Bringing Culture into the Classroom: The Impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on Student Engagement and Self-Efficacy in Social Studies

Siddeeqah K. Cruse

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.
BRINGING CULTURE INTO THE CLASSROOM: 
THE IMPACT OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SELF-EFFICACY IN SOCIAL STUDIES

by

Siddeeqah K. Cruse

Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2008

Master of Teaching
University of South Carolina, 2009

Master of Education
University of South Carolina, 2012

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements 
For the Degree of Doctor of Education in
Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education
University of South Carolina
2019

Accepted by:

Todd Lilly, Major Professor

Christopher Bogiages, Committee Member

Jeffrey Eargle, Committee Member

Gloria Boutte, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

For

Jordyn and Jonathan Jr.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my husband, Jonathan, who supported me throughout this journey. Your belief in my ability meant more than you could ever imagine and I thank you for your continuous encouragement. Also, Jordyn and Jonathan Jr., your little faces kept me motivated. Dream big and don’t let any circumstance define you; find your passion and what you love to do then give it your all.

I would also like to thank my mother, Victoria Moss. Your guidance and wisdom has steered me in paths I never thought were possible. Your words have continued to motivate and encourage me, and I am blessed to be your daughter. You taught me how to be a mother and what it means to live life with a purpose. I am sure you are smiling down on me and I will continue to make you proud.

Finally, I would like to thank members of my dissertation committee. Dr. Todd Lilly, my dissertation chair, thank you for your support and helping me “believe”. You forced me to think outside of the box and always provided meaningful feedback. You went above and beyond to see me through this process and I thank you. I also would like to thank Dr. Bogiages, Dr. Eargle, and Dr. Boutte for serving on my dissertation committee.
ABSTRACT

The presence of the achievement gap has plagued our education system for decades. One of the most astonishing trends has resulted in the racial achievement gap as White students drastically outperform minority groups with African American males being the most affected population. Educators have studied and implemented Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) to increase the achievement of African American males. CRP contends that all students are capable of learning and should be held to high expectations while using students’ culture and interests to drive instruction. This action research study examines the impact of culturally relevant teaching on the self-efficacy and engagement of African American males in social studies. Three African American males were used as focal students in this 7-week study. This action research suggests the use of culturally relevant practices can positively impact student engagement. Such practices include holding students to high expectations while creating a classroom environment that helps students develop a sense of belonging and care.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication......................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iv

Abstract.............................................................................................................................. v

List of Tables ...................................................................................................................... vii

List of Figures .................................................................................................................... viii

List of Abbreviations ........................................................................................................ ix

Chapter One: Introduction................................................................................................. 1

Chapter Two Literature Review ....................................................................................... 13

Chapter Three Methodology .............................................................................................. 36

Chapter Four Research Findings ....................................................................................... 48

Chapter Five Summary, Action Plan & Conclusions ....................................................... 93

References ........................................................................................................................ 106

Appendix A: Student Permission Form ............................................................................. 125

Appendix B: Achievement Goal Questionnaire Revised (AGQ-R) ................................. 126

Appendix C: Student Measure of Culturally Relevant Teaching Survey ......................... 127

Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Questions ............................................................... 128

Appendix E: Student Engagement Observation & Reflection Tool ................................. 129
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Junior’s MAP Scores ................................................................. 41
Table 3.2 Jason’s MAP Scores ................................................................. 42
Table 3.3 Tyler’s MAP Scores................................................................. 43
Table 4.1 Means, Standard Deviation, Min Max SMCRT First Admin .............. 83
Table 4.2 Means, Standard Deviation, Min Max SMCRT Second Admin .......... 84
Table 4.3 Means, Standard Deviation, Min Max AGQ-R First Admin ................. 91
Table 4.4 Means, Standard Deviation, Min Max AGQ-R Second Admin ............. 91
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Student Demographics................................................................. 7
Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework................................................................. 22
Figure 4.1 Social Contract............................................................................. 49
Figure 4.2 Student Engagement Observation: Social Contract ....................... 52
Figure 4.3 Student Engagement Observation: Cornell Notes & Maps Skills........ 63
Figure 4.4 Student Engagement Observation: Quizlet Live ......................... 65
Figure 4.5 Tyler’s Journal Entry................................................................... 71
Figure 4.6 Jason’s Journal Entry................................................................. 71
Figure 4.7 Junior’s Journal Entry................................................................. 72
Figure 4.8 Comparison-Influence Chart & African Influence Chart ............... 76
Figure 4.9 Student Engagement Observation: Influence
Chart & Smart Board Simulation ................................................................. 81
Figure 4.10 Student Engagement: Context Within Culture.......................... 82
Figure 4.11 Student Engagement Cycles..................................................... 86
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGQ-R.......................................................... Achievement Goal Questionnaire Revised
CMS.......................................................... Community Middle School
CRP .......................................................... Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
CRT .......................................................... Critical Race Theory
SMCRT............................................. Student Measure of Culturally Relevant Teaching
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”
-Nelson Mandela

Many thoughts and memories rush to mind as I reflect on my life before becoming an educator. Growing up in a low socioeconomic neighborhood, I attended mostly underperforming, majority African American schools. I am thankful for a wonderful mother who pushed me and for teachers who were aware of my potential and demanded nothing less than my best. I also think of my peers who were not as fortunate to have supporting parents or teachers as I did. Their potential remained untapped and many never escaped a cycle of poverty. Witnessing such travesty has shaped my view of our education system. I became a teacher to be a change agent, to help students like myself and my peers. I vowed to make a difference by motivating and encouraging students while helping them understand the value of education. I always tell my students that it is not where they come from but where they are going that matters most.

Throughout my undergraduate career I worked with various after-school and enrichment programs for at-risk youth. After graduation, my first two places of employment were considered rural, low-income schools with majority African American populations. Many of the students reminded me of myself and teaching them gave me purpose. After five years I began working for a neighboring school district in a more
affluent middle school. However, I quickly realized it exhibited many of the same problems I previously encountered. I finally understood that issues of minority underachievement, student apathy, and the lack of diversity training isn’t confined to certain areas; these problems plague most K12 educational institutions. This led me to consider the proposed Action Research based on the Research Question that investigates how culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies can increase self-efficacy, and overall student engagement. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy uses students’ culture and background to drive instruction and has the potential to make instruction more interesting to students. The goal of traditional educational research is to “explain or help understand educational issues, questions, or processes (Gay & Airaisian, 2000, p. 24). This type of research is usually conducted by researchers who may oversee the research but not be directly involved with the study or subjects. The goal of action research in education is to improve practice immediately within one or a few classrooms or schools (McMillan, 2004). Teachers are directly involved through critically analyzing their practices and how students learn best. Strategies and programs are usually handed down for teachers to use but can be limiting in their ability to truly impact student learning; they do not work for all populations. Many educators would agree that “Research occurs in the ivory towers, whereas practice takes place in the trenches” (Parsons & Brown, 2002, p. 13). Great ideas may be presented but the teacher must find what works best for his or her class.

Dewey (1938) states that genuine learning takes place through experience. It is more beneficial for teachers to be engaged in dialogue and play an active role through action research than rely on traditional educational research. Also, students who possess the needed skills but still do not meet state standards may need to have more positive
experiences or interactions with school personnel whom they feel really care; achievement could increase simply through building relationships. “It is not enough for individuals to possess the requisite knowledge and skills to perform a task; they also must have the conviction that they can successfully perform the required behavior(s) under typical and, importantly, under challenging circumstances” (Bandura, 1977a, p.193).

Cultural relevance is not only about culturally relevant content or strategies but also about understanding/appreciating students’ experiences and having a “curious, open, and positive attitude” towards students (Mintrop, 2016, p. 103).

**Problem of Practice**

Student performance on both SC READY and SC PASS, summative- and high-stakes- assessments, have steadily decreased resulting in a focus on data-driven instruction. The district has become more diverse over the past ten years as the African American and Hispanic populations have increased and the percentage of Whites students has decreased. The overall percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch has also increased within this time frame. However, the most glaring trend is the widening gap between grade level classes which are majority minority and honors classes that tend to have mostly White populations. According to assessment data released by the school district, African American males who receive free or reduced lunch are the largest underachieving subgroup but many students within this population score above the 50th percentile on the MAP Reading assessment. This implies they have an average reading skill set and the potential to meet state standards on SC READY Reading but are not performing as predicted; there is a disconnect between potential and performance.

Santana, Rothstein, and Bain (2016) explain that the achievement gap is created by a gap
in opportunity among students. Teachers tend to cater more to honors students by holding them to higher expectations and delivering instruction that is more rigorous than grade level students; the ability of grade level students is questioned leading to lessons that may be perceived as unchallenging and uninteresting. Grade level students are not afforded the same opportunities as honors students despite their potential which may result in disengagement. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), academic achievement and learning improves through engagement whereas disengagement can lead to student withdrawal and adverse effects on academic achievement. Students’ lack of a sense of belonging may also factor into their disengagement. A sense of belonging includes students’ sense of being respected, valued, and feeling they are important member of the classroom and is closely associated with engagement (Masika & Jones, 2016).

**Research Question**

How does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy impact the engagement and self-efficacy of 7th grade African American males?

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this action research study is to increase the engagement or the willingness to engage of 7th grade African American males at Community Middle School (pseudonym) through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in accordance with the identified Problem of Practice (PoP) for this Dissertation in Practice (DiP). African American males of low socioeconomic backgrounds are either failing to meet state standardized testing goals, or they may not be doing well academically, despite their potential given that they do score above the 50th percentile on MAP Testing. The lack of
engagement may be the reason for this discrepancy. “African American adolescents disproportionately perform poorly compared to peers in both behavioral and academic aspects of their educational experience” (Martin et al, 2007, p. 689). African American males in particular have lower achievement rates than African American females (Garibaldi, 1992). My hypothesis is that the use of culturally relevant teaching may allow students to relate to content though their own experiences, build relationships, and gain confidence in their ability to succeed while developing a sense of belonging. Thus, by using culturally relevant teaching practices these African American males may become more engaged and motivated as belief in their ability increases.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Ladson-Billings (2009) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically [because it uses] cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Culturally relevant pedagogy is driven by students’ culture and views diversity as a strength (Bassey, 2016). It is fueled by three main tenets: academic excellence, cultural competence or cultural awareness, and critical critique (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Schmeichel (2012) notes there was a lack of emphasis placed on culture in the classroom before *Brown v. Board of Education* due to segregation. Cultural differences became profound after integration and the realization of the low achievement of minority students in comparison with Whites was recognized. The concept of culturally relevant teaching evolved from deficit thinking or attributing students’ low performance to student and/or parent experiences to using students’ differences as resources to build upon (Ladson-Billings, 1995). With culturally relevant pedagogy, differences in culture and background are no longer viewed
as a negative but a positive way to differentiate instruction. Valenzuela (2017) emphasizes the importance of schools subscribing to students’ culture by incorporating diversity into the curriculum instead of treating the presence of varying languages and ways of life negatively. Scholars agree that one way of increasing the academic achievement of minority students is through the use of a curriculum that is culturally relevant (Bassey, 2016, Harper, 2009; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; LaCour et al, 2017, Schmeichel, 2012; Valenzuela, 2017).

Research Site and Participants

Description of Teacher Researcher

The teacher-researcher is an African American, female educator at Community Middle School, the site of this Action Research study. She has taught at this site for four years and taught middle school social studies for a total of 10 years. Much of this time has been spent teaching seventh grade social studies which covers history from the seventeenth century to present day. Mentoring disadvantaged youths has always peaked the teacher researcher’s interests. She grew up in a low socioeconomic neighborhood and witnessed firsthand how the lack of an education can lead to a life of poverty. The researcher has nephews, cousins, and a son- all black males. All of these factors combined has led her to focus the Action Research Study on African American males given their under achievement nationally.

Research Site

Community Middle School (CMS) is a public secondary educational institution which serves grades 6-8. It is located in a rural/suburban, affluent community in the southeastern region of the United States. The community is majority white but is
witnessing an influx of diverse residents as new subdivisions are being built due to families migrating from the surrounding urban areas. CMS has a total student population of 788 students. One percent of the population is Asian, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 47% is African American, and 49% is white. It offers five high school credit courses and a variety of different enrichment classes in performing arts, fine arts, STEM and Business Education. CMS is a National School to Watch and has received several accolades for academic achievement. However, its reputation is in danger due to the widening achievement gap between honors and steady growth of grade level students.

![Student Demographics](image)

**Figure 1.1 Community Middle School Student Demographics**

**Student Participants**

Student participants in this Action Research Study are seventh grade students. Students are enrolled in the teacher-researchers grade level social studies class. There is a total of 15-20 students participating in this study with a focus on 3-5 African American males.

**Action Research Design**

The proposed Action Research study for the Problem of Practice (PoP) is a qualitative methods design with the purpose of determining how culturally relevant
pedagogy impacts the engagement and self-efficacy of 7th African American males. The teacher-researcher will use one grade level class for this study with a focus on 3-5 African American males. Males included in this group will be African American males in the teacher-researchers first period class. The teacher-researcher will implement culturally relevant pedagogy to include differentiation of texts to expose students to multiple perspectives and create standards-based lessons guided by students’ culture and interests. Lesson will be rigorous and thought-provoking to encourage critical analysis of historical events that shape the world. Semi-structured interviews with the focus group of 3-5 African American males will be used to gauge both the thoughts and perceptions of participants. Surveys to monitor students’ self-efficacy will be administered and engagement will be measured through the use of an engagement rubric. The teacher researcher will take field notes throughout the study to note daily interactions within the class.

**Ethical Considerations**

Teacher-researchers must ensure they are being ethical when conducting action research. He or she must continuously ask “At what point does teaching become research?” (Nolen & Putten, 2007, pg. 402). The purpose of action research is to use teacher inquiry to study and solve specific class or school dilemmas while improving practices (Mertler, 2016.). The nature of action research makes research and teaching seamless; they are intertwined which makes distinguishing teaching and research difficult (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). However, “keeping caring, fairness, openness, and truth at the forefront of your work as a teacher-inquirer is critical to ethical work (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014. P. 150).
As the teacher-researcher, my action research will take place during normal class time. I will ensure the standards, curriculum, and assessments are aligned to meet mandatory state standards. As a result, conducting this study will not impede on my duty to teach students to meet curricular objectives. My study is centered on the impacts of culturally relevant teaching and self-efficacy on student achievement. It will be crucial to build an atmosphere of trust, respect, and openness with and among student participants to create an environment conducive to learning for all involved. Through building relationships students will become more comfortable to share backgrounds and experiences and view the time spent engaged in culturally relevant activities positively. Student participants will not be required to share any personal information, however. The teacher researcher will keep the student participants’ safety and well-being at the heart of the study.

The principal of Community Middle school has approved the teacher researcher’s action research. Students as well as parents will be informed of their opportunity to participate in this action research study. A consent form with a brief description will be provided to both parties due to data collection. Students will not be penalized for not participating in surveys and can withdraw from participation at any time. This form will relay FERPA stipulations and make students and parents aware of their anonymity as participants. Students, parents, as well as the research site will have pseudonyms and real names will not be used throughout the study.

**Potential Weaknesses**

I am the only teacher-researcher but will include input from stakeholders for guidance. As the teacher researcher I assume the low academic achievement of African
American males can be reversed and can be corrected in all educational institutions with the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. In addition, I am speculating that since the African American males participating in this study have the potential to succeed but have low academic achievement, they are failing due to a lack of self-efficacy. Lastly, the study is limited to Community Middle School and I am imposing the delimitation of the sample being one class with a focus on 3-5 7th Grade African American males.

**Significance of Study**

Nationally, the graduation rate for African American males is only 54% whereas the graduation rate for Whites is 75% (Thompson, 2016). In addition, this group account for only 5.5% of the college population with a mere 1 in 6 receiving a college degree (Toldson & Lewis, 2012). The lack of an education has contributed to increased incarceration, high unemployment rates, and high poverty rates among African American males. “The potential loss of resources—intellectual, cultural, and economic—resulting from lower achievement reduces the capacity of African American males to be productive, integral, and contributing members of their communities” (Davis, 2003, p. 515). Weber (2010) notes “education is a central site of contests over race, gender, sexuality, and class in the United States both because knowledge is the key to resisting oppression and because educational credentials are essential to getting good jobs, salaries, benefits, and better quality of life” (p. 49). This research study will engage a group of underachieving, African American males in activities centered on their cultural experiences and backgrounds to boost achievement and foster a growth mindset in
students. These changes in attitude, combined with their ability, have the potential to increase the overall success of participants.

**Conclusion**

The Action Research topic seeks to answer the following research question:

**Question:** How does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy impact the engagement and self-efficacy of 7th grade African American male students at CMS?

The results of this study will be used to determine the effects of culturally relevant pedagogy on student engagement and self-efficacy. Student participants are seventh grade, African American males from Community Middle School. The low achievement of this subgroup despite their potential to succeed has caused the teacher-researcher to inquire possible solutions to this problem. Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) states the goal of action research is to make things better, improve specific practices, or correct something that is not working properly. Interviews, surveys, and academic performance will be used to assess student engagement and measure levels of self-efficacy. Chapter One gives an overview of the Problem of Practice, purpose and significance of the study, as well as possible weaknesses of this qualitative method Action Research Study. Chapter 2 will review the literature related to this action research study.

**Definition of Terms**

For this study, the terms below are defined and are used throughout this study on using culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies.
Achievement Gap- When one group of students (such as, students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant (Hanushek, 2010).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy- A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Disengagement- The action or process of withdrawing from involvement in an activity, situation, or group (Disengagement, n.d.).

Extrinsic Motivation-External feeling of motivation; feeling that one’s behavior is regulated by an outside source which reinforces the behavior (Brief and Aldag, 1977).

Intrinsic motivation- Internal feeling of motivation; feelings of commitment to the work for one’s own sake (Brief and Aldag, 1977).

Relatedness- One’s sense of interpersonal acceptance and closeness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-Efficacy-One’s belief in their ability; belief one has in their ability to succeed in specific situations or a task/goal (Bandura, 1977a)
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Social studies education plays a crucial role in one’s life and not only helps students understand the past, but also how the past has shaped the present and implications this may have for the future (ASCD, 2011). Students also gain a better understanding of the world around them and how to actively participate in society (Duncan, 2011). Upon careful examination of assessment data, the teacher researcher recognized a disturbing discrepancy in achievement between honors and grade level social studies classes across grades 6th-8th at CMS. Further analysis revealed the achievement gap had widened at an alarming rate and is not limited to social studies or even CMS, but is a multi-discipline, district-wide issue. Due to this pressing matter, as the teacher-searcher, I seek to investigate the effects of culturally relevant pedagogy on self-efficacy and engagement of African American males in social studies as part of the action research study of this DiP. The constant decline in academic achievement could possibly be the result of a lack of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989; Phan, 2014), boredom (Pekrun et al, 2014; Tze, Daniels, & Klassen, 2016), and/or teacher-student relationships (Froiland, & Davison, 2016; Zee & de Bree, 2017).

The research question, how does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies impact self-efficacy and engagement of African American males, is the focus of this qualitative method action research study as a result of the identified problem of practice.
The purpose of the study is to improve the engagement and self-efficacy of African American males at Community Middle School using culturally relevant pedagogy. CRP uses students’ culture to drive instruction while helping students become more critical of social inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). It also emphasizes the relevance of curriculum to students’ backgrounds and experience (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Durden, Escalante, & Blitch, 2014). Positive teacher-student relationships are an essential element of culturally relevant pedagogy as teachers form bonds with and believe in all students’ academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Skinner et al (2009) argues that school engagement can be molded and influenced by the quality of student relationships with their teachers. In addition, increased cognitive engagement is positively associated with student achievement (Chase, Hilliard, John Geldhof, Warren, & Lerner, 2014) as students become more self-efficacious and motivated (Greene, 2015; Walker & Greene, 2009). Thus, theoretically, CRP can increase student achievement.

This chapter presents a discussion of literature related to culturally relevant pedagogy and how it may result in increased self-efficacy and engagement of African American males. The literature review also discusses the frameworks used within this action research study: culturally relevant pedagogy, critical race theory, and critical race pedagogy.

Machi and McEvoy (2016) details three tasks for selecting literature to review: determine the materials to include and exclude, preview the material, select the appropriate literature, organize it, and then refine the preliminary topic statement. I used this framework to select literature to be reviewed. First, EBSCO, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were utilized to locate peer-reviewed articles related to the major areas of the
study. I then skimmed, scanned, annotated, and labeled articles of significance for use in the review. This process was repeated until I obtained articles of historical and theoretical perspectives in the needed areas.

According to Machi and McEvoy (2016), a literature review is “a written argument that supports a thesis position by building a case from credible evidence obtained from previous research” (p. 5). They state the purpose of a literature review is to present current knowledge on topic and to argue how this knowledge leads to a problem or question in need of research. The materials utilized in this literature review were chosen carefully to provide supportive documentation by experts as evidence for the argument presented. The literature review explores existing theory and research that will be used as guidance throughout this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culture is essential to learning. It impacts how students communicate and learn while molding their perspective and opinions. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) utilizes students’ culture and background to facilitate teaching and learning and is rooted in the social constructivist learning theory (Burnett, 2010). Social constructivism stresses the significance of culture and environment in understanding society and the creation of new knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999). Social Constructivists believe reality is constructed through human interaction, knowledge is a product of social and cultural contexts, and takes place during social activities (Kukla, 2000; Prat & Floden, 1994; McMahon, 1997). Vygotsky (1962), a key theorist in the social constructivism field explains, “Directed thought is social. As it develops, it is
increasingly influenced by the laws of experience and of proper logic” (p.16). Learning is a social process based on experience and interpretation. The social constructivist learning theory is a subset of the constructivist theory. Both learning theories are similar in stating learning is constructed through a learner’s interpretation of experience and is an active not passive process, but constructivist fail to acknowledge cultural and social contexts (Doolittle, 2014). Social constructivism stresses the collaborative nature of learning.

The practice of using culture to drive instruction did not originate with culturally relevant pedagogy. Desegregation of schools in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in more diverse student population which challenged traditional teaching practices (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally responsive, and culturally compatible have been used to described teaching based on students’ culture and background. However, Gloria Ladson-Billings is credited with creating the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy is defined as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 382).

Ladson-Billings (1995b) examined previous research pertaining to pedagogy and culture and discovered that early studies focused on micro and macro analytical perspectives of this topic. Previous research focused on linguistic interaction patterns between teachers and students and typically conducted in small communities. Studies also tended to hone in on student deficits then implement interventions rooted in students’ cultures. “Each [study] suggests that current student ‘success’ is represented by
achievement within the current social structures existent within the schools. Thus, the
goal of education becomes how to ‘fit’ students constructed as ‘others’ by virtue of their
race, ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as
meritocracy” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 467).

The idea of instruction based on culture evolved overtime. It became more
conscerned with using the classroom as a place for social change by altering the
curriculum then later began to focus on teaching with the curriculum content as one of its
main components (Gay, 2013). Culturally relevant pedagogy was also mainly concerned
with underperforming African American students but became more inclusive of non-
white, low achieving students (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Ladson-Billings (2014)
discusses the fluid nature of culture and the need for its continued growth as culture
progresses- the remix, and advocates for a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

“The notion of a remix means that there was an original version
and that there may be more versions to come, taking previously
developed ideas and synthesizing them to create new and exciting
forms” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.75-76).

However, the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy has been reduced and
implemented improperly in many classrooms. Ladson-Billings (2014) notes:

“What [they] are now calling ‘culturally relevant pedagogy’ is
often a distortion and corruption of the central ideas I attempted
to promulgate. The idea that adding some books about people of
color, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting
‘diverse’ images makes one ‘culturally relevant’ seem[s] to be what the pedagogy has been reduced to” (p. 82).

As a result, the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy is compromised. A synthesis of the literature revealed the following characteristics of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b):

1. Communication of high expectations
2. Learning within the context of culture
3. Student centered instruction
4. Teacher as facilitator
5. Reshaping the curriculum

According to Ladson-Billings (1995a), there are three components of CRP—academic achievement, cultural competence, and cultural critique. Academic achievement conveys the notion that all students are capable of learning while cultural competence involves valuing students’ culture and background and utilizing this information to guide instruction. Cultural Critique is concerned with teaching students to critically analyze society and institutions to challenge existing inequalities (Kumar, 2018). All three elements are needed to challenge students while helping raise their cultural awareness.

Critical reflection is also central to culturally relevant pedagogy. According to Howard (2003), teacher critical reflection should analyze the influence of race, culture, and social class on students’ learning and how individuals perceive the world around them. He argues that such reflection allows teachers to evaluate their own thoughts and opinions to break down any prejudices or biases they may possess. Teachers’ beliefs and
experiences, or lack thereof, can have a tremendous impact on teaching and learning. Educators must “acknowledge how deficit-based notions of diverse students continue to permeate traditional school thinking, practices, and placement, and critique their own thoughts and practices to ensure they do not reinforce prejudice behaviors” (Howard, 2003, p. 198). Students should not be stereotyped based on social class, race, or culture and should be held to high expectations. The diverse backgrounds present throughout educational institutions are assets to teaching and learning not obstacles. Critical reflection should also be conducted with school programs, policies, curriculum, and instruction (Allen et al, 2017). Discriminatory practices can be challenged with hopes of eradication. The lack of critical reflection permits the status quo to continue. Teachers must understand the barriers to culturally relevant pedagogy to dismantle them.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies which focused on legal scholarship and the interpretation of rights in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Many Black attorneys criticized CLS claiming it failed to address the role of race and racism when analyzing the legal system (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Decuir & Dixson, 2004). As a result, CRT was birthed in the 1970s in response to the shortcomings of CLS. Race and racism became the tools to critique social and political inequalities with an aim of analyzing their role in “perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial groups” (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). In 1995 Ladson-Billings and Tate extended this idea by arguing that race remained untheorized in the analysis of social inequalities in education thus pioneering the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to education.
CRT in education is a field of study that prioritizes race and racism as contributing factors of the unfavorable school experiences and outcomes of Students of Color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Its purpose is to destroy all forms of racism and discriminatory practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Furthermore, CRT provides educators a way to appropriately discuss race and racism (Lynn & Parker, 2006). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) the main principles of CRT are the permanence of racism, counter narratives, intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression, interest convergence, its interdisciplinary nature, and commitment to social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1989).

Ladson-Billings (1998) indicated that stories of African Americans are often muted and left out when they challenge dominant culture authority and power. The implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy would eradicate this issue due to its guiding principles of cultural competence and cultural critical. CRP is based on students’ culture and interests and allows educators directly address issues race and racism that negatively impact society. Concerning academic instruction, Ladson-Billings (1998) indicated:

“CRT suggests that current instructional strategies presume that African American students are deficient. As a consequence, classroom teachers are engaged in a never-ending quest for the right strategy or technique’ to deal with (read: control) at-risk (read: African American) students. Cast in a language of failure, instructional approaches for African American students typically involve some aspect of remediation. This race-neutral perspective
purports to see deficiency as an individual phenomenon. Thus, instruction is conceived as a generic set of teaching skills that should work for all students” (p. 19).

Counter narratives or storytelling will be used throughout this study to allow the voices and perspectives of student-participants to be acknowledged.

**Critical Race Pedagogy**

Critical Race Pedagogy is rooted in Critical Race Theory and uses the aforementioned tenets of CRT in a pedagogical approach. Critical Race Pedagogy is an instructional construct used by educators of color to challenge and transform established Eurocentric power structures in school curricula to establish spaces that support the experiences of students of color (Lynn, 1999). There are 4 main components of Critical Race Pedagogy: recognizing and understanding the nature of racism, understanding the power dynamics inherent in schooling, self-reflection, and liberatory practices in both teaching and learning that advocates for justice and equity within school and education (Jennings & Lynn, 2005).

According to Aleman and Gaytan (2017) Critical Race Pedagogy “centers race and racism, validates the experiential knowledge of Students of Color, and deconstructs dominant ideologies in their classrooms” (p 130). It is characterized by its use of various instructional approaches aimed at “counteracting the devaluation of racially oppressed students” (Lynn, 2004, p. 155). These strategies oppose the Eurocentric status quo and serves as a way to aid in the development of positive racial and cultural identities of students of color (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). The aim of Critical Race Pedagogy is to evolve classrooms into places where Students of Color can thrive (Lynn, 1999). Due to
its nature and focus on race and equity, Critical Race Pedagogy has origins in culturally relevant teaching (Jain et. al, 2017) and can be used to meet the goals of critical race pedagogy. This action research study using culturally relevant teaching to increase engagement will incorporate the ideas Jennings and Lynn (2005) by using counter-storytelling to understand race and by challenging the traditional, Eurocentric narrative of history.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework in Figure 2.1 details how this study uses elements from three theoretical frameworks. These various components of culturally relevant pedagogy, critical race theory, and critical race pedagogy will be used to guide lessons and create pedagogical tools to support students in an attempt to answer the research questions. This framework was created to support the needs of students and this action research study.

**Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework**
African American Males

“African American adolescents disproportionately perform poorly compared to peers in both behavioral and academic aspects of their educational experience” (Martin et al, 2007, p. 689). African American males in particular have lower achievement rates than African American females (Garibaldi, 1992). On average, minorities from low income families tend to perform worse on all indicators of achievement including tests, attainment of high school diploma and college degrees, and employment than their White counterparts (Zhao, 2016). Black males graduate at a lower rate than white students and have higher dropout rates and lower college attendance rates (White, 2018). These gaps have persisted despite the implementation of federal mandates such as Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind which aimed to ameliorate the underperformance of minorities (White, 2018). However, such policies focused on data and failed to address the inequitable practices within the educational institution itself (Taylor, 2006). Early research pertaining to African American males focus on low achievement and the effects of the resulting achievement gap, but research is needed to examine how educational institutions contribute to this problem (Stinson, 2006).

Jackson and Moore (2006) state, “The existing body of knowledge is both limited and disjointed. It neglects to examine collectively the educational experiences of African American males throughout the educational pipeline [elementary, middle, and high school]” (p. 202). Previous studies focused on environmental and cultural factors as possible causes of low achievement and depict a grim outlook for the future of African American males (Jackson & Moore, 2008). Such studies have created a negative perception of African American males in education and society which impact both
teaching and learning (Donna & Moore, 2013). “Many African-American males are kidnapped into believing that they are inferior and unable to succeed in school” (Milner, 2009, p. 245) despite their ability to succeed.

Ellis, Rowley, Nellum, and Smith (2018) conducted a study to explore whether racial academic stereotypes and racial centrality were associated with and predicted school efficacy of black males. The sample consisted of 103 black males with an average GPA of 2.73 on a 4.0 scale from a majority African American, low socioeconomic high school in Southeastern Michigan. The results of the study showed racial centrality as the strongest predictor of school efficacy. Positive school experiences were also associated with school efficacy whereas the internalization of racial academic stereotypes served as a barrier to beliefs in ability to succeed academically in school. Tyler et al (2017) reached similar results in their study examining the association between the internalization of stereotypes by Black males and academic self-handicapping, to intentionally confirm a negative stereotype to avoid being perceived as intellectually inferior. One hundred thirty-eight Black males enrolled in a public high school in the Southeastern United States participated in a survey with two scales. A Nadanolitization scale assessed the internalization of racist stereotypes extant in mainstream society while the other scale measured academic self-handicapping. Findings from the study showed that internalization of racist stereotypes about Black Americans was predictive of academic self-handicapping behaviors among Black American male high school students.

Davis (2003) argues African American males have the potential to be more successful in educational institutions that care for and nurture them as individuals; educators and schools should be supportive to meet their needs. According to Noddings
(2012), teachers should aim to create a climate of caring to teach by being both receptive and acceptive while meeting the needs of their students. She asserts teachers must not only meet the educational or prescribed needs of students as specified by educational instructions, but also expressed needs conveyed by listening and understanding students. Noddings (1999) notes:

“They [teachers] should be able to draw on literature, history, politics, religion, philosophy, and the arts in ways that enrich their daily teaching and offer multiple possibilities for students to make connections with the great existential questions as well as questions of current social life” (p. 215).

Other theories proposed to explain the low academic performance of African American males are centered on three main areas: student attitude, social organization of schools, and masculine identity (MacLeod, 1995).

Supportive teacher–student relationships are important to establish and maintain a class environment that encourages positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Gest, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2005). In accordance, team building activities and engagement in culturally relevant activities will be incorporated into lessons to foster a relationship of trust and mutual respect with and among student-participants and the teacher-researcher. Though the personal bond formed, students’ backgrounds and culture will be used in effort to engage, motivate, and help students begin to believe in their ability to succeed.
Social Studies

Social studies is a core academic content area in K-12 education. Though required by many educational institutions, there are many different perceptions of its purpose and goals. This section reviews the literature related to the historical perspective and perceptions and beliefs concerning social studies.

The contemporary social studies curriculum stems out of the progressive education movement of the early twentieth century. The National Education Association (NEA) established social studies as the new interdisciplinary social science content area in 1916 with its main goal being the cultivation of citizenship (National Education Association, 1916). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) was created afterwards in 1921 with this same mission (Murra, 1970). Social studies did not exist until it was established by the NEA. Instead, students learned from the discrete subject areas of geography, civics, and history. The original goal of social studies was to improve society by expanding democracy and establishing economic and social justice (Lybarger, 1983). Despite controversy, the goal of social studies has remained constant into the twentieth century (Lybarger, 1983).

Despite the goal of social studies remaining unchanged, the focus of social studies has witnessed major modifications in the last 150 years due to political and social influences (Bolinger & Warren, 2007). These changes are the result of outside forces uniting to support or revise the content’s curriculum due to ideological positions (Thornton, 2001). The social studies curriculum in the 1950s was more aligned with the Progressive Era as it was highly student-centered and activity oriented (Jarolimek, 1973). However, the curriculum projects such as the Harvard Social Studies Project and The
High School Geography Project from 1960s, relied mostly on the structure and inquiry methods of the discipline and focus on games and/or simulations because of the launching of Sputnik I and the Cold War (Oswald, 1993). This resulted in independent discipline projects focusing on higher level skills and concepts, problem-solving and problem-finding activities, and allowing students in interdisciplinary connections (Byford & Russell, 2007). This led each discipline- geography, history, economics and others to focus on itself instead of the overall goal of social studies in the 1980s (Passe, 2006). The 1990s into the twenty first century witnessed state reform initiatives to include creating new academic standards and accountability measures in the form of assessment to improve instruction in all content areas (National Council for Education Statistics, 2003). The federal government has also passed reform initiatives in education such as Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind, which have resulted in the marginalization of social studies through its emphasis on math, English, and science (Onosko, 2011).

According to the NCSS (2010), social studies education plays a crucial role in one’s life. It states that it not only helps students understand the past, but also how the past has shaped the present and implications this may have for the future. Furthermore, students gain a better understanding of the world around them and how to actively participate in society through social studies education (NCSS, 2013). However, teachers may downgrade its importance or neglect to fully implement the curriculum correctly when selecting activities based on convenience or student interest rather than on established social studies goals (Brophy, 1990). Social studies instruction typically consists of whole class instruction including frequent lecturing (Amarza, 2001; Lucey, Shifflett, & Weilbacher, 2014). Yet, lectures and assignment completed individually are
not meaningful or productive practices of learning (Hendrix, 1999). In addition, most social studies lessons and instruction also primarily rely on a single textbook as the main tool for instruction (Wade, 1993; Nokes, Dole, & Hacker, 2007). A variety of strategies and resources should be used (Salako, Eze, & Adu, 2013).

Lucey, Shifflett, Weilbacher (2014) conducted a quantitative study using online surveys to examine elementary and middle level social studies teachers’ perceptions and beliefs. Many teachers reported they believed the goal of social studies learning was the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, the instructional methods they reported using were more focused on the acquisition of basic facts. A lack in training may be the reason for the confusion between the purpose of tasks and the level of ability needed for assignments (Fischer, Bol, & Pribesh, 2011). There should be an aim for meaningful instruction requiring higher-order thinking skills in social studies as expected in other academic subjects (Brophy, 1990; De la Paz, 2005).

Despite its importance, many students view social studies as boring and irrelevant (Almarza, 2001; Brophy, 2009; Schug, Todd, & Berry, 1984; Shaughnessy, & Haladyna, 1985). Such feelings may be accredited to the instructional strategies, such as lecture, teacher-centered instruction, and dependency on a single text, used by teachers (Amarza, 2001). Disinterest could also be the result of students failing to understand the purpose of social studies and how it relates to them personally (Kueby, 2004). Disinterest and boredom can lead to a lack of motivation resulting in decreased academic achievement.

Rooted in the Progressive Era in the early twentieth century, the goal of social studies is to teach students how to be productive members of society and navigate the world around them (Byrd, 2012). Federal educational policies have placed an emphasis
on math and English making educators and students perceive the subject as less important in comparison to other subjects (Onosko, 2011). The perception of social studies as unimportant, along with the disinterest and boredom due to teacher-centered social studies instruction, may contribute to students’ disengagement and thus underachievement in this content area (Brophy, 2009). However, the use of culturally relevant pedagogy has the potential to make the content more engaging and increase student achievement.

**Student Motivational Factors**

To be motivated means to be moved to take action (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A student’s level of motivation affects their achievement in school. This section explores the literature related to the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, disinterest and disengagement, situational interest, and relatedness to student motivation.

**Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation.** Intrinsic motivation is defined as internal feeling of motivation or feelings of commitment to the work for one’s own sake while extrinsic motivation is a feeling that one’s behavior is regulated by an outside source which reinforces the behavior (Brief & Aldag, 1977). Intrinsic motivation is supported by the fulfilment of the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, extrinsic motivation involves completing actions to earn a reward or avoid negative consequences (Hayenga & Corpus, 2010). Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can lead to students performing well in school however, overtime they tend to lose enjoyment in the learning process when motivation is based on external factors (Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005). Yet, intrinsic motivation can lead to academic, social, and emotional improvements in students (Froiland, Oros, Smith, & Hirchert, 2012).
Intrinsic motivation is one of the most impactful forms of motivation is directly related to students’ academic success (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan. 1991).

Froiland and Worrell (2016) used structural equation models to examine the relationship between intrinsic motivation, learning goals, engagement and academic performance of 1575 high school students from the San Francisco Bay area. The findings revealed both learning goals and academic achievement correlated positively with intrinsic motivation. In addition, due to the racially diverse nature of the high school, the study also found the same holds true for its Latino and African American populations. An earlier study by Froiland and Oros (2014) supports these findings through its examination of intrinsic motivation, competence, and student engagement. This longitudinal study of a national represented population of fifth through eighth graders also found that intrinsic motivation and engagement predicted the development of reading achievement.

**Self-efficacy.** According to Wood and Bandura (1989), self- efficacy refers to one’s beliefs in their ability to generate needed motivation, skills, and courses of action to meet expected performance goals. They further argue that “the conception of ability with which people approach complex activities is likely to have a significant impact on the self-regulatory influences that govern ongoing motivation and personal accomplishments in complex decision-making environments” (Woods & Bandura, 1989, p. 407). Self-efficacy influences the use of effective behaviors or actions, which in turn strengthens motivation. Thus, motivation increases with self-efficacy as individuals begin to gain confidence in their ability to succeed and set personal goals to avoid failure. The higher the self-efficacy, the more challenging goals become increasing motivation and one’s perceived ability to succeed (Bandura, 1989).
The belief in ability impacts an individual’s behavior or course of action when confronting a task. New patterns of behavior can be learned through direct experience and more complex behaviors can be developed to replace unfavorable actions. “Most of the behaviors that people displayed are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of example” (Bandura, 1977b, p. 5). Coupled with the idea of ability as an incremental skill which constantly evolves by amassing knowledge and increasing mastery (Woods & Bandura, 1899), a person’s level of self-efficacy can be increased through direct experience and modeling. Bandura (1977a) states:

Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts. Those who persist in subjectively threatening activities that are in fact relatively safe will gain corrective experiences that reinforce their sense of efficacy, thereby eventually eliminating their defensive behavior. Those who cease their coping efforts prematurely will retain their self-debilitating expectations and fears for a long time. (p. 194)

One must learn appropriate coping measures to meet expected demands by persevering through tough tasks.

Liem et al (2008) investigated ways the motivational belief constructs of self-efficacy and achievement goals related to achievement outcome using a nationally representative sample of 1475 students with an average age of 15 in Singapore. Students were recruited from 147 classes in 39 secondary schools. They found that self-efficacy
directly influenced deep learning and achievement outcome. In addition, mastery goal adoption led to the adoption of deep and surface learning strategies. The student’s perception of their ability influenced the amount of effort put forth and thus achievement. Similarly, Walker et al (2006) conducted a quantitative study of 191 participants from a large Southeastern University. Questionnaires were used to examine the relationships between identification with academics, self-efficacy, and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation and assessing the predictive value of the variables relationship to cognitive engagement. Self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and academic identification each contributed uniquely to the prediction of meaningful cognitive engagement. However, extrinsic motivation was not a predictor of academic achievement.

Disinterest and Disengagement. Disinterest and disengagement are major influences on motivation and achievement. James (1890) acknowledged that interest is one of the determining factors in what people pay attention to and remember. Dewey (1913) agreed by stating interest promotes learning, enhances understanding, and increases effort. Students who are not interested in a subject tend to pay less attention by not fully engaging in the learning process. This leads to a decrease in academic achievement (Jimmerson et al, 2006). When individuals enter a situation with interest in the topic, they are more likely to be motivated to learn more about it through the adoption of a mastery goal (Harackiewicz et al, 2008). Students tend to pay closer attention to things that interest them which can increase achievement. Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) notes, “Individual interest is an antecedent to cognitions that determine the strength of an individual’s intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to act in a particular situation. Thus, individual interest is viewed as a precondition of intrinsic motivation (p. 158).
**Situational interest.** Though students may not show initial interest, situational interest can be aroused. Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) explains that situational interest depends upon the environment and can be used to motivate students when they do not possess pre-existing individual interests. Instructional models and teaching strategies as well as the characteristics of the assignment can contribute to the development of situational interest (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Student perception due to the presentation, anticipated difficulty, and personal connection are key factors to consider when creating situational interest. Students may become bored when they are not interested in topics as detailed by Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, and Perry (2010), who found that self-reported boredom was more likely to co-occur with difficulty paying attention during learning activities. Conversely, boredom was less likely to co-occur with intrinsic motivation to learn, self-reported effort at learning, and the perceived self-regulation of learning.

**Relatedness.** Interest, engagement, and thus motivation can be increased through student relatedness (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Relatedness is characterized by one’s feelings of interpersonal acceptance and closeness to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and has the potential to greatly influence student achievement (Elmore & Huebner, 2010). According to King (2015), a student’s sense of relatedness is a predictor of his or her initial levels and changes in engagement and discontent, which in turn, directly impacts academic achievement. Students who experience respect and feel they can be themselves is associated with academic motivation in that setting (Anderman & Anderman, 1999). Wang and Eccles (2013) note that teaching for relevance predicts higher academic self-concept and subjective task value. They explain greater interest and the use of self-
regulatory strategies in learning, such as self-monitoring and evaluation, are more common when the curriculum includes meaningful topics that reflect students’ personal goals and interests. Students who can relate to their environment, content, and/or establish relationships with their peers, and teachers are more likely to succeed in school. As stated, students can be motivated internally or from an outside source such as rewards. A student’s belief in him or herself can directly affect the amount of effort put forth. Conversely, the lack of self-efficacy can cause a decrease in motivation. Students may become disinterested or disengaged in a subject as a result and become bored. Such feelings can negatively impact student performance.

**Conclusion**

American democracy is reliant on the interactions of citizens who hold diverse opinions and political affiliations. Thus, it is imperative for students to be able to understand the problems of society, possess accurate information concerning their views, and employ effective skills to understand their function in society (Byrd, 2011). As a result of its aim to promote civic competence to prepare students to actively participate in society, social studies plays a major role in this process (NCSS, 2013). However, due to instructional strategies in this content area being mostly teacher-centered lecture, textbook centered, and lower order thinking skills, students tend to be bored and dislike social studies resulting in poor performance (Brophy, 2009). In addition, high-stakes testing due to increased accountability has caused many schools and students to view other subjects as a priority and more important than social studies which can negatively impact students’ attitudes concerning this subject (Onosko, 2011).
Culturally relevant pedagogy is grounded in social constructivism and critical race theory. Social constructivism focuses on the social nature of learning and the relationship between positive environments and emotions in the process of gaining knowledge (Vygotsky, 1962). The environment, meaningful experiences, personal factors, and emotions or perception are discussed as areas of contention in social studies but are emphasized in culturally relevant pedagogy to improve student engagement.

As stated, students’ lack of self-efficacy and motivation are at the root of possible reasons for disengagement in social studies. However, culturally relevant pedagogy has the potential to motivate students in many ways. Its collaborative nature, emphasis on creating an environment conducive to learning, and making content more relatable through experience could theoretically result in increased motivation. Moreover, its focus on teachers understanding students as individuals can aid in establishing positive teacher-student relationships which could increase student engagement. As a result, students will likely become more engaged and confident as motivation increases leading to higher student achievement.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will provide an in-depth discussion of the research methodology and design used in this Dissertation in Practice. The purpose of this action research study is to determine the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on student self-efficacy and engagement. The research question: How does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies impact self-efficacy and engagement of African American males? This study seeks to determine if utilizing culturally relevant strategies impacts student engagement and self-efficacy.

Action research methodology proves to be the best framework to address my research question. Merter (2016) describes action research as being “focused on solving a classroom or school problem, improving practice, or helping make a decision at a single local site” (p. 13). Educators identify a specific issue then actively works to develop and implement a plan to better understand for the betterment of educational practices. In contrast, traditional educational research tends to present findings for teachers and schools without sufficiently addressing the diversity of educational institutions or needed adaptations (Metz & Page, 2002). Often this leads to traditional educational research being impracticable to classroom teachers.
Role of the Researcher

According to Mertler (2016), “Action research is participative since educators are integral members- not disinterested outsiders- of the research process” (p. 18). In traditional educational research, researchers are somewhat removed from the setting and seldom directly involved (Schmuck, 1997). I will position myself as an insider by being both the researcher and instructor; I will create lessons centered on culturally relevant teaching strategies and implement them in my social studies classes.

Design of Study

The current action research study will employ a qualitative research design but will also employ quantitative data collection tools. Such designs are more beneficial for action research. Mertler (2016) states “most educators, when investigating their own classroom practices, see the benefit of collecting some data that are qualitative and some data are quantitative” (p. 105). The different types of data provide information that can be statistically analyzed and gauge student perception. Researchers use various models for action research designs. The action research model proposed by Mertler (2016) includes four steps- planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. This model will be utilized in this action research study to answer my research question.

Planning The first step of the research cycle is the planning phase. The planning phase includes identifying and limiting a topic and gathering information. Mertler (2016) notes the importance of identifying and limiting a topic by stating “If the research topic is too broad or too vague, the researcher may become overwhelmed with too many possible variations in the data collection, too much data, and too little time. If too narrow, it may
not be possible to collect appropriate data to be able to answer the question at hand” (p. 53).

While brainstorming a Problem of Practice within my professional context, one area immediately stood out. Faculty data meetings highlighted an issue that resonated deeply with me; I strongly believe in and actively advocate for equity in education. However, school and district data revealed major problems. The presence of an achievement gap was evident, and it was obvious that as educators we were failing to meet the needs of all students, not just those considered advanced. As a result, the focus of my problem of practice is grade-level students. This led me to consider the following research areas from my professional context:

1. How can mentoring improve student achievement?
2. How can mentoring improve self-efficacy?
3. How can culturally responsive teaching through mentoring improve student achievement?
4. How can the use of culturally relevant pedagogy impact the achievement, self-efficacy, and motivation of African American males at CMS?

I initially included mentoring due to the programs I worked in as an undergraduate and the wonderful relationships I formed with my teachers. One of the main components of culturally relevant pedagogy is the environment of the classroom being one of comfort and respect while tapping into students’ experience during learning. I realized culturally relevant pedagogy would allow me to not only tap into students’ hidden potential, but also build relationships in the process. Through reflection I concluded it would benefit
students to focus more on engagement than achievement. After much thought, the following research question was derived: How does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies impact self-efficacy and engagement of African American males? I immediately began gathering information and reviewing the literature related to this research question which is provided in Chapter 2.

**Development of the research plan.** After formulating a research question, my next step was to begin developing a research plan. As stated, this seven-week, qualitative methods study will include both qualitative and quantitative data. The inclusion of both types of data may result in a better understanding of the research problem than using either type data solely (Mertler, 2016). In accordance with the principles of action research, this study will take place within my educational context - my classroom. Lessons created will be centered around culturally relevant pedagogy and exposing students to multiple perspectives in history. The unit used for this study will be The Age of Exploration which is one of the weakest units for seventh grade social studies students as evidenced by student’s scores on South Carolina Social Studies PASS testing. I will also collaborate with other social studies teachers at Community Middle school as well as building level educational leaders in effort to help improve the proposed problem of practice. Burt et al explains:

“Interacting with peers, planning action, action, and reflecting-on-experience all require making the implicit explicit to serve cognitive, communicative, and emotional functions. What social contexts add over individual experiences is the synergistic effect of a group with a common problem, being in the same
(experiential) boat and sharing a common purpose. What the groups also add, even if they sometimes deal with conflict, is positive interpersonal support and mutual affirmation as they pursue common goals. In the sense of power-relations and ownership, the groups are collegial--participants are co-learners and co-teachers” (p.262).

Such collaboration will be critical to my action research study.

**Acting** According to Mertler (2016), the second phase of an action research study is the acting stage. During this phase data is collected and analyzed to determine how well the action research study answers the research question. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be used and statistically analyzed to determine the validity of measures used to calculate the impact of culturally relevant in social studies on student engagement and self-efficacy employed throughout the study.

**Sample** The context of this action research study will be Community Middle School. The students at CMS will serve as the sample for this study. The group consists of approximately 15-20 students. I will use a convenience sample since randomization is not possible due to possible disruptions to the normal school schedule. One of my classes will be used for the study. Three to five African American males within the class will be used as a focus group throughout the study. The study will be centered on 3 of the 5 African American males in the focus group. Student narratives are listed below.

**Junior.** Junior is a very intelligent student. He is 13 years old and loves sports, especially basketball. He aspires to play on the school basketball team and plans to try out once the season begins. He also likes to play video games and loves spending time
playing Fortnite. Junior wants his friends to be respectful and caring and is very social. He describes himself as funny and smart and one day would like to own his own home. Despite characterizing himself as smart, his proudest moment is passing 6th grade. He admits he “really didn’t try” and instead used class time to socialize. School was always easy, and he never had to study before, nor did he do any homework. Junior earned C’s and D’s in academic core classes and almost failed science in 6th Grade despite scoring at the 80th percentile for MAP during the Spring Administration of MAP at the end of his 6th grade year. His RIT fluctuated throughout the year. Figure 2.1 details his MAP scores for each administration since entering Middle school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>RIT</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019 Fall</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Spring</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Winter</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Fall</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jason. Jason is a reserved student; he is quiet at times and apprehensive to speak aloud unless he is sure of himself. He is 11 years old and will turn 12 in December. Jason is younger than his peers and age may contribute to his reservedness. His father served in the military and he has moved quite often living in Hawaii, Georgia, Texas, and now South Carolina. Jason characterizes himself as having a funny personality but only once a person gets to know him well. He likes to play video games
and Fortnite is his favorite game as well. Jason spends much of his free time at school in the media center. Most days he can be found there playing board games and building structures in the media center’s Maker Space before school starts and during lunch. His favorite subject is math and he aspire to be a gamer one day. He prides himself on having made honor roll from first through fourth grade. Table 3.2 details Jason’s MAP scores since entering middle school. His RIT increased throughout sixth grade but then dropped again for the first administration of 7th grade with his highest rank being in the 50th percentile.

Table 3.2 Jason’s MAP Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>RIT</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019 Fall</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Spring</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Winter</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Fall</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tyler.** Tyler is 12 years old. He enjoys playing sports and interacting with his younger sister and older brother. He is a member of a recreational football league and practices each day after school. Tyler cherishes this time due to being able to spend it with his father. His most memorable moment is winning a football championship. Social studies is his favorite subject and he wants to go into the medical field one day. Tyler’s
mother speaks of his curious nature and how he tries to teach her what he learns in social studies when he is home. He describes himself as smart but (with emphasis added) cool. Tyler scored in the 50th and 40th percentiles in MAP reading in 6th grade. However, his scores drastically decreased for the first administration of seventh grade, dropping down to the 11th percentile from the 52nd percentile. MAP scores are shown in Table 3.3.

### Table 3.3 Tyler’s MAP Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>RIT</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019 Fall</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Spring</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Winter</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018 Fall</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Methods**

**Implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is a method of instruction rooted in using students’ culture and experience to guide teaching and learning. I chose this pedagogical style to help increase engagement and self-efficacy of my grade level social studies class. The ability of grade level students is often underestimated leading to instruction that is less rigorous and disengaging. A synthesis of the related literature by Gloria Ladson-Billings will be used to create lessons. Specific components used are academic excellence, cultural awareness, critical critique, and building a classroom environment of respect. I will reflect after each lesson and use this data to improve later lessons.
Culturally relevant pedagogy will be incorporated into the seventh-grade social studies standards to create meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

**Data Collection Methods**

My research question is: How does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies impact self-efficacy and engagement of African American males. As stated, this is a qualitative methods study. Qualitative data collection methods include focus groups, individual interviews, and observations. Surveys, a quantitative data collection method, is also used in this study. The inclusion of both types of data may lead to a better understanding of the problem of practice than either type of data independently (Mertler, 2016).

**Surveys.** Two surveys will be administered throughout this action research study. The Achievement Goal Questionnaire-Revised or AGQ-R (Elliot & Murayama; 2008) will be used to examine students’ achievement goal orientations. Students with higher achievement goals tend to be more self-efficacious and are more likely to “prefer academic goals such as seeking challenge and new knowledge as well as getting good grades, outperforming other students, and showing their intelligence through their schoolwork” (Komarraju and Nadler, 2013, p. 70). The AGQ-R consists of 12 items measuring mastery-approach (3 questions), performance-approach (3 questions), mastery-avoid (3 questions), performance-avoid (3 questions). AGQ-R questions will be worded to reflect students’ goals for social studies achievement. This survey will be administered at the start and end of the study to measure students’ achievement goal attainment. (See Appendix B) The second survey- Student Measure of Culturally Responsive Teaching Survey Tool, requires students to assess their perception of the use
of culturally relevant pedagogy and will be administered at the start and conclusion of the study. See Appendix C for survey questions

**Focus Group.** The focus group will consist of 3-5 African American males. The group setting of focus groups helps stimulate conversation and produce information that may not be collected from a single person (Guest et al, 2017). The focus group will be used throughout the study to inform the researcher how to plan and adapt lessons as well as to share participants’ thoughts and point of view concerning culturally relevant teaching and their belief in their ability to succeed.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** According to Mertler (2016), in semi-structured interviews the researcher “asks several ‘base’ questions but also has the option of following up a given response with alternative, optional questions that may or may not be used by the researcher depending on the situation” (p. 134). Guest et al. (2017) further notes they provide more insight into one’s personal thoughts, feelings, and world view. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with only the research focus group. The first interview will allow the researcher to get to know individual member of the group better. Subsequent interviews will be held at the midpoint and end of the study to give the researcher in depth details concerning their perception of the culturally relevant lesson implemented by the researcher. See Appendix D for the interview questions.

**Unstructured Observations.** The teacher-researcher will conduct unstructured observations throughout the six-week study. This type of observation provides more flexibility to attend to other activities occurring in the classroom during observations or brief intervals of observation and note-taking (Mertler, 2016). The teacher-researcher will complete the engagement rubric during observations. See Appendix E for the
Student Engagement Observation Tool. Field notes will also be taken during this time as well as after lessons have ended as reflection.

Data Analysis

As stated, the data collected from my study will be both quantitative and qualitative. Both data sets will be given equal emphasis allowing the researcher to “combine the strengths of each form of data (Mertler, 2016, p. 107). The data sets will then be compared to note similarities which can lead to increased credibility of the study (Mertler, 2016). Inductive analysis will be used to analyze qualitative data. Through this process the researcher seeks to identify and organize data into important patterns and themes in effort to construct a framework for presenting the findings of the study (Mertler, 2016). After patterns and/or themes emerge, I will analyze the information to establish connections between the data and the research question.

Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mertler (2016) defines descriptive statistics as “simple mathematical procedures that serve to simplify, summarize, and organize relatively large amounts of numerical data” (p. 178). The central tendency measures of mean and median will be used to describe student-participants’ responses to the surveys administered. Standard deviation will be used in lieu median calculations in any event that there is an extreme outlier which could manipulate the data.

Conclusion

Chapter Three details the methodology employed in this action research study. A detailed description of the research design including the role of the researcher, the sample, and data collection and analysis is provided. Mertler's (2016) model for action
research is utilized in this study to answer the research question. Thus, this chapter also discusses his four steps- planning, acting, developing, and reflecting- as they relate to the methodology of this action research study. Chapter 4 will detail the results of this study.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH FINDINGS

This action research study examines the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on student engagement and self-efficacy. The problem of practice for this study is the widening achievement gap between grade level and honors class with African American males being the largest underachieving subgroup despite scoring above the 50th percentile on MAP Reading. I recorded and analyzed the effects of the implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on three African American males, specifically focusing on engagement and self-efficacy. Students completed a Student Interest Inventory at the start of the study to help the teacher-researcher plan lessons that catered to their likes.

The Student Measure of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Goal Achievement survey were administered at the start of this action research study and repeated at the end to monitor any changes in students’ perception of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and their levels of self-efficacy. A focus group of five African American males was also created and students were interviewed at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. This provided an in-depth narrative of students’ perception of culturally relevant lessons as well as their levels of engagement and self-efficacy. Unstructured observations were conducted throughout the seven-week study with an engagement rubric as a data collection tool to assess engagement during lessons using both Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and other instructional methods such as lecture, note-taking, and independent
practice. Field notes were taken daily at the end of each lesson to note and reflect on the interaction of the focus group students during lessons. This intervention occurred at the beginning of the school year, beginning with August 24.

**Research Question**

How does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies impact self-efficacy and engagement of African American males?

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this action research study is to increase the engagement or willingness to engage of 7th grade African American males at Community Middle School through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Findings of the Study**

This section begins with the teacher researcher’s first impression of the student participant. The findings of the study are then presented. The findings are separated in chronological order and discusses targeted lessons. This discussion includes relevant information from field notes and semi-structured interviews along with the teacher-researcher’s analysis of the events that occurred during the targeted lessons. Analysis is based on the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy: academic achievement, cultural awareness, and cultural critique. In addition, themes that were recognized by the teacher-researcher during data analysis are also discussed. These themes include learning within the context of culture, communication of high expectations, and the development of relationships.
First Impressions

My first impressions of Junior, Tyler, and Jason were of promise and hope. Each student described himself as smart when asked of the one thing they would like for people to know about them. This is a great mindset to possess. Their individual assessment data told this same story; they were capable of success but did not work to their potential. This was evidenced by the drastic decrease in MAP Reading Scores. It was now my duty to find out why this disconnect existed and bridge the gap between their mindset and performance.

My first impression was also one of drudgery. This came as a result my observation of student behavior the first days of school. The start of a new school year is one of excitement for most students. Jason, Junior, and Tyler were no different. They came into the classroom and sat in the back tables and immediately began to talk loudly while laughing and joking with their peers. Junior seemed to be the focal point of the class as others listened to him speak. I could tell he was among the popular group from his interactions with other students; they were very fond of him. The same was exhibited with Tyler. The class erupted in laughter as he told jokes and spoke about his summer. Jason was more reserved and was more of an onlooker than being involved in the conversation.

I recognized it would tougher to increase Junior and Tyler’s willingness to engage than Jason. They were considered leaders of the class and seemed to have a reputation of being more popular or “cool” than smart. and wanted to uphold this perception. I redirected them several times during the first few days of class, but this redirection did not change their behavior. They were even defiant at times and refused to participate in
activities. On the other hand, Jason was more of a loner and was not disruptive but also
did not participate in class activities. I knew working with these guys would be a
struggle requiring much time and dedication, but that my efforts would reap great
rewards in the end.

Friday, 8/24- The third day of the new school year.

Social Contract. The class social contract was the first activity completed during
this action research study. A social contract is an agreement of behavior. The purpose of
completing this activity was to establish classroom norms and expectations that everyone,
including myself, would abide by this school year. This activity is part of the Capturing
Kids’ Hearts Curriculum created by Flip Flippen. There were several lessons throughout
this action research that deal with issues of diversity and there must be procedures in
place to help ensure such conversations are effectively held.

Students were divided into groups of five and each group member was assigned a
role: time keeper, facilitator, spokesperson, on-task person, and affirmer. The activity
required students to answer the following questions:

1. How do you want to be treated by me?
2. How do you want to be treated by each other?
3. How do you think I want to be treated by you?
4. How do you want to be treated by each other when there is a conflict?

While completing this activity, one of the most common responses on how students
would like to be treated was respect.

Junior: Everybody better respect me. If they don’t respect me I’m not
gone respect them.
Tyler: Bro be quiet. You don’t respect nobody.

Junior: I just said if they respect me then I will do the same, duh. Look who talking you don’t respect Mrs. Cruse.

Tyler: (Jokingly) She got to earned it (class erupts in laughter).

Students wanted to feel respected. This included respecting their opinions and they wanted to be treated fair and as an equal to the teacher and other students. Essentially, they wanted to feel a sense of belonging. Once the lesson was completed and the social contract was written, all students signed the document and it was posted in the classroom to reference during activities and discussion as needed.

Each group also had to come up with a class name as part of this assignment. The two finalists for the class name were “Almost Honors” and “The Crusers.” The Crusers was created as a variant of my last name- Cruse. I was proud of the name “Almost Honors.” This showed me students believed in their ability to learn and be successful by comparing their ability to honors students. The vote was 8-7 in favor of The Crusers.

Figure 4.1 Social Contract

Figure 4.2 shows the results of the unstructured observations for the Social Contract Lessons. The frequency of behaviors reflects the total number of times the
behaviors were observed in one class period. See Appendix D for the full description of behaviors being observed. Apart from reading and giving feedback, students were relatively disengaged except for Jason. He asked questions and interacted with the text and other students in his group. Junior and Tyler mostly spoke but did not write anything. They simply served as sounding boards for the group. However, they all displayed low-yield engagement indicators during this hour and five-minute class period. Students responded to peers, listened, and took turns talking during the lesson but did not exhibited higher yield factors such as engaging in discussing the text or other input. Low yield engagement factors represent low levels of engagement as students are not as involved in lessons or tasks.

![Student Engagement Observation](image)

*Figure 4.2 Student Engagement: Social Contract*

**Monday, 8/27**

**Scavenger Hunt.** The scavenger hunt was an activity designed to help students build a sense of community by getting to know one another better. It also allowed me to observe students working together collaboratively. This activity provided me with the
opportunity to get to know my students better by helping to build relationships. Positive teacher-student relationships are essential to establishing and maintaining a class environment that is conducive to positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Gest, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2005).

Students were tasked with finding a classmate with the identified trait on their handout. For example, the first task was for students to find a peer who rode a bus to school. They would introduce themselves if they didn’t know one another and then move on to find someone for the next description. I actively walked around and conversed with students but listened and watched the interactions students were having with one another. This activity was strategically placed after the social contract activity to reinforce the class behavior agreement.

Tyler and Jason were frequently off task and were redirected often. They were also reprimanded for horse-playing. They continued to misbehave after being warned. Both students were sent back to their seats after I spoke with them privately. The purpose of this conversation was to let them know this type of behavior would not be tolerated but also to reinforce the expectations that were set. Tyler apologized for his actions and joined the class again after 5 minutes.

The private moment with the boys was not as effective as I had hoped. The horse playing did end but they were still frequently off-task. Many of the conversations that took place were not on-topic. However, each time I addressed an off-task behavior, the social contract was reviewed to ensure students understood the expectations of the class. I held students to the expectations of the Social Contract and continued to stop the lesson as needed. This lesson set the foundation for future lessons and the expectations I have
for students’ engagement. I was able to reinforce group norms, but students didn’t get to know one another as I intended. Student engagement was low overall; low yield engagement factors were prevalent.

Since the school year was less than a week old, students were still unfamiliar with me at this point. They did not know me well enough to understand my high expectations and confidence in their ability to succeed. Despite this fact, I continued to address disruptive behavior and reinforced the Social Contract as needed. Private conversations were held in hopes of building relationships. I understood from the previous lesson that my students demanded respect, and I did not want to damage our budding relationship by addressing their actions in front of the entire class. Instead, I invested the time to speak with them one on one. These conversations were not as effective as I hoped but students recognized their faults and participated in the conversations that were held. Students tended to revert to their off-task behavior once they began to interact with their peers.

**Tuesday, 8/28**

**Empathy Lesson.** The Empathy lesson was adapted from the Teacher’s Guild Empathy Challenge. The purpose of the lesson is to increase student empathy to build a classroom community. The first task was to teach students about the concept of empathy and stereotypes. The objective of this lesson is to help students understand that stereotypes are the product of not truly knowing someone but judging them based on the actions of one or few people within the same race, gender, or class. As seen in previous lessons, one of the aims is to build relationships and to help students get to know one another better.

Students were asked 4 questions during the lesson:
1. What is something people might not know about you just from looking at you?

2. What is something people have assumed about you just from looking at you?

3. What is something you wish people knew about you?

4. What are some ways you identify? Try to come up with as many ways as you can. (Ex: I’m a girl. I’m from Los Angeles. I am creative. I am Hispanic.)

These questions were used as the basis for creating student messages. The messages revealed ways students felt stereotyped and then they followed it up with what they would like for others to know about them to combat the conceived notions stated.

Students were encouraged to share but could decline if they didn’t want to read their message aloud. I first asked the class to explain the word stereotype:

Junior: All Black people eat chicken and watermelon.

Teacher-researcher: How does it make you feel when you hear things like this?

Junior: I don’t care. They say junk like that so I say stuff about them too.

Tyler: I laugh when I hear stuff like that. I hear it a lot.

Jason: Not me. I want to fight when I hear it.

Teacher-researcher: Why do you think people stereotype others?

Jason: Cause they racist.

White Student: Racist! How you just gone say that?
I redirected students using the social contract. Two of the agreements on the social contract are “to be open-minded” and “to agree to disagree at times.” We discussed how Jason and Tyler’s comments may have been offensive and how to effectively communicate during discussions. We also spoke about the fact that being White is not the same as being racist and Jason’s comment was not targeted at his White peers. I reminded students that we may not always agree with the opinion of others and not all comments are stated with malice; people may simply be uninformed. I then proceeded to ask the same question.

Jason: I really don’t know why. They don’t know me.

I used Jason’s answer to explain that people tend to stereotype others due to their lack of knowledge about particular groups. This can be based on gender, class, race, age, and/or ability. Minority groups such as Blacks and Hispanics tend to be stereotyped due to being compared with White cultural norms. Next, students completed their messages. Though Junior and Tyler declined to share, they contributed meaningfully to the discussion and commented on their peers’ messages. I also participated and shared my message.

**Teacher message:** I identify as an African American female and people assume I have a bad attitude and am unapproachable, but I want people to know that I am a loving and caring person with a bubbly personality.

**Jason’s message:** I am a black male and I want people to know that I am great at math!

**Tyler’s message:** Just because I am and athletic doesn’t mean that I am not smart. I want people to know that I am very smart and cool.
**Junior’s message:** Just because I am big doesn’t mean that I am an athlete. I want people to know that I am smart too.

All three students chose to communicate stereotypes related to their gender or race. Though Junior and Tyler’s message doesn’t specifically mention race, they both spoke of race when I probed them further during discussion. This shows they recognized and could communicate the stigma placed on African American males by society. However, they were able to combat it with positive characteristics.

Overall, this lesson met all my expectations. Students communicated well and were engaged throughout the lesson. Meaningful conversations took place and despite the conflict caused due to the comment about racism, the lesson helped students learn about their peers with different cultures and backgrounds; it helped them to break down the stereotypes they may have held.

This lesson spoke to students’ sociopolitical awareness. One of the aims of culturally relevant pedagogy is for one to develop the ability to assess social inequities and take action (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Students were able to vocalize ways Blacks are stereotyped and how it makes them feel. Specifically, they were able to address stereotypes of black males. One prevalent stereotype is the idea that most Black males are only good at sports especially if they are tall or have a bigger stature than others. Both Junior and Tyler’s message spoke specifically of this stereotype: they wanted everyone to know they were not just athletes but also smart and capable of achieving in school as well as sports. Jason simply wanted others to know that he is a Black male and is smart which goes against what society portrays. The stereotype of Students of Color, especially African American males, as deficient is prevalent and tends to result in
unfavorable school experiences for these students. Critical Race Theory provides educators with a way to appropriately discuss the impacts of race and racism in the classroom and seeks to alter this negative perception of Students of Color (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Counternarratives are characteristic of Critical Race Theory and uses storytelling to debunk the deficit models used to describe the ability levels of Students of Color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995b). The messages created during this activity and the narratives of Jason, Tyler, and Junior throughout this action research study give Black males a voice and provides a counter narrative to how they are traditionally viewed.

I felt this lesson was a milestone in my journey to build positive-relationships with students. I made myself vulnerable by sharing my message with students. My message seemed to give students the needed approval to do the same. They were open and honest, and I supported them throughout this process.

**Thursday, 8/30**

**Cornell Notes and Creating H.O.T. Questions.** As stated, the previous lessons were used to build a foundation for the rest of the school year. Building a class environment that is conducive to learning is key. Students must feel comfortable with themselves and others to truly collaborate and be a productive member of the class (Froiland, 2016). I recognized this importance and vowed to continue to add to this foundation throughout the action research study. However, it was time to begin teaching seventh grade social studies content. I used the South Carolina Social Studies Standards to create lessons. There is not a district curriculum for social studies and I possessed the freedom to create lessons as long as they were standard-based.
This lesson was developed to teach students how to properly take notes and create higher order questions. Higher order thinking skills should be incorporated in social studies at the same rate as other subject areas (De la Paz, 2005). Cornell notes help students organize information and can be used as a study tool once completed. The method required students to take notes, but they also created questions from the information written and wrote a summary to explain the main points of the notes. This lesson focused on the impact of Europeans on the Americas which is required by the South Carolina Social Studies Standards. The notes gave a brief overview of the social, political and economic impacts of colonization on Natives Americans. Students took notes but worked in groups to create their questions and discuss the summaries they wrote. Students revised their questions and summaries based on feedback from their peers.

Tyler was absent during this lesson. Junior and Jason were relatively disengaged during this lesson and neither completed their notes. In addition, they barely engaged in collaborative group work or discussion. I continued to redirect both students in hopes of them completing their assignment. Jason even stayed after class to talk about his effort during the lesson. He inquired about his performance and stated he tried but was tired. I responded with letting him know being tired was not an excuse and to push harder next time. He dropped his head and walked off to class. I viewed this moment as a breakthrough with Jason. He was becoming more aware and critical of his work ethic and seemed to want to meet the expectations I had set for him. I hadn’t had the same success with Junior and Tyler at that point.
This lesson was not specific to the history of Blacks. Instead, it focused on Native Americans and ways their lives were impacted by Europeans. However, there are some similarities with the treatment of both groups. This comparison may have peaked students’ interest if introduced at the start of the lesson. When students are interested and can relate to the topic, they tend to be more engaged (Wang & Eccles, 2013). The lesson began to delve into social studies content and to challenged students academically for the first time this school year. I was met with a bit of resistance but continued to push students. Ladson-Billings (1995a) notes that culturally relevant pedagogy is not just “feel good” teaching but is rigorous. This lesson served to heighten students’ cultural awareness of Native American history. It was not as successful, but students were able to understand how the lives of Natives were altered because of colonization. The closure for this activity required students to tell one thing they learned during the lesson. Junior, Tyler, and Jason responding by stating the following:

Junior: The Europeans came and took the Natives land.

Tyler: Most of the Native died.

Jason: They made them work as slaves in the mines.

**Tuesday, 9/4**

**Map Skills.** The 7th Grade social studies is World History from 1700 to present. This is a very extensive time frame and covers a broad range of topics. It is important for students to be able to put the information presented to them into context visually therefore map skills are pertinent. This lesson focused on the European powers- France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain. Students were taught the main components of a map, such as the title, map key, and compass rose, and then created
maps themselves. The first map was a map of Europe and students had to locate the European powers, color code them according to a map key, label the oceans, and create a title. The second map depicted European colonial claims in the Americas. It required students to color code each colonial claim according to a student-created map key, label the oceans and continents, and then create a title. Students worked in groups to complete this assignment as I walked around the class to assist as needed. The lesson was reviewed, and volunteers were called upon to label parts of the map on the Smartboard.

Map skills are typically difficult for seventh graders. They tend to struggle with basic concepts such as cardinal directions and the name and location of the seven continents. Geography is currently not a stand-alone course at the middle-school level, but students can choose to take it as such in high school. As a result, many students lack needed knowledge in this area. I incorporated map skills into my class to give students a frame of reference when learning about topics. It is helpful for students to know where the European powers are located and which areas they colonized to fully understand the types of colonies that were established. However, due to the lack of basic skills this lesson was very difficult for students.

Tyler, Junior, and Jason began working as expected but I noticed their effort began to lessen when presented with content they didn’t understand; they began to give up instead of asking for help from me or their peers. I heard many sighs and I redirected Tyler and Jason due to putting their heads on their desks.

Jason: I give up. This is too much.

Tyler: Why do you make everything so hard. It wasn’t like this last year.
I monitored them closely and assisted as soon as I observed them beginning to engage in off-task behaviors. Students’ perception of assignment as being difficult can be a deterrence and should be considered when stimulating situational interest (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). I motivated them continuously by communicating my belief in their ability. None of the student fully completed the assignment during class, but they all worked hard. They were given the opportunity to finish for homework, but sadly the maps were returned the following day without any additional work done at home.

Overall, engagement increased from the previous Cornell Note Lesson to this lesson. Off-task behaviors were observed during both lessons but were less distractive to the learning environment during the Map Skills lesson. See figure 4.3 for the results of the student engagement observation for a comparison of the Cornell Notes and Map Skills lessons.

![Student Engagement Observation](image)

**Figure 4.3 Student Engagement: Cornell Notes and Map Skills**

Students were again faced with a challenging task. Students responded better to this assignment than the previous notes assignment despite both not directly addressing the history of Blacks. The map skills assignment was more hands on and I provided more scaffolding due to observing students becoming frustrated with the difficulty of the
task. I encouraged students to continue working to their full potential and assisted as needed in hopes of preventing them from completely giving up and shutting down. Through this assignment students were visually introduced to the dominance of Europeans in the Americas; they could see the routes sailed and land seized by European counties. This information will be reinforced and extended in other lessons to help students understand the perceived superiority of Europeans and its effect on society.

Friday, 9/7

**Quizlet Live.** Quizlet live is an online study application that allows students to study information through learning tools and games. Students were given questions and vocabulary to match with the correct answer. This activity served as a quiz review and students were taught the content through Cornell notes and map-skills assignment. Figure 4.3 shows the results of the Student Engagement Observation for these assignments.

Despite the low levels of engagement during the initial lessons covering the content, Jason, Tyler, and Junior were highly engaged during the Quizlet Live review. Each served as leaders within their groups and stayed focused and on task. Off-task behavior was exhibited by Junior at the start of the activity but was quickly ended by Tyler:

*Tyler to Junior: Now you know you not supposed to be chatting!*

Junior was using an application on his chrome book to talk to a friend instead of logging onto the Quizlet Live site.

*Junior’s team won the first round of Quizlet Live. Two other rounds were played, but neither of the focal students were in the winning groups. Students were informed*
they would play again later and directed to copy down the information that was confusing to them. All focal students completed this task despite previous reluctance to complete assignments requiring them to write. Junior, Tyler, and Jason all expressed their love for playing games, especially Fortnite, a video game on PlayStation 4, and this was evident in their competitiveness during this lesson. They collaborated with all their group members to ensure answers were correct and expressed excitement as they played.

Figure 4.4 Student Engagement: Quizlet Live

This lesson achieved the goals of the two previous lessons. Students were able to understand the social, political, and economic impacts of Europeans on the Americas and the European possessions in the Americas. The previous lessons were challenging for students and I was met with resistance while facilitating student learning. However, this lesson was well-received. Students equated this class task with what they are familiar with in their culture—gaming. This exemplifies the fluidity of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Gaming is a part of culture for many students today.
but was not in previous generations. Their competitiveness, despite the topic, was evident as each group sough to win Quizlet Live. As a result, they became more aware of Native American culture while I became more culturally aware of my students.

**Monday, 9/10**

**Influence Chart.** I frequently use graphic organizers to help students narrow down what is important and to organize information. The influence chart lesson was created for this purpose. According to the standards, students must know the social, political, and economic impacts of the five European powers on the Americas. The content is extensive, and a graphic organizer helps move information from short term memory to long term memory.

Students were required to read an informational text to complete this assignment. Each group was assigned a mother country and had to read the accompanying section, then highlight the social, political, and economic impacts. Students then wrote the information on their Influences Chart handout. Whole-class instruction and lecturing are typical strategies in social studies and were only used briefly during direction instruction (Lucey, Shifflett, & Weibacher, 2014). This method was chosen to prevent frustration as seen in the map skills lesson due to the rigor and amount of content presented. Guided practice was conducted then students read the informational text aloud and worked on their parts of the chart independently. They were allowed to conference with their group members before coming up with their final answers.

Jason and Tyler were more engaged than Junior. He refused to write any information on his chart despite being able to discuss the text and give feedback to me and his peers.
Junior: Yall have that wrong. Social means culture so religion is a cultural influence.

Student: …But you don’t have anything on your paper so how you gone tell us? (loudly).

Jason didn’t finish his assignment but asked to come during recess to finish and I gladly agreed. Again, he was showing that he wanted to succeed and cared about his performance. Tyler worked slowly and even gave up at times and put his head down but other students in his group motivated him to keep working. He was able to finish the assignment and I wrote him a pass to his next class. I noticed that when I redirected Tyler and Jason or speak with them privately about their performance, they tend to become more engaged and try harder. I did not observe the same progress with Junior, but I continued to push him to work to the best of his ability despite his apprehension.

The Cornell Notes assignment gave a brief overview of the social, political, and economic ramifications of exploration. This assignment provided more in-depth details of the effects including the death and enslavement of millions of Native Americans. As a result, students became more informed and capable of articulating the travesties of exploration.

By the third week of school, my relationships with my students grew significantly since the beginning of this action research study. Students now were more cooperative and willing to engage when faced with challenging tasks whereas before they were more prone to giving up. Skinner et al (2009) notes the ability of teachers to increase student engagement though positive relationships. Private conversations were not as successful before but were impactful at this point of the study. Students also began to make each
other accountable for their behavior and actions due to understanding the established expectations. This was potentially a result of perceived respect and care and an increase of students’ sense of belonging. I made a conscious effort to make each student feel valued. This included allowing them to share their thoughts and feelings, inquiring about their lives and well-being outside of the classroom, and showing a genuine interest in my students all the while demanding their very best.

This action research study revolved around increasing the self-efficacy and engagement of African American males using culturally relevant pedagogy. I hypothesized the use of this teaching methodology would increase student engagement and self-efficacy. Relationships and high expectations leading to academic success are both important factors of culturally relevant pedagogy and aided in students’ willingness to engage.

Monday, 9/17

Influences Jigsaw. The Influences Jigsaw activity was a continuation of the Influences Chart lesson. Students worked in groups to complete an assigned section of their influence chart. After discussion and coming up with final answers, students wrote their information on a master class Influence Chart. Each group presented their information to the class by explaining the social, political, and economic impacts of their assigned European power.

This activity was the first lesson students received after returning from a week-long break due to inclement weather. Initially I debated whether to teach this collaborative lesson after such a long break. However, assignments completed in individually are less meaningful (Lucey, Shifflett, & Weibacher, 2014). I started class
by explaining to students the objective of the lesson and reiterated my expectations. I also reviewed our social contract and relayed by belief in their ability to complete this assignment successfully. Students lived up to this expectation as they were highly engaged during this lesson. Overall, students were attentive as each group presented and completed their individual charts from the master chart.

I prompted Junior and Tyler a few times to get on task. Tyler worked slowly while Junior sat idly. Tyler participated more once his group began preparing for their presentation. I had a private conversation with Junior outside the classroom to better gauge his behavior. He stated he was tired, and I encouraged him to push through and get some rest once he was home. He returned to his group but was not as engaged as I had hoped. I continued to encourage him throughout the class period. Junior did not speak during his group’s presentation. Jason initially put his head down when he entered class but sat up after being redirected.

Tyler: I am trying to figure out why they say Columbus discovered America. Natives were here first.

Jason: I saw a meme on the gram that talked about everyone being immigrants. So how Trump gone stop Mexicans from coming over if everyone got here the same?

Tyler: (laughing) You remember what happened last year. Let’s not bring that up. (He was referring to a school incident when students were involved in a shouting match on a school bus yelling “Build the Wall” while opponents chanted “Impeach Trump”.)
Jason: Yea, but it doesn’t make sense. How immigrants gone band immigrants? Sounds crazy to me.

I used Jason and Tyler’s conversation as a teachable moment. We discussed that everyone has his or her own individual beliefs and opinions. I stressed that students in the class may have different political views and opinions that Tyler and Jason and having such views are not problematic. I reiterated the “Agree to Disagree” clause of our social contract and explained that sometimes we may not agree with the opinions of others, but that doesn’t make the differing opinion wrong or their opinion right.

As my relationship with students grew, they became comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions. They were more willing to voice their feelings and how the content as well as current events have impacted them personally. Overtime, students became more critically aware of social injustices that impact their lives and gained the confidence to speak out against them. Such interaction may be the result of students’ development of a sense of belonging and feeling respected. This awareness was illustrated in the following lesson.

**Tuesday, 9/18**

**Thanksgiving Mourning.** This lesson was adapted from the Teaching Tolerance website. In the lesson students explored the perspectives of two Native American authors about the meaning of the Thanksgiving holiday. The written perspectives were read by students in groups then aloud as a class. Students participated in class discussion and I asked questions throughout the activity to ensure they comprehended the texts. Finally, students independently wrote journal entries. All focal group students were highly engaged in this activity. They read aloud within their groups
and interacted with the text by asking questions and making connections to their lives.

Student reactions to the texts:

Tyler: So, they really took those people land even after they helped them?

(Referring to the natives and European settlers)

Junior: Why this the first time I heard about this? We didn’t learn this before?

Jason: Man, that’s messed up! Ain’t that how they did us too?

Junior: I am confused. Why would they teach us that Thanksgiving is about family?

Tyler: This whack man. They wrong for this.

After the discussion of both texts, students wrote a journal entry based on the following prompt:

Write a journal entry about whether you have a new view of Thanksgiving. Identify specific things you learned from either James or Keeler and explain how this new knowledge affects your opinion.

All focal group members completed their journal entries as assigned.

Figure 4.5 Jason’s Journal Entry  Figure 4.6 Tyler’s Journal Entry
Students were introduced to two different Native Americans’ perspectives of Thanksgiving to develop their own understanding of this holiday. They made connections to their lives and culture during this activity while formulating their own opinions.

This assignment proved to be a huge milestone. Students were able to relate the information in the lesson to the history of Blacks and vocalize the injustices encountered by the Native American population. Interest and motivation can be increased when students can relate to the content (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Even greater, all students completed journal entries to express their thoughts. It was hard getting students to write down their thoughts during previous activities, but they were actively engaged and seemed to like writing during this assignment. Each student worked hard to complete the assignment with very little resistance. All three students gained a new perspective of Thanksgiving due to being exposed to multiple perspectives of this event. They were never exposed to the Native American perspective of Thanksgiving and previously
viewed it as a time of peace. Though they planned to keep their same traditions, they now understood what the day represents for many Native Americans.

**Thursday, 9/20**

**African History Lesson.** I started off this lesson by asking students what they knew about Africa.

   Tyler: Slaves.

   Jason: It’s a big country.

   Junior: Those commercials about feeding children and water.

Further probing only resulted in answers related to slavery and poverty. I then instructed students we would learn about a different time period in Africa before slavery and emphasized that African history does not begin with slavery. Instead, they would learn about a time detailing the great Kings and Queens and powerful kingdoms of Africa.

   Tyler: Africa had kings and queens. Then why they end up slaves.

   Junior: If I was a king there is no way I would’ve been a slave. I would’ve fought back.

Students were then presented with a lesson on Ancient Africa. We discussed the great civilizations and various cultures within the region. We then watched a video which dispelled many of the myths students had about Africa.

   Junior: I ain’t never heard this before.

   Tyler: Makes sense. People always say black people are kings and queens. I see it on Instagram all the time.

The ending of the video began to talk about slavery and its impact on the great kingdoms of Africa.
Jason: I told you. Just like what they did to the Indians.

The video included how Africans participated in the trade of other Africans into slavery.

Tyler: So, we sold our own people?

Jason: That’s what the video said bruh. That’s crazy.

A discussion of how the exploitation of the existing system of slavery within Africa and the competition for power among African tribes led to African selling other Africans into slavery. Using the Critical Race Theory framework, I was able to appropriately have a conversation with students about race and racism (Lynn & Parker, 2006). All focal group students asked questions and contributed to the discussion. There were few off-task behaviors and Junior was asked to sit up during the video. Otherwise, students were engaged during this portion of the lesson. After the lesson Tyler and Jason made the following comments:

Tyler: So, they played us into selling our people.

Jason: They made it seem like they were helping but really just wanted the people.

This lesson supplied students with counternarrative of African History. Previously, students equated African American or Black history with slavery and prevalent stereotypes of the African continent. They were not aware of the great African kingdoms and African accomplishments before slavery began. Students were excited to learn about the positive aspects of African history and how European exploration resulted in major changes for the continent both in the past and present day. Students were more engaged due to being able to relate to the topic; they were more interested because of
being able to see themselves in the content. Figure 4.7 shows the results of the Student Engagement Observation Tool for the African History lesson.

Friday, 9/21

**African Influence Chart.** The next day students were given an assignment similar to the Influence Chart they completed earlier in the study. Students were tasked with reading an informational text on the impact of Europeans on Africa. They were required to read the text and highlight the social, political, and economic impacts and fill out their charts with this information. Students could collaborate with their peers throughout the assignment. I walked around the class to monitor students’ progress and assist where needed.

Engagement was not as high for this assignment. I hoped with students’ familiarity of the assignment and the opening topic the previous day would make them more interested. I frequently redirected Junior and Tyler put his head down when the assignment was first given. I gave the entire class a pep talk to motivate them to push through the assignment. Again, I noticed that Junior, Tyler, and Jason were more willing to participate in discussion than write. Though contributed meaningfully, it was still important for them to complete written tasks as well. This was also a trend with many other students in the class. I stopped the entire lesson to have a whole class discussion about expectations and effort. I asked students why they fail to work to their full potential while stressing their ability. Many were honest and replied by saying they were tired and didn’t feel like working. I responded by asking what would happen if they gave up every time they were tired or didn’t feel like doing something? Where would this get them in life? I asked what if their parent or guardian simply gave up every time they were
tired or didn’t feel like working? Students didn’t respond to my questions and many didn’t make eye contact as I looked at each of them.

Students worked better after the class discussion. They were more willingly to work overall and only a few didn’t finish the assignment. Jason, Tyler, and Junior finished and worked well with group members. I was proud students completed the assignment despite their apprehension but wished they would’ve done so without redirection. Despite the rough start, engagement for this activity was much higher than with the similar Influence chart.

![Student Engagement Observation](image)

**Figure 4.8 Comparisons of Influence Chart and African Influence Chart Engagement**

My relationship with students was a contributing factor in the changed behavior observed after giving the class a pep talk. I used my relationship with students to arouse situational interest (Pekrun et al, 2010). They recognized my sincerity and care for their academic success and were able to meet the set expectations. It amazed me how honest students were during the conversation, but it was soothing to know they felt they could be truthful regardless of their answers. I interpreted students’ reluctance to make eye contact with me as them understanding they had disappointed me. However, their drastic improvement was the perfect apology and proved what I knew all along- students were
capable of completing the task set before them. I did not allow them to give up and as a result they became more culturally aware of the social, political, and economic impacts of Europeans on Africans.

**Monday, 9/24**

**Cornell Notes.** The last part of the Age of Exploration unit included European influences on Asia. Students have already learned about European Influences on the Americas and Africa. Students took Cornell Notes to begin this section. They were directed back to the resources used for the previous Cornell Note assignment and participated in a brief review on how to create higher level questions and the requirements for note summaries.

Again, students displayed the same lack of effort and apprehension when given written work. I found myself reminding students of our previous pep talk and telling them to push through. I monitored student discussion of their leveled question and made sure to give students positive feedback. Students slowly began to work but complained that they hated Cornell Notes.

Tyler: Why we have to do this?

Junior: Just do it and get it over!

I reviewed with students how Cornell Notes help with retention of information. I also showed them how they can use their notes as a study guide. These were all things I explained in the previous lesson, but students seemed to understand the purpose of this type of note taking better. Students were more engaged during this Cornell Note assignment than the notes assigned earlier in the study. They were able to overcome their initial dislike and to complete their assignment. When students are more interested in a
topic, they are more likely to be engaged (Harackiewicz et al, 2008). I asked Jason what encouraged him to finish this set of notes but not the ones in the previous activity. He stated:

Jason: I didn’t want to hear your mouth today! (laughing)

Jason’s statement confirmed my thoughts. Students cared how I felt and didn’t want to let me down; they liked and respected me and wanted the same in return. I reciprocated by continuously motivating and encouraging them, by never giving up, and always believing in their ability to succeed. This is critical to the implementation of culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). I took the time to get to know my students as individuals and the rewards for my efforts were great. Despite redirection, occasional off-task behaviors, or needed pep talks, students tended to work to their full potential once they perceived I genuinely cared for them.

Friday, 9/28

Guest Speaker. Community Middle School holds a Career Day every year. All stakeholders are invited to come speak to individual classes about their career and to share words of encouragement. I invited Mr. Smith (pseudonym) to speak to my class. Mr. Smith is an African American male from a rural southern town. He attended one of the state’s prestigious colleges on a football scholarship. He majored in mechanical engineering and described college as one of the toughest things he had ever completed. While in college, football began to interfere with his ability to do well in his classes. As a result, Mr. Smith decided to quit the football team.

Tyler: I love football. I don’t think I could’ve just quit.

Mr. Smith: It was either quit or not be able to graduate on time.
Mr. Smith detailed his background and being a product of a family who “didn’t have it all.” He told students of how he always knew he was smart but never worked to his full potential in middle or high school. “I goofed off a lot. But then I promised my mama that I would make something of myself and that is what I stuck with.” He earned a degree in mechanical engineering and is now an engineer with Ford Motor Company. Mr. Smith then showed students the type of cars he has helped design and the new models that will be coming out soon.

Jason: Yo, you did that? (with excitement)

Tyler: Dang, that’s bad!

Mr. Smith ended the lesson by telling students:

Mr. Smith: If you say you can’t, you’re right; and if you say you can, you are right. It is all about your mindset.

After Mr. Smith exited I spoke with the class to emphasize the importance of working to their full potential. I then reminded them it is not where they are from that matters but where they are going that is most important.

Mr. Smith’s message reiterated the same things I told my students throughout this action research study. Mr. Smith seemed to have more credibility with Junior, Jason, and Tyler than I had in the beginning. This could be due to Mr. Smith being a Black male. They could relate to him more than they could relate to me. I had to earn students’ respect and actively work to build a relationship with them but they openly respected Mr. Smith. They responded to him by saying “yes sir” or “no sir” and paid attention while he was speaking which is also culturally related. In addition, there were very few off-task behaviors. The cars he showed students excited them and drew them in to the
conversation. Students were amazed that he gave up football for academics and couldn’t believe someone from such a small town could achieve so much.

**Tuesday, 10/2**

**Smartboard Simulation.** The Smartboard Simulation was used as a review. The review focused on the social, political, and economic impact of Europeans on the Americas. Students completed an influence chart while learning the content. As noted, the assignment required students to read an informational text aloud then highlight the social, political, and economic influences of Europeans on the Americas. They were then tasked with filling out a chart detailing the information they highlighted.

All students were highly engaged during the Smartboard Simulation. Students were required to compare and contrast the social, political, and economic impacts using a quad-Venn diagram. The various effects surrounded the quad-Venn diagram and student-volunteers came to the smartboard to drag and drop the information into the correct place. Surprisingly, Junior was the first student volunteer. All members of the focus group raised their hand to participate and gave feedback to their peers concerning the accuracy of answers on the smartboard.

Tyler: Now you know economic means money so why you put it under social? That’s culture.

Junior: Like how whites tried to change the Indians culture. Like how they try to change everybody.

Jason: I got this, I got this. Pick me next!

Figure 4.9 displays the results of the Student Engagement Observation for the Smartboard Simulation and Influence Chart assignments. More indicators of engagement
were displayed during the Smartboard Simulation than the Influence Chart assignment despite both assignments covering the same information. The use of technology may be a contributing factor. Students exhibited similar level of engaged during the Quizlet Live activity which also incorporated technology. Both activities peaked the interest of Junior, Tyler, and Jason due to their competitive nature. Again, all students stated they like to play video games and Jason would like to be a professional gamer. Technology and gaming are a part of their culture and students were more engaged when these things are used in the classroom. Through the use of technology and gaming, I infused students’ culture into the curriculum- culturally relevant teaching- and used their social behavior to help them move forward in their education.

Throughout this action research study there has been a growing awareness of social justice issues. Lessons have introduced students to multiple perspectives leading to heightened cultural awareness and realization of social injustices that students have been able to relate to their own lives. The comments of Junior, Jason, and Tyler revealed their understanding of racism and oppression and how it impacted them personally.

![Figure 4.9 Student Engagement: Influence Chart and Smartboard Simulation](image-url)


**Culturally Relevant Teaching Themes**

Analysis of all compiled data revealed three trends that are consistent with culturally relevant pedagogy. Student engagement increased due to lessons that specifically dealt with culture, the communication of high expectations, and the establishment of positive relationships with students.

**Learning Within the Context of Culture**

There were several lessons pertaining to learning within context of culture during this seven-week action research study. This includes the following aforementioned lessons: Empathy, Thanksgiving Mourning, Guest Speaker and African History. During the coding process it became evident from student engagement observations that overall student engagement increased during these lessons. These were the lessons students related to the most. Intrinsic motivation increases when students have a sense of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Figure 4.6 shows the result of the student engagement observation for these lessons.

![Student Engagement Observation](image)

*Figure 4.10 Student Engagement: Content Within Culture Lessons*
Despite the Empathy Lesson measuring lower than other lessons, it still proved to be more engaging than other lessons during this study. The Thanksgiving Mourning, Guest Speaker, and African History lesson consistently kept students engaged when compared to other lessons.

**Student Measure of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Survey.** Students completed a survey at the beginning and end of this action research study to measure the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. The first survey assessed their previous social studies teacher’s use of culturally relevant pedagogy. This included their perception of how students’ culture and background was used to drive instruction. Students rated their previous teacher’s use low. The ratings ranged from 3 to 0- neutral to strongly disagree. Also, the median for most of the items were below 3 indicating students disagreed with most of the items on the survey; students did not perceive their teacher’s practices as being culturally relevant. Student’s perceptions were altered after participating in this action research study. Student responses ranged neutral to strongly disagree, 3 to 5. The median response for most answers were above 4 with standard deviations close to one or below. Overall, students perceived my practices during this action research study as being culturally relevant.

Table 4.1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Min/Max for First SMCRT Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MIN/MAX</th>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min/Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 – 3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 – 3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 – 4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 – 3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communication of High Expectations

This action research study began at the beginning of the school year. All students were new to me and I was unfamiliar with everyone in the class. Students were also unfamiliar with me. Despite setting high expectations and frequently repeating them, students tended to put their heads down and display off task behaviors at the start of the study. Students just sat in their seats and did not work. There were not any behavior problems, but they simply refused to do their work.

Tyler: “I didn’t have to work last year as long as I was quiet!”

Junior: “Yea, they just say fail quietly.”

Jason: “Yep, and I still passed!”

Student-participants were not used to be held to high expectations. It was acceptable to not complete tasks if they were not disruptive in other classes. This presented problems due to my persistence for students to work to their full potential. Expectations were continuously repeated during all lessons in effort to help students recognize the importance of participation and completion assignments as well as my belief in their
ability to succeed. This required me to constantly walk around the classroom to encourage and redirect students as needed. Student-participants initially did not receive the continued redirection well.

Junior: “Why do you want me to do this so bad? What’s the purpose?”

Jason: “I can’t do nothing in your class.”

Students viewed my behavior negatively and failed to understand my relentless effort. However, overtime this began to improve. The first three unstructured observations took place before the first focus group meeting. Engagement was relatively low during this timeframe. Overall, there were low levels of engagement and the lower yield engagement factors, oral turn-taking, listening, responding orally, and off task behaviors, were present. This corresponded with students’ lack of participation despite the communication of high expectations. Despite the marginal gains from the first and second cycle of observations, I continued to monitor students’ progress and provided constant redirection while communicating expectations. This included whole class “pep talks” and encouragement as well as private conversations with students during class change, lunch, and recess. I told all students they could either get on board and start working to their potential or get carried as I continuously pushed them to work to the best of their ability. As the study progressed, students began to meet the communicated expectations without being prompted as frequently. However, this was not the norm and redirection became instrumental in their engagement. Lower yield-engagement behaviors stayed relatively consistent while off task behaviors decreased as the study progressed. Figure 4.8 shows the difference in engagement for lessons during the three cycles of
unstructured observations. Overtime, engagement increases as students were consistently held to high expectations.

   Jason: “Yall just do it so we don’t have to hear her mouth again.”

   Tyler: “I know, I know (pause) I can do it, get to work (in the teacher’s voice).

Students began to self-monitor to ensure they were meeting the communicated expectations.

   Figure 4.11 Student Engagement Cycles

   Relationships

   The establishment of positive teacher-student relationships were essential to student engagement. As stated, this action research study took place at the start of the school year and I was unfamiliar with the students and vice versa. However, over the course of the study we became knowledgeable of one another and created close bonds. Continuously holding students to high expectations contributed to the formation these relationships. It was tough getting students to work at the beginning of the study and they were less likely to follow directions even after being redirected. My consistency showed students I would not give up on them and that I believed in them. I started the
initial focus group meeting with a presentation entitled “All About Me.” I spoke with students concerning my background, life, and the trials and tribulations I had overcome. The purpose of this presentation was not only to help build relationships with the students but to also show them it is possible to succeed in life despite race, class, and hurdles they may encounter. The students made several comments while listening:

Junior: Wow, so you from the hood too?

Tyler: She don’t look like it.

I then asked how did I have to “look” to be from the hood.

Jason: You don’t talk like us.

Tyler: Yea, you talk white.

I followed up this comment with asking what it meant to talk white.

Junior: All proper (deepening his voice and sitting up straight).

Jason: She just bougie. You been through a lot though. I live with only my dad now too.

I closed with telling my students that it is not where they come from but where they are going that matters most.

Getting student to understand that I genuinely cared for them was not an easy task. They seemed skeptical of me and my interest in them. I frequently heard “Why do you care so much anyway?” The shift in attitude for Jason is shown below:

Week 2 during a focus group meeting when asked about his likes and dislikes

“Teachers don’t really care about stuff like this. They gone teach the way they want. They just want us to sit down and be quiet.
Week 4: After a private conversation about not doing his work

“You are really upset! I’m sorry. I didn’t know you really cared so much. I’ll come and do it at lunch. Is that ok? You not gone be mad no more right?”

Once Jason realized I cared about him things improved. After this encounter Jason would come to my class during lunch to work on missing assignments or just to talk. He became more vocal in class and began to give more effort. There were small gains that increased over time. However, it was a constant struggle to keep him on track.

Relationship building with Tyler was not as easy. He consistently slept in class at the start of the year and refused to work. I sought out help and talked to his teachers from the previous year to see if any of them had established a relationship with him. I was seeking ways I could be successful in this same capacity. I was heartbroken to learn no one was able to reach him and he the behavior I was encountering was the norm. I reviewed Tyler’s learning styles inventory and data from the focus group to find his interests to connect with him personally. Football was one of his interests. His dad took him to practice daily. This time was very important to him due to his parent’s recent separation. I would ask about his practice, games, and football in general to help forge a relationship. I made sure to speak to him every morning and asked how he was doing. Though not drastic at first, I was able to see increased engagement. He began to participate more and put his head down to sleep far less often. A slight hand on his shoulder or tap and he would pick his head up quickly whereas before he would continue to sleep.
Building a relationship with Junior was also difficult. Unlike Tyler who slept, Junior simply sat in his seat and daydreamed. He would be disruptive as times but went back to daydreaming after being redirected due to misbehavior. Information from his previous teachers and his learning styles inventory was not helpful in forming a personal connection. My directions and words of encouragement did not matter to him and seemed to fall on deaf ears. However, I soon realized there was one person in the classroom that he really cared for. During the third week of class one of the young ladies who had grown very fond of me asked if she could speak with me after class. When we began talking she stated:

Female Student: “Mrs. Cruse, Junior is my boyfriend and I can’t have him treating you like he do. He don’t do nothing in your class. I’m gone have to talk to him about this.”

The female student had also recognized Junior’s resistance to participate in class and was determined to make a difference. I sought Junior out during lunch and made him aware of the conversation I had with the female student. He began to smile and walked off. My personal connection to him was through another student but it helped to open dialogue and there was a noticeable improvement in class. Again, not perfect or consistent, there was an improvement in Juniors’ engagement after speaking with him.

At the end of the study students took a Unit Test to assess the content they learned. Junior scored a B+. He went to class the next period and refused to take his math test. When asked why he did so well on my test but would not do his math test he responded

Junior: “Her class is more important”. (Referring to my class)
I had mixed feelings about his comments. I was ecstatic that he valued my class and felt it was important but disheartened that he did not take his math test and was exhibiting the same behaviors in math class that he previously displayed at the start of the year.

Though positive teacher-student relationships are important, positive relationships among students are also pertinent. My focal students grew closer to me as well as each other as the study progressed. They supported one another and motivated each other to do well in class.

Junior to Tyler: “Sit up man! You always tired. Go to bed at night.”

Jason: “Come on. We can do it.”

Tyler: “Here she come. You better work.”

Students could be in different groups but still monitor one another. I began seeing them sit together at lunch and huddled at recess. Tyler, Junior, and Jason’s bond became stronger as my bond with them became stronger. I became the warm demander my students needed by balancing care and authority to create a learning environment conducive to their learning.

Through relationship building and continually holding students to high expectations, I hoped students’ self-efficacy would increase along with engagement. However, there were only minimum gains in some areas. The AGQ-R assessed 4 achievement goals: mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance. Mastery-approach is a positive predictor of enjoyment, task value, and self-efficacy while performance-approach predicts hope, pride, and self-efficacy. Mastery-avoidance also predicts task value, enjoyment, and self-efficacy but negatively predicts shame. Performance-avoidance positively predicts shame but
negatively predicts self-efficacy. Both administrations of the AGQ-R revealed medians above the midpoint. There were slight decreases in the areas of mastery-approach and performance-approach while there were gains in mastery-avoidance and performance avoidance which indicates a slight decrease in shame and self-efficacy. These results contradict the findings from student engagement observations and field notes where students spoke positively of their ability to learn. Tables 4.3 and 4.4 details the results of the first and second administration of the AGQ-R.

**Table 4.3 Means, Standard Deviations, Min, and Max First AGQ-R Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery-approach</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery-avoidance</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-approach</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-avoidance</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.4 Means, Standard Deviations, Min, and Max Second AGQ-R Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery-approach</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery-avoidance</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-approach</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-avoidance</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Three themes emerged upon review of the data collected from various sources. Learning within the Context of Culture, Communication of high Expectations, and Relationships were used to organize and interpret the findings of this action research study. Through this analysis I was able to assess the relationship between culturally relevant pedagogy and student engagement, and self-efficacy. Though results revealed students’ self-efficacy was minimally impacted by my use of culturally relevant pedagogy, student engagement increased as a result of culturally relevant practices.
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, ACTION PLAN AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion and Overview

I see a reflection of myself when I look at many of my students - low socioeconomic backgrounds and a member of a minority group but filled with an abundance of untapped potential. I became an educator to help these students like my teachers helped me; I became an educator to make a difference in their lives and aid in their understanding of the importance of an education. It was revealed during analysis of social studies assessment data that African American males were the lowest achieving subgroup despite their MAP Reading scores being above the 50th percentile. This led me to investigate the following research question in this action research study:

How does the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies impact self-efficacy and engagement of African American males?

The purpose of this study is to increase the engagement or willingness to engage and self-efficacy of African American males using culturally relevant pedagogy. Three African American males were chosen as focal students in this action research study. This chapter will provide a summary of the findings of this study followed by a discussion of changes and implications for educators. The chapter concludes with a reflection.
Summary of Findings

**Self-efficacy.** Increasing students’ self-efficacy through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy was one of the aims of this action research study. The discrepancy between students’ potential, as evidenced by their MAP reading scores being above the 50th percentile and academic performance, led me to believe students may lack self-efficacy. According to Akar, Doğan and Üstüner (2018), “A person just having knowledge and skills are generally not sufficient to successfully implement a particular work. That person also should have belief and expectation about his/her capability to conduct that work” (pag3). Assessment scores made it apparent that students possessed the needed skills, but their performance did not reveal these results.

Each member of the focal group completed a survey to measure their self-efficacy at the beginning and end of the research study. This survey was composed of 12 items that assessed students’ achievement goals in four areas: mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance. There was not a significant change in students’ self-efficacy according to this measurement tool.

**Student Engagement.** Increasing student engagement using culturally relevant teaching was another aim of this study. According the results of the Student Measure of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, students recognized my infusion of culture into the curriculum and perceived me as a culturally relevant practitioner. I hypothesized that the aforementioned discrepancy between student potential and performance could be a result of students’ disengagement. King (2015) notes that student engagement improves academic achievement and increases learning gains. Data analysis revealed there was an increase in engagement throughout the study because of culturally relevant practices.
The teacher-researcher noted such an increase during lessons that specifically targeted African American culture. There was also an increase in student engagement overtime as students were consistently held to high expectations and as positive teacher-student relationships were built with each focal student.

**Discussion of Changes**

This action research study implemented culturally relevant practices using social studies content. Various data collection tools including semi-structured interviews, surveys, an engagement observation tool, and field notes were used to attempt to answer the research question. The critical race theory (CRT) tenet of counter-storytelling was employed to highlight the perspectives of the African American males included in this study and to provide a counter-narrative. As a result of these research findings, I plan to continue to create standards-based, culturally relevant lessons for the remainder of this school year in effort to increase student engagement. I will continue to collect and analyze data using culturally relevant pedagogy and adjust lessons as needed to positively impact student learning. Next year, I will continue to build positive teacher-student relationships to create a community of learners and modify lessons taught this year to include my future students’ culture and interests. I will also make a greater effort to involve parents and guardians in this process.

**Action Plan**

According to Mertler (2016), action research is a collaborative process executed by educators for educators to improve their practice to evoke change. Reflection is a critical component of action research due to its focus on improving one’s own craft (Mertler, 2016). I initiated this study to improve my pedagogical practices in hopes of
increasing students’ self-efficacy and engagement. I recognized there was a problem and sought to improve my practices in the classroom. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) notes that such reflection is the driving force behind professional growth. An action research study may have no clear ending as educators observe, act, and reflect in continuous cycles to improve teaching and learning (Mertler, 2016). The following details my action plan resulting from personal reflection during this study.

As the teacher-researcher, I am a member of Community Middle School’s (CMS) leadership team and serve as the Social Studies Department Chair. I aid administration in developing school wide professional development and provide input pertaining to the implementation of policies and practices as a member of the leadership team. My responsibilities as the department chairperson entails providing monthly professional development, facilitating the development of common assessments, aiding in curriculum planning, and conducting data analysis with teachers.

Brubaker (2004) notes the ability of teacher-leaders to evoke change by serving as curriculum leaders. As a teacher leader, I frequently interact with teachers and students and have a responsibility to help both. Teachers and students recognize my genuine concern and desire for them to succeed. Effective leaders are driven internally to achieve and keep the needs and feelings of those they lead at the heart of decisions. Utilizing these practices has placed me in a unique position to serve as a catalyst for change.

There has been a push to create learning communities at CMS. Learning communities play a pivotal role in increasing student achievement to create effective educational institutions and I believe they can be used to mitigate the current problem of practice in all subjects using culturally relevant pedagogy. According to Sarason (1972),
A learning community is “any instance when two or more people come together in a new and sustained relationship to achieve common goals” (p. 130). Richlin and Cox (2004) state that such communities “provide an excellent structure to help faculty members develop scholarly teaching and learning due to the deep learning that can take place” (p. 128). I seek to empower teachers to continually reflect on their practice and use students’ culture and background to drive instruction. Teachers, students, and leaders will benefit from this deep learning as educators learn from each other and transfer this knowledge into the classroom. In addition, teacher leaders are likely to emerge through this process and will be invited to lead. We will learn from each other throughout this process as “leaders become followers and followers become leaders” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 131). The roles will constantly change.

My actions as a curriculum leader are rooted in my leadership philosophy. Community building is essential to successful educational institutions as stakeholders work together towards a common goal. As a curriculum leader, I will utilize learning communities in this capacity to serve students and teachers. The goal of increasing student engagement and use of culturally relevant pedagogy will be kept at the forefront of decisions as teachers learn from one another and the role of teacher and curriculum leader become interchangeable. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) explain “Unless inquiry is tossed into the professional conversation and dialogue that contributes to the knowledge base of teaching, the inquiry has little chance of creating change” (p. 236).
Implications for Teachers

Based on my experiences and reflection throughout this study, I have two recommendations for teachers:

1. Create a class community that is conducive to the development of students’ sense of belonging
2. Include curriculum connections to race and culture

Culturally relevant teaching is considered “good teaching” and cannot be compiled in a list of strategies due to its fluidity (Schmeichel, 2012). It involves believing in students’ ability to succeed, teaching students using their culture but also exposing them to other cultures, and assessing inequitable policies and institutions that impact society and may look different due to its dependence on student needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Using student culture to drive instruction benefits all students despite its emphasis on minority achievement (Bassey, 2011).

Create a class environment that fosters a sense of belonging and care. Schools are social environments that play a vital role in shaping the educational experiences of students. The social interactions between teachers and students influence the learning process and can have both positive and negative effects on student learning (Hornstra, van der Veen, Peetsma, & Volman, 2015). Maximizing the learning context and student achievement is dependent upon the extent in which positive emotional environments are created for all students (Sari, 2012). Such environments help students develop a sense of belonging by feeling they are respected members of the school or class community.
According to Sari (2012), students who experience acceptance and feel a sense of belonging exhibit increased motivation and engagement and are more dedicated to school. Despite these facts, schools tend to be “disconnected, uncoordinated, disjointed, irrelevant, and damaging to the lived experiences of African-American male youth” (Johnson, 2015, p. 909). Positive emotional environments are seldom created for African American males resulting in their lack of relatedness to school which can result in disengagement and subsequent underachievement (Hornstra, van der Veen, Peetsma, & Volman, 2015). Thus, it is pertinent for teachers to create an environment that helps African American males develop a sense of belonging to allow them to thrive in individual classrooms.

The implementation of care in the classroom is also important to the academic success of African American males. Teacher expectations and students’ perception of care can have both positive and negative effects on self-efficacy, student engagement, and teacher-student relationships (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Black males are often negatively perceived and face lowered expectations despite the need for warm but firm teachers who consistently hold them to high expectations (Howard, 2008, Ware, 2006). Academic performance begins to decrease when students believe teachers do not care about them or their academic performance (Noguera, 2003). Poor and minority students can become empowered and experience academic success after persistent failure when provided with genuine care by their teachers (Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). Specifically, Black students benefit from the feeling of care that is incorporated in culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).
I recognized the importance of a class community of care and belonging very early in my study. Students spoke of the need to be respected and valued during the first two weeks of school. I was accepting of this information and aimed to create an environment that students felt cared for and were productive members. I did this through icebreakers and “getting to know you” activities. I intentionally planned activities such as the social contract, empathy lesson, and scavenger hunt to allow students to get to know one another better but to also allow me to get to know my students. This included their culture and their background. Student work groups constantly changed and gave students the opportunity to engage in various peer groups. Group and whole class discussion were held to open dialogue within the class and offer chances for students to share their opinions. A class community was forged as students became more comfortable with me and each other and as they recognized I cared for them inside and outside of the classroom.

**Include curriculum connections to race and culture.** Once teachers have created an environment that promotes students’ development of a sense of belonging and care, I suggest teachers begin to incorporate conversations about race and culture into the curriculum. Often these conversations are left out of the classroom due to teacher and/or student discomfort but all parties can become more culturally aware. Being culturally aware is beneficial in many ways. The most impactful benefit is its ability to help people become knowledgeable of social inequities and power structures that negatively impact the lived experiences of minorities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Critical critique, the third tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy, is the ability to assess inequitable social institutions and will aid teachers in understanding their students’ experiences better. This shift in
mindset or critical consciousness is crucial to becoming a culturally relevant practitioner. Delphit (2003) notes “we must learn who the children are, and not focus on what we assume them to be” this includes “developing relationships with our students, and understanding their political, cultural, and intellectual legacy” (p.103). This includes talking about race and culture and empowering students to be change agents (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Students may feel isolated or disengaged when the curriculum is not reflective of their culture and their sense of belonging can be decreased which negatively impacts academic achievement (Singh, Chang, & Dika, 2010).

Once I created a class community and students perceived I cared for them, discussions about race and racism became easier. Students were more willing to share their opinion and knew what they said mattered. Students were not afraid to speak about ways they had been stereotyped or make connections from the past to inequities in society today. Such dialogue also brought the class closer as a community. They trusted each other and though there may have been disagreements, we were able to solve them amicably.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This action research study was concerned with increasing the self-efficacy and engagement of three African American males. There are many suggestions for future research based on the design of this study. This includes increasing the size of students included in the research. In addition, only Black males were included in the study, expanding the study to other minority groups is also recommended. Ladson-Billings (2009) notes that culturally relevant teaching is not only for minorities but benefits all students.
As the teacher-researcher, I was able to achieve relative success in increasing student engagement. This was due to many factors including my warm demander teaching style. However, the question of what will happen to these students when they are in the 8th grade lingers. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to track student engagement using culturally relevant pedagogy overtime and not just in one subject or grade. This includes a focus on White teachers’ ability to effectively implement culturally relevant pedagogy. Over 80 percent of teachers are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Currently, there are only two Black teachers on the 8th grade team at CMS. There is a greater probability of students having White teachers than African American teachers next year. My position as an African American female allowed me to share a very similar culture, history, and frame of references as my students. In addition, the warm demander teaching style is characteristic of African American teachers. More research is needed to explore the needed changes for White teachers to adequately replicate the traits of a warm demander and establish positive teacher-student relationships needed to effectively implement culturally relevant practices.

One final area of concern is student achievement. King (2015) notes that student engagement is positively correlated with achievement. Students who are engaged tend to perform better academically. Increasing the academic performance of African American males is essential to narrowing the achievement gap between White and minority students. This action research study focuses on increasing engagement using culturally relevant pedagogy, but further studies should be completed to explore the relationship between engagement and achievement.
Final Reflection

As intended, this study helped me to understand my curriculum and my students better. Crafting standards-based, culturally relevant lessons forced me to think more critically about my content and instruction. It also helped me understand the importance of using culturally relevant practices in the classroom. However, none of these things came easy. I realized on the first day of school that I had signed up for a daunting task. My boys seemed incorrigible and were tough to read. I knew breaking their shell would require hard work and perseverance but felt it would be worthwhile.

Increasing students’ engagement or willingness to engage was very difficult at the beginning of the study. I felt defeated at times but refused to be deterred by students’ disruptive behavior or resistance to fully engage in lessons. I recognized the talent and skills my boys possessed and giving up on them was not an option. Instead, I pushed through and continued to chip away at the ice slowly as I continued to maintain a warm but strict environment; I expected the best from my students every single day. Some days were more successful than others, but I viewed everyday as an opportunity to do the work I feel I am called to do.

I recognize that my journey is not over after this seven-week study. I have only begun and there is still a long journey to complete. Today, I can say my boys have come a long way even if they all are not as far along as I would like. Junior, who was the toughest to motivate and build a relationship with, exhibited the most growth. He became the student I had to monitor the number of times I called upon him to answer questions due to his hand being continuously raised; he began to dominate class and I had to give other students the opportunity to share. Junior began to take on more of a
leadership role in class and became engaged in daily classroom activities. Even greater, he was able to transfer this behavior to other classes as well. This was a complete change from the beginning of the study. I met with Junior’s parents and his other teachers close to the start of the school year due to the parents’ concerns about his lack of effort; he was not participating in class or completing his assignments in all of his classes. His dad cried in a follow-up meeting due to progress Junior had made not only in social studies but in all classes. My use of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies made a positive impact on Junior’s performance in his other classes. This exchange warmed my heart.

Jason became more social because of this study. He is now more open to sharing his thoughts and opinions but only when probed. Jason has continued to make progress in my class but still comes into my room at times due to not completing work as needed. However, I view this as growth. The work is being completed just at a different time. In addition, he tends to score well after the assignments are turned in to me. This is not true of Tyler. It is still a struggle to get him to work. Some days he completes his work as needed and is engaged in lessons and other days he does not do his work. Yet, I can always count on him to share his opinion and contribute to class discussion meaningful. Tyler is still a work in progress and I will continue motivate and encourage him.

Conclusion

Culturally relevant teaching is considered “good teaching” and cannot be compiled in a list of strategies due to it fluidity (Schmeichel, 2012). It involves believing in students’ ability to succeed, teaching students using their culture but also exposing them
to other cultures, and assessing inequitable policies and institutions that impact society and may look different due to its dependence on student needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Using student culture to drive instruction benefits all students despite its emphasis on minority achievement (Bassey, 2011). Positive relationships are key to student success. This includes being empathetic, holding students to high expectations to achieve academic excellence, and believing in their success. But it also includes talking about racism or the “elephant in the room” and making the curriculum more reflective of minorities. These factors can mean the difference between engagement and disengagement and subsequent achievement. Theoretically, culturally relevant pedagogy can increase student achievement and aid in narrowing the racial Achievement Gap. “The place where more immediate change can occur is the schools” (Zhao, 2016, p. 722) and I believe it begins with effectively incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy.
REFERENCES


Bassey, M. O. (2016). Culturally responsive teaching: Implications for educational justice. Education Sciences. 6(35); 1-6.


Reflections from over 20 years of research. *Educational Psychologist, 50*(1), 14-30.

groups and individual interviews: findings from a randomized study. *International

and emotions: The mediational roles of perceived progress, control, and value.
*British Journal Of Educational Psychology, 86*(2), 313-330.


Harackiewicz, J. M., Durik, A. M., Barron, K. E., Linnenbrink-Garcia, L., & Tauer, J. M.
(2008). The role of achievement goals in the development of interest: Reciprocal
relations between achievement goals, interest, and performance. *Journal of
Educational Psychology, 100*, 105–122.

How they contribute to student motivation in rural high schools. *Learning and


James, W. (1890). Talks to teachers on psychology. London u. a.: Longmans, Green and Comp.


National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). (2013). The college, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards: Purposes, practices, and
implications of the college, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies
state standards. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS.

friendship as predictors of early adolescents’ adjustment across the middle school

Noguera, P. A. (2003) The trouble with Black boys: The role and influence of
environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African

heuristics while reading historical texts. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*(3),
492–504.

ethical principles and practices. *Educational Researcher, 36*(7), 401-407. In Dana,
research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry*

Oberle, E., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2013). Relations among peer acceptance,
inhibitory control, and math achievement in early adolescence. *Journal Of Applied
Developmental Psychology, 34*(1), 45-51.

between social and emotional well-being and peer relations in early adolescence:
Gender-specific predictors of peer-acceptance. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence,
39*, 1330–1342

118


Pianta, R. C., & Steinberg, M. (1992). Teacher-child relationships and the process of adjusting to school. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development,*


APPENDIX A

STUDENT PERMISSION FORM

August 6, 2018

Dear Parent:

My name is Siddeeqah Cruse, I am teacher at XXXXXXX and I teach your student social studies. I am also a current doctoral student at the University of South Carolina.

I am conducting an action research study to examine student motivation and engagement. I will be asking students questions about certain lessons, assignments, and assessments. I will audio record lessons and interviews throughout the study. The data collected will be confidential and anonymous.

If you have any questions concerning this research or your student’s participation, please feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXX extension XXXXX or at XXXXX.

Sincerely,

Siddeeqah Cruse
B.A. University of South Carolina
M. Ed. University of South Carolina

By signing below, I give consent for my child/student to participate in the above referenced research study.

Parent/Guardian Name: ___________________________________
Student’s Name: ________________________________________
Parent Signature: ________________________________________
APPENDIX B

ACHIEVEMENT GOAL QUESTIONNAIRE REVISED (AGQ-R)

ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

Table 1
*Items for the Achievement Goal Questionnaire–Revised (AGQ-R) Paired With the Original Achievement Goal Questionnaire (AGQ) Items*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Item content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My aim is to completely master the material presented in this class. (original Item 9: I desire to completely master the material presented in this class.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I am striving to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible. (original Item 8: It is important for me to understand the content of this course as thoroughly as possible.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>My goal is to learn as much as possible. (original Item 7: I want to learn as much as possible from this class.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My aim is to avoid learning less than I possibly could. (original Item 4: I worry that I may not learn all that I possibly could in this class.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I am striving to avoid an incomplete understanding of the course material. (original Item 5: Sometimes I’m afraid that I may not understand the content of this class as thoroughly as I’d like).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>My goal is to avoid learning less than it is possible to learn. (original Item 6: I am often concerned that I may not learn all that there is to learn in this class.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>My aim is to perform well relative to other students. (original Item 3: My goal in this class is to get a better grade than most of the other students.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I am striving to do well compared to other students. (original Item 2: It is important for me to do well compared to others in this class.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My goal is to perform better than the other students. (original Item 1: It is important for me to do better than other students.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>My aim is to avoid doing worse than other students. (original Item 10: I just want to avoid doing poorly in this class.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I am striving to avoid performing worse than others. (original Item 12: My fear of performing poorly in this class is often what motivates me.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>My goal is to avoid performing poorly compared to others. (original Item 11: My goal in this class is to avoid performing poorly.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX C

STUDENT MEASURE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT TEACHING SURVEY

Five Point Likert Scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Items:

1. Explain what we are learning in different ways to help students learn.
2. Want parents to be involved in student learning.
3. Provide visual examples when explaining things.
4. Use things such as videos, pictures, and guests to help students learn.
5. Want students from different cultures to respect one another.
6. Use what I already know to help me understand new ideas.
7. Try to communicate with my parents about my grades and what I am learning.
8. Treat all students like they are important members of the classroom.
9. Try to find out what interests me.
10. Use real-life examples to help explain things.
11. Use examples that are interesting to help students learn.
12. Use examples from my culture when teaching.
13. Asks about students’ home life.
15. Asks about ways that students’ culture may be different from others.
16. Speaks about contributions that my culture has made to social studies.
17. Helps students learn about other students and their cultures.
18. Talked about the ways that people from different cultures are not understood.

Focus Group Interview Questions

I am going to ask you several questions about the lesson we just completed. I would like you to give me as much feedback as possible. There are no right or wrong answers so please tell me anything you think.

1. How did you like the assignment?
2. Do you think it was relevant to your life?
3. Do you think you understand the objectives of the lesson better by working with your classmates?
4. How did this assignment make you more culturally aware?
5. How did this lesson make you question society or things that have happened throughout history?
6. Did you find this assignment more engaging than other assignments? Why?
APPENDIX E

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT OBSERVATION & REFLECTION TOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade/Content</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time In</th>
<th>Time Out</th>
<th>Observer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBSERVATION &quot;LOOK-FORS&quot;</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>SPECIFY EXAMPLES/NON-EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Engages in setting learning goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Engages in making choices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Engages in reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Engages in writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Engages in discussing text or other input</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Engages in problem solving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Creates products</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Engages in peer tutoring, cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching, and other cooperative group structures: Specify</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Engages in relevant, real-world learning experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Applies meta-cognition strategies, Specify:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Making connections</td>
<td>e) Summarizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Inferring/Generating Hypotheses/Predicting</td>
<td>f) Visualizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Asking/Generating Questions</td>
<td>g) Synthesizing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Determining importance/big ideas</td>
<td>h) Monitoring and Clarifying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Creates/uses learning tools, Indicate:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Concept mapping</td>
<td>b) Advance/Graphic organizers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Manipulatives</td>
<td>d) Technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Other, Specify</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Engages in self-assessment of their work, what they learn, and how they learn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Engages in asking for and giving specific feedback to peers and to the teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lower-Yield Practices for Students

1. Completes worksheet, homework
2. Engages in oral turn taking
3. Responds orally
4. Engages in listening
5. Engages in off-task behaviors

2012 SURN Principal Academy: School of Education at The College of William and Mary, SCHEV, and VDOE