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## **Culture in the Classroom: A Study for Strategies for Bridging Classroom Divides**

William Rolison

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CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM: A STUDY FOR STRATEGIES FOR BRIDGING  
CLASSROOM DIVIDES

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## **DEDICATION**

To Shelly and Aidan.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers perceive the impact of socioeconomic class and culture on student/teacher interactions and to identify specific strategies that may be implemented to bridge cultural divides between students and teachers. To do this I employed a qualitative action research design incorporating semi-structured interviews, recorded dialogue, and researcher generated questionnaires. Together with two collaborating teachers, I examined teacher views of sociocultural influences on student/teacher interactions and identified cross-cultural strategies to implement in bridging sociocultural divides between students and teachers.

Study participants reported that participation in interviews and group dialogue made them more aware of how socioeconomic class and culture can create barriers to effective student/teacher interactions. Qualitative analysis of data revealed that study participants felt that socioeconomic and class differences between students and teachers presented both challenges and opportunities. Personal relationships were viewed by study participants as an important means of developing trust and overcoming sociocultural divides. Strategies identified for implementation were seen by participants as supporting student/teacher exchanges and building of relationships. Selected strategies include student authored autobiographies, narrative writing on cultural themes, arts-based exercises, and student/teacher dialogue.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACT.....	American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
ESL.....	English as a Second Language
IRB.....	Institutional Review Board
NCES.....	National Center for Education Statistics
NCSS.....	National Council for the Social Studies
NCTE.....	National Council for Teachers of English
PLC.....	Professional Learning Community
SEL.....	Social-Emotional Learning

## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Each morning I drive from my home toward Marathon Learning Center - the urban alternative school where I teach social studies. My drive often feels like an exploration of the human condition. It begins in my own neighborhood. A large scale, middle-income development in an area steadily evolving from rural farm and timber land into a bedroom community.

The neighborhood where I live now is a marked departure from where I grew up. Though the homes are more modest than others in the area, there is a solid sense of middle-class living. Homes lie between well-kept lawns and spacious back yards. Children ride new bikes or skateboard along our streets. Teenagers can be seen in their driveways tinkering with dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles. Delivery vans and service trucks are ever present.

As I leave my neighborhood, I pass more middle-income neighborhoods like my own bordering affluent communities with large homes and well-manicured lawns. In this area there are two public libraries, as well as a YMCA that offers several children's sports leagues and even equestrian lessons. My development and the ones immediately surrounding it are predominantly populated by White residents mostly from established middle-class families.

Within a 10-minute drive, I pass a number of trailer parks. People can be seen walking beside the road carrying bags from stores located several miles away. The homes are in varying states of disrepair. Rust is visible on the outside of many trailers. Having visited

tenants living in this neighborhood I know that some have floors of bare plywood or holes in the walls and floors that animals may pass through.

These areas are more diverse in ethnic makeup than my neighborhood, though there are still more White residents than African Americans or Hispanics. More than a few Confederate battle flags appear from behind trailer windows or beneath porch overhangs. Driving through these communities sometimes seems like reliving a part of my own history.

Moving closer to the city I drive through a mixed industrial area where apartment buildings and older homes stand next to an airport and a chicken processing plant. Economic conditions have pushed many more established families out of this area. Replacing these have been an increasing number of lower-income families and recent immigrants. Recently, several businesses have opened here to serve the Spanish speaking population. Entering the city, I drive through older areas comprised largely of lower-income White and African American residents. While the homes are older many are well maintained. However, there is observable decay in the streets and public spaces.

In 35 minutes, I have driven through a range of economic conditions from relative affluence to poverty. I have traveled between Black, White, and Hispanic communities and among heterogeneous neighborhoods. The demographic distribution of the district in which I teach seems to extend well beyond that observed on my drive. We serve students from more than 40 countries. Our students speak more than 20 languages and come from every economic level. Our diversity ranges beyond race and socioeconomic status. Even students who look very much like I do and live in neighborhoods much like my own can have backgrounds and living situations very different from mine. As do many teachers, I view diversity as a positive, but often feel that my fellow teachers and I could better teach our

students if we had approaches to help us to understand and use our student's diversity to create connections.

### **Problem of Practice**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2017) projected that by 2026 the percentage of White students in our nation's schools will have declined from 58% in 2004 to 45% (2017). At the same time the Hispanic population within our schools is projected to rise from 19% in 2004 to 29%. While the diversity of American schools is increasing, schools continue to report an achievement gap between majority student groups and others. The four-year graduation rates of African-American, Hispanic and Native American students all lag that of White students.

Similarly, the four-year graduation rates of disabled students, economically disadvantaged students, and those students for whom English is a second language are lower than average (NCES, 2017). It is this increasing diversity of our student population and the role of diversity as a factor in unequal educational outcomes that create a need for better understanding of how teachers may leverage differences to enrich the learning of students. Yet, as Ladson-Billings (2015) asserted, our educational institutions rarely consider the effects of culture on educational outcomes.

My own experiences as a teacher mirror these points. I am a White, middle-class teacher, serving classes comprised primarily of African American students. My formal training consisted of several courses in psychology and human development. However, it included only one elective course in anthropology.

In my time as a classroom teacher, I have attended many professional development courses in cultural competency. These courses, though, have largely consisted of the type described by Banks and Banks (2016) as the superficial transmission of fact. As a result, I

had little in the way of formal training in strategies and methods to address barriers arising from differences in class and culture between myself and my students. In discussing this with other teachers at my school, I found that my experiences were shared by many. The existence of this gap in preparation created a need to both investigate how perceptions of class and culture may shape student/educator interactions, and to identify specific strategies that may be used to bridge sociocultural divides.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Throughout this study, I have relied upon the definition of culture first penned by Edmond Burnett Tylor in 1891 as, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p.1). Culture not only shapes our perceptions of self and our interactions with others, it influences how we are educated and how we choose to educate others (Juszczuk & Kim, 2017). As sociocultural diversity is a central focus of this work, it is grounded in the multiculturalist assumption that our society’s diversity and its plurality should be represented in the constituent structures of its educational institutions (Banks & Banks, 2006). In recent years much research has been conducted on the role of sociocultural factors in shaping interactions in educational environments.

Sociocultural factors affect family involvement in education related activities (Bhargava, et al., 2017). They also shape the very personalities of students and the adults that surround them (Menardo et al., 2017). Socioeconomic status, race and cultural divides have been linked to disparate educational outcomes in many communities (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Roche, et al. 2016).

To more fully explore the role of sociocultural factors in shaping educational experiences and outcomes I have drawn upon the works of Paolo Freire and Pierre Bourdieu.



Freire (2017) constructed a model of critical pedagogy that emphasizes the need for educators to reflect not only upon their biases and assumptions, but also upon their roles in maintaining oppressive systems. The practices of personal and professional reflection closely align with many culturally responsive interventions and was an integral part of this study (Banks & Banks, 2016).

Bourdieu's model of non-material forms of capital is especially useful in examining the impact of socioeconomic status on educational opportunity and attainment (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) asserted that in addition to economic capital, members of society accumulate cultural capital, the advantages one gains through education, or familiarity with specific cultural norms or expressions: and social capital, the connections made through familial and social networks which may serve to facilitate meeting individual's objectives. Bourdieu's (1986) perspective may be especially useful in understanding culturally responsive pedagogy as described by Gloria Ladson-Billings.

Ladson-Billings (2013) argued that the divides between cultural and socioeconomic groups have fostered a number of what she termed educational debts amounting to what may be seen in Bourdieusian terms as diminished cultural and social capital. The accumulation of these societal debts, Ladson-Billings (2013) argued, represents a collective responsibility. As the population of our schools grows more diverse, addressing these educational debts grows more complex. This understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy also informed my work.

To better meet the needs that arise from cultural divides teachers and schools have been encouraged to adopt specific strategies to create, "a common space, favorable to the exchange of ideas, to the acquisition of knowledge concerning different cultural values, to

the expression of tolerance and positive attitudes regarding diversity” (Pricope, 2015, p. 24). Numerous studies using an action research approach to support culturally relevant pedagogy have been conducted. In these studies, several strategies were found to be efficacious. Among these were the creation of relevant professional development, the establishment of teacher work groups centered on culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally themed dialogue (Gaultner, 2016; Meissou, 2016).

The intent of this study was to examine teacher perceptions of class and culture and to explore the idea of positively impacting the educational environment using specific strategies to create a common space between staff and students. I have attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do collaborative exchanges of opinion between teachers alter their perception of sociocultural barriers to effective student/educator interactions?
2. What strategies can be identified to facilitate improved interactions between students and teachers?
3. What effects do collaborative exchanges of opinion have on the beliefs and attitudes of educators?

### **Positionality**

Education is an essential factor in economic and social mobility (Wei et al., 2016). While concerns over educational inequalities have been frequently voiced since the end of World War II, race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status continue to contribute to inequalities within our schools (Ratcliff et al., 2017; Hughey & Jackson, 2017). Much progress has been made in narrowing achievement gaps between White students and students

of color, still, disparities remain (Wei et al., 2016). However, improved teacher student interaction may contribute to lessening those disparities (Ratcliff, et al., 2017).

Gaultner and Green (2015) studied efforts to facilitate the inclusion of migrant children into a traditional school setting. Gaultner and Green (2015) found that action research could be an effective means in reshaping views of culture through, “collaborative exchanges of opinion amongst peers as well as with the migrant communities” (p. 49). Through the process of collaborative action research, I sought to address the research questions by examining the effects of collaborative exchanges of opinion amongst teachers in identifying specific strategies to address cultural and socioeconomic divides between teachers and students.

### **Description of Self**

I am a White male of European heritage. Both of my parents came from working class families. I was born into a poor, rural, Southern family who saw education as the only hope for improving their situation. As evidence of this, my father - who was the first in his family to attend college - eventually obtained his PhD and became a college professor.

For much of my early childhood my father taught high school and pastored small churches while attending graduate school. As inhabitants of the only parsonage in our small town, our family was, occasionally host to those in need of help. People would knock on our door in the evening asking for whatever leftovers we might have, for milk for their child or for enough gas to make it into the nearest city. My parents would invite them in and they would eat with us. My mother would find what food she could in our pantry and pack a bag for our guest to take with them. My father would then ride with them to the local gas station, where unbeknownst to anyone in town, the owner would fill their gas tank for free.

It was these experiences that impressed upon me the idea that I later came to recognize in the works of Paulo Freire (2017) as humanization. While few in my conservative, Southern hometown would identify with the works of a critical theorist like Freire, the countless examples I witnessed as a child of people with little means giving without reservation to their neighbors, their community and complete strangers impressed upon me the value of humanizing actions set against dehumanizing economic and social conditions, and how those efforts sustain community.

My childhood was far from utopian, however. I attended an elementary school in a small county that had begun integrating its schools under a court order just a few years before. Though African Americans had lived side by side with Whites for generations, racial tensions ran high. The county high school was closed several times in those years when students rioted. I can remember racial epithets being hurled by Black and White students in my elementary school. Several football games were canceled in those years because, “the Black schools” were not safe for our mostly white football team. While on an intuitive level I knew that there was something amiss in this, it would not be until I was much older that I would question the assumptions upon which such views were based.

It was dramatically different when my family moved to student housing near the campus of Florida State University. There we lived among families from more than 70 countries. In our neighborhood there were few White families. Far from feeling marginalized, however, we felt part of an international community. We had opportunities to grow together with friends from around the world. It was this experience that shaped in me a deep interest in culture.

Raised in a family that was in transition from working-class to middle-class I came to see much of the world through the lens of class structure. Along the way I witnessed the subtle, and at times not so subtle, forms of segregation and discrimination wielded against people belonging to marginalized groups in our society. I have come to be increasingly influenced by the precepts of equity pedagogy. I view myself as a social constructivist philosophically aligned with critical pedagogy.

### **Relationship Between Self and Study**

As I reflected upon who I am in relation to my research and those I enlisted to participate, I found that I occupied different positions relative to the different groups with which I have worked. From an institutional standpoint, I was an insider. I have been very much a part of the school that served as a setting for my research. In the eight years I served at this school I became one of the “old-timers” outlasting many teachers who came after me. In that time, I developed strong relationships with other staff members. I served as a department chair. In that role I was responsible for ensuring that district and school initiatives were carried out and that the concerns of those in my department were shared with administration.

From the perspective of sociocultural background, I was an outsider. While I shared common ground with many of my fellow teachers, such as a Southern heritage and the status of middle-class/middle-income, I had a different cultural heritage and background than most of my colleagues and all students. I am a white, middle class teacher raised in Florida and still not entirely at home in South Carolina.

Regarding positionality, I collaborated with my fellow teachers in analyzing data and reflecting upon our shared views of practice. In this sense I was what Herr and Anderson

(2015) described as an insider collaborating with other insiders. However, in relation to my students who were of a different racial and socioeconomic background, I was an outsider and as such was cognizant of the fact that my research reflects my and my collaborator's views of their reality. Indeed, the purpose of this research was to bridge some of the barriers created by an outsider status.

### **Statement of Purpose and Methodology**

While there has been a widespread improvement of outcomes, the inequality of educational attainment caused by factors beyond the control of the individual student, such as family background, remains problematic (Raitona & Vona, 2016). Recently, there has been an increased interest in better preparing teachers who are predominantly white, middle class and monolingual to teach diverse student populations (McVee, 2014). The purpose of this research was to better understand perceptions held by teachers as to how sociocultural factors influence the patterns of communications between diverse students and teachers, and to investigate specific strategies to facilitate improved interaction between them. Through this inquiry I hoped to identify strategies for incorporation into my own practice and to share them as a resource for teachers in my school.

Herr and Anderson (2015) characterized action research as “oriented to some actions or cycle of actions...to address some problematic situation” (p. 4). They further asserted that action research is best when conducted in collaboration with other stakeholders. For this study, I chose a collaborative action research approach as one that would allow me to partner with other teachers in pursuing effective cross-cultural strategies to improve the interaction of students and teachers in my school.

Efron and Ravid (2013) described the purpose of qualitative research in the educational setting as, “to gain insight into and understanding of how students, teachers, parents, and administrators make sense of their educational experience.” Because the purpose of this inquiry is to better understand the viewpoint of other teachers regarding student/teacher interactions without quantifying particular characteristics of those interactions, a qualitative approach was well suited to the research. For this reason, I partnered with fellow teachers to collect and analyze qualitative data – such as semi-structured interviews, recorded dialogue, and questionnaires - to share perspectives on the practice of pedagogy within our classrooms.

### **Data Collection, Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

In this qualitative collaborative action research study, I employed semi-structured interviews, recorded dialogue, and questionnaires. I enlisted two collaborating members of my school’s instructional staff and obtained consent from study participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Efron & Ravid, 2015).

Upon enlisting participant teachers, I arranged to meet through the Zoom virtual meeting platform to conduct a semi-structured interview about the perceptions of culture and classroom interaction held by the teacher. These interviews were transcribed and I completed the first level of coding to assist in identifying themes for further dialogue. Before using interview data, I checked codes with interviewees to ensure valid inferences had been drawn (Efron & Ravid, 2015).

After completing interviews, I met with participants in a workgroup of collaborating teachers. This meeting was recorded for transcription and coding. Peer checking was employed for final thematic analysis. During the workgroup participants discussed the

themes identified in teacher interviews and worked to develop strategies to strengthen cross-cultural interaction between teachers and students. Strategies were identified and initial implementation was discussed. Collaborating teachers agreed to contribute further to planning and implementation of strategies.

### **Significance and Limitations**

Efron and Ravid (2013) argued that qualitative action research applied within the school setting is designed to investigate phenomena by focusing on the meanings behind the experiences for individuals or groups. In undertaking this study, I employed a qualitative collaborative action research approach to better understand teacher's perceptions of the influence of class and culture on student/teacher interactions and what specific strategies could be identified and implemented to facilitate more effective exchanges. This research was of immediate value to my own practice and that of the teachers who collaborated with me. As I share the results of this research it should also provide useful insight to the teachers of my school. The results of this research will likely extend beyond this to inform the practice of other teachers working with students who have backgrounds dissimilar to their own or diverse student populations.

In using interviews, recorded dialogue, and questionnaires I hoped to provide a rich, narrative account of the process through which teachers work to identify and implement effective cross-cultural strategies. However, the nature of such research is subjective. While I attempted to triangulate data and provide for valid descriptions of the views and experiences of participants, outcomes could only be measured through the impressions of study participants. Additionally, the process described has evolved in a manner unique to the setting and personal factors of the participants.



## **Organization of the Dissertation**

In Chapter Two I undertook a review of literature to include works relevant to the themes of culture, diversity, culturally relevant pedagogy and promoting cultural dialogue. In Chapter Three I included an in-depth discussion of the methodology, methods, instruments and means of data analysis employed in this research. Chapter Four contains a report of the findings of this study and in Chapter Five I discussed the relevance and application of the study's findings.

## **Definition of Significant Terms**

**Autonomous Minority** – A minority group whose members may experience some bias or prejudice, but, do not experience systemic oppression.

**Critical Pedagogy** – Teaching practice designed to help students raise their awareness of social issues and assist in the development of critical consciousness.

**Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance** – Theory developed by John Ogbu that examines disparities in educational achievement through the lens of cultural group affiliation and power relations (e.g. voluntary minorities, involuntary minorities, and autonomous minorities).

**Culture** – The traditions, beliefs and behaviors associated with discreet racial, ethnic, or religious groups.

**Culturally Appropriate Pedagogy** – Teaching practice evidencing competency in the culture(s) of students.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy** – An approach to teaching practice in which a student's unique cultural traits are utilized to provide effective instruction and improve educational outcomes.

**Equity Pedagogy** – Pedagogical practice that employs methods and learning environments designed to provide diverse students with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences to function within society while working toward a more just and democratic world.

**Involuntary Minority** – Member of a minority group whose presence within a country is associated with coercion, persecution, or subjugation.

**Socioeconomic Status** – The position inhabited by an individual in relation to income and social factors.

**Voluntary Minority** – Member of a minority group whose presence within a country is largely due to voluntary migration.

## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Socioeconomic status, race and culture have long been recognized as influences on the educational outcomes of diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Roche, et al. 2016). Overall, there have been improvements in the disparity of these outcomes. However, the inequality of educational attainment caused by factors beyond the control of the individual student, such as family background, remains problematic (Raitona & Vona, 2016). These disparate outcomes have accumulated over generations and serve to feed a cycle of diminished achievement within some student populations (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Dealing with the specific factors fueling this cycle, Ladson-Billings (2013) argued, amounts to a societal debt owed to each student. As the populations of our schools grow more diverse, meeting these educational obligations grows more complex.

In addressing this indebtedness, educators must examine the institutions in which they practice and create a school culture that supports the idea of a shared space in which diversity is viewed favorably and diverse learners can come to feel that they are equal participants (Pricope, p. 24; Hansman et al., 1999). There is an increasing interest in better preparing teachers who are predominantly white, middle class and monolingual to teach diverse student populations (McVee, 2014). But how can teachers and students from disparate backgrounds best construct a cultural space in which student teacher interaction is optimized? Specific strategies have been successfully employed to support culturally responsive pedagogy. These

strategies include creation of relevant professional development, the establishment of inquiry-based teacher work groups, and dialogue between faculty members (Gaultner & Green, 2016; Meissou, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to explore how sociocultural factors influence the beliefs and behaviors of students and teachers from divergent backgrounds within an urban alternative school. As a primary focus I sought to investigate educator perceptions regarding specific strategies to facilitate improved student/teacher interaction. Through this inquiry I identified specific strategies to incorporate into my own practice and to share as a resource for teachers in my school.

As previously outlined, I focused on the following research questions:

1. To what extent can collaborative exchanges of opinion between teachers alter their perception of sociocultural barriers to effective student/educator interactions?
2. What strategies can be identified to facilitate improved interactions between students and teachers?
3. What effects do collaborative exchanges of opinion have on the beliefs and attitudes of educators?

This collaborative action research study sought to examine teacher views of how class and culture impact the formation of socially constructed barriers between students and instructional staff and how these barriers may be minimized, or their effects mitigated. While broad themes of class, culture, inclusion, and multicultural pedagogy were examined, specific attention was devoted to those issues impacting relationships between lower income African American students and teachers of disparate cultural and socioeconomic

backgrounds. To better understand these issues and to create a foundation for inquiry I have reviewed the existing literature related to this inquiry.

This literature review begins with a discussion of concepts and literature which form the theoretical framework for this inquiry. Next, I explored constructs of culture and socioeconomic status and their impact on educational outcomes. Then, the precepts of multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy were examined. Following this, I outlined specific research-based strategies for improving culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as applications and interventions employed in classrooms, professional learning communities and schoolwide settings.

### **Historical Perspectives**

Multicultural education is a relatively recent field within the study of pedagogical theory, most directly tied to the tumultuous societal changes of the 1960s and 1970s, but tracing its origins as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Sultanova, 2016). Carter G. Woodson, long recognized as the father of Black History Month, began efforts to advocate for the inclusion of African-Americans in the curriculum shortly after earning his Ph.D. in 1912 (King et al., 2010). While Woodson believed that it would be possible to change the prevailing perception of African-American inferiority by presenting a more complete history of African-Americans, he felt that this would only be possible if the subject were approached with scientific objectivity (King et al., 2010). Further, King et al. (2010) noted that beginning in 1922 Woodson wrote or edited more than 20 texts related to the history of Africa and African Americans and served as the primary editor of two journals of African American history. He felt that that providing such resources would allow classroom teachers to assume the responsibility of incorporating these resources into the curriculum (King et al., 2010).

The antecedents of public discussions concerning diversity within American society date at least as far back as 1620, however, pluralism in its modern context is a much more recent idea (Marty, 2007). Scott (2004) contended that, contrary to arguments voiced by many, the origins of multicultural education lie in this modern sense of pluralism. He held that this evolving sense of pluralism, arising first during the second world war, laid the foundation for the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In turn, the *Brown* decision advanced pluralist's ends by placing the impetus on schools not only to integrate, but to assume responsibility for the well-being of all students groups. Within this context, Scott (2004) argued that the idea that multiculturalism grew out of the Black Power movement and White guilt is due in large part to the misconception that multiculturalism is ethnocentric.

As multiculturalism grew from earlier efforts largely targeted toward resolving inequities suffered by African American students, it is often identified with Afrocentric approaches (Dunn, 1993; Scott, 2004). However, multiculturalism is dissimilar from Afrocentrism, as well as other ethnocentric approaches, in many ways. Afrocentric approaches to education seek to employ elements of African culture and models of education to provide authentic learning experiences to students (Akua, 2019).

Scott (2004) stressed that multiculturalism looks outward, where approaches that center a particular culture at look inward. Further, he noted that multiculturalism is oriented more toward improving relations between groups than preserving cultural identity. Scott (2004), claimed that multiculturalists ascribe greater value to the rights and freedoms of the individual than those of the racial or ethnic group. Unlike ethnocentrists, multiculturalists view complex individual identities positively and generally support interracial dating and

marriage. In fact, Scott (2004) observed, many multiculturalists are to some degree estranged from their own ethnic groups.

Some take a broader view of the development of multicultural education in America, tracing the origins of multiculturalism as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sultanova (2016) posited that multicultural education has progressed in a series of waves first described by Carl Grant as growing from larger societal movements. Each of these waves represents a new understanding of the relationship that exists between diverse groups and society as a whole, as well as a reconceptualization of multicultural education.

The last of these waves is perhaps the one that most directly impacted today's educators (Sultonova, 2016). As it was during this time that The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) began to advocate for the inclusion of multiethnic components into the curriculum (Sultonova, 2016). Among the significant efforts made toward reform at this time Sultonova (2016) contended, were the publication of Curriculum Guidelines for Multiethnic Education by the NCSS and new rules by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) which required member organizations to use multicultural education courses and programs.

More recently, Banks and Banks (2016) characterized multicultural education as, “an idea or concept, an educational reform movement, and a process” (pg. 2). They argued that the purpose of multicultural education is to change the structure and approaches of educational institutions so that all students have an equal opportunity for academic achievement regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, cultural group, or disability status.

## **Theoretical Framework**

As discussed in Chapter One, I drew upon Tylor's (1891) definition of culture as, "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p.1). Culture impacts both how we are educated and how we choose to educate others (Juszczuk & Kim, 2017). As sociocultural diversity is a central focus of this work, the role of culture in shaping interactions between individuals is an essential part of this examination.

To better delineate the effects of cultural group affiliation on educational attainment and pedagogic practice, I drew from the research of John Ogbu. In discussing Ogbu's work it is important to note that the term minority is viewed by many as dated and often associated with a world view premised on Whiteness and privilege. The terms minority and majority are used here for clarity in referring to concepts developed more than 40 years ago (Ogbu, 1979).

Ogbu's (1998) cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance holds that gaps between the educational achievement of majority and minority students are not due to organic differences between members of the two groups. Rather, these differences arise from the interplay of inequities, inherent forms of discrimination visited upon marginalized students, and the resulting perceptions and responses from members of these groups (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998).

Central to understanding Ogbu's theory of how minority groups achieve differently are the concepts of voluntary, involuntary, and autonomous minorities (Ogbu, 1992). Ogbu asserted that minorities whose presence within a society has resulted from voluntary immigration tend to have an instrumental relation to the larger society (Foster, 2004). An



example of such groups is Korean-Americans. Members of these groups often perceive their presence to be a positive and seek opportunities to advance within the existing societal structure.

Ogbu (1992) termed marginalized groups whose existence within a larger society is associated with coercion, forced relocation or subjugation as involuntary minorities. Examples of involuntary minorities familiar to most Americans include Native Americans and African Americans. However, involuntary minorities exist in societies around the world (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998).

Members of involuntary minority groups, might have directly experienced prejudice and oppression, or belong to a group who historically suffered persecution. In either case, the result of such repression can become a generalized mistrust of social institutions. Ogbu held that such mistrust may lead involuntary minorities to assume an oppositional position in relation to societal institutions, including schools (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Foster, 2004). This suspicion may impact how involuntary minorities view teachers, especially those belonging to majority groups, who serve as integral members of a distrusted organization (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998).

Ogbu (1992) also described a third minority group who are more inward looking and exhibit a specialized relation to the larger society as an autonomous minority. Examples of autonomous minority groups include Jewish Americans, Mormons, and the Amish. Members of this group might or might not have been the victims of explicit prejudice. Regardless of the existence of any generalized bias against autonomous minorities, they are not viewed as subordinate to the majority group.

Autonomous minorities may be influenced by social and cultural references that are external to societal norms. For instance, they often draw upon independent cultural references that encourage success (Foster, 2004). The relationship of Ogbu's voluntary, involuntary, and autonomous minority groups to social institutions such as schools as described by his cultural-ecological theory are represented in figure 2.1.

Membership in lower socioeconomic class, or involuntary minority group status were associated with negative educational outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ogbu, 2004; Roche et al., 2016). Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory provided a valuable model for understanding how systemic racism and generational oppression may shapes in some groups a resistance to the institutions that have historically served as instruments of oppression and thereby, at least in part, contributed to unequal educational achievement in some minority groups. Another critical theory, that of Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theories of non-material capital can be useful in understanding disparities between majority learners and some minority learners in educational achievement.

Bourdieu (1986) held that economic capital is a useful tool, that aids the individual in successfully navigating the myriad demands of life. However, he contended that it is not the only resource that we draw upon. In addition to material forms of capital, we may employ cultural capital, including knowledge, skills, education, or objects with symbolic value, or social capital, such as the advantages we obtain through group affiliation or social networks (Bourdiue & Nice, 2015). Both cultural and social capital have been observed to influence educational achievement in students (Jaeger & Mollegaard, 2017; Plagens, 2011). This would seem to lend considerable weight to Ladson-Billings' (2013) argument that unequal

outcomes should not be viewed so much as a deficit within individual learners, but a collective societal debt owed to learners that have inherited the legacy of a bias system.

In considering my own practice, I found several of the tenets of critical pedagogy as outlined by Paulo Freire to be particularly useful in defining phenomena that I regularly observe. Critical pedagogy assumes that mainstream education is often complicit in preserving an exploitive status quo (Braa, 2016). Two mechanisms identified by critical pedagogy scholars as preserving this status quo are the hidden curriculum, which influences students to accept an ordered system of authority beyond the classroom, and the transmission from teacher to student of cultural ideologies which maintain the status quo (Braa, 2016).

Freire (2017) asserted that the people's vocation is humanization, a process by which they gather an understanding of themselves in relation to the greater whole of society and through which they are able to work toward liberation of themselves and others. He views the role of educators as one that facilitates this process of humanization. Freire (2017) viewed the traditional didactic model of education, which he termed the banking model, with teacher as repository of knowledge and student as empty vessel, as antithetical to the process of humanization. Instead, he insisted that student and teacher must construct understanding through a process of dialogue, in which they co-create meaning and relation.

Critical to the process of dialogue outlined by Freire (2017) is a process of reflection through which parties gain a better understanding of the impact of ingrained sociocultural assumptions in the way each perceives and interacts with the world. Through this reflection, individuals begin to understand their role in maintaining the status quo. In understanding this, they may better understand how to interrupt the self-perpetuating cycle of oppression (Freire, 2017; Ramis, 2018).

Ramis (2018) argued that this gives voice to those who have not had a voice before, thus challenging the reproduction of the status quo. Ultimately, dialogue is the means through which people work together to accomplish a common goal (Ramis, 2018). Mindful of my role in this process, I embarked on this study seeking to construct with my colleagues a clearer understanding of the role of culture in shaping the space that we share with our students and how we might better work with one another. To that end I sought to identify and initiate a model of multicultural education that will serve to improve my own pedagogic practice.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Among the tenets of multicultural education is the idea that all students should be afforded an equal opportunity of education, irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, culture, gender, or sexual orientation (Banks & Banks, 2016). However, Banks and Banks (1995) held that several factors impede the implementation of multicultural education in schools. Foremost among these factors, the authors argued, is the popular notion that simply revising curricula to include factual knowledge about various groups will be sufficient to provide a truly multicultural education.

As an alternative to superficial transmission of fact, Banks and Banks (1995) advocated a model of equity pedagogy. This model challenges educators to focus their instruction in meaningful ways that encourage students to construct new knowledge and understanding about social, cultural, and equity issues through questioning, evaluating, and reasoning. Equity pedagogy seeks to encourage students to examine issues such as positionality, stereotypes, and bias in a way that promotes democratic ideals, equality, and

social justice. This, I believe, provides an especially provocative position from which to approach dialogue about culturally related themes.

Similarly, one of the field of multicultural education's most influential scholars, Gloria Ladson-Billings, first outlined a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy that sought to re-center efforts to define appropriate practice away from the micro- and macro- analytical perspectives of many researchers to an approach based in reflexive practice and collaboration (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Initially, Ladson-Billings (1995) established three criteria for culturally relevant pedagogy. An approach must support students' (a) academic development, (b) facilitate cultural competence, and (c) lead toward developing a greater sociopolitical awareness or critical consciousness. In the decades since its inception, Ladson-Billings' theory has sometimes been used to support superficial activity-based approaches and deficit perspectives that eschew authentic engagement with sociocultural issues (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In response, Ladson-Billings (2014) advocated a culturally sustaining pedagogy grounded in a symbiotic interplay of teaching theory and reflective practice that promotes not only academic achievement, but also helps students to strengthen and revitalize their cultures.

Advocacy of a system of education that prioritizes reflexive practice and affords equal opportunity to all learners, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, culture, gender, or sexual orientation is a conception aligned with Freire's (2017) role of educator in support of the process of humanization. Banks and Banks' (1995) critique of popular notions that simply revising curricula to include factual knowledge about various groups provide a multicultural education is a concept that also aligned with Freire's model of a banking approach to pedagogy that dehumanizes both teacher and student (Freire, 2017). Both equity pedagogy and culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy challenge educators to focus their instruction in

meaningful ways which encourage students to construct new knowledge and understanding about social, cultural, and equity issues through questioning, evaluating, and reasoning (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Both encourage students to examine issues such as positionality, stereotypes, and bias.

The use of culturally responsive strategies may invoke a variety of complex responses. Howard (2001) explored the perceptions of African American students toward culturally relevant teaching through interviews conducted with summer program participants. Study participants expressed positive perceptions of teachers who recognized student's cultural capital in instruction and demonstrated a knowledge of student's culture. Participants also felt that good teachers were those who made them feel at home.

A positive student response might not be the only outcome of culturally responsive strategies. In a study employing classroom observations and participant interviews, Buck (2017) examined the perceptions of teachers in a school employing a peace curriculum relying on culturally appropriate models of pedagogy. Buck (2017) wrote that peace teachers who taught using a cultural competency model sought to employ their own cultural capital while building on students' cultural background and experiences. Participants reported that peace teachers who utilized culturally responsive methods were treated with greater respect by students. However, Buck (2017) also found that the presence of these teachers, while welcomed by teachers of other subject areas, complicated the views of other teachers regarding their relationships with students.

Taylor et al. (2016) explored preservice teacher's attitudes toward multicultural education. They found that 84% of study participants expressed that they considered multicultural education an important part of the curriculum and 81% considered themselves

comfortable with teaching students from other cultures. However, the authors also note that 24% of respondents were bothered by hearing people speak in another language.

### **Impact of Culture and Socioeconomic Status**

There is often a lack of clarity among educators as to what constitutes culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Tylor (1891) defined culture as, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p.1). This definition extends beyond the overly restrictive view often held by educators of culture as limited to race or ethnicity (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Here I assumed that culture is both constructed and serves to mediate the construction of ideas, behaviors, perspectives, and social interaction within the school environment. Juszcyk and Kim (2017) observed, “Culture affects our perception of self, our communication styles, and how we are educated or choose to educate the members of our society” (p. 132). Indeed, culture affects not only what we teach, but how we teach (Covertino et al., 2016). Sociocultural factors not only influence family involvement in education-related activities, but they shape the very personalities of students and the adults that surround them (Bhargava, et al., 2017; Menardo et al., 2017).

Our nation is rapidly approaching a time when our schools, taken as a whole, will be majority minority (NCES, 2017). In their descriptive analysis of more than 20 cohorts over a 20 year period, Paschall et al., (2018) found that a significant achievement gap still exists between white students and those who are African American and Hispanic. The inequality of outcomes is not, however, equal across ethnic or income groups. In many cases, African American students from middle-class and upper-income families have made progress toward

closing achievement gaps, while a substantial discrepancy still exists between measures of achievement for lower-income African American students and White students.

The disconnect between aspirations of minority group members and their perceptions of group identity may lead to academic disengagement (Debrose et al., 2018). As previously discussed, Ogbu (1992), regarded the context of minority group membership as a key component to this disengagement. In comparison to voluntary minorities, Ogbu (1992) maintained that members of involuntary minority groups (e.g. African Americans) tend to view their minority status as a consequence of circumstances beyond their control. This, in turn, creates a different cultural framework for judging appropriate behaviors and potential in-group status, which may result in greater and more persistent disparities in achievement for involuntary minorities (Ogbu, 1992).

As a White, middle-class teacher in a school whose student population is markedly different from me in terms of race and socioeconomic status (fewer than 5% share my racial or socioeconomic background), I was keenly aware that there were clear differences between my students, my fellow teachers, and me. Diversity, however, extends beyond *prima facie* considerations of race and ethnicity. Even students who belong to the dominant cultural or ethnic group may differ significantly from their peers in many ways.

As with race and ethnicity, other forms of diversity such as socioeconomic class, disability and linguistic group affiliation may impact educational attainment (NCES, 2017; Paschall et al., 2018). The four-year graduation rates of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those students for whom English is a second language are all lower than average and poverty serves to intensify these disparities (NCES, 2017; Paschall et



al., 2018). Thus culture, class, and personal background combine to influence the lived experience of every student.

Though educational institutions today may exhibit some degree of diversity, barriers to understanding diverse cultural groups still exist (Hansmen et al., 1999). Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that a particular stumbling block exists in the misunderstanding that many teachers have about culture as it relates to the norms and behaviors of their students. She attributed much of this misunderstanding to a lack of preparation in teacher preparation programs, citing a dearth of anthropology or other culturally oriented classes. This, she asserted, creates both a general lack of understanding of what culture is and an inability to discern what student behaviors may be attributable to culture.

### **Research Based Strategies**

The literature presented several specific strategies that can be employed in supporting culturally responsive pedagogy. These strategies included the following: (a) incorporation of culturally responsive professional development, (b) use of autobiographical narratives, (c) teacher led discussion, (d) critical thinking and discussion of cultural themes, (e) sociocultural mediation, (f) incorporation of models for intercultural communication, (g) reframing of curriculum content and (h) specific administrative supports (Forrest & Dunn, 2017; Doran, 2014; Rashidi & Meihami, 2017; Gay & Kirkland 2003; Nieto, 2017, Decapua, 2016, Martell, 2018, Genao, 2016). Each of these strategies presented unique considerations for application.

Multicultural programs have been demonstrated to impact teacher attitudes. Forrest and Dunn (2017) undertook a statistical analysis of responses to an online survey of teachers in New South Wales examining teacher attitudes regarding antiracism and multicultural

education. They found that in schools that had taken antiracism and multicultural initiatives, teachers reported more supportive attitudes toward multicultural education than the general public. Further, they found that teachers in these schools were more accepting of student diversity than the general public.

Teachers have expressed a need for more training in culturally responsive methods. Doran (2014) examined the professional development experiences of 10 teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students through participant interviews and questionnaires distributed to school administration. She reported that participant teachers expressed a need for professional development in areas of specific curriculum supports and affective approaches to diversity. Doran (2014) also described increased teacher interest in approaches to classroom management for diverse learners. However, there appeared to be some conflation of classroom management with cultural and linguistic issues.

Several researchers have looked at specific strategies to support professional development in pre-service and in-service teachers (Rashidi & Meihami, 2017; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). In their qualitative study, Rashidi and Meihami (2017) examined the use of autobiographical narratives in raising the cultural awareness of student teachers. Student teacher participants were asked to construct autobiographical narratives focusing on the themes of using cultural varieties in teaching, detecting the gap between cultural contexts, conceptualization of cultural issues, cultural transformation, addressing new modes of cultural use, internalizing new cultural issues, and cultural awareness. After completing the self-evaluative cultural narratives, the participant teachers reported more awareness of their own culture, cultural variations and how culture may influence their teaching of English.

Study participants further reported that they perceived cultural variation in the classroom as advantageous.

Gay and Kirkland (2003) engaged preservice teachers in reflective dialogue centered around culturally responsive practices in their schools. Participants reported that the definition of cultural relevance was static within their schools. Further, they remarked that culture was often perceived as a descriptor of race and ethnicity only. Participants reported that teachers at their schools often perceived their role as facilitating the assimilation of culturally diverse students. The reflective conversations undertaken in this study uncovered that new teachers often perceive themselves as most closely aligned culturally to students. These teachers felt they were best positioned to disrupt current culturally irrelevant practices within their schools.

To identify successful intercultural practices, Nieto (2017) studied the methods of bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) teachers through participant interviews. Nieto (2017) noted that bilingual and ESL teachers work almost exclusively with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Among these teachers, there are several widely employed strategies that may be transferable to most classrooms.

Nieto (2017) noted that successful bilingual and ESL teachers must form strong interpersonal connections with students. Further these teachers frequently communicate with students about their identities and realities. Drawing upon this communication teachers built upon student's culture and personal experience to deliver instruction. Finally, Nieto (2017) found that bilingual and ESL teachers serve as a bridge between students, their families, and schools.

Through a meta-synthesis comparing qualitative studies, Decapua (2016) explored the use of intercultural communication models and a culturally responsive instructional model in teaching students with limited interrupted formal education (SLIFE). He observed that culturally responsive pedagogy encourages teachers to build from what students bring to the classroom. Examining the Intercultural Communications Framework, Decapua (2016) noted that this framework is designed to assist teachers in developing deep cultural knowledge. Finally, Decapua (2016) stated that use of the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm can help transition SLIFE students to a more traditional classroom environment.

Martell (2018) conducted a quantitative study of the impact of reframing United States history content within the context of race and culture. This study pointed to many positive results from employing an approach centered on culture and race. Of students participating in the study, 81% reported that reframing content gave them a better understanding of cultural perspectives of the past. Of the participants, 68% reported that these classes helped them identify with the people in the past. Finally, 78% of student participants reported that they could recall more information from this class than prior classes.

Genao (2016) studied the effect of reflective experiences undertaken by educational leadership candidates on the promotion of culturally competent teaching and leadership. Participants were drawn from leadership candidates serving in several schools with diverse student populations. Participant reflections centered around three strategies that support raising cultural awareness. Genao (2016) asserted that participants' reflections were more closely aligned with student views than those of the typical American teacher. Further,

participant reflections emphasized how culture shapes interactions between students, teachers, and staff. Celebrating culture was viewed as a means infusing diversity.

Individual views of a culture may be changed through the exchange of opinions and subjective experiences (Gaultner & Green, 2016). In their qualitative action research study of students and faculty in a mainstream British elementary school with a large population of migrant Slovakian students, Gaultner and Green (2016) explored cultural themes with students and faculty members. Student participants were asked to create artwork reflective of their daily experiences as migrant students. The researchers then used the artwork to elicit from students their thoughts about their unique experiences.

To create a common intellectual space among school instructional staff, Gaultner and Green (2016) used a series of teacher workgroups to generate ongoing dialogue around issues related to migrant students and school culture. Faculty participants were invited to dialogue with the researchers and each other about their perceptions of migrant students and the opinions held by staff members about the student's impact on school culture and teaching practice. To bridge the student/teacher divide Gaultner and Green (2006) presented student artwork and student comments to staff in faculty workgroups.

Faculty reviewed the student artwork and discussed the attitudes reported by migrant students about their migrant and non-migrant peers, teachers, and experiences in an unfamiliar learning environment. Collaborating participants reported that workgroup experience had complicated their views of migrant students, the role of culture in influencing behaviors and perceptions, and the school culture. Among the changes reported, faculty participants had a deeper understanding of the cultural differences between Romani and non-Romani students from Slovakia and a lessened fear of intracultural differences.

## **Considerations for the Application of Strategies**

As noted previously, culturally responsive approaches used to address the needs of diverse learners may create complex outcomes (Buck, 2017). Durden et al. (2014) found that successful implementation of multicultural education required educators to employ multiple strategies. Further, they asserted that factors such as classroom environments devoid of culturally diverse resources and professional supports could mediate the effects of otherwise sound strategies for culturally relevant pedagogy.

Others have reported similar findings. Ngo (2011) illustrated how an environment lacking authenticity and depth of cultural resources can hinder efforts to implement culturally appropriate programming and may be ineffective or even perceived negatively by the intended beneficiaries of such programs. She argued that initiatives that focused on celebration or appeasement were not seen as serving students or teachers well.

Ngo (2011) found that uncritical approaches negatively impacted teacher perceptions of multicultural education. She reported that teachers voiced concern about students' cultures being tokenized by shallow approaches. Further, she noted that multicultural approaches used within the school she studied were ineffective at addressing homophobia and racial tension. One teacher interviewed by Ngo (2011) stated that in her experience students viewed their lived experiences as more important than a poster.

Multicultural education may affect students of divergent backgrounds differently. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and non-majority students may respond differently to interventions (Callingham, 2016). In Matin's (2014) study of how the effects of multicultural education may be affected by participant race, she noted that while multicultural approaches have been shown to have a positive impact on the academic

engagement of minority students and narrowing the achievement gap between some groups, several scholars have proposed that multicultural education may benefit White students more than non-White students.

Martin (2014) offered three potential explanations for this. First, she proposed that multicultural education may facilitate the development of white identity aligned with valuing diversity and rejecting oppression. She suggested this would be consistent with research indicating that Whites, whose cultural context is different from non-Whites, have less developed identities than other groups (Martin, 2014).

Next, Martin (2014) suggested that multicultural education may create important opportunities for intergroup interaction. She observed that while most members of minority groups are required regularly to interact with racial groups other than their own, Whites do not have to interact with other racial groups as often. Thus, multicultural education may present a formal means to increase the opportunities for such interactions.

Finally, Martin (2014) argued that multicultural learning may promote the capacity to engage in complex thinking. The opportunity afforded by multicultural education to engage in reflective activities and examination of nuanced issues may allow students to gain experience in dealing with complicated issues. This, in turn, may allow for the development of greater cognitive ability.

To better understand how participant race may correlate with varied outcomes from exposure to multicultural education, Martin (2014) undertook a quantitative study using a pre- and post-test design to collect responses from 117 college students, with 68 students completing the study. Students in the treatment group were enrolled in a course fulfilling the

college's diversity and pluralism requirements. Students in the control group were registered in another social science course.

Martin (2014) found that students in the treatment group evidenced significant gains in citizen engagement, perspective taking, belief in the compatibility of democracy and difference, intergroup interactions, and ethnic identity development. Further, Martin (2014) reported that White students in the treatment group demonstrated significantly higher scores in perspective taking and belief in compatibility of democracy and difference. While the small sample size of this study and its confined geographic area limit constrain arguments for generalizing its results, it does provide evidence to support the argument that multicultural education may impact different racial and ethnic groups in different ways.

Another factor impacting outcomes on school culture and performance may be the attitudes, beliefs and assumptions held by teachers. Geerlings et al. (2019) administered a Likert-scaled survey to measure the effect of teacher norms on how students viewed members of ethnic outgroups. Their findings suggested that students who witnessed teacher's positive interaction with culturally diverse students had more positive attitudes toward members outgroups.

In their case study of the impact of cultural contradictions on early dropout rates in one urban high school, Patterson et al. (2007) used personal interviews, focus groups and document reviews to identify factors that might negatively impact the rate of students leaving school before completion. In the school studied, they found evidence of faculty and staff misunderstanding the role of culture in defining perceptions of parental roles and an effort on the part of some faculty and staff to define seeking to define the role of parental involvement. This, they observed, was coupled with a deficit view of student's families held by some staff.



## Summary

In reviewing the literature several themes emerge. Multicultural education advocates an approach to education that affords equal opportunity to all learners. It is a relatively recent field of pedagogical theory which has undergone several stages of incremental change. The evolution of multicultural education has impacted and been impacted by broad social movements.

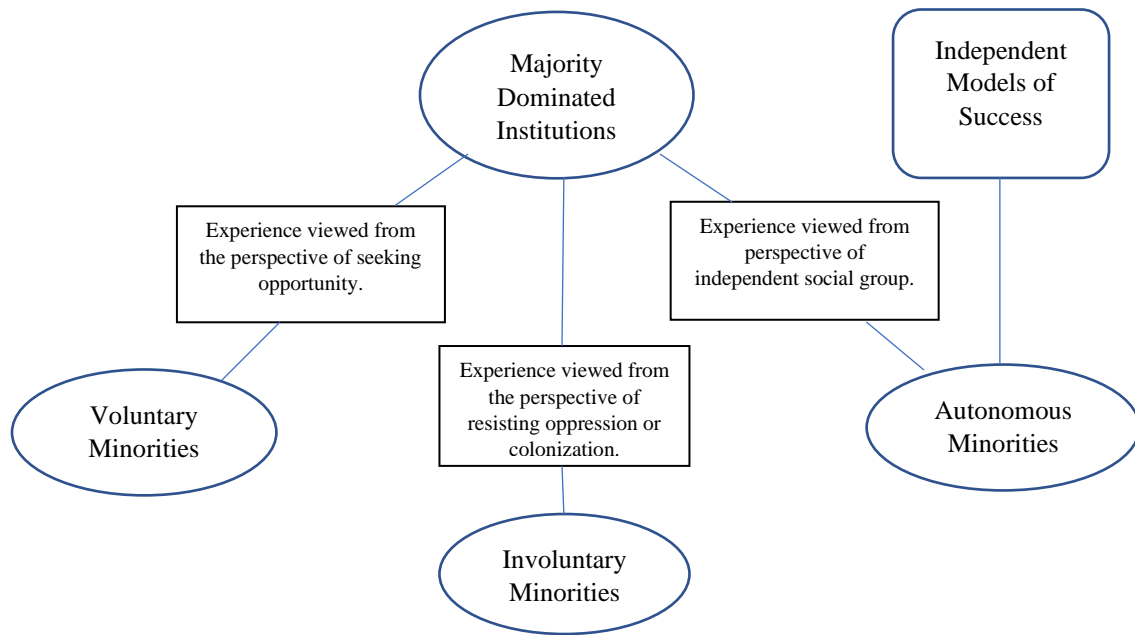
The application of Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory to pedagogic practice introduced additional layers of complexity to views of diverse student populations. This model necessitates that we consider the legacy of students' direct and indirect experiences with social institutions and their culturally influenced response to those experiences. Thus, educators may need to reassess existing views of how culture and class shape student/teacher interaction.

Critical pedagogy is one means of addressing inequality in educational setting. Critical pedagogy seeks to disrupt reproduction of the status quo through humanization. Central to humanization is the process of dialogue, which serves to give voice to those who have not historically been represented. The goal of such dialogue is to allow individuals to accomplish goals cooperatively.

Various strategies have been employed to support multicultural education including the incorporation of culturally responsive professional development, the use of autobiographical narratives, culturally themed teacher workgroups, critical thinking and discussion of cultural themes, sociocultural mediation, incorporation of models for intercultural communication, reframing of curriculum content and specific administrative

supports. Multicultural approaches may have complex and unintended outcomes. Finally, multicultural education may impact minority and non-minority groups differently.

I drew from the works cited in this chapter to inform the design of the collaborative action research study outlined in the next chapter. Through this study I sought to understand teacher perceptions of culturally related issues relevant to educator/student interactions in the setting in which I practiced and to develop appropriate strategies for fostering improved interactions between educator and student. Central to this process has been the incorporation of dialogue between and among participants and researcher to construct an understanding of the impact of class and culture on our shared space. Throughout this study I have referred to the model of voluntary, involuntary, and autonomous minorities developed by Ogbu. Finally, I drew upon the model of multicultural education, first set forth by Banks and Banks (1995), which seeks to provide equal opportunities for all learners in constructing knowledge for the purpose of pursuing equality.



**Figure 2.1** *Ogbu's Minority Groups and Majority Dominated Institutions*

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

Though educational institutions today may exhibit some degree of diversity, barriers to educational attainment still exist for diverse cultural groups within these institutions (Hansmen et al., 1999; Raitano & Vona, 2016). Ogbu (1992) argued that members of what he terms involuntary minorities (e.g. African-Americans) vary from voluntary minorities in the degree to which they trust white Americans and White-controlled institutions such as schools. This, in turn, creates a different cultural framework for judging appropriate behaviors and potential in-group status (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). As a white, middle-class teacher in a school whose student population is racially and economically dissimilar to me (more than 90% African-American, 100% subsidized lunch), I was acutely aware that there are marked differences between my students, my fellow teachers, and me.

The purpose of this collaborative action research study was to explore the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers in alternative school setting regarding barriers to student/educator interaction and identify strategies that may facilitate improved classroom interactions between students and teachers. My primary focus was the factors that affect my own practice and those of my collaborators. However, it was anticipated that much of the understanding gained from this study would be immediately transferable to other teachers in my school and in similar teaching environments.

## Research Design

The complex and ever-changing nature of the classroom environment creates specific demands for teacher researchers seeking to better understand and refine their practice (Klehr, 2012). Many methodologies exist for conducting research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, action research is a methodology with distinct characteristics that distinguish it from other approaches (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015). These characteristics make action research an option well-suited to research in the school environment.

Efron and Ravid (2013) defined action research in the educational setting as, “inquiry conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their students’ learning” (p. 2). As such, action research is a methodology attuned to the complex environments of schools. Likewise, the focus of action research placed on improving practice is one congruent with the need to improve educational outcomes.

Action research prioritizes the acquisition of understanding for immediate application within the practitioner’s environment over generalized knowledge that applies to broad populations. This shift in paradigm allows the action researcher to tailor their approach to affect the most direct impact on their practice. Similarly, practitioner-researchers may draw upon context-specific knowledge and experience as well as subjective understanding to further their research in ways that may not be employed in other research traditions (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Herr and Anderson (2014) noted that while there are many contested areas of action research, most agree that action research is done by or together with insiders and not to them. This distinguishes action research from other forms of research traditionally conducted in the field of education. Indeed, action research differs fundamentally from many traditional

research methodologies in that it enlists active participants rather than passive subjects (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Action research creates an environment that favors collaboration (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This affords teacher researchers the opportunity to leverage existing methods of cooperative practice to conduct meaningful research. This study was designed to incorporate existing collaborative structures as a way to deepen the ongoing collaboration I shared with my colleagues.

The unique environment created within this alternative school setting creates special considerations for researchers. First among these considerations was the relatively short residency of the students within our school. The average student is assigned to our program for 45 days. While it is possible that a student may remain beyond 45 days, it is equally likely that they will leave the school before completing the assigned number of days or be removed early due to truancy, disciplinary infractions, or placement in another alternative setting. The transient nature of our students makes longitudinal comparisons difficult and increases the need to use methods that allow some flexibility in the collection of data while offering the greatest potential for gaining deeper understanding of phenomena.

A further consideration was the limited number of potential participants. The number of instructional staff in our school is typically below 15. This number combined with the turnover of our student population would make it unlikely that a sample appropriate for quantitative research could be drawn and maintained throughout the study. As Efron and Ravid (2013) related, qualitative action research applied within the school setting is designed to investigate phenomena by focusing on the meanings behind the experiences for individuals or groups. Klehr (2012) observed that qualitative methods are often employed by teacher

researchers to meet the unique demands of research in the school setting. Due to the small population and the depth of inquiry needed to understand how cultural influences shape the interaction of teachers and students, I chose to rely on established qualitative action research methods of data collection and analysis for this study.

### **Sampling**

One of the strengths of action research designs is the flexibility with which the researcher may address the constitution of samples (Efron & Ravid, 2015). The small number of staff working within the school serving as the study site coupled with the changing demands of staff created by the early closing of schools' physical facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the selection of a stable sample that offered the greatest opportunity for in-depth collaboration and study. Therefore, I drew a purposive sample comprised of two collaborating members of my school's instructional staff. Teacher participants were selected from among those who expressed an interest in cross-cultural or culturally relevant pedagogy and those who were able to meet virtually through the Zoom meeting platform.

Jennifer was Marathon's Media Specialist. She describes herself as a White, middle/upper middle-class woman. This was Jennifer's first school year at Marathon. However, she had worked in other culturally and economically diverse schools.

Maria was a social studies teacher at Marathon. Maria described herself as a middle-class woman of Cuban and Southern (American) descent. She had been a classroom teacher at Marathon for nine years. Before teaching at Marathon, Maria spent several years teaching at another majority-minority school in the same district.

To strengthen peer review and increase the transferability of study findings, consideration was given to selecting at least one participant from a dissimilar cultural background. While efforts were made to recruit teachers who represented various viewpoints, the educational requirements for educator certification and standardized pay scales meant that educators recruited for this study would most probably share many commonalities. These commonalities, however, are likely to be representative of a sizeable plurality, if not the majority of educators in similar roles.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Action research is a reflective process that places the researcher at the center of each stage of research (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This centering effect might be more prominent in qualitative studies where the researcher is, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted, “the primary data collection instrument” (p. 218). It is the qualitative researcher that not only selects the methods employed, but also assumes the primary role in drawing meaning from shared experience. These factors made it important that the researcher made explicit potential bias and assumptions, as well as outlined the methods employed to mitigate bias in the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

### **Positionality**

I was a teacher and department chair employed by the school that served as a site for this study. From this perspective, I may be seen as an insider by other faculty and staff. My insider status among other faculty might have predisposed me toward marginalizing the views of others who are not perceived as being insiders.

As the primary investigator for this study, I brought to this research a particular set of biases and assumptions, many of which were shaped by that privilege which attaches itself to being a White, middle-class, male. As discussed in Chapter One, my personal identity is

intrinsically connected to my background as a White, working/middle-class male. Many of my beliefs and assumptions were formed as child raised within a devoutly protestant, deeply Southern family.

These factors contributed to how I viewed-and was viewed by-others. I took several steps to mitigate the biases that I brought to this study. These steps included recruiting collaborating teachers whose cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds are different from my own; member checking data collected from participants; and member checking data analysis, codes, and themes through collaborative teacher workgroups. The fact remains, that research of this kind is limited in that it only presents the perspectives of participants.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical issues that must be considered by the action researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Guidelines for the ethical implementation of research often require that permission for a study be obtained from one or more gatekeepers (Efron & Ravid, 2013). A further ethical consideration is the expectation that research participants, to the greatest degree possible, be informed of the pertinent issues involved in their participation, including the researcher's purpose, study procedures and means employed to protect participant confidentiality (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Finally, participants should be notified that they have a right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

To meet the requirement of obtaining permission from appropriate authorities, I submitted a study proposal for review by and consent of faculty advisors from the University of South Carolina College of Education. An application that included a study protocol was approved by University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB). A study proposal was then submitted to the Office of Accountability, Assessment, Research and



Evaluation of the school district which houses the school I studied. A formal consent document was not required for this project. However, participants were informed of the purpose of the research, procedures, methods for assuring their confidentiality, and right of withdrawal, through an invitation to participate in the study (attached as Appendix B).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) argued that the balance of power between researcher and subjects must be considered to minimize the risk of coercion. While my authority over other teachers is limited, I am cognizant of the fact that power dynamics may be perceived differently by individuals. To address this issue, I stated explicitly in the invitations to participate that participation in this study was voluntary and that there would be no penalty for non-participation or for withdrawal. Further, I explained verbally to potential participants that their participation would be voluntary and made myself available to answer any questions that participants might have before electing to participate in this study.

Research involving the reporting of data from participants requires that means be employed to protect participant confidentiality (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 2016). Data collected as part of this study was held as confidential. Study-related materials were kept on a password-protected computer and in a locked cabinet.

Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and no identifying information other than general descriptors of age, gender and race or ethnicity were solicited. Pseudonyms were used throughout the dissertation and in any further written description or narrative. Participant list and any identifiable were secured and kept in a separate location, and was destroyed upon completion of the dissertation process.

As part of the transcription process, I reviewed notes and interviews for any information that might be used to identify specific participants. Identifying information other

than general descriptors was not transcribed or reported. After completion of the dissertation defense, all materials such as notes, recordings, or transcripts containing information beyond general descriptors of age, gender and race or ethnicity, which might be used to identify individual participants, was destroyed.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews, a recorded workgroup session, and a follow-up questionnaire. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) held that interviews are a common means employed by researchers to elicit data that cannot be obtained through direct observation. The semi-structured interview is a frequently used format that provides a framework from which to interview, while allowing the researcher flexibility to pursue emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As one focus of this research was the perceptions of culture, school environment, and classroom interaction held by participants, semi-structured interviews allowed for greater flexibility in approach and the opportunity to probe for deeper understanding of participants' attitudes and beliefs than would be possible through quantitative methods such as surveys.

Upon enlisting two participants from among the school's instructional staff, I arranged to meet with them for private interviews via the Zoom meeting platform (see interview questions attached as Appendix A). Participant interviews were approximately 90 minutes long and consisted of twenty open-ended questions. These questions served to elicit responses from participants on specific topics, as well as anchoring a broader discussion of participant attitudes and beliefs. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. To gain greater insight into the positionality of collaborating educators, each was asked to complete a short autobiography. After an initial round of coding, interview transcripts were

returned to collaborating teachers to provide for member checking and input into emerging categories and themes.

Next, I met with study participants to conduct a workgroup. This workgroup served as a venue for further discussions of how culture and class impact student/educator interactions at Marathon High School and a planning session to identify specific research-based strategies for bridging divides between students and educators. During this workgroup implementation of selected strategies was discussed for the upcoming school year. The meeting was recorded for transcription and analysis through open and axial coding. Participants were provided with copies of coded transcripts, a table of derived codes and categories, and a representation of axial codes to allow for input and member checking.

As part of the workgroup process, participants discussed codes and categories identified in participant interviews. Further, they identified and discussed specific strategies to strengthen cross-cultural interaction between teachers and students. Before reporting findings from interviews or workgroups, codes and categories were checked with participants to ensure valid inferences have been drawn (Efron & Ravid, 2015).

Both interviews and recorded dialogue made it possible to probe the views of collaborating teachers. However, several questions remained as to how the process of reflection and dialogue had altered the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of participants. To better understand this aspect, a brief questionnaire was administered.

Researcher-generated documents such as questionnaires are a common feature of action research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To better understand what, if any, changes occurred in teacher views as a result of participation, a questionnaire comprised of six open-

ended questions was developed (Appendix C). Questionnaires were distributed to participants via email. A discussion of participant responses appears in Chapter Four.

As is the nature of qualitative studies, the process employed in collecting and analyzing data may change to better suit emerging data and ecological factors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The advent of the global COVID-19 pandemic during this study's data collection period dramatically impacted school operations across the country. As a result, the methods of data collection had to be altered. However, in using interviews, recorded dialogue, and a follow-up questionnaire I was able to capture a detailed narrative account of the process through which teachers work to identify and implement effective cross-cultural strategies.

### **Limitations**

While qualitative research may provide a deep understanding and rich description of phenomena that are not easily quantified, its means are often subjective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a result, qualitative research is not readily generalizable beyond the context of the study setting and population. For this reason, the purpose of this qualitative action research study has not been to generate theory that may be broadly applied across populations. Rather, it has been to better understand phenomena within the context of a single setting and to generate ideas to improve practice within that setting, and to provide insight that may be transferable to settings with similar contexts.

This study attempts to better understand the perceptions of teachers as to the role of socioeconomic class and culture in shaping student/educator interactions in an alternative school setting and identify strategies that may be used to bridge sociocultural barriers. The atypical setting of an alternative school may limit the transferability of this study. Though, it

should be considered that the student population of alternative schools are drawn entirely from the general student population and spend the majority of their academic careers in traditional classrooms. A further limitation to this study is that the student population of the study site is almost exclusively African American while the teachers were of largely middle-class backgrounds and of White and Hispanic origin.

Finally, this process has been unique to the setting and personal factors of the participants. It represents the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of participants. The results of this study may not be readily transferred to schools whose student and teacher demographics are significantly different.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers in an alternative school setting regarding barriers to student/educator interaction and to identify strategies that may facilitate improved classroom interactions between students and teachers. The alternative school that has served as a setting for this study varies in several significant ways from most mainstream schools. Most of the school's students are assigned due to substantial disciplinary or attendance infractions at other schools in the district.

Students are most often assigned to the school for 45 days, after which they return to the schools they were originally zoned to attend, or a placement judged to be more appropriate for their needs. Further, students are more likely to have a greater than average number of absences or be diverted into other programs. This means that the student population is highly transient, and there can be wide swings in the number of students attending the school.

A fluid population of non-traditional students prone to lower attendance levels would make sampling for quantitative approaches problematic. These considerations together with the study's focus on improving practice and complex social issues tied to deeply held attitudes and beliefs made the study well-suited to a qualitative action research approach (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While the findings from qualitative studies may not be immediately generalizable to large populations, the ability afforded by the methods to deeply probe concepts and themes allows the qualitative researcher the ability to create rich and nuanced descriptions of phenomena in a ways that may be transferred to meaningfully inform the practice of others in similar contexts (Creswell & Creswell 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study was designed to incorporate collaboration to strengthen credibility. To address ethical considerations, I have secured the permission of appropriate gate keepers, obtained the informed participation of participants, and implemented security measures to safeguard confidentiality. As this study used a qualitative action research design, its results were not expected to be broadly generalizable (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather, the primary intent was to better understand how phenomena within the context of my own practice and the practice of collaborating educators. Beyond this, specific elements of this study's findings may be transferable to those whose practices share similar contexts.

## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **DATA COLLECTION**

#### **Overview of Study**

As previously observed, American schools continue to grow more diverse (NCES, 2017). This increasing diversity makes understanding how culture and class shape the learning environment all the more important. Sociocultural factors impact students and adults (Menardo et al., 2017). Socioeconomic status and cultural divides have been associated with unequal educational outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Roche, et al., 2016). Yet, the effects of culture on educational outcomes is often overlooked (Ladson-Billings, 2015).

#### **Purpose of Research**

As previously stated, this qualitative action research study was initiated to address a specific problem of practice. This problem arose from the need to better understand how sociocultural factors impact student/educator interactions and to identify specific strategies for addressing divides arising from differences in culture and class. The purpose of this collaborative action research study was to examine the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers in an alternative school setting regarding barriers to student/educator interaction and explore strategies that may be implemented to improve interactions between students and teachers.

#### **Data Collection Methods**

To explore these questions, a convenience sample of two collaborating teachers was drawn. Jennifer was a White, middle-class woman. The current school year was Jennifer's

first as Marathon's media specialist. However, she had worked in other culturally and economically diverse schools. Maria described herself as a middle-class woman of Cuban and Southern (American) decent. She had been a classroom teacher at Marathon for nine years. Before teaching at Marathon, Maria spent several years teaching at another majority-minority school in the same district.

Data for this qualitative action research study were collected through semi-structured interviews, recorded dialogue, and written questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews were used to gauge initial teacher perceptions. Dialogue was recorded during a workgroup to discuss barriers created by class and culture, and explore possible strategies for bridging those barriers.

Data from interviews and recorded dialogue were analyzed through open and axial coding. I have presented the results from coding in tables. Additionally, this chapter includes a discussion of the study's research questions and findings. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of key findings and an introduction to the study's action plan.

### **Interventions**

This study sought to better understand the perceptions of teachers about how class and culture shape student/teacher interactions and what, if any, strategies may be employed to improve interactions between students and teachers. The interventions incorporated within this study were developed to gauge teacher perceptions and develop potential approaches that may be implemented to facilitate better student/teacher interactions.

Initially, a set of interventions were designed to be administered within the study site over an eight-week period. On March 15, 2020, Governor Henry McMaster ordered that all



public schools in South Carolina be closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This created the need to substantially modify the intervention strategies.

Because a majority of students attending Marathon lacked reliable access to the Internet, the school began a process of delivering instruction through instructional packets augmented by online lessons and resources. Teachers were restricted from meeting physically and directed to conduct any necessary meetings through a virtual platform such as Microsoft Teams or the Zoom virtual meeting platform. To meet the demands of this altered school environment interventions were adapted to the virtual environment.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

A semi-structured interview was conducted with collaborating teachers through the Zoom meeting application (Appendix A). Each interview consisted of 20 open-ended questions designed to elicit discussion of participant's experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. The intent of these interviews was to explore teachers' perceptions about how class and culture impact student/teacher interactions at Marathon, as well as to establish their familiarity with ideas such as multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Interviews were conducted for approximately 90 minutes each. Both were recorded using a digital audio recorder. These recordings were then transcribed for qualitative analysis using Microsoft Word.

Analysis of qualitative data frequently involves an iterative process using multiple methods of coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Open coding is a technique often used during the initial phase of coding to identify codes and emerging categories. Axial coding is utilized as a second level to refine data and uncover relationships between codes and categories (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Participant interviews were initially coded using open coding. Coded transcripts were returned to participants to allow for member checking. Axial coding was then applied to identify relationships between codes and categories. The codes drawn from axial coding were organized into a conceptual model of how culture and class are perceived to impact student teacher interaction at Marathon High School. This conceptual model and specific themes arising from these interviews are discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

### **Participant Workgroup**

After completing interviews, a workgroup session was scheduled with collaborating teachers. Due to constraints imposed by Marathon High in response to the COVID-19 pandemic a physical meeting was not possible. Instead, this workgroup met for approximately two hours, through the Zoom meeting platform.

Prior to this meeting a draft of the conceptual model presented in Figure 4.1 was shared with participants. Participants reviewed the model, discussed its implications for teaching across cultural divides and offered suggestions to how the model might be better aligned to represent their understanding of the process of teaching across socioeconomic and cultural divides. The workgroup then turned to discussing specific strategies that might be adopted for use at Marathon High School. Several potential strategies for bridging cultural divides between students and teachers were examined. Among these strategies were (a) equity pedagogy, (b) cultural autobiographies, (c) narrative writing, (d) arts-based methods, and (e) dialogue.

Audio from this workgroup was recorded via digital audio recorder and transcribed to allow for qualitative analysis using Microsoft Word. Open coding was again used to identify codes and categories arising from this workgroup. Codes and categories were organized in

table format to allow for further analysis through axial coding (Appendix C). A more detailed discussion of these appears in the Findings section of this chapter. After participating in the workgroup, teachers were asked to reflect upon how the process of participation in this study had influenced their thinking about the topics of class, culture, and student/teacher interactions.

### **Questionnaires**

After analysis of the semi-structured interviews and workgroup transcript, it was unclear as to how participation in this dialogue and other activities may have impacted the views of participants. To better understand how participant attitudes and perceptions may have changed, I employed an instrument commonly used in action research, the researcher-generated questionnaire (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Questionnaire forms consisted of six open-ended questions distributed and returned via email. Findings from this instrument are discussed in the following section.

### **Analysis**

A number of codes and categories emerged from analysis of qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and recorded workgroup. Axial coding from participant interviews yielded a conceptual model which was used to initiate dialogue during the participant workgroup. Axial coding of the transcript produced from the participant workgroup was used to illustrate the interrelation of factors perceived to impact student/teacher interactions at Marathon High School. A detailed discussion of findings follows below.

## **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Participants were first asked to complete a semi-structured interview. After initial coding and member checking, axial coding was utilized. Axial codes and categories were organized to form a conceptual model of how class and culture shape student/teacher interaction at Marathon. This model is related in Figure 4.1.

The model presented in figure 4.1, drawn from participant interviews, illustrates the perceived role of culture and class in establishing a foundation for teacher beliefs. Bourdieu (1986) defined the ingrained habits and beliefs instilled in the individual through exposure to social, economic, and cultural factors as habitus. These beliefs help to establish a world view that colors the individual's day-to-day interactions. This idea can be seen in participant's response to questions about their own backgrounds and beliefs.

## **Positionality and Cultural Capital**

Notably, both participants indicated their belief that cultural factors and class background had shaped their views and the attitudes of students around what Bourdieu termed cultural capital – which consists of material and intangible assets that a person may use to navigate in and between social strata (Bourdieu, 1986). Participant-teachers identified education as an intangible that was particularly valued by their families and associates. They saw education as enriching their lives and affording greater opportunity. Participants also believed that their views of education differed substantially from that of their students, who they believed did not share their views on the value of education.

Jennifer commented that her students instead prioritized symbolic forms of cultural capital such as fashionable clothing and other items promoted by pop culture over education. This, she noted, seemed tied to status. In both instances, the valuation of different forms of

cultural capital was identified as resulting from cultural and socioeconomic influences. In both instances, views of cultural capital helped to shape perceptions, which in turn contributed to the attitudes held by both teachers and students. Participants noted that student and teacher attitudes were important in shaping student/teacher interactions.

Participant interviews made clear that teacher perceptions shaped attitudes toward student/teacher interactions. For example, Jennifer remarked that she felt that students were materialistic because of the value they seemed to place on owning things thought to be expensive, such as newer cell phones or fashionable shoes. Both Maria and Jennifer commented that one thing they could do for students is to help them see intangibles like education as being more important, while also helping them to view some material goods as less important.

The effect of student/teacher interaction on teacher perceptions was also made apparent through interviews. Maria noted that working with homebound students from low-income families had caused her to rethink how she had viewed the community in which she had lived for many years. During a later discussion she noted that while working with students who had committed crimes, she had begun to question more superficial labels often placed on students such as “good kids” or “criminals”.

Interestingly, participant views of the effect of socioeconomic and cultural influence on student behavior differed. Jennifer expressed that she believed that some of the disciplinary problems experienced at Marathon High were the result of an acceptance of such behaviors within such cultures, perhaps reflecting the view expressed by Ogbu that involuntary minorities may be influenced by their cultural groups toward oppositional behaviors (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). Maria, in reflecting on her own experiences, noted that

many of the problematic student behaviors exhibited by students at Marathon High were as commonly displayed by students attending her private parochial school in Cuba.

During interviews, participants also contended that student perceptions were important in shaping how students and teachers interact. Both Maria and Jennifer expressed that they felt that positive student perceptions were important in forming relationships. Relationships, in turn, were important in creating positive student/teacher interactions. As would be discussed in detail later, Jennifer felt these viewpoints were important enough that she consciously sought to create an image that encouraged positive opinions in students. Maria, on the other hand, felt that trust building through authenticity was the best way to encourage affirmative viewpoints in her students.

### **Participant Workgroup**

The next intervention phase involved a workgroup session attended by collaborating teachers and me. Before this workgroup a draft of the conceptual model presented in Figure 4.1 was distributed to participants. The meeting began with a discussion of this draft model. Input was solicited from both participants. This meeting was recorded and transcribed for analysis using open and axial coding. Table 4.1 presents an excerpt from the table used to organize codes and categories generated from the meeting transcript.

### **Evolving Ideas**

The workgroup began with a discussion of the conceptual model developed from participant interviews. This served as an opportunity for participants to debrief and provide further input. During this discussion both Jennifer and Maria expressed some feelings of dissonance. Jennifer observed that concepts discussed in the interview process were ideas that, “even us educated folk haven't really articulated or thought about in real depth.” While

she noted that the discussion had created some confusion, she also recounted she felt that, “this is really something that we can’t be in our own thought bubble.”

Maria noted that while much of the original analysis of participant interviews highlighted negative outcomes from student/teacher interactions, there are many positive results that potentially arise from cross-cultural interactions between students and teachers. She expressed that she felt as though, “We keep getting the outcomes confused... It shouldn't be all negative.” In considering teachers whose cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds were significantly different than their students, she emphasized, “Our cultural background can make a positive difference.”

Maria went on to express that she felt that teaching across cultures could benefit both students and teachers. She felt this was especially true of its ability to broaden the experiences and horizons of students and teachers. About her remarks during the prior interview, she recounted, “I remember that I said that it was a very enriching experience and that it helped me understand the culture in the class I was different from me and that I wouldn't give that up for anything.”

### **Workgroup Considerations**

The intent of the participant workgroup was to provide an opportunity for dialogue about individual experiences of how class and culture shape student/teacher interactions and to allow for collaboration in identifying strategies to be employed in addressing barriers to effective student/teacher interaction. Analysis of transcripts from the workgroup meeting revealed several ancillary issues to developing strategies. These included culture, context of practice, personal and professional reflection, teacher perceptions, student perceptions, and relationships. The interconnectedness of these concepts is depicted in Figure 4.2.

## **Culture**

Culture was a concept central to this study. It was a topic of much discussion during the workgroup meeting. Jennifer revealed that her culture was responsible for instilling in her some of her earliest beliefs. She remarked, “It’s shaped me before I shaped it in myself.

The effects of culture on shaping perceptions of positionality on in-group and out-group status was a topic of some debate between participants. Maria, expressed her belief that teachers who had dissimilar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds from their students could, “open up their horizons.” She posed the question, “Does this mean that an African American teacher who comes from the same background...is by the mere fact of being from the same cultural background a better teacher?”

To this Jennifer responded, “I think she is a more relevant teacher.” When asked to expound upon this idea Jennifer explained, “I think all I’m saying is that initially there’s less ground to cover when they walk in and are the same race.” She further observed, “So, they seem like, initially, that they have less relationship building to do.”

In considering the idea that Marathon’s student population was almost entirely comprised of involuntary minorities who may be inclined to exhibit mistrust in the school environment, both Jennifer and Maria agreed that there were issues of trust to be overcome. As discussed later in this chapter, both Maria and Jennifer saw trust as an important element of building relationships.

## **Context of Practice**

As previously discussed, Marathon High School is an alternative school with a small population of transient students comprised almost entirely of African American students. Participants raised several issues related to the context of practice at Marathon High School.



Jennifer noted, “We [teachers] are in a unique situation here.” Maria agreed and added, “We are really small.”

Jennifer viewed the unusual aspects of the setting as providing opportunities to better serve students. She asserted, “I think Marathon could look a lot of different ways.” At the same time, Jennifer raised the issue of transferability relating that, “I don’t know if all of our conversation applies to the whole wide world.”

### **Reflection**

Reflection upon one’s personal beliefs and assumptions is an important practice in culturally responsive pedagogy (Rychly & Graves, 2012). The process of interviews and workgroup caused participants to examine existing assumptions and to weigh new ideas. Jennifer stated that she believed that many of the concepts discussed were not ones most people had thought about in depth. She noted that this had at times left her feeling “confused and frustrated.” In summarizing Jennifer observed, “What I walked away with is that these are all neat ideas, but... I never had to name all of them.”

### **Teacher and Student Perceptions**

The process of reflection led participants to discuss their own perceptions as well as what they believed to be the perceptions of their students. Both Maria and Jennifer reported beliefs that student/teacher interaction may be impacted by student perceptions. Both felt that students held their own criteria for what constituted an effective teacher. Maria, however, noted that students may view a teacher as accessible, but not necessarily believe they are a good teacher, thereby placing possible limits on the role of personal relationships in creating positive student/teacher interactions.

## **Relationships**

While diversity between students and teacher could have a positive affect for both, it can also create divides. Maria shared that, “there’s always a little distance there at first.” Jennifer noted that teachers who come from a background significantly different from their students may be perceived to lack some degree of credibility. These observations raise the issue of the role of personal relationships in student/teacher interactions.

Participant views of the importance of relationships in teaching differed. Jennifer saw relationships as being central to teaching practice, commenting, “I think for these kids, it’s more about relationships than it is about learning.” While Maria agreed that relationships were a factor that influences student/teacher interactions, she felt that it was possible to be an effective teacher without developing warm personal relationships with students. She remarked, “It is a lot of relationships, it’s not only relationships though.” Both Maria and Jennifer did, however, express that they felt it was important to make students feel as though they were safe and could trust their teacher, mirroring Ogbu’s recommendation that majority teachers be explicit in demonstrating acceptance of students from involuntary minority groups (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998)

Creating lasting relationships has been an important part of teaching for both Jennifer and Maria. During this session Maria expressed warmth towards her students, as I have witnessed her do on a number of occasions, saying, “I really do like them as human beings...even the ones that drive me crazy sometimes.” She related that experience has taught her that much of what teachers are told about affecting an air of aloofness can be counterproductive. Instead she says, “I just allowed myself to be me and that worked better as far as establishing relationships.” She expressed that her relationships with students had

largely been an organic process, saying, “I can’t think right now that there is anything that I intentionally do to build a relationship.

Jennifer, however, has been intentional in her approach to building relationships with students. “I truly feel that these kids need me to bring the character, the consistent persona to work much more than they need me to walk in and have a bad day,” she said. This, she feels, provides students with a consistency that allows them to grow comfortable enough with her to invest in a relationship. Jennifer also noted that intentionality was important in trying to bridge cultural divides in that, “if you’re not intentional about it... you may be successful or unsuccessful, but... maybe you can’t see why.” The topic of intentionality would resurface as specific strategies were discussed.

### **Strategies**

Equity pedagogy is an approach to teaching centered around helping students from diverse backgrounds develop the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes necessary to function in society while supporting ideals of justice, democracy, and humanity (Banks and Banks, 1995). This approach was discussed as a means of engaging students. Jennifer noted that as this approach would support, “crafting this intentionality or awareness” and that it might be a means of involving other faculty in cross curricular activities. It was agreed that we would explore using equity-based approaches to create scalable units of study around current issues such as international migration.

As part of its daily schedule, Marathon devotes 20-30 minutes in each class period to social-emotional learning. Curriculum departments are permitted to develop instructional units for this time with broad latitude. It was decided that the social studies department would undertake the design of a series of classroom activities centered around facilitating students’

greater understanding of the role that culture and socioeconomic class can play in shaping us as individuals, our assumptions, and our relationships with others. Four methods were identified for use in these activities. These were (a) cultural autobiographies, (b) narrative writing, (c) dialogue, and (d) arts-based education.

As discussed previously, cultural autobiographies have been found to raise cultural awareness and support the acquisition of cultural competencies in teachers and student teachers (Bersh, 2018). Members of the workgroup agreed that this approach would be well suited for use in the classroom. Jennifer observed, “if you can get them to talk about themselves you can dig deeper.”

It was decided that this approach could be adapted for use as a joint project between teachers and students. In this way, students and teachers can cooperatively explore and share their own cultural stories while creating conversations targeted toward developing deeper understanding. The value of this approach to creating connections with students was pointed out by Maria, who commented that this would allow her to, “be intentional in developing relationships.” The workgroup determined that this activity could serve as an introductory activity allowing students to tie unfamiliar concepts to their lived experiences.

Narrative writing about cultural variations has been presented in the literature as a useful means of engaging students in exploration of cultural themes that can lead to re-conceptualizing cultural concepts and internalizing cultural issues (Rashidi & Meihami, 2017). Workgroup members held a similar view. Jennifer pointed out, “It can lead to really fruitful, wholesome conversations.”

It was agreed that in adapting this strategy for use at Marathon culturally themed narratives could be assigned as topics for journaling. Proposed topics for narratives included

cultural views of beauty, family and culture, and the role of pop culture in shaping views. Further, participants agreed that by helping student to examine cultural themes, narrative writing could serve to support other activities such as arts-based approaches.

Arts-based approaches have been demonstrated as a means of facilitating greater cultural awareness and supporting culturally relevant pedagogy (Gaultner & Green, 2016). While Jennifer pointed out the need to, “broadly define art,” to engage as many students as possible, it was agreed that providing the opportunity for students to explore cultural themes through art could provide a powerful medium of internalizing concepts. For this reason, the workgroup chose to incorporate arts-based components as part of each assignment.

Dialogue can be an effective process for supporting cultural inquiry and deepening the individual’s understanding of other cultures (Gaultner & Green, 2016). Workgroup participants discussed the inclusion of formal and informal dialogue as a mode of supporting efforts to bridge existing cultural divides. Participants recognized that meaningful dialogue could grow from other activities such as journaling. Maria saw dialogue as “a good way to build relationships.”

### **Questionnaires**

As a follow-up to discussions that took place during interviews and workgroup meetings, a questionnaire was distributed to participants to gauge what, if any, changes had occurred in how they viewed their own positionality and the influence of class and culture on student/teacher interactions. Participants noted that they had become more aware of their own cultural bias. Jennifer, observed that she had come to think of cultural barriers as less of obstacles to be negotiated and more as differences to be accepted and used to deepen student/teacher relationships. Jennifer also expressed, as had Maria in earlier discussions, that

she would appreciate the opportunity to read more literature related to the issues raised in this study and continue discussions of a similar nature.

## **Findings**

### **Research Question One**

**To what extent can collaborative exchanges of opinion between teachers alter their perception of sociocultural barriers to effective student/educator interactions?**

Participants noted that in interviews and workgroup session, they had been introduced to a several new concepts about culture and class. Jennifer stressed that discussing ideas that she had not had to name before had been confusing. However, she expressed that the process had required her to acknowledge that her views were to some extent inherited.

As part of their participation, participants were also required to consider the how context of their practice setting had shaped their experiences. Jennifer expressed, “We’re in a really unique context.” Aside from the behavioral issues noted by all participants, Maria remarked, “We’re talking about an environment that’s small.” Expanding on this Jennifer asserted, “I don’t know if all of our conversation really applies to the whole wide world.”

Both Jennifer and Maria expressed that their views about sociocultural barriers had changed as a result of participation in this study. During discussions in the workgroup meeting Maria observed that she felt that being more intentional about developing relationships would be helpful in reaching diverse students. When asked as part of the participant questionnaire, Jennifer responded that she now saw barriers less as obstacles to be surmounted and more as factors to be accepted and worked with to deepen student/teacher relationships.

## **Research Question Two**

### **What strategies can be identified to facilitate improved interactions between students and teachers?**

Several strategies to employ in addressing the impact of cultural divides on student/teacher interactions were identified. Participants agreed that existing time dedicated to social emotional learning could be focused on culturally responsive strategies. Cultural autobiographies were selected as an introductory activity that would allow students to approach unfamiliar ideas within the familiar context of their own lives' experiences.

Narrative writing about cultural themes was selected as an approach that would help students identify and examine cultural concepts. Participants also agreed that incorporating an arts-based approach could help students expand and internalize cultural concepts introduced through autobiographies and narratives. Finally, student teacher dialogue was selected as a means supplementing other activities and building student/teacher relationships.

## **Research Question Three**

### **What effects do collaborative exchanges of opinion have on the beliefs and attitudes of educators?**

Both participants reported that their experiences during this study had altered their beliefs. As noted before, Jennifer expressed a greater awareness of her own cultural biases. She also reported that she had become more convinced to seek out educational opportunities for her own son. With regard to student/teacher interactions, she expressed that her experience had convinced her to "seek student esteem in small ways."

In responding to the follow-up questionnaire, Maria commented that the experience of participating in this study had caused her to reflect more deeply upon her own views of

culture. Further, she remarked that the process helped her to better understand how class and culture can sometimes create barriers to student/teacher interactions. She also stated that her belief that sociocultural differences may have both potentially positive and potentially negative impacts on learning remained unchanged.

Participants reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet with others to discuss issues of culture and cultural divides. They welcomed the opportunity to continue collaborative exchanges and to continue developing culturally based learning opportunities. Jennifer asserted that she had been exposed to several ideas that needed to be expanded through further exploration.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers in an alternative school setting regarding barriers to student/teacher interaction and to explore strategies that may be implemented to improve interactions between students and teachers. To conduct this exploration, a convenience sample of two participating teachers was drawn. A semi-structured interview was administered to each participant to assess their experiences, attitudes and beliefs about how class and culture impact student/teacher interactions. A workgroup was then convened to identify specific strategies that could be employed within the practice setting to address cultural and class division between students and teachers.

Interviews and workgroup session were recorded, transcribed, and coded using open and axial coding methods. Transcripts from interviews and workgroup session as well as codes and categories derived from transcript analysis were shared with participants to allow for member checking and input. Axial coding from initial interviews yielded a conceptual



model of how culture and class influence student/teacher interaction. Analysis from the participant workgroup examined participant views of the intervention process, their perceptions and attitudes regarding how sociocultural factors influencing student teacher interactions, and their opinions about potential strategies for addressing class and cultural divides.

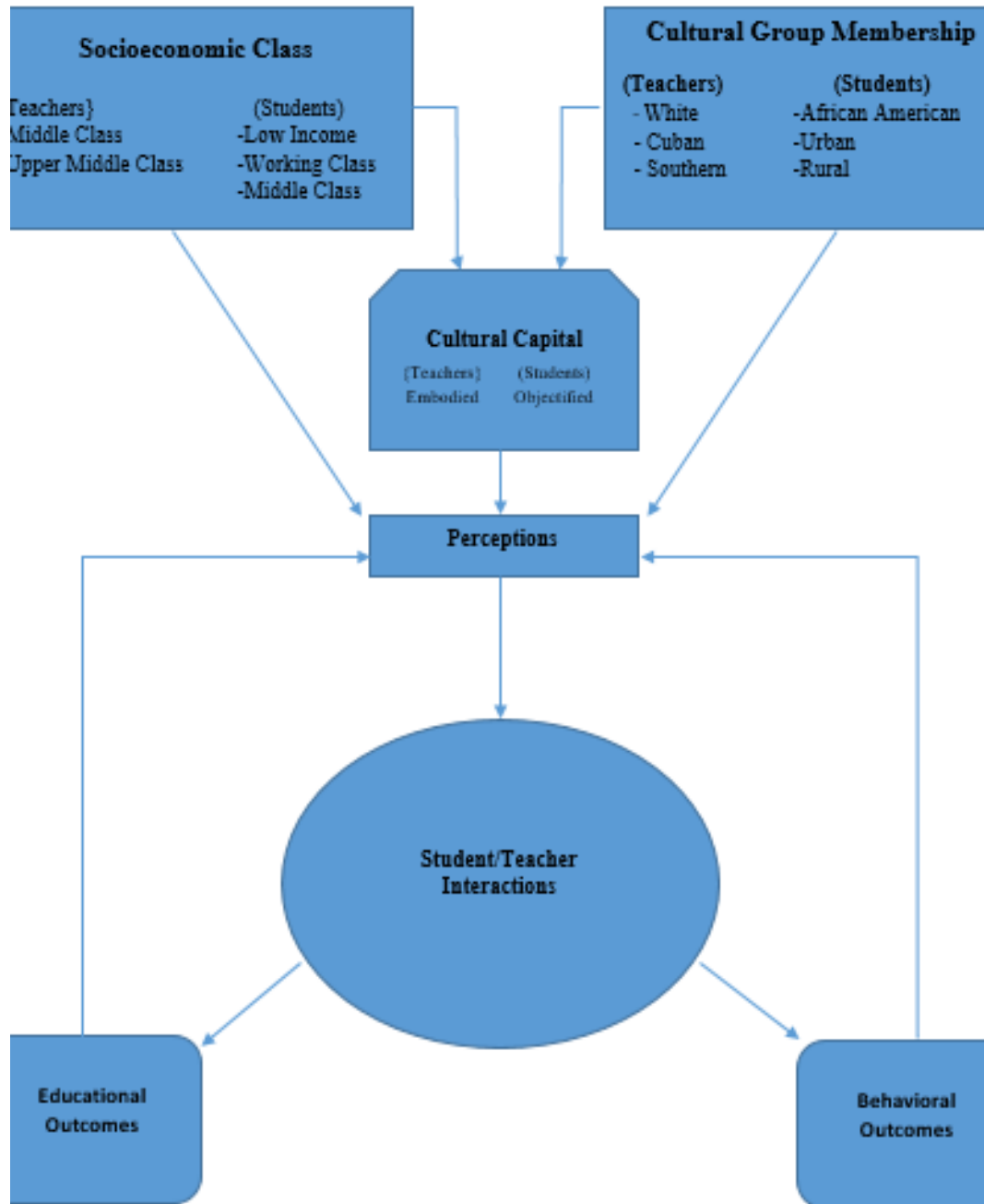
Participants expressed that the process of interviews had offered exposure to new ideas regarding class and culture, as well as caused them to reflect on long held beliefs. In Jennifer's case this had caused her to reflect on the nature of her beliefs and the extent to which they had, "shaped me, before I shaped them." Jennifer also expressed that further exploration of these ideas would be required to, "flesh them out."

Several strategies were identified during the participant work group. These included equity pedagogy, cultural biographies, narrative writing, arts-based approaches, and dialogue. Participants were enthusiastic about the opportunity to implement these strategies in the coming term.

The findings presented in this chapter were used to develop an action plan for implementation. This plan is discussed in the following chapter. Included in the discussion of future plans are possible implications of this study's findings.

**Table 4.1** *Excerpted Codes*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Narrative</b>	<b>Participant</b>
Reflection	Outcomes	I remember that I said that it was a very enriching experience and that it helped me understand the culture in the class I was different from me and that I wouldn't give that up for anything.	MARIA
Reflection	Outcomes	My questions is basically about the outcomes. The outcomes that are written here.	MARIA
Reflection	Assumptions	... I can inspire, I can be, but there again, that is judgy and that's my own point of view that I, I can't escape.	JENNIFER
Relationships	Authenticity	I just allowed myself to be me. And, and that worked better as far as establishing relationships,	MARIA



**Figure 4.1** *Culture and Class in Shaping Student/Teacher Interactions*



**Figure 4.2** *Ancillary Factors in Identifying Cross Cultural Strategies*

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **ACTION PLAN AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This collaborative action research study attempted to better understand how teachers perceive the impact of sociocultural factors in influencing the interactions between diverse students and teachers, and to investigate specific strategies to facilitate improved interaction between them. Interventions consisting of semi-structured interviews, provision of academic literature related to study related concepts, and participant workgroups were administered over a three-week period. Data were collected and analyzed over a five-week period.

#### **Overview of Study**

A study proposal was submitted to the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review. Upon clearance from the IRB, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the district Office of Assessment and Evaluation in accordance with existing policy. Once permission was obtained, selection of the study sample began.

During the sample selection period the district closed all physical facilities and began a process of distance education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. School staff were instructed to avoid any physical meetings or exchange of materials that may risk transmission of the virus. This necessitated a modification of the original study design to incorporate methods that could be carried out through email and online meetings. Thus, only teachers who could commit to be available for virtual meetings and follow-up were selected.

A convenience sample consisting of two teachers who expressed interest in participation was drawn. I met with participants to conduct semi-structured interviews and a

participant workgroup. Participants were provided with peer reviewed articles related to multicultural education and a follow-up questionnaire was administered to gauge changes in teacher attitudes.

### **Problem of Practice**

Socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and culture influences the educational outcomes of diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Roche, et al. 2016). Some improvement has been made in the disparity of these outcomes. However, inequities still exist in the educational attainment of diverse learners (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014). Problems remain concerning many of these inequities existing due to factors beyond the control of the individual student, such as family background (Raitona & Vona, 2016). Educational inequalities have amassed over generations and created a cycle of lowered educational attainment in some populations (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Attending to the causes of this cycle, is a societal responsibility (Ladson-Billings, 2014). It is incumbent upon educators to create a school culture that supports diversity in which learners of all genders, races, ethnicities, and cultural groups can learn as equal participants (Hansman et al., 1999; Pricope, 2015). Preparing teachers who are largely white, middle class and monolingual to teach diverse learners has become a growing concern (McVee, 2014). While there exists some debate as to the best approaches, strategies have been developed to support multicultural education. Determining which of these strategies might be employed at Marathon High School has been a defining problem practice.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this collaborative action research was to address the problem of practice by examining the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of teachers in the school setting

regarding barriers to student/educator interaction and to identify strategies that may facilitate improved classroom interactions between students and teachers. My primary focus was those factors that affect my own practice and those of my collaborators. It was also anticipated that much of the understanding gained from this study would be transferable to other teachers in my school and in similar teaching environments.

### **Research Questions**

Over the course of this study I attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent can collaborative exchanges of opinion between teachers alter their perception of sociocultural barriers to effective student/educator interactions?
2. What strategies can be identified to facilitate improved interactions between students and teachers?
3. What effects do collaborative exchanges of opinion have on the beliefs and attitudes of educators?

### **Methodology**

Once the sample was drawn, I met with participating teachers through the Zoom virtual meeting platform to conduct semi-structured interview consisting of twenty open ended questions designed to explore teacher perceptions of how socioeconomic class and culture impact the ways in which students and teachers interact. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were first analyzed through open coding. Coded transcripts were returned to participants for review and member checking. A second round of coding was completed using axial coding to identify the relationship of concepts to one

another. This process produced a conceptual model of the impact of class and culture on student/teacher interaction and educational outcomes.

After interviews were complete, I provided participants with five peer reviewed academic articles discussing topics relevant to multicultural education. These articles discussed equity pedagogy; Ogbu's (1992) conception of voluntary, involuntary, and autonomous minorities, and specific strategies employed to mitigate cultural barriers to student/teacher interactions. A workgroup meeting was then scheduled for participants to meet.

Participants met through the Zoom virtual meeting platform to discuss the conceptual model developed from interview codes, reflect upon their own perceptions of how class and culture impact their interaction with students, and identify specific strategies to be employed their own classrooms. The workgroup was recorded and transcribed for analysis. Initial analysis was again completed through open coding. Coded transcripts were shared with participants to allow for review and member checking.

Several categories emerged from the open coding process. Among these were: (a) culture, (b) context of practice, (c) reflection, (d) teacher perceptions, (e) student perceptions, (f) relationships, and (g) strategies. Axial coding was then applied and a model of the interrelation of concepts was developed. Additionally, multiple strategies were identified for incorporation in the upcoming school year.

Specific strategies included the use of student written cultural autobiographies, narrative writing, student/teacher dialogue, and arts-based approaches. These approaches could be incorporated into existing classroom time devoted to social-emotional learning. Participants agreed to pilot these strategies as an initiative of the school's social studies



department. After an initial trial, participants agreed to share experiences and any materials developed with other teachers at Marathon High School.

To ascertain what, if any changes, had occurred in the perception of teachers during this study, a questionnaire consisting of six open ended questions was developed. This questionnaire was distributed through email.

## **Overview of Findings**

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

During initial interviews both Maria and Jennifer reported that they had observed the influence of culture and socioeconomic class both on their students and themselves. Each indicated that these factors had, to some degree, shaped their perceptions and attitudes, which might impact the ways they and their students interacted. Both participants viewed teaching in the current environment as a source of personal reward and occasional frustration.

Analysis of participant interviews revealed that both participants felt that sociocultural factors had influenced them in ways that were different than that of their students. Both asserted that their own cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds had formed within them a deep appreciation of the value of intangible forms of cultural capital such as knowledge and education, while their students seemed to prioritize objectified forms of cultural capital such as cell phones and clothing associated with in group or financial status. Interestingly, Maria noted that many of the problematic student behaviors that are considered almost endemic in the current school environment were present to the same degree in her private parochial school in prerevolutionary Cuba.

Interview data also underscored the perception among participants of the value of forming relationships in negotiating cross-cultural interactions with students. Jennifer felt

that it was important to intentionally personify a positive, accepting, and helpful presence. This mirrors Ogbu's work suggesting that mistrust must be overcome by teachers who make explicit their acceptance and support of students (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998).

Axial coding of interview transcripts yielded a conceptual model of student/teacher interaction. Within this model socioeconomic class and culture exert influence as perceptions and attitudes of both students and teachers dynamically act upon student/teacher interaction. In turn, student/teacher interactions help to reinforce or moderate the existing attitudes of students and teachers.

### **Participant Workshops**

Analysis of the participant workshop transcript revealed a number of themes related to the processes of dialogue and strategizing. Participants commented on the role of culture in shaping early views and attitudes and their belief that both socioeconomic class and culture effect the formation of teacher/student relationships. Both Jennifer and Maria agreed that socioeconomic and cultural differences could create divisions between student and teacher, however, both contended that differences could also enrich the experiences of teaching and learning.

Marathon High School was an alternative school with a transient student population. Participants generally agreed that this presented a unique context of practice. While it was noted that the alternative school setting presented challenges in dealing with student behaviors, participants also agreed that the smaller setting allowed teachers to engage with students in more meaningful ways, which they felt had ramifications for the identification of strategies to bridge cultural divides and the transferability of those strategies to other teaching environments. It should be noted, however, that the strategies identified for

implementation by the workgroup have been successfully employed in general education environments.

The workgroup session afforded participants an opportunity to reflect upon their own values and beliefs as well as how these perceptions had been shaped by culture and socioeconomic class. While Jennifer found the process to be at times discomforting, she expressed that it had been an opportunity for exposure to valuable ideas. As the process of reflection shifted to include how participants viewed the perception of students, both Jennifer and Maria said that they felt student's views of positionality regarding in-group versus out-group status affected student/teacher relationships and interactions.

Maria noted that oftentimes her relationships with students from backgrounds dissimilar to her own started with, "a little bit of distance there." Jennifer reported that she felt as though teachers with socioeconomic or cultural background more similar to those of students, "had less ground to cover," in forming relationships. However, participants agreed that forming personal relationships with students was not only instrumental in bridging divides; it was potentially enriching for both student and teacher.

The importance of relationship-building led Jennifer to attempt to consciously project an air of acceptance and support, an idea that aligns with Ogbu's suggestion that majority teachers should make clear that they accept student differences (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). Maria observed that in the past she had not made conscious attempts to foster trust in her students. Instead, she felt that being authentic in her interactions with students had organically fostered trust. Upon reflection she felt that employing explicit strategies to build relationships with students would help mitigate sociocultural barriers.

Workgroup participants discussed several strategies that might be employed to help diminish sociocultural barriers between themselves and students. Of those discussed, participants identified student-authored cultural biographies, narrative writing on cultural themes, arts-based exercises, and student/teacher dialogue as strategies to be implemented. It was agreed that the social studies department could adopt these strategies for use during class time allotted for social-emotional learning.

### **Follow-Up Questionnaire**

To gain a better understanding of how participant perceptions may have changed as a result of participating in this study a questionnaire was developed and distributed. Participants reported a greater awareness of cultural bias. Jennifer expressed that she had begun to view cultural divides as something to be used in building relationships. Jennifer and Maria also related that they would enjoy the opportunity to read more literature related to the issues raised in this study and to continue discussions of a similar nature.

### **Description of the Action Researcher as Curriculum Leader**

In my role as an action researcher, my aims were closely aligned with my objectives as a teacher and a team leader. The purpose of qualitative research in the field of education is to better understand how individuals construct meaning from educational experiences (Efron & Ravid, 2013). A primary goal of action research is that of effecting positive change or improving educator practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to better understand how teachers perceive the influence of socioeconomic class and culture on student/teacher interactions and improve these interactions by identifying specific strategies that may be employed to mitigate divides created by sociocultural factors. While the intent of this research was first to improve my own practice and to add to the understanding of this study's participants. It was also my goal

to provide a means to inform the practice of other teachers who may benefit. The collaborative nature of this action research study created inroads to affect change in the practice of participants, but also to expand through existing networks to create broader change.

### **Action Plan**

Upon completion of the study, I will share its findings with the faculty and administration of my school. I enlisted the ongoing collaboration of the study's participants in piloting the strategies identified for implementation as part of a departmental initiative. Study participants also agreed to assist in dissemination of results and materials developed through this process to the faculty and staff of Marathon High School.

Once strategies have been piloted, I will approach the school's administration to request that the pilot program be presented to faculty through the schools existing professional learning communities (PLCs). Study participants and I will then share the findings of this study together with the school's faculty as part of regularly scheduled PLC meetings. We will provide a description of the study's methodology and findings to each PLC. Further, with the support of my school's administrative team, we will work with each of the school's PLCs to help them identify and implement successful classroom strategies to strengthen their delivery of culturally responsive pedagogy.

### **Recommendations for Policy/Practice**

#### **Recommendation 1**

Several strategies for addressing sociocultural barriers were identified through this study. These included (a) student authored cultural autobiographies, (b) culturally themed narrative writing, (c) dialogue, and (d) arts-based exercises. Evidence to support the

application of each of these strategies is present within the existing literature. Working together, study participants selected these strategies as the most viable for implementation within their classrooms.

These strategies will be implemented in the social studies classes at Marathon High School in the upcoming year. The participants of this study have agreed to work together to develop and employ lesson activities based on these approaches in the upcoming year. Time currently allotted for social emotional learning will be used to pilot these approaches. After initial implementation these strategies may be employed by other departments at Marathon High School.

### **Recommendation Two**

Friere (2017) asserted that dialogue can be an effective means of consciousness raising. Dialogue between teachers in this study provided evidence of an increased awareness of existing bias and a need to build trust and relationships between students and teachers. The aforementioned strategies can be used to provide opportunities for student/teacher dialogue, while structured opportunities for dialogue can be incorporated into professional development and professional learning community activities to increase awareness of sociocultural barriers and negotiate potential solutions.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Qualitative action research seeks to investigate phenomena by focusing on the meanings behind the experiences of individuals or groups (Efron & Ravid, 2013). In this study I employed a qualitative collaborative action research approach to better understand how teachers construct interactions through the mediums of socioeconomic class and culture, and what specific strategies may be identified and implemented to facilitate more effective

exchanges. This research is of immediate value to my own practice and to those teachers who have collaborated with me in this study.

While qualitative research is useful in examining the subjective perceptions of individuals and unique contexts of practice, its focus on the subjective experiences of individuals as opposed to objective measures of broader trends means that its findings are not readily generalizable to larger populations. However, the results of this research should also provide insight to teachers who practice in the same setting. Further, the results of this research are likely transferable to the practice of teachers working with students who have backgrounds dissimilar to their own or diverse student populations.

This study was limited to the perceptions of teachers who identify as White and middle-class and whose students are almost entirely African-American. It leaves unexplored the perceptions of African American teachers and students, as well as the implementation of the strategies identified. Further research in this area should be conducted.

### **Summary**

American schools continue to grow more diverse (NCES, 2017). While the gaps in educational achievement between learners in the majority and those belonging to some minority groups has shrunk, there remain inequalities linked to culture and socioeconomic class (Raitona & Vona, 2016). This study was initiated to address the barriers that arise between students and teachers by attempting to better understand how teachers perceive the impact of socioeconomic class and culture on student/teacher interactions and to identify specific strategies that may be implemented to bridge cultural divides between students and teachers.

Employing a qualitative action research design with two collaborating teachers, I examined teacher views of sociocultural influences on student/teacher interactions and identified specific cross-cultural strategies to implement. Analysis of data revealed that study participants felt that socioeconomic and class differences as between students and teachers presented both challenges and opportunities. Personal relationships were viewed by study participants as being an important means of developing trust and overcoming sociocultural divides. Strategies identified for implementation were seen by participants as supporting student/teacher exchanges and building of relationships.

Selected strategies include student authored autobiographies, narrative writing on cultural themes, arts-based exercises, and student/teacher dialogue. Participants agreed to pilot these strategies as part of a department initiative. It was further agreed that this initiative would be applied during existing classroom time devoted to social-emotional learning.



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## **APPENDIX A:**

### **PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- 1) How would you describe your own cultural background?
- 2) How would you describe the cultural backgrounds of your students?
- 3) How would you describe your social class?
- 4) How would you describe the social class or classes of your students?
- 5) What, if any, role do you think culture plays in the way we teach?
- 6) In what ways has your culture shaped the way you teach?
- 7) What, if any, role do you think class plays in how we teach?
- 8) In what ways has your socioeconomic class impacted your teaching?
- 9) How would you describe your experiences teaching students from sociocultural Backgrounds different from your own?
- 10) What would you regard as some of the most positive things about teaching students from different sociocultural backgrounds?
- 11) What would you say are some of the challenges you face in teaching students from sociocultural backgrounds different from yourself?
- 12) Has the way in which you interact with students inside or outside the classroom changed in response to differences between your sociocultural background and theirs?



- 13) Have your teaching methods changed in response to the needs of diverse students?
- 14) Are there specific teaching strategies that you employ to teach diverse learners?
- 14) How would you define multicultural education?
- 15) How would you define culturally relevant pedagogy?
- 16) How would you define culturally responsive pedagogy?
- 17) What do you consider to be the most important consideration(s) when teaching diverse students?
- 18) How do you think schools could better serve diverse students?
- 19) Are there any questions that you as an educator would ask students who come from a background different from your own?
- 20) Are there any specific topics or strategies that you would like to explore as part of this project?

## **APPENDIX B:**

### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

#### **UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA**

##### **Invitation to Participate (Educator)**

##### **Class and Culture in the Classroom: A Study of the Beliefs and Perceptions of Students and Teachers in an Alternative School Setting**

Dear Colleague,

My name is William Rolison. I am a teacher at [Redacted] and a doctoral candidate in the College of Education, at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my degree in curriculum and instruction, and I would like to invite you to participate. This study is sponsored by the College of Education at the University of South Carolina.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how class and culture impact the interactions between students and teachers. If you choose to participate in this study, you will take part in an interview and three work groups centered around identifying and mitigating class and cultural barriers to effective student/teacher interaction. The session(s) will be audiotaped so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. Audio recordings will be reviewed by the research team only, and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Participation is confidential. Others in the work group will hear what you say, and it is possible that they could tell someone else. Because we will be talking in a group, we cannot promise that what you say will remain completely private, but we will ask that you and all other group members respect the privacy of everyone in the group.

Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

Participation, non-participation, or withdrawal will not affect your grades in any way. If you begin the study and later decide to withdraw, he or she will not be penalized in any way.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about this study. You may contact me at (803) 381-6551 or [william.rolison@richlandone.org](mailto:william.rolison@richlandone.org). You may speak with my faculty advisor, Dr. Aisha Haynes, at (803) 777-2791 or [haynesa@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:haynesa@mailbox.sc.edu).

To participate in this study please contact me to schedule a time when we may meet at your convenience to conduct a brief interview. Thank you for your consideration.

With kind regards,

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## APPENDIX C:

### PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Participant Questionnaire

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Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I have written the following questionnaire to better understand the extent to which discussions may shape the views of educators about how class and culture influence student/teacher interaction. As with the information you have shared previously, your participation is voluntary, responses to these questions will be confidential, and you may withdraw from participation without penalty. If you would like to discuss this form, or any other aspect of this study, please feel free to contact me by email at: [william.rolison@richlandone.org](mailto:william.rolison@richlandone.org) or by phone at: (803) 381-6551.

1) In what ways, if any, did participation in this study affect how you view your own culture?
2) In what ways have your views about how culture impacts student/educator interactions changed?
3) In what ways, if any, did participation in this study affect how you view your own socioeconomic status (class)?
4) In what ways have your views about how socioeconomic status (class) affects student/educator interaction changed?
5) To what extent have your discussions with other teachers in this study changed how you view sociocultural barriers to interactions between students and educators?
6) Do you have any further comments you would like to make about your participation in this study?