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Student Perceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and The Impact on Teacher-Student Relationships

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY AND THE IMPACT ON TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Without him, I am nothing. My relationship with him has given me strength when I became weak and encouraged me when I was down which has helped me complete this journey. His love, protection, and grace are unmatched, for that, I am forever grateful.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how six eighth-grade Magnet Program students perceive their teacher-student relationship through the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. This case study provided information that guides a classroom teacher in the implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy that helps develop and maintain teacher-student relationships. The resulting analysis and interpretation provided major themes that developed regarding the use of culturally relevant strategies in the classroom.

This study informs educators in the profession about the extent to which students perceptions impact their relationship with the teacher. Findings showed that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy impacted the way students perceived the teacher-student relationship. Major themes helped to explain those perceptions and the findings can be used by teachers and administrators to advocate for additional funding and professional development in the areas of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and relationship building.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy moves away from regarding minority students as ill equipped to navigate educational systems to one that calls for changes to be made to provide equity for all cultures. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1990) crafted Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to describe ways of helping Black students learn that has been implemented with some success. This changed the stance from what students needed to do to overcome challenges to one that focused on what educators needed to adjust to remove obstacles and barriers that were causing the system to be inequitable. This included developing a school environment that would meet the needs of the students, their families, and communities (Downer et al., 2007).

Educators have followed the work of Ladson-Billings and other culturally relevant theorists to help transform the 21st-century classroom. These educators sought to explore what types of cultural practices and competencies teachers could include in their school settings to make students feel valued (Liu et al., 2020). As a result, the merging of inside and outside of school identities allowed students to feel more welcomed and, therefore, more willing to engage in school in order to become more academically successful (Graves & Rychly, 2012). According to Ladson-Billings (2014), academic success, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness are three significant domains of student work that contribute to the effectiveness of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Academic success is how students grow over time in the mastery of content.

Cultural competence is how students learn to identify, recognize, appreciate, and celebrate their own cultures, while also learning about others and valuing those as important (Shannon-Baker, 2018). Socio-political consciousness involves moving student learning out of the classroom to see how students themselves could adapt their learning to solve real-world problems in their lives, communities, and on the global stage.

Over time, teachers began to use Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and expanded it to include feminism, social reconstruction, and pragmatism to meet the needs of all learners (Wiggan, 2007). All these aims hold in common one goal: to provide educational equity to students of all cultures and diverse needs. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy was developed on the basis of the 1970s Afrocentric education, which underpinned the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. Blacks sought to equalize and provide equitable educational experiences in the now desegregated classrooms (Shockley & Cleveland, 2011). Ladson-Billings (1994) pointed out that educational systems provide environments in which all learners could be successful, but previous pedagogies did not focus on students of all cultures.

Those pedagogical theories focused on the works of figures like John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, and Lev Vygotsky, who studied young white privileged students (Gay, 2013). As a result, early curricula were culturally devoid and disadvantaged (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Paris (2012) discussed the need for educators to move the framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to a more intentional schema from pockets of equity to systems rooted in culturally sustaining pedagogy. Alim (2005) argued that sustaining and maintaining culturally relevant ideas and schemas is key to its effectiveness. Although cultural relevance has been implemented in classrooms, it does not appear to have been

applied consistently across the board—or even remain in the classroom past the professional development meetings that introduced teachers to these ideas. Caraballo et al. (2020) explained that there are systemic inequalities that include differences in race, ethnicity, and language. Equity calls for a change to deficit term usage in describing academic challenges. Changing the responsibility of making the system work involves moving away from terms like "the academic achievement gap" to an opportunity gap, which puts the burden of correction on the system itself and not the learner who is oppressed by it (Caraballo et al., 2020).

Paris (2012) points out that the work of Ladson-Billings has become well known and widely disseminated. However, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy practices have not gone far enough to push the actual conceptual value of making education equal for all (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The lack of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy implementation is only one part of the argument. Though relevancy and responsiveness are a part of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, they need to be explicitly taught and tied to the educational framework; otherwise they are learned in isolation and would not be considered a part of the pedagogy because the teacher would not be utilizing all of the its tenets. As a result, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is an umbrella under which many different student iterations can exist, which still leaves out some students (Alim et al., 2017). For instance, ethnic and linguistic differences exist depending upon geographic location. Urban communities have different needs than suburban or rural communities, and the historical practice of teaching to one type of student is antiquated (Brown, 2004).

During this, my first year as a lead teacher, I became privy to how teachers form relationships with students without conscious intention, which may not work for one or

both parties and could cause unanticipated and potentially adverse consequences. As a teacher, I was primarily concerned about what went on in my classroom and would not allow students to talk about what was going on in other classes, especially if that information seemed negative. I felt that I needed to support other teachers by insisting that all teachers want the best for their students.

In my current role as a lead teacher, my duties are to track and follow student progress in magnet classes. I specifically like to focus on the Black students in the program because of their academic vulnerability—historically and in the present. This group has the most referrals, absences, and low grades. My practice presented itself through this new perspective. Lack of teacher-student relationships impacted students in my program, and I needed to take steps to investigate how to minimize these problems, as eight-grade performance can be a precursor to how students will perform in ninth grade.

Forming and sustaining healthy, productive relationships are essential in all aspects of life (Erikson, 1995; Maslow, 1979) and impact all levels of interaction in society (Adams et al., 2018; Bandura, 1993; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). In school systems, teacher-student relationships drive student outcomes well beyond the results of standardized testing (Popham, 2011). Beyond material mastery, students need classroom environments that reflect the demands of the 21st century. Students must engage in assignments that require collaboration as a critical trait necessary for success, and success depends on the ability to work well with others (Byrne et al., 2019; Geisinger, 2016).

A student's education in the modern classroom must include something called the four Cs: ability to Collaborate, Communicate, Critically think, and Create, all of which rely heavily on healthy, respectful relationships with others (Alismail & McGuire, 2015).

One of the ways to develop a healthy and respectful relationship with students is by modeling positive relationship behaviors (Allen et al., 2018). Teachers should model the way people should interact with each other, which in turn should help students learn what is expected of them in interactions with others. As a result, relationship as a learning tool is critical, as explained through Social Cognitive Behavior theories proposed by Bandura (1993), Bruner (1983), and Dewey (1937). While teachers are responsible for ensuring students learn course content, they must also attend to assisting students to become productive citizens and functioning adults (Dewey, 1937).

Maintaining substantial student engagement and resulting achievement (Popham, 2011) is a problem in our K-12 classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2000). A lack of attention to relationship building has led to the decline of student attendance, student engagement, and positive student outcomes (Brophy, 1986). Despite numerous training and professional development sessions geared towards relationship building (Ryan, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), some teachers struggle to establish positive relationships with students, to provide student-centered learning environments, and to value students who have different cultures and beliefs than their own (Wayne & Youngs, 2003). This has negatively affected students' chances for higher levels of achievement (Hanushek, 2016). Researchers indicate that some teachers seem unable to effectively reach students using outdated strategies, practices, and interventions (Peterson et al., 2016). Some of these problems could be the result of the lack of teacher diversity, dearth of the opportunities of having a teacher of the same gender, and limited professional development opportunities related to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Egalite et al., 2015). Teacher-student relationships can have long-lasting, beneficial, and positive impacts on both a student's

academic and social development (Kohn, 2005). Teachers play a large role in the development of students. Bruner (1983) and Dewey (1937) explored how teachers deliver content and how teachers are also responsible for ensuring that students become productive, well-adjusted members of society. Students learn how to become socially adept by interacting with their teachers through intentional teacher modeling of positive actions in relationships (Bruner, 1983).

This study examines how the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy by teachers could impact students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships. This action research seeks to highlight the need for schools to employ more teachers committed to the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and highlight its correlation to relationship building within the classroom dynamic. It is assumed that data will give evidence of the positive benefits of these dynamic relationships. As a lead teacher, the researcher is tasked with investigating mismatches in engagement and student outcomes across a Magnet Program. Teachers are action researchers using observed phenomena to generate reasons for problems and identify solutions (Mertler, 2021). The researcher's responsibility is to understand the reasons for student disengagement and propose possible solutions.

Statement of the Problem

This research study identifies the lack of a positive teacher-student relationships as a problem of practice that causes some students to disengage from positive academic behavior. When the relationship between the teacher and student is not ideal, classroom engagement decreases (Canter & Canter, 1997). Disengagement leads to a reduction in the student's perception of efficacy, engagement, and achievement in the course (Marzano, 2003). An effective teacher-student relationship can increase attendance,

reduce negative disciplinary outcomes, and improve student engagement within a class (Canter & Canter, 1997). A trusting, respectful teacher-student relationship can transmit the message to students that the teacher is invested in their futures and wellbeing (Birch & Ladd, 1997). As a result, students will more likely desire to do well, feel compelled to attend class regularly, and receive fewer referrals due to mutual trust and a low-risk high-engagement environment (Pianta et al., 2016).

Overall, students need teachers who can relate to them and who can also make the course content relevant and meaningful to their overall development. In order to address the problem of some teachers being unaware or unfamiliar with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, educational leaders must introduce teachers to the concept through sufficient training, ensure they diversify the curriculum, and monitor the efforts of teachers in their efforts to enhance the student learning environment (Kaput, 2018). Additionally, teachers who are confident in implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy could also model this for other teachers. Addressing students' needs is crucial, and research must be conducted to generate implementable solutions to close the opportunity gaps and provide equity in education for all students.

Summary of Background Knowledge

Teachers establish effective relationships with students by creating conducive learning environments and providing students opportunities to be successful (Hattie, 2012; Marzano, 2003). Marzano (2003) studied effective teaching practices and determined that an effective teacher-student relationship had a significant impact. As teachers begin to provide more personalized learning options for students, teachers must develop effective classroom instructional practices (Kamil et al., 2008). The most

beneficial way of doing this is by establishing positive teacher-student relationships (Hattie, 2012). Those effective and productive teacher-student relationships developed through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are critical to establishing a classroom environment that promotes learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers can build these environments by being intentional in creating relationships rather than assuming they develop without effort (Bandura, 1993). Once the environment is set for relationship building, students begin to feel more comfortable with the teacher and their classmates. They then feel safe and trust that their teacher has their best interest at heart (Hughes et al., 2001). Additionally, when these relationships work well and are sustained and continued, the student can thrive (Pianta et al., 2016). When teachers create a safe, comfortable, and welcoming environment, respect for others, and new learning experiences, students feel more inclined to share and collaborate (Bandura, 1993).

Klee and Miller (2019) explained that eighth-grade students are dependent upon effective teacher-student relationships to build a framework and knowledge base that will become necessary as they transition to high school. However, it is not to be overlooked that many older students may need additional support to reach the next grade level and navigate through school successfully (Jackson, 2018), even though the teacher has done a successful job of preparing the student for the next step. Unfortunately, engagement has been shown to decline as students progress through the upper elementary grades and middle school, reaching its lowest levels in high school (Marks, 2000). In a recent article about relating to students, we are told that while student attitudes and ways of thinking may differ from ours, we must still respect them and their thought processes (Boutte,

2015). Through community building, teachers and students are more apt to appreciate the authenticity of each person's personality, values, and beliefs (Marzano, 2003).

Teachers should show empathy and understanding when interacting with students of many different cultures in their classrooms (Kamil et al., 2008). This interaction can seem detrimental to more traditional educators because it requires a change from teacher as objective expert to one of collaboration in the educational environment (Yandle, 2018). As the teachers show empathy, students feel that the teacher genuinely cares for them beyond their teaching content (Reddy et al., 2003). Students become comfortable and feel they will not have to bottle up feelings or hide who they indeed are.

A positive classroom culture can be established when students can trust the teacher and begin to accept that what they are telling them comes from a place of love and learning rather than from a place of judgment (Reddy et al., 2003). Teachers will want to identify ways to help students feel good enough or smart enough to conquer both life's problems and the course content. Klem and Connell (2004) found that students who perceive teachers as caring, supportive, and invested in their learning will be more likely to report ongoing engagement in school and more positive reactions to school-related challenges, which in turn will be associated with better attendance and higher test scores (Hattie, 2012). When teachers are caring, supporting, and invested in students, students enter school confident and ready to take on challenges they face because they feel they have the support of teachers (Marzano, R. J. & Marzano, J. S., 2015). Students are not oblivious to this type of compassion in the classroom and most often welcome it. This is reflected in Delpit's (2012a) "warm demander" strategy: "teachers expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in

a disciplined and structured environment" (p. 72). Delpit (2012a) discusses how teachers who use warmth and personal relationships, in connection with demanding and high expectations, help minority students succeed. This "warm demander" strategy is directly related to the benefits of having a positive teacher-student relationship, especially when Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is being implemented.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy allows teachers to connect with students on a level that helps them understand the content better and helps to elevate students using their own cultures as the avenue of entry and strength when dealing with academic matters (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In order to empower students, teachers must understand who they are and what they represent. By establishing a community within the classroom and developing relationships with students, teachers can focus on the "whole child" and understand every student they meet. As a result, teachers can incorporate relatable aspects of students' daily lives into the curriculum (Rajagopal, 2011). "Teaching that ignores student norms of behavior and communication provides student resistance, while teaching that is responsive prompts student involvement" (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 1995, p. 18). If teachers want students to be engaged and involved with the content, they must find ways to reach them (Marzano, R. J. & Marzano, J. S., 2015).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is one of the ways that teachers can reach all students. Rajagopal (2011) discusses how language (jargon and slang), prior knowledge, and extracurricular activities such as music and sports are familiar aspects to students that teachers can use to enhance their teaching. A teacher's knowledge about a student's background has an impact on classroom environment, classroom management, and instructional delivery, which directly affects student outcomes (Milner et al., 2013). This

explanation helps teachers understand the need for continual development and growth in the culture, background, and experiences of their students. This does not mean, however, that an educator does not follow the state outlined standards and guidelines; it simply means that educators must include the student's "learning styles, culture, background, prior knowledge, vocabulary, music, and sports into the curriculum" (Rajagopal, 2011). This means that teachers are being asked to enhance the traditional curriculum with relevant teaching strategies and interventions for students (Kamil et al., 2008). This aligns directly with the first Culturally Relevant Pedagogy criteria, academic success, that Ladson-Billings outlines in her overview of a pedagogy that is "committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment," which criterion encourages teachers to get students to "choose academic excellence" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). To do so, teachers must demand that students produce quality work that involves rigor and meaningful connections to issues that impact them as students.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy challenges teachers to establish an interactive dialogue with students instead of delivering a one-way lecture (Milner et al., 2013; Rajagopal, 2011). Teachers, including both pre-service and veterans, should remain proactive in the pursuit of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which will require them to make additional changes and continuously monitor and adjust to meet all students' needs (Peña-Sandoval, 2019). Because of these changes, teachers will see engaged, involved, and growing students (Goodenow, 1993).

A key feature of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is creating connections between and among students of different cultures. As some students transition to virtual learning, the need to make those connections becomes difficult. The Connectivism Learning

Theory assists teachers in their ability to engage students in the learning environment through various technology platforms. Eight principles guide the Connectivism Learning Theory:

1. Learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions.
2. Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
3. Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
4. Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.
5. Nurturing and maintaining connections are needed to facilitate continual learning.
6. Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
7. Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
8. Decision making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision. (Siemens, 2004, pgs. 5 – 6)

The Connectivism Learning Theory's eight principles will assist students in the virtual classroom "to create new meaning for themselves" (Utecht & Keller, 2019, p. 108). These principles are also a basis for successful teaching and learning in nearly any environment (Utecht & Keller, 2019). In order for deep learning to occur, students must be exposed to a diversity of opinions that can both affirm and challenge their current understanding. When teachers create environments that allow for connections, students can learn more deeply because they connect specialized nodes. Another tenant is that the

capacity to know more is more valuable than current knowledge. As a result, students must feel that they will learn more from each other in the collegial environment that the teacher helped create. Teachers must model how to develop, nurture, and maintain connections to facilitate continual learning. Students must also see the connections and connect learning from the teacher, the students, and the material presented.

Connectivism posits that authentic learning is called currency, which means possession of accurate, up-to-date information (Siemens, 2004). This endeavor to collect and share educational currency should inform the learning activities that experienced teachers deliver. Students must also be in an environment that acknowledges the process of learning and unlearning. While the right answer today presents itself, it can change when learners are given new information that could render yesterday's answer wrong. This understanding does not occur in environments where students do not feel valued or fear expressing their opinions or understanding. Connectivism posits that collaborations do not just appear but take well planned, intentionally designed experiences implemented with fidelity by teachers who understand the importance of positive teacher-student relationships.

The move of the American education system to virtual learning in 2020 due to COVID-19 illuminated the need for educational leaders to stress to their teachers that relationships must be developed and kept in place if continued learning is to occur. With much of the teaching and learning taking place through technology and not face to face, teachers have been finding new ways to connect to students to feel engaged and motivated to participate in the classroom. Ice breakers, shared photos of family pets, and empathetic acknowledgment that virtual learning is challenging has deepened many

teacher-student relationships. Conversely, researchers have found that when teachers do not take the time to personalize instructional delivery and humanize their students, students become disconnected and disengaged.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study is based on the need for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as a means of improving student outcomes (Boutte, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2011). This pedagogy was developed from the tenets of Critical Race Theory and shows how students' backgrounds and culture develop individual beliefs and values based on community experiences. Critical Race Theory was established due to the Critical Race Legal Scholarship developed in the 1970s to showcase race at the forefront of legal work scholars were doing. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that Critical Race Theory is "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 2). This theory was then used as a lens to identify ways to improve the educational experience of minority students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). They argue

> that education policies and practices in the United States often contributed to inequitable educational outcomes for students of color and was a logical consequence of a larger inequitable social and political system that is premised on the subordination of people of color and people who live in poverty." (Dixson, 2018, p. 233)

This pedagogy frames this study and helps to advance the Critical Theory Race and its connection to education.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy emerged from the education arm of the Civil Rights movement. It includes Black educators' efforts to mitigate racism and provide positive identity experiences for Black students in White American classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). This framework has expanded to include practices and beliefs of many cultures in the classroom, broadening to the term Multicultural Education (Sultanova, 2016).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy can be a means to increase student achievement and close the opportunity gap (Byrd, 2016). By utilizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, educational leaders are beginning to increase student achievement. "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy centers students' culture in teaching practice through three primary approaches: high expectations, promoting cultural competence, and promoting critical consciousness" (Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers face difficult decisions regarding instructional practices, curriculum, and the learning environment because of the need to set high expectations, promote cultural competence, and expose students to critical thinking (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019).

Within our schools and classrooms, we often find inequitable responses to our students' concerns (Popham, 2011). This concern is often connected to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy when educators do not have the necessary or needed resources to fully implement a culturally relevant classroom in which students can make connections to the content (Ladson-Billings, 2009). "Culturally relevant" here means fraiming the classroom to accept and validate all types of cultures as equal and worthy of inclusion into the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Inequities are seen throughout our schools and classrooms. For example, some schools and classrooms get resources for reading and

math interventionists, funding for positive behavior reinforcement, and specialized training and professional development, resources that others do not get. Some schools have high student-to-teacher ratios and thus large class sizes, few interventionists to work with students individually or in small groups, and often, limited opportunities to explore or learn about different cultures (Lucas & Byrne, 2017). As a result, because of these inequities, many students cannot compete and do not have the same academic opportunities as other students (Spellings, 2012).

Teachers should want to ensure the development of positive relationships with students and provide them with fair and equitable resources. Once in place, teachers have enhanced student-centered learning opportunities. Not all students learn the same way, in the same capacity, or at the same pace (Vygotsky, 1978). However, as teachers use culturally relevant strategies, educators must ensure that what they learn about students in their classrooms should be used to the advantage of students. When figuring out the most effective student-centered learning opportunities, we should focus our attention on culture and its impact on students (Smaldino et al., 2012).

A difference in culture has caused many challenges for teachers who are not prepared to reach a subgroup of students (Gay, 2013). To help reduce the disparity of relevant, meaningful, and engaging content, teachers should begin their planning with the students in mind (Bruner, 1986). This means planning their content around the many similarities they have across the range of cultures present in their classrooms. This again relates to how meaningful relationships are between teachers and students because it helps teachers learn their students and how they feel about school and, more specifically, about their classes. With positive teacher-student relationships, equitable resources,

effective student-centered learning, and cultural awareness, teachers see how students achieve and are motivated to attend school—all byproducts of a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy framework.

These decisions further challenge teachers of diverse student populations, which require multitier decision-making. For this to occur, teachers would first have to develop relationships with their students (Goodenow, 1993). This development would involve Social Identity Theory, because both people would have to understand who they are as a person. Social Identity Theory helps students see how their identities are formed as a consequence of their associations with others, including peers, teachers, and family members (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Teachers must develop relationships with students to understand a student's background, family life, goals, aspirations, and cultural differences (Boutte, 2015).

Developing these relationships also helps the teacher understand each student, affording the teacher a better capacity to reach that child. As a result, students bring to the relationship and classroom their backgrounds, experiences, and cultural differences. This assists the teacher in knowing the student as the "whole child" and not just their performance in the classroom. This is based on the Funds of Knowledge" concept, which is based on the simple premise that people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge (González et al., 2006). This allows the teacher to connect the content and curriculum to the students and meet them where they are. Additionally, this helps create an inclusive, diverse classroom where all students feel needed and wanted (Zimmerman, 1990). This inclusion can also help to address how valuable students feel regarding the learning environment.

Additionally, the problem in practice draws on the precepts of Social Identity Theory, which dictate that forming identities occur socially to include classrooms. Social Identity Theory is a theoretical framework through which scholars seek to understand how people choose social groups and how they represent the social norms of their chosen groups (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain that the Social Identity Theory describes the cognitive processes related to social identity and how social identity impacts intergroup behavior. The three key cognitive components of Social Identity Theory that Tajfel and Turner (1979) outline are: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison, all of which are relevant to a student's overall development.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how six eighth-grade Magnet Program students perceive their teacher-student relationship through the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The study will utilize a qualitative design to provide narrative details and data leading to observations and conclusions. The design will make use of semi-structured interviews and observations. These tools will help better understand the relationship between teachers and students and how Culturally Relevant Pedagogy impacts various aspects of those relationships. It is hypothesized that the more positive the perception students have of a teacher, the better they will perform in the teacher's class (Marzano, R. J. & Marzano, J. S., 2015). Participants will be pulled from a Magnet Program in a central South Carolina middle school. All participants were offered the opportunity to participate in the study, and the data collected from those participants was analyzed for the purpose of this study. These students come from eighth-grade

English classes at different levels: College Preparatory, Honors, and High School credit-bearing classes (English I). The participants and research site are critical to this study because students will have been in their respective class for an entire semester and have had the opportunity to establish a relationship with their teachers. There are 42 eighth grade students in the Magnet Program, while this study will focus on six to afford the researcher a substantial advantage to monitor student's progression throughout the nine weeks term through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. At this point, enough time has elapsed where relationships should have already been formed and norms established.

Research Question

This study will answer this research questions:

1. How do eighth-grade Magnet students perceive their teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as impacting the teacher-student relationship?
2. What impact, if any, does virtual learning affect students' perceptions of their teacher-student, culturally relevant-relationship?

Research Rationale

The rationale for this study is to explore in what ways Culturally Relevant Pedagogy may impact teacher-student relationships and possibly mitigate any negative student outcomes. There is a recent push for educators to begin exploring, researching, and implementing best practices that will improve the educational outcomes of students who have not performed well or were entirely disengaged in the educational system (Balfanz et al., 2014; Tatum, 2006). Within this group, Black students have increasingly been at the top of the list for adverse outcomes ranging from low academic achievement,

increased suspensions, and high dropout rates (Balfanz et al., 2014; Tatum, 2006). School districts implement professional development for educators that focus on instructional strategies that may not meet this group's needs without fine-tuning the conceptual frameworks for which they are applied (Hattie, 2012; Popham, 2011). Based on a one-size-fits-all pedagogy in a culturally diverse classroom, instructional strategies are a risky attempt at improving educational outcomes (Bristol, 2014).

Positionality

As an adult who serves children in multiple capacities within the school building, I have witnessed many students of different ethnicities and backgrounds be challenged in several areas of their lives. This is a result of the many different factors that each of them face. However, I have noticed how our Black male students are not being reached due to a lack of effective teacher-student relationship building. From my experiences, I have observed many of them fail because they are not being provided the resources, experiences, and interventions to help them make connections to and with the content.

I grew up in a predominantly Black rural community where several of its citizens were classified as living below the poverty level. In this neighborhood, there were few college educated people or people with good jobs. Most adults were working minimum wage jobs and had three to four children. My parents were not college graduates but had decent jobs, allowing us to be considered middle class. As a result, my brothers and I were afforded opportunities outside of the neighborhood to enhance our talents, crafts, but most importantly, our academics. We were given tutors to assist us with our classes and became very aware of the broader world at a young age because of the many

experiences we had. However, we attended the same schools as our friends, neighbors, and family members.

I was in all advanced academic program (AAP) classes and my teachers would often comment on what a good student I was. I often think about the success I had throughout my K-12 education and the teachers that taught me who were Black like me. They were the same teachers who also taught the other students. They appeared to not be as engaged with them. Was this because we came from different backgrounds? Unfairly, I think so, because I felt like they took time to build relationships with students that look like me, which affected my viewpoint on teacher-student relationships.

Not all students are afforded the opportunities that I had to stay on top of my schoolwork, receive academic assistance from tutors, and be engaged with school, but teachers should nevertheless feel compelled to provide all students with engaging and relevant lessons in the classroom. As a result, the relationships I had with my teachers allowed them to enhance my understanding of the course content by utilizing the connections we made to entice me to engage with the course content. Due to these relationships with my teachers, I was authentically engaged with my schoolwork and felt I could obtain high academic achievement levels.

Because of these early experiences, when I became a teacher, I felt it was my duty to provide the same conditions to present my students with an environment and teacher who provided the same experiences and opportunities I had. This is why I have come to believe that positive teacher-student relationships are important and necessary. Positive teacher-student relationships can have lasting impacts for both teachers and students but most importantly are vital in equipping students with the tools necessary to thrive.

My experiences as a student drive my passion as an educator, which translates to a pursuit of education. Through this research, I believe I will be able to better understand the needs of the students in my magnet program, as I am tasked with ensuring they are successful. Those needs include being able to understand how to improve student achievement and engagement in the classroom. In the past, I made sure that I understood the needs of the students I taught. I adjusted and recreated assignments and projects that best fit the needs of the students I was serving in the way that Smith (2018) suggests in "starting where people are at" in order to change (p. 640). So I built relationships to allow authentic engagement with students beyond a getting-to-know-you survey that identifies only surface needs. As a lead teacher, I am tasked with developing experiences that show teachers how to ensure equity in a diverse classroom to give the best experiences to the students they serve. While I do not have a direct role with the students and therefore fewer interactions with them than do their teachers, I am more aware of what they need because of my expanded role and access.

As a Black, first-generation college student, educator, and advocate for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, I believe that my position can enable me to share student voices passionately. The teachers I interviewed were my peers, and the students knew who I was before I asked them to participate in this study. My position played an essential role in this study. As a lead teacher in a school of predominately Black students, I felt it imperative to research how we can improve the way we serve our students. My social identities also impacted my approach to this study. Being a Black male educator played a significant role in my interactions with students. Sharing a similar cultural background assisted me in understanding their experiences.

In conclusion, as I continue to progress in my educational journey, I will participate in more curriculum writing sessions to help affect change within the curriculum and pedagogy used in the Magnet Program classrooms. By doing so, I am using my voice to help give all students a seat at the table because adults must give students the chance to become advocates for themselves. Additionally, I continue to provoke change on a professional level by using a collegial approach to introduce the keys to the teachers I serve in a non-threatening way. To do this, I will ensure that the teachers are aware of how to provide and enhance their specific learning environments so that they are inclusive, which is a big step in providing diverse environments. Finally, by addressing these next steps, I will continue building and reaching the economic, political, and cultural goals of education.

Research Design

This study will employ an action research qualitative case study of what impact eighth-grade Magnet Program students perceive their teacher-student relationship to be through their teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

The purpose of using a case study is to present "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37) that seeks to be interpretive rather than definitive (Taber, 2014). When completing a case study, it is logical to begin by using observational data to focus on the researcher's primary area of interest. The researcher addressed this problem of gathering qualitative data for interpretation about perceived engagement levels through semi-structured interviews. The study's constructs will focus on the perception students have about the importance of

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to strengthen teacher-student relationships. This study will take place in a middle school located in central South Carolina.

"Qualitative research is interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). This study will utilize a correlational design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Using this qualitative approach, the study will also lend itself to observing and analyzing events as they unfold. By doing so, the researcher can analyze a narrative set of data outcomes.

Case study research seeks to describe the experiences of a specific group (Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D., 2018). Using a case study, researchers can go in-depth with the participants because the researcher will be working very closely with them. The case study research approach will help us understand the relationship more clearly by allowing the researcher to do observations and semi-structured interviews to gain more insight into the relationship's strengths, challenges, and complexities (Driscoll et al., 2007). Using this case study, the hope is that the researcher will be able to understand the phenomenon of the relationship between the teacher and student and if that relationship helps the student be more engaged in class and produce academically. "Actions, behaviors, expectations, norms, and beliefs are strongly influenced by the uniqueness of each context and perceived differently by each individual" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 40). The meanings of these different experiences and situations should better help the researcher see why these relationships are the way they are. These characteristics serve to justify why a qualitative case study approach would best address the research questions.

This research study took place in a middle school in central South Carolina. Demographics vary in this school, largely due in part to the school-within-a-school community. Students in this school come from different socio-economic backgrounds. A good percentage of the students perform well academically; however, a significant number of students perform poorly in their classes and on standardized tests. The school has 969 students, and the student body is comprised of 73% Black, 22% White/Caucasian, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 1% who identify as multi-racial, and less than 1% Asian American. The school has 68 certified teachers, eight being in the Magnet Program, four administrators, three guidance counselors, one school resource officer, one media specialist, and 28 classified staff members.

This study participants were six students enrolled in College Preparatory and Honors 8th Grade English and English I. This sample was a convenience sample because of their enrollment in the Magnet Program.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection for this qualitative study will come from a variety of sources. Throughout this study, the researcher used researcher-created password-protected Google Forms to collect written responses from students. These responses varied based on the tool that indicates whether students perceived the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy by the teachers to have impacted their perception of the teacher-student relationship. The researcher drew from the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy framework of Ladson-Billings that served as a foundation of this study to analyze this study's data. The perceptions of students were collected using a pre- and post-survey, semi-structured interviews, and student journals. The perceptions of teachers were collected during a semi-structured

interview. The surveys, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and student journals were analyzed to determine if themes or trends regarding the participants' perceptions were evident. Emergent themes were organized, and the transcripts were coded to aggregate the data into smaller categories of information (Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D., 2018). Once the transcript data were coded, the researcher identified the themes that emerged from the interviews. The instruments and tools used in the study were valid and reliable.

Significance of the Study

This research is needed because it will help educators and administrators understand how teacher-student relationships impact students' perceptions of their relationship with the teacher, which impacts their inclination to engage with the teacher and the pedagogy. The study will further explore how the students' views of learning impact their academic, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. This will show administrators and teachers how to best serve all students' needs and enhance students' academic engagement and participation. Exploring the impact of relationships will help justify the need to recruit, prepare, and hire teachers who are committed to addressing the classroom environment's relationship aspect to get the most put of students in their class. This will also address the problem in practice by providing narrative data to justify and support suggestions the researcher will make based on the student responses on teacher-student relationships.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is that the researcher has no control over the relationship building (or lack thereof) by the participants. Another limitation is that

because the research will take place in such a specialized setting with a central focus and design different from general school settings, it may or may not be reproducible in other settings. Another limitation is the small sample size of six students and the limited time frame of study of one semester, which could skew the data (Trafimow et al., 2019).

Although the researcher in the role of lead teacher assists teachers with developing and maintaining positive and productive interactions with students, the researcher is not in the classroom with teachers every day to encourage Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The students have also already been students with this teacher for a semester before the study beginning, which means they have established a relationship in some capacity.

Using only qualitative data will omit the inclusion of respondent validity and triangulation of findings to limit threats to validity of interpretation through faulty analysis of student responses (Mertler, 2021). The researcher will interpret verbal answers to explore the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on student perception of the teacher student relationship.

List of Definitions

Academic Engagement: engagement reflected by indicators such as time on task, homework completion, and credit earned toward graduation (Appleton et al., 2006).

Behavioral Engagement: student attendance, classroom participation, suspensions, and participation in extracurricular activities (Appleton et al., (2006)

Relationship: Relationships are the positive connections between students, adults, and peers in the school setting that foster positive social interaction and establish a nurturing environment of trust and support (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019).

Student perception: A personal interpretation of information from the student's own perspective (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019).

Teacher-Student relationship: the academic relation between teachers and their students (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature review will analyze current academic journal articles about teacher-student relationships as a working, collaborative, evolving partnership in an attempt to understand the factors that impact how the relationship is maintained and the challenges that the relationship may face. Cultural differences, parental involvement, student motivation, student engagement, student achievement, teaching to the test, and lack of a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to positively impact the relationship can be barriers in and outside of the classroom in forming productive teacher-student relationships.

On average, students spend over seven hours of their weekdays at school interacting and forming relationships with other students, teachers, administrators, and support staff. These relationships are vital and essential to the child's development (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Teachers are the adults in the classroom setting. They help students learn how to develop relationships with other students and model how to interact with others (Downer et al., 2007). Although students may not consider relationships with teachers to be friendships, a relationship exists nonetheless. The relationship could potentially impact student attendance, disciplinary outcomes, and course engagement (Downer et al., 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative action research is to explore what perception students have of the teacher-student relationships and whether or not the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy has an impact on their perception of these relationships. These

students will come from eighth-grade English classes at different levels: College Preparatory, Honors, and High School credit-bearing class (English I). This study looked to see what perception students have about their teachers' use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on teacher-student relationships.

Teacher-student relationships can be bridges, "specific processes which adolescents report foster positive student-teacher relationships" (McHugh et al., 2013, p 11) but also barriers. "In the classroom, a student's relationship with the teacher can foster academic value systems, sustain long-term engagement, and inform enduring self-appraisals the student will form of him or herself as a learner" (McHugh et al., 2013, p. 12). Students' relationship with their teachers also affects student personal growth and development (Vygotsky, 1978), helping students understand who they are as a person, and the teacher may play an important role in that development. The drive of self-determination in engaging with schoolwork and collaborating with others to gain knowledge is primarily developed through a series of interactions within teacher-student relationships. Students perceive a teacher to have a preconceived expectation about them and are continually trying to gauge the teacher's expectation and evaluation (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004).

The teacher's role in initiating the development of the relationship will determine if the student wants to take time to develop that relationship. If a teacher provides students with access to resources that support or help them reach their academic goals, they will invest in the relationship (Dewey, 1937). If not, any negative perception or interaction with the teacher will automatically disengage them (Cummings & Bridges, 1986). "Each person in a relationship holds a unique perspective and assessment of the

relationship" (McHugh et al., 2013, p. 14). Both the student and teacher must understand how they benefit from one another.

Studying factors related to building and maintaining relationships will help us better understand these interactions. Sometimes these interactions can be positive or negative, but they all affect the overall disposition and relationship (Downer et al., 2007). Students will change and grow over time as they begin to mature (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which could mitigate the adverse outcomes due to poor teacher-student relationships. With that maturity, their outlook begins to change on their role in the relationship, the impact the relationship has on them, and ways in which the relationship can evolve (Kesner, 2000). The literature review will also highlight Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Social Identity Theory, multicultural education, student engagement, student motivation, student achievement, connectivism, and virtual learning.

The literature review helps the reader to understand more about the topic. It provides the reader with background knowledge to make connections with the researcher's case. Machi and McEvoy (2016) define a literature review as "a written document that presents a logically argued case founded on a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge about a topic of study. This case establishes a convincing thesis to answer the study's question" (p. 12). This literature review also helps put the topic into context and understand how it best fits into the study's overall content (Cleland et al., 2018). Selecting topics for this literature review was difficult because there are so many different perspectives, theories, and viewpoints that needed to be included to understand the teacher-student relationship. These materials are needed because they influence how strong and capable the relationship is between the

teacher and student. These topics help make the research project relate to the classroom's instructional practices and strategies that affect student achievement and engagement.

When searching for literature related to teacher-student relationships, I searched peer-reviewed journals, scholarly articles, textbooks, and online databases. I used the following keywords to search the literature: "teacher-student relations," "teacher-student relationships," "student engagement," "student achievement, "student motivation," and "parental involvement." I utilized several search engines in order to find numerous sources that could help me develop a better understanding of the current state of knowledge regarding these topics. Databases provided much of the research and literature. I used EBSCO Host, ProQuest, and Google Scholar to search for relevant topics that would provide information related to teacher-student relationships.

Teacher-Student Relationships

According to the South Carolina Department of Education (2019), the definition of teacher-student relation is the relationship academically between teachers and students. Students begin to develop relationships with teachers early, especially in elementary school (Bruner, 1983). School time is when students can think that their teachers are their best friends because they spend so much time with them and have yet begun to recognize the boundaries in their relationships with adults. This view is probably because, at this age, students believe that "a caring environment exhibiting a homelike atmosphere in which teachers treat all students with respect and care and interact with them in relationships similar to the extended family" is like another home (Erikson, 1995). This exchange is necessary because students believe that school is an extension of the home. Therefore, the people in the school would reflect the people in the home and their traits,

such as caring, loving, empathetic, and understanding. As a result, this belief helps to develop a good relationship. “Research revealed that adolescents’ positive relationships with teachers predict changes in motivation outcomes, sense of belonging, interest in school, achievement expectancies, and values, as well as engagement, effort, and performance” (Uslu & Gizir, 2017, p. 66). When this positive relationship is in place, students benefit tremendously, so it is important for teachers to maintain a home-like relationship with students.

Although the need for positive teacher-student relationships is evident, there is still some concern about establishing and maintaining those relationships effectively. Several factors contribute to why teachers struggle with relationships with students. “Research has shown a decline in the quality of teacher-student interactions as students progress through PK–12, which suggests a missed developmental opportunity” (Yu et al., 2018, p. 332). There seems to be a problem developing relationships with students at this age because teachers do not know how to do that (Yu et al., 2018). However, if teachers wish to see students grow, they must begin by establishing an environment in which students feel they are safe and comfortable (Vygotsky, 1978).

To provide students with classrooms where they feel this way, teachers must know their students. It requires them to build relationships with their students to understand who they are, their background, goals, ability levels, and learning styles (Downer et al., 2007). There are different types of students we serve that are identified by several factors. As a result, this requires additional work on behalf of the teacher, who would have to learn the many “unique characteristics of the ‘culturally different learner’” (Schmeichel, 2012). Because of this, when administrators observe teachers, classroom

communities, and effective student-teacher relationships, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy should be evident (Boutte, 1999). However, these elements are not always present, thus causing students to struggle to understand the content being taught. When those classroom elements are evident, especially Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, students feel a sense of belonging to the classroom and content (Paris, 2012).

Environments in which students thrive are a consequence of positive relationships that have been established and are being maintained. These relationships help to increase self-esteem in students and enhance their sense of well-being: "Specifically, students noted how their teachers built-up their self-esteem and gave them a more positive outlook on life and themselves" (Yu et al., 2018). This information is essential to note so that as we advocate for teachers to develop relationships with their students, they understand how much it helps students. By building and maintaining relationships with students, teachers can become aware of how to bridge the gap between them and their students (Downer et al., 2007).

Teacher-student relationships are at the core of the teaching and learning framework. Teachers provide instruction while students learn the content. This is dependent upon both parties working cooperatively to collaborate in the process (Anwar, 2019). Teachers have traditionally been seen as the holder of the information, and that the students should strive to learn all that they can from the person with the mastery of the content (Harris et al., 2016). However, recent reform efforts in teaching education programs have swung the control of the learning in the classroom to a more student-centered, problem-based framework where a student's inquiry about a particular subject leads the direction of the instruction with the teacher being more a collaborator or

facilitator of learning and not the sole source of knowledge. Strong teacher-student relationships must be in place for the collaborative work to take place because each party has a vested interest in the outcome and the process.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory emerged within the law profession when confronting racism was the norm for lawyers, activists, and legal scholars (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Created by legal scholar Derrick Bell, Critical Race Theory examined how race and racism have shaped our social structures and how the system of racism functions to oppress people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Berry and Candis (2013) state that Critical Race Theory is "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 47). Critical Race Theory is comprised of:

> the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational
>
> the idea of an interest convergence
>
> the social construction of race
>
> the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling
>
> the notion that whites have been recipients of civil rights legislation" (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54).

While this theory initially began within the law profession, it has now been extended into other professions. Bell (1970) described a tension between property rights and property owners in events leading up to the writing of the U. S. Constitution in 1787. The tension is rooted in the institution of slavery, which saw Blacks as property. This attitude is still associated with Blacks generations after emancipation and excluded

Blacks to from issues of civil and human rights. One of the human rights that Blacks were excluded from was education.

The focus on race to identify ways to improve the educational experience for Black students was developed by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). “Critical Race Theory scholars in both the law and in education believe that examining and exposing the ways that racialized inequity manifests and persist must inform social actions that can lead to social change” (Dixson, 2018, p. 233). “By permitting ourselves to engage in the ideology of critical race, we can become even freer to bring all of who we are into the classroom” (Berry & Candis, 2013, p. 44). This allows the teacher to create an environment where he or she and the students can share past experiences, stories, and knowledge. This theory also speaks to the barriers that students may experience in relation to instruction and discipline because of their background. As a result, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) were able to investigate the many ways race benefited or affected students in school. Their investigation led them to three key ideas. First, race plays a critical role in the education of Black students. Secondly, race is a source of social and school inequities, and lastly, race is related to society’s use of property rights. Bell (1970) claimed that when, property rights are withheld from students, students are not afforded equitable educational experiences. “In the United States and much of the post-mercantilist world, race and ethnicity continue to be the primary indicators of social standing and access to resources” (Berry & Candis, 2013, p. 48). The framework of racism and the effects of racism guided educators in their understanding of Critical Race Theory.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy provides the theoretical framework of this study. This framework is appropriate because it is more likely to help educators make connections with students to meet the needs of all students. Ladson-Billings (1994) defines Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as "a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning" (p. 37). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy has been implemented in several disciplines and professions today (Hammond, 2018). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy allows teachers to connect with students on a level that helps them understand the content better. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy helps to "empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is significant because it helps all students understand who they are and, as important, understand the differences in others.

When we focus on students, we must consider all the factors that the students do not control but which do have an impact on the way the student can or cannot perform in the classroom. Identification of these distractors can help specify the aim of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: to teach all students equitably (Ladson-Billings, 2014). The presence of these obstructions and external factors impacts student motivation, not just within education but also in society, and shows that we have work to do (Whitaker et al., 2012). Dixson (2018) asserts although Culturally Relevant Pedagogy scholars typically use its constructs to analyze an educational issue, policy, practice, or event, the ultimate end, whether articulated or not, is the fight for social change (p. 233). This culturally relevant

teaching also impacts the instructional methods and strategies that teachers use to teach Black students.

Ladson-Billings (2014) identified three Culturally Relevant Pedagogy domains: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Academic success refers to the "intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75).

> Cultural competence refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture. Sociopolitical consciousness is the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems." (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75)

To empower students, teachers must understand who students believe the teachers are and what they represent. Teachers must also understand who they believe their students to be and what they represent. This helps to establish a community within the classroom. By establishing a community within the classroom and developing relationships with students, teachers can focus on the "whole child" and hopefully understand every student they serve. "Teaching the whole child will require not only that teachers recognize, understand, and intentionally acknowledge cultural group behaviors, but also observe and interact with students as individuals" (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 77). As a result, teachers must be intentional in their efforts to learn about all of their students, particularly those of different cultures.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is multidimensional and one of the areas teachers often feel they cannot control. “Engaging students in their own learning has challenged educators for decades” (Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 262), even though most students want to be engaged (Raufelder et al., 2015). Student engagement has been “defined in many different, and sometimes inconsistent, ways” (Corso et al., 2013, p. 51), including time on task, little to no tardiness to class, and full participation in activities from class beginning to end. Student engagement “refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education” (Great Schools Partnership, 2020).

Another facet of student engagement is the compelling nature of the teacher-student relationship on the student’s willingness and desire to interact with the teacher and the content, either positively or negatively (Reyes et al., 2012). Positive student engagement is observable in student participation in classroom discussions (Wilkins, 2014). It can also be observed as a student actively paying attention to a lecture, asking questions, and answering questions without being prompted (Reyes et al., 2012). Conversely, a negative teacher-student relationship results in disaffection and little or no classroom engagement. It can manifest in refusal to complete work, participate in the discussion, or completely withdrawal from the teacher and peers during the class period (Wilkins, 2014). The negative effect of the lack of a positive teacher-student relationship can be extreme and can lead to more severe consequences for students, including temporary or even permanent suspension or if the refusal to cooperate disrupts the school

environment, prohibiting other students from learning (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

Positive student engagement resulting from effective and intentional teacher-student relationship-building leads to many desirable academic and life outcomes (Corso et al., 2013). Some of these academic and life outcomes are making good grades, scoring higher on standardized tests, reducing the chance of dropping out of high school, and increasing students' opportunities to attend and graduate college (Flowers et al., 2017). However, not all students are engaged in the learning environment. "Moreover, levels of disengagement typically increase as students' progress through school; the longer students are in school, the less engaged they are" (Corso et al., 2013, p. 51). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy will reduce the number of times students are disengaged from a sterile curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2014), which causes problems for those students who are engaged in the classroom. Engagement also refers to the child's well-being, and students "who are engaged behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally in school are likely to feel better about themselves, be satisfied with their lives, and enjoy higher work quality later in life" (Corso et al., 2013, p. 51). When all three levels of engagement are activated, students experience levels of stability that enable them to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom and the ability to complete the work (Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

Research shows that as students grow older and matriculate through school, their engagement level declines (Galloway et al., 2013). Students seem to be more engaged and excited about school during elementary years versus high school years, with mixed findings for middle school years (Cornell et al., 2016). "Unfortunately, research into

student engagement and motivation reveals that up to 60% of high school students are 'chronically disengaged'" (Corso et al., 2013, p. 51). However, there is an exception for high-performing students, often attending high-performing schools, who continue to be engaged in class because of their intrinsic motivation. However, that is not necessarily full engagement. Galloway et al. (2013) set out to discover if students were fully engaged in high-performing schools and which factors led or did not lead to full engagement. They hypothesized that full engagement would be rare but could be seen "among younger students than their older counterparts, and among females as opposed to males," predicting "that these fully engaged students would have better mental health, stronger physical health, and greater academic integrity than their busily engaged peers" (Galloway et al., 2013, p. 1430). This study involved fifteen high-performing middle and high schools and included 6,294 participants. The participants completed the Stanford Survey of Adolescent School Experiences, "which examined students' perceptions of teacher support as well as their experiences with school engagement, health, and academic integrity" (Galloway et al., 2013, p. 1431). The study reported that, "behavioral engagement far exceed those of cognitive engagement, and affective engagement remains relatively rare" (Galloway et al., 2013, p. 1434). This is important to note because of the impact behavioral engagement has on the student. "Fully engaged students achieve significantly higher GPAs, take significantly more advanced courses, cheat significantly less, and experience significantly less academic worry and significantly fewer internalizing, externalizing, and physical symptoms of stress than students in the two other engagement profiles" (Galloway et al., 2013, p. 1434). Engagement can be broken down into four types: academic, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.

Academic Engagement

Academic engagement is when a student actively works on an assignment, collaborates with peers, participates in classroom activities, and asks and answers questions in classroom discussions (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Researchers reported that when students perceived their teacher to care about them personally and academically, they would be more likely to work on their assignments (Barber & Olsen, 2004) and be academically engaged. There can be a decline in student engagement, however, when a mismatch develops in beliefs about what teacher support should be and how it looks in the classroom as students get older (Bru et al., 2010). Teachers may provide less help when students struggle as a way of teaching students how to problem-solve. Teachers also see students as developing as young adults. As such, teachers are less likely to work on encouraging students to do the work because they feel students should be responsible for their learning and not have to be compelled by an outside source to do the work (Allen et al., 2011; Danielsen et al., 2010).

Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement is a massive part of how engaged students are in learning and at school. Bruner explains that behavioral engagement "entails positive conduct, such as following the rules and adhering to classroom norms, as well as the absence of disruptive behaviors such as skipping school and getting in trouble" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). Furthermore, engagement "concerns involvement in learning and academic tasks and includes behaviors such as effort, persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions, and contributing to class discussion" and also involves a student's participation

in school-related activities (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). These activities help to provide students with opportunities to learn and grow in and outside of the classroom.

These behavioral interactions vary widely. They "range from responding to the teacher's directions to activities that require student initiatives, such as involvement in extracurricular activities and student government" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 62). Behavioral engagement also refers to participation in the classroom and how students get along with others. Teachers must take steps to include activities and materials that increase a student's behavioral engagement because if the student becomes disengaged, the likelihood for underperformance and dropout increases (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002). This disengagement behavior seems to affect minority students at disproportionate rates due to a lack of curriculum that reflects who they are as students and who they see as allies (Rumberger, 1987). This is particularly alarming because the fast-paced, technologically driven global economy requires people who have developed a drive to work independently and collaborate with others. In school, these skills are introduced and refined; schools that fail to connect with students, in essence, limit the student's lifetime earning potential (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement "refers to students' affective reactions in the classroom including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 63). Emotional engagement looks at a student's feelings and interactions toward the school and the teacher. Emotional engagement is an attachment that makes the student feel a sense of belonging. Emotional engagement in the classroom is also tied to the student's motivation in the classroom. Emotional engagement can capitalize on a

student's motivation to engage in the learning activities beyond situational learning into a personal desire to engage when the teacher takes steps to build the interest in the lessons presented in the classroom (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Students are learning to control their emotional states in this age group. The personal internal and external stressors coupled with academic pressures can create a scenario in which the student emotionally shuts down and disengages because they lack the schemata for processing and attending to negative emotions resulting from any number of reasons (Renninger et al., 1992). Cognitive dissonance occurs the more rigorous and complex the work becomes. As a result, teachers must guide students through the levels of frustration, embarrassment, or fear in making mistakes while learning new material to replace old knowledge or introduce new understanding (Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

When students emotionally invest in their classwork and interacting with peers and their instructor, engagement levels increase, and academic performance is improved (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Researchers note that disengaging from school and subsequently dropping out is not a process that happens all at once but is the culmination of semesters and years of students feeling unwanted, left out, and unimportant in their classes (Fredricks et al., 2004). Researchers have noted a reciprocal link between a lack of emotional engagement and problem behavior (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). When a student does not feel included in the classroom, they logically exhibit behavior that would lead to their removal. However, positive emotional engagement with teachers and peers directly impacted how long a student would continue to work on tasks in the classroom and willingly seek out help from teachers and peers (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement "stresses investment in learning, and from the literature on learning and instruction, which involves self-regulation, or being strategic" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 63). Cognitive engagement strictly looks at the student's learning process and how the student can prepare for the next level (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Cognitive engagement focuses on "psychological investment in learning, a desire to go beyond the requirements, and a preference for challenge" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 64). When students are engaged cognitively, they can become very creative but also show "flexibility in problem-solving, preference for hard work, and positive coping in the face of failure" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 64). Through cognitive engagement, students can learn, understand, and master their work in the way the teacher would like for them to (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Cognitive engagement is evident when the student is actively thinking about the information presented to them and using their mental acuity to learn and master the content and the skills (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). When teachers use teaching and learning materials that students are interested in, the motivation to initiate engagement on a cognitive level increases (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Researchers noted peers added to positive cognitive development as well. When teachers build in collaboration opportunities across groups that respect similarities and differences, students collectively activated their cognitive strengths. They learned from each other, helping support others working through challenging coursework (Sahil & Hashim, 2011). Cognitive engagement drives the student through the thinking processes to grasp more difficult material via a feeling of self-efficacy that has been encouraged

and developed by the classroom community through intentional bonding (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement is not automatic and only comes when a student feels they have been given the tools and support necessary to engage with the content or show mastery of a skill (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021).

Student Motivation

Student engagement is often tied to student motivation (the terms student motivation and education motivation will be used interchangeably in this study). Motivation varies from student to student and is displayed in several ways. "Engagement motivation is defined as the doing of study activities where a student is moved to act for different reasons" (Malmstrom & Öqvist, 2016, p. 155). When students are motivated, they are energized and committed to the task at hand. Student motivation is different for everyone, and the same things do not motivate all students. However, just like with student engagement and teacher-student relationships, student motivation declines as students transition to secondary education (Malmstrom & Öqvist, 2016). To avoid this decline, teachers should help students develop goals that help them see themselves in the future (Kitching et al., 2011).

Although motivation declines for some students, some scholars do not believe that high engagement can exist only when motivation is high (Hufton et al., 2003). Therefore, those students may very well still be motivated to achieve the task set before them, despite seeming uninterested or disengaged. Even with the disengagement, motivation still offers students a chance to express themselves. "Studies have also shown that motivation influences students' creativity, adaptive coping strategies, and deep conceptual learning" (Malmstrom & Öqvist, 2016, p. 156). This motivation has a lot to

do with what students prioritize. It also has to do with how they feel about the tasks they have to accomplish.

Several factors can influence motivation. These factors are classified as either extrinsic or intrinsic motivation factors (Harris et al., 2016). Students who have positive relationships with teachers may perform better out of internal motivation to do so rather than the external one of receiving something tangible. “Previous studies set out to examine whether extrinsic factors (such as teachers’ leadership) influence educational motivation and whether intrinsic factors (such as self-efficacy) influence educational motivation” (Malmstrom & Öqvist, 2016, p. 156). Intrinsic motivation is about the student’s ability to be motivated by self-reflection and goals (Harris et al., 2016). Extrinsic motivation is when outside forces or events motivate students (Hufton et al., 2003).

The goal is for students to become intrinsically motivated, allowing extrinsic motivating factors to supplement what they feel within. “According to the theory, intrinsic factors may drive students’ motivation so that they act entirely without exterior motives and only for their own employment’s sake” (Malmstrom & Öqvist, 2016, p. 157). The drive that prompts intrinsic motivation for students helps them understand why they have homework, why they need to complete it, and why the learning that comes with it is of value (Malmstrom & Öqvist, 2016). Researchers have compiled data that suggests motivation is a critical factor in aiding the formation and sustaining of teacher-student relationships. When students desire and are motivated to engage in school-based activities, they will be more likely to interact with others in the classroom, specifically

the teacher. Teacher-student relationships are built through consistent, concerted efforts to find common understanding and educationally important values (Hufton et al., 2003).

Student Achievement

Student achievement is one way that teachers can see growth. Achievement is multifaceted. Ultimately the student's achievement is based on their engagement in the class and their motivation (Hattie, 2012). Student achievement is defined as when students "acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will prepare them to lead happy and successful lives" (Kaput, 2018). Student achievement is one way that teachers are evaluated to see how effective they are in the classroom related to student's growth (Kim et al., 2018). Many times, student perform based on their attitudes and interactions with the teacher. "The expectations for student success held by teachers and communicated to students are potentially important influences on classroom interaction," but teacher "expectations were more likely to sustain pre-existing levels of student achievement than to radically alter student performance" (Beady & Hansell, 1981, p. 192). Researchers assert that student achievement is often a direct correlation to the level of engagement and interaction teachers have with students (Beady & Hansell, 1981; Dennie et al., 2019; Kitching et al., 2011). When students feel the teacher has provided them with the tools to work, they can do just that. However, some factors can affect a student's ability to achieve and include the teacher's race, sex, education, and years of experience (Beady & Hansell, 1981).

Beady and Hansell (1981) studied students' expectations and perceptions for their Black and White teachers in predominately Black and White schools. There were two samples, the first consisting of all fourth and fifth-grade teachers in a random sample of

elementary schools in Michigan. The second sample came from seven majority Black schools. The teachers completed questionnaires that asked for information about their race, sex, education, and years of experience. The questionnaire also asked questions about the school's achievement and socio-economic status. Lastly, the questionnaire asked about current student achievement and opportunities for future growth. The findings showed that "Black teachers and white teachers who taught in Black elementary schools had different expectations for their student's future success"(Beady & Hansell, 1981, p. 199).

According to Dennie et al. (2019), overlooking growth in a student's mastery of the material and increased depth of knowledge in a subject unfairly minimizes what student achievement can look like with positive teacher-student relationships. Academic growth is often measured with standardized tests, which do not consider possible testing bias, opportunity gaps, or inequitable classroom experiences that students may encounter (Wilkins, 2014). Students who may experience challenges when faced with material that their previous teachers may have not adequately prepared them for tend to disengage rather than ask for help or admit to not knowing what other students around them seem to know (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). When a teacher begins building robust and positive teacher-student relationships with their students in ways that honor cultural values and traditions, along with community knowledge and literacies, the teacher has laid the foundation for the students to feel respected and capable of contributing to the knowledge building that will take place in the class (Paris, 2012). Teachers can be perceived as warm receivers or cold gatekeepers dependent upon the way they relay how they value what experiences and prior knowledge a student enters their classrooms with

and their abilities and promises to be successful if they work with the teacher in a meaningful, respectful, and open manner (Murry et al., 2020).

Determining academic success should be multifaceted when evaluating whether a student has achieved mastery of a specific objective. Though achieving a set score on an assessment to show mastery of a skill or understanding of content is generally the one measure of what success is thought to be, growth towards mastery should be considered a part of academic success. Teachers and students should discuss, identify, and establish what academic success will look like for each student (Wilkins, 2014). The diverse nature of the student body, the variety of opportunity for enriching educational experiences outside of school, and the access to equitable learning environments underscore that academic success cannot be viewed as one accepted standard of measure (Wood et al., 2018). A dialogue about academic goals, personal aims, and how to measure and gauge a student's place on the path to those goals and aims cannot be centered on a standardized test that may not be of any relevancy or interest to what the student has in mind for what they want to achieve at school and after (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Teacher-student relationships solidify an agreement about the beginning of the learning that will take place, support the students' efforts along the way, and celebrate the steps made towards the goals, not just when the goals have been met (Wilkins, 2014). Teacher-student relationships that focus only on test scores or report card grades fail to capitalize on the personal aspect of the learning process, which is the introduction to, adoption of, and utilization of knowledge that may be entirely previously unknown to the student (Wood et al., 2018). In this way, if a student fails to reach a benchmark that does not account for how the school system failed to provide the learning opportunities for that

student, then the failure is placed on the wrong party—the student—rather than more appropriately the school system (Wilkins, 2014).

Connectivism

The concept of Connectivism has evolved. "Connecting to people and resources online is no longer something that takes place mainly in our place of study or work" (Bell, 2009). This type of evolution is necessary as "implications of this for learning and teaching are that internet devices are becoming on hand during teaching and learning activities giving students and teachers access to global resources and online tools and services" (Bell, 2009). Picciano (2017) discusses connectivism as "a learning model that acknowledges major shifts in the way knowledge flows, grows, and changes because of vast data communication networks" (p. 174). Technology has changed to include multiple activities for several people at different times. "Connectivism is in the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories" (Siemens, 2005, p. 5).

As technology continues to evolve, how we connect will also evolve. "Connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations" (Siemens, 2005). Picciano (2017) helps strengthen the application of the connectivist learning model by explaining "that connectivism as a theory is driven by the dynamic of information flow. . . Students need to understand, and be provided with, experiences in navigating and recognizing oceans of constantly shifting and evolving information" (p. 175). This heavily impacts the relationship between teachers and students as teachers are expected to meet the requirements and expectations of the connectivist learning model. "Teachers change their own beliefs more easily through

discussions and collaboration with colleagues face-to-face and also increasingly through web communication" (Trna & Trnová, 2017, p. 72).

Teachers will have to adapt to the different roles of technology in the classroom. Foroughi (2015) suggests that, "a connectivist classroom be like an atelier, an open space in which students pursue their work, with opportunities for the instructor to make suggestions from which all of the students can benefit." This allows the teacher to facilitate the learning process as opposed to a "sit and get" environment (p. 17)

> "To create an effective connectivist learning environment, instructors should use a variety of pedagogical methods that facilitate the following: self-expression (blog, journal), debate and dialogue (listserv, discussion forum, open meetings), search of archived knowledge (portal or web site), learning in a structured manner (course, tutorials, when appropriate), and communicating new information about the topic area." (Foroughi, 2015, p. 17)

These pedagogical methods are utilized to ensure that the needs of all students are met.

Virtual Learning

Information and communication technologies (ICT) provide the framework in which constructivism operates. "The means to acquire knowledge, master skills, and learn to apply what is learned through the design of activities that train personal faculties are evolving in proportion to the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT) that continues to transform the way humans work, play, and interact with one another" (Washington, 2015). Virtual learning continues to increase over time. "Educational activities and assessments that successfully leverage learning technologies and digital learning material offer many benefits to students, faculty, and institutions"

(Washington, 2015). “Virtual learning communities encourage members to learn and contribute knowledge” (Yang et al., 2007, p. 84). This online learning method is only one of the different categories that comprise the online programs that allow students to learn outside of the traditional classroom. Online instruction may be supplemental or full-time, within or across multiple school districts or states, or even internationally delivered. Instruction may range from fully online to entirely face-to-face, delivered synchronously or asynchronously.

It should be noted that most online learning currently occurs asynchronously—that is, students and teachers work at different times and have limited real-time interaction with one another” (Natale & Cook, 2012, p. 537). Through these online programs, researchers and educators believe that educational transformation can occur. “Advocates believe that virtual learning has the power to transform an obsolete K-12 system of schooling by providing the means to personalize learning, ensure all students have access to quality teaching and extend learning to all hours of the day and days of the week” (Natale & Cook, 2012, p. 541).

Impact of Virtual Learning on Teacher-Student Relationships

One of the critical components to building effective and positive teacher-student relationships is when a teacher creates a supportive, respectful classroom environment. The teacher models how to behave with other students, interact with adults in the classroom, and monitor how students interact (Borup et al., 2020). Virtual learning changes how a teacher can do that and should still be an essential component to teaching and learning (Kitching et al., 2011). Teachers can create academic communities of engagement where students feel valued, appreciated, and confident enough to engage

with the material through a virtual, online learning space. This is contrary to the way students usually interact in digital platforms, where they interact without adult supervision. On social media platforms, students can behave positively or negatively without an adult to mediate or point out when something is inappropriate (Borup et al., 2020). A potential beneficial effect of learning in a virtual environment is that a teacher can model the appropriate way to agree, disagree, and discuss topics that help the young adults develop a mode of interaction that could transfer to the way they interact with others on social media platforms outside of the classroom (Borup et al., 2014.) This type of learning is valuable, and the actual content being taught in the classroom is the model for the way students should treat each other beyond the classroom walls.

Researchers have argued that this time of online learning is an opportunity to change how students see their interactions online. Before online learning, students were primarily disconnected and unaware of how digital devices can dehumanize and distort the ways students see each other (Borup et al., 2020). When the face-to-face component is removed, many students ignore the constraints of civil discourse to say things and express ideas in ways that are detrimental to others' mental and emotional health. Teachers can highlight this problematic behavior and explain how such behaviors extend to bullying, harassment, and cruel treatment of classmates (Kitching et al., 2011).

Impact of Virtual Learning on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Virtual learning has been in use for the past few decades, rapidly changing from the original iteration of the computer lab to a 1:1 model that provides each student with a digital learning device (Borup et al., 2014). Multiple types of digital learning devices are in use in classrooms, ranging from tablets to laptop computers, even expanding to include

smart phones for some activities. Some students, however, lack access to updated digital technology and Internet access. Teachers must build classroom communities in virtual spaces that consider that virtual learning brings the student's home into the classroom and brings the classroom into the student's home (Stark, 2019).

Multiple virtual learning communities exist that are similar to those in traditional brick and mortar schools (Borup et al., 2014). Teachers deliver instruction in whole group settings with real-time video conferencing through platforms like Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. This face to virtual face meeting allows students to see their teachers but also to see their classmates, which can provide the opportunity for relationship-building exercises that create connections between students and teachers (Borup et al., 2020). Sitting in front of a computer in a room isolated from the classroom community can harm students and teachers because traditional relationship-building involves short meaningful exchanges of conversation, affirmative gestures, and the sharing of materials and spaces. Teachers can tailor virtual learning to be an inclusive, culturally relevant space and not one that involves sterile transmission of material from a teacher to a student (Borup et al., 2020). If the teacher does not make an intentional and concerted effort to humanize virtual learning, the virtual classroom will not be an inviting, welcoming, and respectful space where students can thrive.

Colleges embrace digital technology to bridge gaps of awareness and interaction with their students who may be from rural and suburban societies (Stark, 2019). Researchers support adding a component to teacher education to show teachers how to teach and connect virtually with students, which should help new teachers master digital tools use in a culturally responsive manner while being guided by veteran and

cooperating teachers (Garcia et al., 2013; Seglem & Garcia, 2015). Utilizing virtual learning allows teachers and students to engage in meaningful ways that will build a sense of mutual respect, along with the opportunity to share information about their cultures, their communities, and their personal interests in ways that may be more comfortable than in person (Borup et al., 2020). Virtual learning, however, may result in the loss of voice for students who are uncomfortable with speaking up or who often get spoken over in a classroom. Researchers highlight how generally introverted and reticent students in the classroom do not want to bring attention to themselves (Garcia et al., 2013; Stark, 2019). However, when learning is virtual, quiet students may feel free to express themselves behind the safety of a computer screen.

Additionally, quiet students have the added comfort of knowing that the teacher is actively moderating the discussion, a protection that may not exist when a teacher must monitor a large classroom with many students (Borup et al., 2020). Teachers can regulate the interactions in the digital classroom, which is easier to manage than in-person learning (Stark, 2019). Because teachers can read each student's response and take time to reflect and give meaningful feedback, the virtual classroom can positively impact the teacher-student relationship (Anwar, 2019). Digital classrooms allow the teacher to interact with all of the students, giving each individual attention. This attention deepens the way the teachers and students relate because there is an extended time frame for the students to reflect on what they say and for the teachers to frame their responses to students in productive ways (Borup et al., 2020).

Teacher-student relationships can impact student level of engagement depending on a variety of factors like culture, gender, and ethnicity. The literature suggests that the

framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy coupled with Social Identity Theory could cause students to feel positive and optimistic about their educational experiences. This study's design methodology was an action research case study approach that provided qualitative data to analyze what aspects impacted eighth-grade Magnet Program students' perception of the teacher-student relationship.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

"Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (Mills, 2007, p. 5). Action research allows researchers to study their environments and contexts to make a difference in their setting. "Action research is usually defined as an inquiry conducted by educators in their settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students' learning" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 2). The overall goal and purpose of action research are to improve practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

This study focused on two issues: the teacher-student relationship and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The study sought to understand how a teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy could impact the teacher-student relationship.

This chapter further details why I chose qualitative action research as the methodology and describes the study design, context, participation, data collection methods, and instrumentation. It also details the intervention plan and discusses the reliability and validity of the research tools used in the study. The chapter also provides details about data analysis and ends with discussing action research principles and how the study design reflected them.

Research Design

This action research study utilized a qualitative action research case study design to explore student perception of their teachers' use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on teacher-student relationships through surveys, researcher observation of teacher-student interactions, semi-structured interviews, and student journals. The purpose of using a case study is to present "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). "Case study research involves intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units . . . observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time'" (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). "Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). "As such, case studies provide an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deep holistic view of the research problem, and may facilitate describing, understanding and explaining a research problem or situation" (Baskarada, 2014, p. 1). Utilizing this approach also allowed the study to see and understand events as they unfold. "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6).

The purpose of this study was to examine two factors that may affect a student's perception of the teacher-student relationship with teachers in the Magnet program. The research sought to explore this research question:

1. How do eighth-grade Magnet students perceive their teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as impacting the teacher-student relationship?
    a. What impact, if any, does virtual learning affect students' perceptions of their teacher-student, culturally relevant-relationship?

Setting and Demographics

The study was conducted via an electronic platform; however, all participants are Magnet Program students at central South Carolina middle school with 969 students. The district uses the Microsoft Teams system to serve as their learning management system to deliver instructional content and teach skill mastery in synchronous and asynchronous formats. This learning management system offers students the opportunity to meet face-to-face daily in a videoconference to receive instruction from the teachers. Many teachers have also supplemented instruction by recording short instructional videos, which students may use to clarify any misconceptions or misunderstandings of a lesson. The advantages of this mode of instruction are that the pacing is tailored to the student, as the student can choose which mode of learning they feel best serves their needs and attends to the learning preferences, opportunities, and availability.

In this environment, students who are generally reticent to engage in class discussion are empowered to be fully engaged, as they do not have to see other students' reactions to their answers. Additionally, teachers have a better chance of stemming off any negative interactions in the classroom because of their control of the virtual learning platform. Teachers are also using interactive, high-interest supplementary material and third party platforms to support, remediate, and accelerate all learners in the class simultaneously in ways that they could not without this technology.

The teacher who volunteered for the study was a Black female with 17 years of teaching experience and formal training in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. This teacher was chosen because of her experience with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, a high level of content knowledge, and an ability to create opportunities for diverse student populations. The six students involved in this study were eighth graders between 13 and 14 years old. There were three Black males and three Black females. The two Black males were in the college preparatory class, one of whom had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In the same class, there were two Black females. Neither received special education services, and one was listed as gifted. In the English I honors class, there was one Black male and one Black female. Both were identified as gifted. The English I class female student has an IEP and a behavior intervention plan due to emotional issues stemming from undisclosed trauma.

Students were identified by gender, race, socioeconomic status, special education services, and academic achievement levels: (a) gifted and talented, (b) college preparatory, or (c) honors (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 *Participant Demographics*

Student Name	Gender	Race	SES	Special Education	Gifted & Talented	College Preparatory & Honors needing Special Education services	College Prep & Honors not needing Special Education services
Mary	F	Black	Middle	X	X		
Angela	F	Black	Middle	X		X	
Tiffany	F	Black	Low				X
Whitaker	M	Black	Middle		X		
Will	M	Black	Low				X
Eric	M	Black	Middle	X		X	

This Magnet Program is housed at a historically underserved school, resulting in adverse outcomes for students due to various reasons such as inadequate teacher preparation and poor teacher attendance. However, despite these reasons, the program has been awarded a special Magnet Program designation because of its work with students, countering the effects of attending an underserved school.

These factors contributed to creating an opportunity gap. These students are likely to be enrolled in disadvantaged high schools because they are situated in a cluster that faces the same barriers and obstacles as middle and elementary schools. This disadvantage can stem from various sources, but the overall effect is that students experience difficulty obtaining the help needed to succeed in school. According to Allensworth (2012), new teachers, who are often unprepared for meeting the particular needs of students, will teach in high-needs schools. These newer teachers can be susceptible to fatigue and perceptions of low self-efficacy, making them feel vulnerable. They may also lack support from veteran teachers or administration in working with students who have significant needs that must be addressed before content mastery and skill instruction can be accomplished. Another issue facing students of this demographic is their schools' performance level, and the experience of their teachers is closely linked. Seemingly, better performing schools have an advantage in recruiting and retaining teachers, allowing the school to develop the teachers and their skill sets.

In action research, it is common for the researcher to be heavily involved in the site where the study is taking place. "Interactions with those under study enable researchers to acquire familiarity with the situation and gain the trust of participants" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 41). The reflective educator can use their knowledge, skills, and

experiences by actively being an insider to the study. Insider participation allows researchers to "conduct research with students in their own classes to improve some aspect of their teaching" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 52).

Data collection consisted of six phases. The data collection methods complement each data set with information that can address weaknesses in researcher analysis or reiterate patterns identified by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative data provided detailed narrative information to allow for observation and exploration of thematic patterns. One of the chief features of qualitative research is its allowance for higher confidence levels regarding hypothesis testing and analysis (Cleland et al., 2018).

Rationale for Methodology

The researcher chose to use a qualitative design for this study because it provided an enriched picture with the "how" and "why" of the research question and study data to answer those questions (Cleland et al., 2018). The reliance on qualitative data about how students perceive their teacher-student relationships at the beginning of the unit should provide a baseline to compare their perceptions at the end of the unit. This comparison of before and after based on their interactions gave a fuller picture of the perceptions.

Creswell (2009) says, "often the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is framed in terms of using words (qualitative) rather than the numbers (quantitative)" (p. 3). As a result, the best way to understand the student's perceptions regarding their teacher-student relationship and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is through the qualitative research method.

Participants

The researcher made use of interview responses in order to obtain descriptive narrative information to describe the perceptions of students. This information will be presented in a descriptive narrative in Chapter 4. The researcher obtained approval from the district before the study and gained Institutional Review Board approval before the second semester began. When this study was conducted, the researcher was the academy lead for eight teachers and 102 students. Cohort numbers can be smaller than the original cohort due to students transferring out. There will be one teacher participant who teaches three preparatory levels of English. All students in this teacher's class will be allowed to participate in this study. However, only six students' responses were used; three Black males and three Black females from each teacher's classes were randomly selected to participate in the study. Informed consent forms were distributed to students and parents on the first day of the instructional unit.

According to the published data regarding school designation as "high poverty," students in the study came from different socioeconomic situations. All students qualified for free lunch as a result of the district being a recipient of a grant (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). The researcher noted any students who fell outside of the majority, whether by racial or ethnic makeup or socioeconomic status, and included analysis by gender and special education subgroups.

The study was conducted in an English class via virtual conferencing for semi-structured interviews and e-learning platforms for respondent journals. The participants were eighth-grade students at a central South Carolina middle school with 962 students; the Magnet Program enrolled 102 students. Students have been using virtual and hybrid

learning all school year through the end of this study. Students have also been with this teacher for the entire year; however, the study was conducted at the beginning of Quarter Three. The students have had the opportunity to attend classes face-to-face in previous grades. The school earned a designation of "Good" on the 2019 state report card through improved test scores, teacher retention, and student attendance. The school report card reported that school engagement was listed as "Good," with student survey responses yielding 58% cognitive engagement, indicating that students were willing to take on the task of learning content—even rigorous and challenging content. Students also responded 62.7% to behavioral engagement, showing that they recognize they have to be involved in the learning while also being active participants. Emotional engagement concluded the student survey where 59.6% of students expressed their excitement for learning and school. Academic achievement was "Average." However, the school's ability to help students prepare for future success was listed as "Below average."

The participants were students in either the teacher's college preparatory classes or English I class. Some received supplementary special education services through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 learning plans due to a learning disability and as directed by the special education department and committee. Students who received special education services are mainstreamed in this school, which means they receive instruction from a subject teacher rather than from a special education teacher. This special education service method allows students to be instructed in content and task instruction by the subject matter teacher rather than the support lab teacher, who will instead provide remediation that supports general education.

Six students were used for the entire study. One male and one female student were randomly selected from the pool of participants from each course level. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of each student. Mary, a 13-year-old Black female in the 8th grade, enrolled in all honors classes, two of which are high school credit, was chosen. She is in the Junior Honor Society, the Junior Beta Club, a cheerleader, and a member of the school's competition STEM robotics club. Mary has been on the honor roll for the last two years. She enjoys reading and finds that she is above her peers when understanding more complex texts. Rather than reading contemporary young adult fiction, she chooses books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and some classics like *The Count of Monte Cristo*. She reports that the teacher-student relationship matters to her but that it will not affect her grade because if she cannot get the teacher's answer, she has no problem going to teachers she had in the past for help. When asked about this process of solving her problems, she talked through what this means and realized that teacher-student relationships matter significantly to her and are long lasting. She reports that teacher-student relationships matter to her across grade levels and content areas.

Whitaker is a 13-year-old eighth-grade Black male student enrolled in English I. This English I class is his only honors class. He reports this is because he had a terrible math teacher the year before who did not find his jokes funny, and he feels the teacher withheld the honors recommendation as a result of his playfulness in the classroom. When reviewing his transcript, it would appear that Whitaker was on track to be in a math honors class in his eighth-grade year, but the lack of recommendation from his teacher last year changed his educational trajectory. Whitaker believes teachers should

make an effort to get to know students, and students can learn how to have relationships with teachers. He thinks that when a teacher shows more of their personal life in a classroom, it makes him more likely to see them as someone other than a person who teaches a lesson, gives a test, assigns a grade, and then repeats the process over and over again.

The two students selected from the college prep class were Angela and Will. Angela is a 14-year-old eighth-grade Black female student in the college prep class. She struggles with reading and disengages when teachers probe her when she does not know the answer to a question. According to Angela, the teacher has not explained that this is a tool to get her to realize an answer. As a result, Angela thinks that the teacher is trying to make fun of her intelligence because she has been retained twice. She was very scared and turned off from English class when a teacher made her read out loud in the sixth grade, ignoring the note that Angela passed to her that she stuttered. According to Angela, the teacher reported that she would have to learn how to get over it. With this new semester, Angela hopes that she can pass her class and move onto high school, where she feels teachers are not so intrusive.

Will is a 13-year-old Black male student in eighth grade in the college prep English class. He has scored "Approaches expectations" every year that he has taken the SC ready test that gauges his mastery of reading comprehension of a wide range of written material. He is in the low quadrant in the map-projected percentile for understanding complex literary and informational texts. He has failed English in the past two years and went to summer school to be promoted each time. He wanted to specifically bring attention to having no Black teachers until his 8th-grade year for

English. He reports not feeling comfortable speaking out in class because teachers from previous years admonished him to speak correct English. He has a solid grasp of literary concepts but struggles with reading denser content-specific material like nonfiction texts. He stated that his earlier teachers offered book studies choices, but the choices were from books that the teachers liked, not those the students were interested in. When he pointed that out, the teachers indicated that he needed more cultural capital and exposure to the classics instead of pop culture and the gaming community.

Tiffany is a 13-year-old Black female in the 8th grade enrolled in the honors English class. The only reason she was held back from going to English I was a singular test score on a MAP assessment given during April of 2020. She reported that her Internet connection was spotty and shut her test down, causing her to score low. When the researcher reviewed previous Tiffany scores, they were in the 80th percentile, which would have qualified her for English I. Tiffany felt that her teacher did not care enough about her to challenge the placement because the teacher stopped meeting with students virtually and only posted work in the learning system platform that was auto-graded and allowed zero interaction between teacher and student. Tiffany currently has a 99 in her honors course, but she states she is not challenged and wishes she could be in a more rigorous class.

Eric is a 12-year-old Black male in the 8th grade also enrolled in the honors English class. He is an outlier as he has skipped a grade and started school early, which has led to him being the youngest in all his classes. He proudly proclaims his “geekiness” and describes himself as an undiscovered superhero who will save the world with graphic novels. He is keenly interested in getting the most from his class as a basis for a writing

career. He reported that only one of his middle school teachers recognized graphic novels as a legitimate text worth studying and reading. He is an avid reader and attends tutoring to gain a better understanding of the material. He describes himself as respectful, but he will also call out a teacher when they are wrong in an answer or when he feels the teacher is picking on or bullying a student. He admits that this can cause friction between him and a teacher, causing that relationship to sour. However, he said his family taught him to stand up for others, and he has seen that not all teachers care about their students.

Attrition of student participation could be likely as this district has many transient students who move across district schools dependent upon their families' circumstances. Students may also lose vital Internet access, which could cause them to be unable to participate in the study. Families are dealing with extenuating circumstances that could not have been planned for in these unprecedented times. The researcher took every precaution to include students who were likely to stay in the study from start to finish. However, this issue of transience opens the possibility for future studies to explore ways to minimize the adverse effects of moving from school to school. This lack of stability could be a possible reason as to the disengagement of a student in forming a positive teacher-student relationship as the student is aware of the possibility of leaving the school, rendering in their minds the idea that it is futile to put effort into something that is not permanent.

Data Collection Instruments

The data for this qualitative study came from a variety of tools and approaches. Throughout this study, I utilized surveys, observations, semi-structured interviews, and journaling. The survey provided a baseline for students' general perception of teacher-

student relationships. The same survey was used after the study to gauge any movement in student perception of the teacher-student relationship. The researcher included culturally relevant activities in the survey questions about the teacher's use of these classroom activities.

The classroom observations allowed the researcher to observe the interactions between the student and teacher through video observations in Microsoft Teams. The student interviews questioned students about their perceptions of the teacher-student relationship and the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The interviews with the teachers asked about their perceptions of the teacher-student relationship and their use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The students responded to prompts in a journal format that allowed them to elaborate on their perceptions about their relationship with their teacher and the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to strengthen the teacher-student relationship. The researcher used existing instruments (observation evaluation checklist) to collect data and create the researcher's tools to help obtain the data needed to truly understand the relationship between students and teachers and the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The instruments and tools used in the study were reliable and valid.

The data were collected in six phases. The reason for collecting six phases of qualitative data is to allow multiple data points for interpretation. The study utilized a participatory action research approach to investigate the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on student perception of teacher-student relationships as an equal partner in complimenting solid instruction. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Phenomenology is a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world; that is,

their everyday life and social action" (p. 71). The data collected in this study will also be viewed through transformative, pragmatic, and social reconstructionist lenses.

Narrative data combinations of journals and observations helped provide a more robust data set to create a complete understanding of emergent themes through observed data, respondent validation, and participant correlation. This additional data collection cycle aided in the researcher's pragmatic scope that sought to find what effect, if any, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy had on student perception of teacher-student relationships.

This type of research mirrors the evaluation, research, act, and revision planning instructional model that many school districts adopt. Teachers are the first to notice an issue in the delivery and reception of instruction and instructional practices. They can make targeted and intentional refinements almost immediately after researching possible solutions (Mertler, 2021).

Inside participatory practice and individual research are the most effective ways educators can use their knowledge as a reflective educator about their practices and classroom (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using my experience, I decided to approach this study as an insider. An "insider researcher is used to describe a situation where the researcher is a part of the topic being investigated" (Given, p. 1, 2008). The insider approach allowed me to be more confident and knowledgeable in my approach to the content and participants because I am part of the school and am involved with both the students and the teachers. The researcher has more insight into the outcomes of teacher-student relationships in the program than the role of a classroom teacher. Gauging how students perceive the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on teacher-student relationships before and after an on-going period of teacher-student interaction can

bolster the argument for including Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in classroom teaching—depending of course on the results of this study.

Research Procedure

A qualitative approach uses various data to explore a hypothesis, and then uses data from the field to further explore the hypothesis (Mertler, 2021). Schensul et al., (2012) surmised that qualitative research seeks to represent and predict reality in terms that the researcher and community of interest will understand. Logico-inductive analysis can provide a detailed assessment of patterns of responses (Mertler, 2021).

The research process began by identifying a teacher who would participate in the study. The next step was to send Informed Consent forms to all students in this teacher's three classes. The next step was to randomly select six students whose parents agreed to let them participate. From each of the three classes, one Black male and one Black female from each preparatory level class were randomly selected to participate in the study. Their identities were protected by being randomly assigned an alphanumeric descriptor. All information gathered will be secured on a password-protected form with their names in an alphanumeric password-protected format.

In the first phase, the six students chosen participated and completed a pre-survey that resulted in nominal data. This nominal data gauged student feelings about relationships with teachers and the importance of these relationships to help them feel more capable of completing their work and engaging them to be active participants in the class. An initial baseline interpretation of relationship importance, use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and a causal relationship for satisfaction in the class based on teacher-student relationship perception were established.

The second phase was classroom observation. A total of six observations using the AdvancED's Effective Learning Environments Observational Tool were conducted. The researcher conducted three observations and used three observations from the teacher's school administrator to eliminate the possibility of researcher bias and minimize threats to the study's validity. After classroom observations, the researcher looked for critical components to describe the phenomena from both sets of observations, noting any ratings that seem to be outliers. This was particularly useful in identifying what a lack of awareness of the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy can affect an evaluator who lacks understanding of the teaching practices. This observational tool measured to what context and extent learning occurs within the classroom setting. One of the key features is whether or not the educator delivers highly supportive instruction and provides equitable learning. Equitable learning occurs when students are engaged in learning that is relevant, structured, and conducive for students from all backgrounds.

The third phase checked student progress through the researcher's observations of class meetings for student engagement. The observation notes were kept in the researcher's journals using the password-protected format.

The fourth phase involved individual semi-structured interviews with the students and teacher. The semi-structured interviews assessed how students felt they performed in the class based on teacher-student relationships shaped by the inclusion of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The teacher interview explored how the teacher felt their students engaged with them and with course content using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to build teacher-student relationships. The use of various measurements reduced the overreliance of one data set over another, providing a fuller range of information with which to work.

The fifth phase allowed student participants to record their responses and provide narratives of their perceptions in unrestricted paragraph format to answer questions about their experiences regarding their teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and activities which were explained in the journal's directions. Student journals provided narratives that gave the study observable data of obscured feelings through the students' writings. Journals also allowed the researcher explore outliers from reported lower and higher levels of positive and negative perceptions of the teacher-student relationship and supply specific instances that can guide the researcher in analyzing the events that impacted the relationship.

The final phase was a recursive phase extending from the initial responses to allow participants to give more details about their experiences throughout the study. The post-survey generated data that the researcher may use to look for any changes across the span of the study.

Intervention

Before beginning the study, I met with the teacher and explained the study's purpose and the research question. Additionally, I covered the data collection tools that I would use during the study to address the purpose and answer the research question. The teacher described the current instructional unit and what objectives would be addressed during the unit. The students were learning about Emphasis and Parallelism in Writing. The teacher provided me with the lecture PowerPoint, and guided and independent practice assignments for me to review. I conducted the first observation using the ELEOT observation tool and after the first observation, I met with the teacher to discuss what I observed during the class. After the first observation, I shared culturally relevant

strategies that would be most beneficial to the students. The strategies I shared were to utilize instructional scaffolding, capitalize on students' cultural styles and strengths, link students' worlds to the subject matter, provide students with opportunities for positive social interaction, and offer content relevant to their culture and life experiences. These strategies were rooted in differentiated instruction. Culturally relevant strategies assist teachers with connecting content to students' upbringing, experiences, and cultures. After the second observation, I met with the teacher again to discuss what changes in students' understanding were observed, and then I moved to my last observation. The impact of those strategies is discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by open coding to allow the researcher to gather and code the interview data in as many ways possible for interpretation (Mertler, 2021). Open coding is the coding of data several times to begin grouping similar data and identifying data that deviates from what is expected (Mertler, 2021). After sorting this data, the researcher gleaned themes and a larger picture from what was observed to see what is happening. Open coding broke down a more extensive data set into the minor level of component for disaggregation and aggregation of information.

Confidentiality

The participants' confidentiality remained intact throughout the process to ensure no responses were shared with any entity other than the researcher. This information was secured through password protection software to prevent anyone from having accidental access. This was done mainly to maintain confidence in the researcher's ability to keep student responses private. The researcher recorded student responses for transcription at a

later date. The researcher utilized talk-to-text software that created an accurate, unbiased replay of the conversation between the researcher and the students.

Once the transcription was completed, the researcher used the resulting narrative text to make inferences and draw possible conclusions about the subject matter from the semi-structured interviews. Both the audio and transcription files were protected by password and encryption on the researcher's computer. While this data was also stored on cloud servers, the likelihood of it being breached was low. Students were given aliases in the recordings, and teachers were assigned numbers to protect the identities of all involved and protect the confidentiality of the information shared in their responses.

Summary

The data and analysis yielded from this study allowed the researcher to understand the relationship between student perception of the teacher-student relationship and the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The teacher made a consistent effort daily to create and sustain positive relationships with students. The Institute of Educational Sciences identified relationship-building efforts used by the teacher as instrumental in setting a positive classroom environment that increased the likelihood of engagement by students. Students who were perceived to have a productive teacher-student relationship performed at a higher level as opposed to those classes where students reported having little to no relationship with their teachers.

This study carefully followed the steps outlined in this chapter ensure credibility and trustworthiness. The multilayered data collection and analysis strategies also provided credibility to this study. The multiple aspects of the qualitative data were checked and kept secure in online cloud storage. The pre-survey and post-survey, student

journals, observation notes, and interview transcripts provided an abundance of data to add to this study. The interview questions analyzed and identified the aspects of student perceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and its impact on teacher-student relationships. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to contribute to the credibility of this study. Students were available for member checking after the transcriptions were typed and analyzed.

This study's findings were not unique to a specific period, and the study was described thoroughly. The participants were all students in a central South Carolina middle school. All received free lunch services, regardless of race, gender, or educational level, due to being a federal grant recipient. The findings also included rich descriptors that provide evidence for transferability. Participant responses were described in detail so that transferability could also be explored.

The methodology described in this chapter was implemented with fidelity. A journal provided notes that described each step of the data analysis process. Resources and methods were documented. Conversations with experts in the field of teacher-student relationships and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in education were noted. Repeated use of how to observe and assess teacher use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies and instruction gained from the researcher's graduate classes and professional development in Social-Emotional Learning and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy instruction were vital in maintaining fidelity to best practices of instruction. The collection of data from multiple interviews contributed to the trustworthiness of this study. The use of student-written responses ensured the removal of bias or misinterpretation.

The issue of confirmability was addressed by planning for analysis. The researcher was in contact with the study chair, mentors, and other experts in education throughout the study. The researcher was the only person involved in coding the interview transcriptions and reading student journals. Themes were discovered through a close analysis of the semi-structured interviews and observations.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

As proposed in Chapter 1, the purpose of this qualitative, action research study was to explore how students perceive their teacher-student relationships through the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and examine how virtual learning could play a role in their relationship. This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the potential influence Culturally Relevant Pedagogy might have on teacher-student relationships. This chapter explores the findings in response to the central research question, "How do eighth-grade Magnet students perceive their teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as impacting the teacher-student relationship?" The research sub-question that was explored was "What impact, if any, does virtual learning affect students' perceptions of their teacher-student, culturally relevant relationship?"

Overview of Data Collection

Six student participants were invited to participate in this research study. Each student returned a consent form signed by their parent to me. A ten-question pre-survey was administered to collect baseline data (Appendix A). The purpose of the survey was to explore students' perceptions of student engagement in the classroom, teacher characteristics, and classroom environment at that beginning point of the study. The survey looked at these concepts to determine if they impacted the ability of the students to create, maintain, and sustain the teacher-student relationship. Additionally, the survey sought to determine if students knew and understood what culturally relevant strategies

were and whether or not the teacher was implementing the strategies in the classroom. The survey was administered to all six participants one week before the study started, providing a baseline data for the survey.

Students were also observed in the classroom, interacting with the teacher and their response to the teacher's implementation of culturally relevant strategies. The students and the teacher also participated in a one-on-one interview with me to discuss how they perceived their relationship with each other. After completing the interview, students submitted written responses that allowed them to reflect on their experiences this semester, the interactions with their teacher, and how the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies impacted them in class and their relationship with their teacher. Lastly, students were administered the same pre-survey as a post-survey to determine if changes were made throughout this study. For this study, all data collected was qualitative data. The data was coded to glean repeating responses and identify outliers regarding student perception of teacher-student relationships and the teacher's implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Findings of the Study and Interpretations of the Results

The study examined whether Culturally Relevant Pedagogy impacted a student's relationship with the teacher. To evaluate the stated problem of practice, I assisted the teacher with implementing culturally relevant strategies in her teaching. The data were analyzed utilizing Ladson-Billings' (2009) three domains of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: "a strong focus on student learning, developing cultural competence, and cultivating a sociopolitical awareness in students" (p. x-xi) to help identify patterns in narrative analysis responses. A review of the descriptive results provided information

about students' perception of their teacher, their view of self-efficacy in the course, and their confidence in their ability to be engaged and achieve at high levels in the class.

The multiple sets of data used in this study revealed several results. This chapter will review how my analysis of the pre- and post-survey, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and student reflection journals revealed three themes: 1) desire for teacher authenticity, 2) desire for teacher affirmation, and 3) relevance. Based on my analysis, these themes most closely reflect what students see as their teachers' use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and its impact on their relationships. I will discuss each of these themes linked to the three culturally relevant strategies and the students themselves through quotations of their statements. All three themes are connected to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Teacher-Student Relationships.

Results from Survey

The purpose of the survey was to explore students' perceptions of student engagement in the classroom, teacher characteristics, and classroom environment at the beginning of the study. The survey looked at these concepts and questioned students to determine if these perceptions impacted their ability to create, maintain, and sustain the teacher-student relationship. Additionally, the survey sought to determine if students knew and understood what culturally relevant strategies were and whether or not the teacher was implementing the strategies in the classroom. The survey was administered to all six participants one week before the study started and provides a baseline for the survey.

Table 4.1 *Pre-Survey Student Responses*

Question	YES	NO
1. My teacher recognizes and values the cultures represented by the students in my classroom.	**2**	**4**
2. My teacher is knowledgeable of the various cultures represented by the students in my classroom.	**4**	**2**
3. My teacher takes time to learn about the cultures represented by the students in my classroom.	**1**	**5**
4. My teacher recognizes and considers my own cultural influences and how they affect the way my teacher communicates, my expectations, and how my teacher teaches.	**1**	**5**
5. My classroom is decorated in ways that represent multiple cultures and global awareness.	**6**	**0**
6. The books, handouts, and other materials my teacher uses reflect multicultural and global awareness.	**3**	**3**
7. My teacher plans and assesses if Culturally Relevant Pedagogy practices have helped students learn.	**2**	**4**
8. My teacher makes an effort to educate families about our school.	**3**	**3**
9. My teacher builds strong, positive working relationships with the parents of their students.	**3**	**3**
10. My teacher knows the students and builds positive working relationships with them.	**2**	**4**

To avoid teacher intimidation, the survey was administered in a different classroom, and the teacher was not present. As students were taking the survey, several of them asked if I could explain some of the wording. While answering the survey questions, students reflected on interactions and moments in the classroom with the teacher. One of the questions that consistently came up was:

Student: "Will my teacher get in trouble if I circle no?"[1]

Me: "Absolutely not. This survey is simply for me to see how you think about your teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom."

[1] From time to time, quotations from students and the teacher have been lighted to improve comprehension.

Student: “You mean, how she talks about what we are going through?”

Me: “In essence, yes. But also, how she relates your classwork and notes back to your experiences at home and in your community.”

Student: “Oh, bet. That is good. Cuz I feel like she tries, but I want to tell her, her stories are good, but we got stories that we want to share during class. I do not think she wants to waste time letting us tell our stories.”

The pre-survey responses indicated a mixture of views related to the relationship with the teacher, the teacher’s knowledge of students’ background, culture, and experiences, and the classroom environment and experience. Although the teacher had previously attended professional development training centered on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, it was clear that she was not using the strategies consistently. Based on the pre-survey baseline data, it appeared that the teacher used some of the features, as shown in survey question number five, where the classroom is decorated representing multiple cultures and global awareness. However, as shown in question one, the teacher struggled to recognize and value the students’ cultures in her class. To help students develop cultural competence, teachers must see and understand the whole student. “If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 37). This is one area that I monitored during the study to see how the teacher used those differences to impact students’ level of engagement in the classroom. Two of the six students also indicated that the lesson plans were not using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which would be beneficial in developing the students’ learning and academic achievement, one of the constructs of Ladson-Billings’ (1994) pedagogy.

The survey concluded by asking if the teacher knew the students and builds positive relationships. Only two of the six students responded with "yes." These pre-survey student responses of their perceptions about the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and its ability to positively impact teacher-student relationships helped guide the intervention of this study. At the end of the study, students completed the post-survey to compare with the pre-survey responses. The post-survey responses show positive impressions of the teacher after implementing culturally relevant strategies to impact the teacher-student relationship.

Table 4.2 *Post-Survey Student Responses*

Question	YES	NO
1. My teacher recognizes and values the cultures represented by the students in my classroom.	**6**	**0**
2. My teacher is knowledgeable of the various cultures represented by the students in my classroom.	**6**	**0**
3. My teacher takes time to learn about the cultures represented by the students in my classroom.	**6**	**0**
4. My teacher recognizes and considers my own cultural influences and how they affect the way my teacher communicates, my expectations, and how my teacher teaches.	**4**	**2**
5. My classroom is decorated in ways that represent multiple cultures and global awareness.	**6**	**0**
6. The books, handouts, and other materials my teacher uses reflect multicultural and global awareness.	**5**	**1**
7. My teacher plans and assesses if Culturally Relevant Pedagogy practices have helped students learn.	**6**	**0**
8. My teacher makes an effort to educate families about our school.	**6**	**0**
9. My teacher builds strong, positive working relationships with the parents of their students.	**6**	**0**
10. My teacher knows the students and builds positive working relationships with them.	**5**	**1**

The students took the post-survey after observations, semi-structured interviews, and student journal entries were completed. The post-survey showed drastic differences

from the pre-survey. All students now indicate that the teacher recognizes and values the students' cultures in the classroom, is knowledgeable of those cultures, and takes time to learn about those cultures. This is an example of what Ladson-Billings indicated as successful pedagogy. "According to Ladson-Billings (1995), successful pedagogy begins with student-centered teaching where students are treated as competent individual experiences and skills are valued." Additionally, all students see a difference in the teacher's approach to the lesson by using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, which also helps families learn more about the school and builds strong relationships with students' parents. There was also an increase in the number of students who think their teacher knows them and builds a relationship with them.

The survey provided additional support about the research and research sub-question. Students believed they would understand the content and feel more comfortable in their classes moving forward than they had in the past if the teacher had used these practices to bolster the teacher-student relationship, such as books, handouts, and other materials that helped them understand other cultures and be globally aware of them. As a result, the students felt the teacher-student relationship could lead to better grades and a better experience at school when those issues are at the forefront of the class lessons and activities because of intentional planning. These questions were relative to the use of culturally relevant strategies and the teacher's implementation of them.

Results from Classroom Observations

Six classroom observations were completed via the district's video management learning system. The observations were conducted during the same class period on six different days. In addition to the researcher's observations, the teacher's grade-level

administrator also shared prior observations with the researcher. The purpose of six observations was to see if the teacher showed progress and growth through my coaching regarding Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The grade level administrator's observations were used to eliminate the possibility of researcher bias and minimize any potential threats to validity. These observations provided rich, descriptive data related to the teacher's interaction with students, which enabled me to develop a synopsis of the narrative data from my three observations during the time of the study and the comparison of the three observations conducted by the teacher's grade level administrator. Both of us observed various student and teacher behaviors that indicated the students' level of engagement in the classroom. To supplement the rating scores on the AdvancED's Effective Learning Environment Observational Tool (ELEOT), I recorded reflections of the observations in my journal.

The teacher averaged high ratings on the ELEOT in establishing and maintaining a learning environment conducive to learning for a diverse set of students. Specifically, all the observations indicate the teacher is adept at establishing a safe learning environment, providing opportunities for students to take risks in mastering content, and creating spaces for all students to feel valued in the classroom. This is a crucial principle of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. "Teachers should not only recognize students' value and importance, but they should also consciously recognize what their students have in common" (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 78).

The observations showed that the teacher appears to routinely differentiate instruction to meet all learners' diverse needs, noting that not all students are doing the same thing at the same time. This culturally relevant strategy is at the center of the

framework. The teacher understands what the class must accomplish as a whole and what she must do to provide each student with instruction and support to meet the academic goals. Another observed behavior of the teacher was the establishment of high standards and expectations for students to engage with the content, collaborate with other learners, and master the skills necessary to show academic and personal goal achievement. Another feature of a teacher who uses Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies is developing a classroom where all learners and teachers are valued. Caring relationships have been established among all stakeholders in the classroom. As the administrator noted, it is evident that this teacher respects students and that they have a relationship with her. The "Happy Birthday" messages in the chat and responses to their contributions are further evidence of those positive relationships.

The observations also assessed whether or not the teacher adhered to the content area standards and indicators, which meant that the teacher must bridge what students already know and do not know or need to know. The teacher did not simplify content to make it more comfortable, even though the content was difficult. In his observation, the administrator noted that the teacher's connection with students was evident in the chat responses: "You are confident with your teaching, and your students respond to you in a positive manner. You used language from the standards—excellent. I love the positive interaction on current events." This skill is situated in the ELEOT observational tool as the "ability to task learners with appropriate and challenging learning activities/experiences with high expectations for all," which is a critical component of culturally relevant teaching practices. The teacher's overall effectiveness ratings exemplify what is expected of effective teaching: using best instructional practices,

building effective teacher-student relationships, and supporting students in meeting academic objectives through diverse texts, student's cultural capital, and familial knowledge.

Using ELEOT, I observed "Equitable Learning Environment, High Expectations Environment, Supportive Learning Environment, Active Learning Environment, Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment, Well-Managed Learning Environment, and Digital Learning Environment." The Likert scale uses the following ratings: Very Evident, Evident, Somewhat Evident, and Not Observed, with a score for each of 4, 3, 2, and 1, in that order. These student-focused observation tenets gave me a better understanding of what the classroom experience is like every day and how the teacher can establish and maintain a relationship with students. The observation tool measured several critical student-focused tenets, and some of the ratings saw changes over the study's course as indicated in the tables below. As seen through the administrator's observations, the teacher has been consistent in working to maintain relationships with students. However, the consistent use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies was not apparent.

Table 4.3 *Results from Administrator Observations*

Student Focused Observation	Administrator Observation 1	Administrator Observation 2	Administrator Observation 3
Very Evident (4), Evident (3), Somewhat Evident (2), Not Observed (1)			
A1. Has differentiated learning opportunities and activities that meet her/his needs	2	3	4
B1. Knows and strives to meet the high expectations established by the teacher	1	3	4
C4. Is provided support and assistance to understand content and accomplish tasks	2	4	4
D1. Has several opportunities to engage in discussions with teacher and other students	2	4	4
D2. Makes connections from content to real-life experiences	2	3	4
E3. Demonstrates or verbalizes understanding of the lesson/content	3	4	3
F4. Collaborates with other students during student-centered activities	2	4	3

Utilizing the administrator's observations before the beginning of the study helped me decide what areas of focus I would continue to observe. After my observation period, I observed the same tenets, and the data below represents the findings during the observations.

Table 4.4 *Results from Researcher Observations*

Student Focused Observation	Researcher Observation 1	Researcher Observation 2	Researcher Observation 3
Very Evident (4), Evident (3), Somewhat Evident (2), Not Observed (1)			
A1. Has differentiated learning opportunities and activities that meet her/his needs	3	4	4
B1. Knows and strives to meet the high expectations established by the teacher	2	4	4
C4. Is provided support and assistance to understand content and accomplish tasks	3	4	4
D1. Has several opportunities to engage in discussions with teacher and other students	2	3	4
D2. Makes connections from content to real-life experiences	2	4	4
E3. Demonstrates or verbalizes understanding of the lesson/content	4	4	4
F4. Collaborates with other students during student-centered activities	2	4	4

Through the observations, it was clear that the teacher prides herself on empowering students socially, emotionally, and intellectually by utilizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The differentiated learning opportunities met students' needs by using activities and assignments where students can see themselves. During one of the classroom observations, I observed a teacher providing students with an activity that would allow them to insert themselves into the text.

Teacher: "This text is very relatable to many of you because the main character is in the 8th grade. But can be different because of his family structure and

class ranking. Your task is to re-write the ending of the text based on how you would handle the situation if you were in his shoes."

Student: "But, can we tell the truth?"

Teacher: "Of course, but by tell the truth, what exactly do you mean?"

Student: "The main character's family had a lot of money. My family does not. So, I cannot say that we would handle it the same at all."

At this moment, I realized that not only do students not see themselves in the text but also saw that their perceptions were cloudy due to a caste system. As a result, teachers should use intentional planning to ensure that the learning opportunities have high expectations for them and apply to them. The teacher also intellectually discusses current events with students related to the content and employs culturally relevant strategies. This is a massive component of cultivating a sociopolitical awareness in students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). One of the class periods that I observed was the beginning of an Argumentative Essay assignment. The teacher was covering facts, opinions, and claims but also introduced students to fallacies.

Teacher: "Many of you are aware of the conversations that are happening in the community about the gym being closed because of potential gang activity in the area. However, many of the community members are disappointed in the county's leadership because there have been claims of gang activity, but they have not been provided or proven."

Student: "Because it is not true."

Teacher: "Why do you say that? What would the county need to provide in order for these claims to be true?"

Student: “FACTS.”

Teacher: “That is absolutely correct. It is the same in writing. In order for your reader to believe your argument. You must provide them with facts and supporting evidence to back up your claim.”

The teacher used a real-life situation to help students understand why facts are essential in writing. Additionally, the lessons capitalized on students’ cultural styles and strengths and legitimized students’ real-life experiences. During several lessons, the teacher provided students with opportunities for social interactions, serving as a facilitator to bridge students’ culture with the school’s culture. As a result, the teacher demonstrated personal connectedness with all students where they felt comfortable, welcomed, and safe in the classroom environment.

Teacher: “The county is planning to meet with community members to discuss what can be done to reopen the gym.”

Student: “I do not know why. They do not listen to anyone. Just a waste of time.”

Teacher: “Well, that is not the attitude to have. What else do you think they can do?”

Student: “Well, I have ideas, but if I share them, I might get in trouble.”

Teacher: “Absolutely not. Just like in argumentative writing, be sure that you are respectful and use an appropriate tone, and you can share how you feel.”

Student: “Why is it that we have to suffer with the bad kids? I have never seen any gang activity, but I also am never looking for it. I want to this end so

we can start back hoopin' in the gym. These kids want to be in these gangs, and they barely even know how to spell gangs."

[Class erupts in laughter]

Teacher: "I understand what you are saying, and I agree. Something similar happened to me when I was in high school. We almost lost our junior prom because students had been caught smoking cigarettes."

[snickering and laughing]

Teacher: "What?! I am serious!"

Student: "Wait. It wasn't you smoking those cigarettes, right?"

Teacher: "Of course not. But my point is, sometimes the choices of others can have negative effects on everyone. But do not let that stop you from doing the right thing or getting frustrated. There are responsible and productive ways to handle adversity. But I tell you what; I will speak to Mr. Smith [the principal] and see if some of the staff members can attend the next meeting and work to help get the gym opened back up for you all."

Student: "Wow?! You would do that."

Teacher: "Yes, why not?"

Student: "Because you do not even live here or go to that gym. Why do you care?"

Teacher: "I care because you care. All of you care. And because you are my students, I want you to be the best in and outside the classroom. So let me work my magic, and if it opens back, yall owe me."

Student: “We got you. I will make sure everyone does their homework for two weeks straight.”

[Class starts unmuting microphones and turning on cameras]

Students are talking over each other saying: “Oh yeah, I can do that.” “We can all do that.”

Teacher: “Deal.”

Student: “Thank you so much. I am glad we have a teacher that listens to us and cares about us more than her work.”

Teacher: “Of course. Without you, there is no work. Now, let us get back to work. Who is ready to share some facts from their prewriting assignment?”

[Class microphones are back on mute and cameras back off]

Teacher: Ahhh, come on, guys.

This was an awe-inspiring conversation where the teacher was able to listen to her students and made them comfortable, which allowed them to open up and share. Ladson-Billings (2009) believes that students are empowered, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically “by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20).

For the teacher to implement Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies, the teacher must exhibit genuine caring for all students. The results from the classroom observations illustrate how the teacher is making strides in her ability to utilize Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to impact the teacher-student relationship. The teacher continues to provide an equitable learning environment, maintain high expectations for all students, offer students

support in their learning, create learning environments where students are active participants, provide students with feedback, and promote digital learning to all students.

Although the classroom was virtual, connectivism strategies were evident through the classroom observations. One of those strategies, Nurturing and Maintaining Connections, is needed to facilitate continual learning, allowing the teacher to consistently make connections to the learning so that students can continue learning outside of the class. The use of digital tools and technology was vital in achieving this level of connectivism for students. The observations occurred before the student and teacher semi-structured interviews to ensure responses offered insight into the observations.

Results from Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the six student participants, and the teacher used structured questions designed to elicit their perceptions of their relationship with their teacher and the use of culturally relevant strategies. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. All interview data from students and the teacher was collected in response to prepared interview questions. The interview questions were formed from an analysis of questions from the pre-test and post-test survey based on the research on strategies a teacher might use to include Culturally Relevant Pedagogy practices.

The semi-structured interviews were recorded by audio and manually transcribed (Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D., 2018), and all responses were written down. All participants could listen to their interview and correct or clarify any responses to ensure their true feelings and language were captured. This allowed the participants to clarify

their responses and comments. The interview transcripts were analyzed to highlight the themes found in the responses. Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018) shared how emergent themes are organized, and as a result, the transcripts were coded to aggregate the data into smaller categories of information. Once the transcription was analyzed and the data were coded, I was able to identify themes that emerged from the interviews.

Student-participant semi-structured interviews provided a narrative of students' perceptions regarding the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on the relationship they have with their teachers. The students were asked seven questions (Appendix C). I recorded, transcribed, and summarized each student's responses. The interviews supported the three themes related to student perception of the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on the teacher-student relationship. After analyzing the student interview data, I generated three themes from the developing narrative data that repeatedly showed up across the responses. The themes that were identified were: 1) desire for teacher authenticity, 2) desire for teacher affirmation, and 3) relevance.

Desire for Teacher Authenticity

A common theme emerged while analyzing students' responses regarding teachers bringing their true, authentic selves to the classroom. The findings that led to the desire for teacher authenticity theme relates to the development of the teacher-student relationship through the implementation of the following culturally relevant strategies: teacher demonstrates personal connectedness with all students, the teacher-student relationship is fluid and humanely equitable, the teacher exhibits a genuine caring attitude towards all students and the teacher establishes a teacher-friendly environment.

One word that kept reappearing in the coding process was "real." Students said that they wanted their teachers to be real in response to several questions and situations. When asked, "What do you like about your favorite teacher?" students responded in the same ways, with a few students adding an emphasis on being patient.

Mary said that her favorite teacher is "patient and understanding." I asked Mary what she meant by that, and she responded:

> Mary: "When my teachers are patient and understanding, they understand that we make mistakes. But they work with us. To me, that is being real. Cuz you best believe she messes up sometimes too. So if everybody being real, we do not have no fakes in the class. We mess up, but we need our teachers to help us. She is good at that because she does not judge us."

Angela says her favorite teacher is "calm, patient, straightforward, and understanding." While Angela also mentioned patient and understanding, the major part of her response really stood out to me:

> Angela: "She does not hold her tongue. But we like that. Cuz that shows us how real she is and we respect us she lets us be real as well."

Tiffany said her favorite teacher is "honest, an OG, and very friendly." Whitaker felt that his favorite teachers were "up-to-date with pop culture, and if she is missing something, we can school her." Will mentioned that his favorite teacher was "patient and real honest with him." I asked Will to explain more about what he means when he says, "real honest with him."

> Will: "Just keep it 100. That is all I ask. If I am failing, let me know so I can fix it. If I am acting up, let me know so I can correct it. If I am not participating

> enough, let me know so I can. But she also knows that I only participate when it is stuff I am interested in, so I need her to keep letting us read stuff we like."

This response is directly connected to the teacher's ability to understand their students. "Teachers consistently pushing themselves to authentically understand their students can result in evolving practices that continually reflect their students' lived experiences" (Borrero, et al., 2018, p. 25). By providing Will with more texts relative to him, he feels that his teacher is real with him and authentic. Lastly, Eric revealed his favorite is "patient, easy to get along with, knowledgeable but genuine."

While these are all attributes a student likes for their favorite teacher to exhibit, they also shared other attributes they do not like. Mary believes teachers should not be "mean and aggy [aggravating]." Angela believes teachers should not be "giving us too much work and talking over our heads. This is fake because she knows we cannot do all this work in a short amount of time." Tiffany thinks being "unfair, unreal, and show[ing] favoritism" are not good attributes for teachers. Whitaker indicated he does not like for "teachers to try and embarrass us."

Will thought being "unprepared, short-tempered, mean" were behaviors that were not good for teachers to have. Will elaborated by saying, "When they are unprepared, short-tempered, and mean, they show they do not care about us. They are just here for the check." Will's response indicated that authenticity and realness are related to care because he knows when teachers care for him they do not exhibit those behaviors. This connects with teachers building relationships with students. "As caring relationships are

built, teachers help students build skills academically, socially, and culturally" (Williams, 2018, p. 3).

Finally, Eric shared his dislike for teachers who are "mean, lack purpose and treat us like we are just a number." These are not characteristics that he wants to see in her teachers.

When trying to understand the complexities of the teacher-student relationship beyond the surface level, it is vital to gauge students' perceptions on how a professional teacher should act. Although the responses were quite similar, it was enlightening to see the emphasis that so many students place on wanting their teacher to be "real."

Mary believes that "a professional teacher should be meeting us on our level and not hiding things from us. We like to know our teachers so we can learn better from them." Angela shared that she "appreciates my teachers being smart, but I like teachers that are honest and are not scared of hurting student feelings." Whitaker thinks "bougie, composed, and high achievers" are attributes that best describe professional teachers. Will felt that "my teacher should want to see all her students do well." And finally, Eric thinks that professional teachers should "act like adults and leaders."

Desire for Teacher Affirmation.

Several students discussed how much it means for their teachers to affirm who they are as students, not who they want them to be. Merriam Webster defines affirmation as "emotional support or encouragement." The culturally relevant strategies that lend themselves to affirmation in the classroom include encouraging the development of a community of leaders and forming an emotional affiliation with students. Making students feel good about themselves helps their self-efficacy in class and school. The

student interviews made it clear that teachers could provide emotional support and encouragement and build positive relationships with students by learning about them and their cultures, and all of the responses indicated that the teacher was successful in doing these things. This directly correlates to the desire for teacher authenticity, as students want to be affirmed in the classroom.

Mary shared, “we know they care because they know more about us. I think that is important because we feel welcomed.” Angela made it very clear that “teachers understand that we are real people and our thoughts matter. I wish we could talk more about ourselves in class.” Tiffany indicated, “My teachers should make us feel included so if they are their real selves, we can be our real selves. It makes being in class more fun.” Whitaker believes “teachers should want to know about us so they can teach us better.” Will felt that “my teacher should want to see all her students do well.”

The affirmation can be evident through the teacher-student relationship, as when students shared what they believed was the ideal relationship between teacher and students. Mary believes that in an ideal teacher-student relationship, the teacher and student should both have some “give and take.” Angela shared, “she teaches, I learn, we both work” is the type of relationship she likes having with her teacher. Intrigued by her response, I followed up with an additional question.

Me: “Angela, interesting response. What do you mean by ‘we both work?’”

Angela: “It is more than just reading to us or making us take notes. When she teaches, she reaches us.”

Me: “Reaches us?”

Angela: “She makes us feel the content. She makes us feel like we know what we are doing because she makes it about us now.”

Tiffany discussed how she likes “a nice teacher who is fair but believes in me like I am the smartest student she is ever taught.” Whitaker indicated, “my relationship with my teacher should be focused on getting me to the next level and being better than I was before I got to her class. But I know I also have much work to do.” Will thinks the teacher-student relationship should be a “two-way streak.” Eric believes his teachers should be “good listeners, understands me, and I can ask her the hard questions without her being upset.”

While all students used similar terms in describing the ideal relationship between teachers and students, each student responded in slightly different ways based on their individual needs and perceptions of their teacher. Affirming students in the classroom is a characteristic of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Students come to school feeling good about themselves, and when teachers affirm that, it helps students want to be even better. Affirmation comes in learning styles, student behavior, and student goals but uses cultural competence as its premise.

Relevance

Students shared their feelings about what every teacher should know about to work with students. Students, again, shared similar responses, and the theme of being able to relate to the students emerged loud and clear. By making content relevant to students’ cultures and life experiences, the teacher showed precisely what relevance looked like in the classroom. Mary stated, “Teachers should know we have lives, but we do want to learn. They live just like we do. I wish they would ask us about ourselves

while we are learning. We might be more into it." While Mary wants to be asked more about herself, Angela believes teachers should "make the lessons about us and be fair to everyone. We all are different." Tiffany agreed with Angela in the belief that all students are different and "we all learn differently, but we try."

Whitaker's response differs slightly from these, but he agrees that "teachers should know more about us because when we respond or act, it feels good to know that we have been heard." Will proclaimed, "all students want to do good, but sometimes we make bad choices" but stressed that "teachers should know not to give up on us. We are young." Eric felt that teachers should know "we like working at our own pace, but sometimes the work is hard, so we need our teacher to believe in us and show it."

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews support the idea that students appreciate teachers who are authentic and allow students to be the same way, affirm who they are and relate to them on their level.

While the teacher interview questions were somewhat different, the context of the interview questions was the same. I sought to explore how the teacher felt their students engaged with her and course content using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to build teacher-student relationships. There are so many facets of the teacher-student relationship that impact engagement and achievement, but through the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, many of those facets are met simultaneously.

When asked about whether interaction with students supports an orderly and disciplined classroom, the teacher responded, "Yes, I have high expectations, but I make students want to reach them. It makes it easier for me to teach and students to learn." I then asked the teacher to elaborate if she inspires creative thought and the desire to learn,

and she shared, “I do, especially when writing essays. Creative prompts and thoughts allow them to express their individuality. It also allows them to share their truths and experiences with me through the assignments.”

All teachers are responsible for establishing relationships with students. However, not everyone is comfortable or confident in doing that. With that in mind, I asked the teacher if her relationship with her students energizes them. Her response: “My relationships with students are so energetic. I make them like me, to the point where other students are asking to be in my class because I am so much fun” [big grin here]. The students’ responses to “What do you like about your favorite teachers?” and “What behaviors do you dislike in some teachers?” aligned with the teacher’s response. The teacher indicated that she liked teachers who were “honest, straightforward, and strict, but loving and easy to learn from.” She also shared that she does not like teachers who are always “yelling, judging, and impatient.” These responses are relative to how the teacher felt about how students engaged with her and the course content.

After the interview, the teacher talked at length about the ideal relationship between teachers and students.

Me: “What do you feel like your relationship with students should be?”

Teacher: “It should be synonymous with sports. The teacher serves as the coach and the students as the players. We work together on the game plan [lesson plan], discuss the plays [assignments], review the strategies [content], practice [guided/independent] and then have games [assessments].”

Me: “How do you do that?”

Teacher: “It is simple. We work together. I want to make sure I am affirming who they are by allowing them to be their most authentic self while also contributing to the classroom community.”

This was key in sustaining relationships with students as both the teacher and students have a seat at the table while the student takes an active role in their learning. Sustaining teacher-student relationships is vital to developing the whole child and implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom.

Results from Student Journals

After being observed and interviewed, students wrote reflections about the interactions they had with their teacher and, specifically, how they felt about the relationship. Many of the responses indicated what the relationship looked like, how the relationship developed, and how it is maintained. Through this virtual setting, some students saw a difference in how the relationship was established and the challenges they have in maintaining it. Many of the student journal responses show that well-planned lessons helped to reach students where they are and make the content meaningful to them—a critical component of Connectivism in the classroom. Additionally, the implementation of culturally relevant strategies helped students better understand the content, and the same themes that emerged from the interview responses were relevant here—the desire for teacher authenticity, desire for teacher affirmation, and relevance.

Mary put it this way:

> “Before taking this class, I did not think teachers could relate to me or connect with me. Now I feel like if I make an effort, I can expect the teacher to do the same. It’s like the teacher said, a two-

> way street is two way, not come by my way and maybe I will walk with you. I felt like if she corrected me, she just wanted the best of me not just putting me down because she does not like kids that look like me. Sometimes get off on making you look dumb. I can breathe in this class and have my feelings and not be judged for how I respond, how I look, whatever."

Mary's journal response indicates that the teacher-student relationship needs both parties to make an effort at establishing the relationship. She understands that corrections from the teacher show a genuine concern to seeing her develop into the best student she can be. She acknowledges that her teacher has established an environment where she can be comfortable and herself without being judged for how she responds or looks.

In addition to Mary, other students also expressed growth in becoming mature and respectful students who could be honest with the teacher if they felt overwhelmed. Angela, however, had a different focus and wrote:

> "I am gifted and talented and already knew how to use the strategies. The teacher was a helpful teaching source, but it did not change how I see myself in the teacher-student relationship, as I have always been a respectful student who teachers liked. This time though, it felt like the teacher took out the time to get to know me and what I liked, so it felt like she suggested short stories for me to learn from that I had an interest in."

Angela's response showed that intrinsic motivation could sometimes play a role in developing the teacher-student relationship. However, if a teacher shows students they

are making an effort to learn, it impacts how they learn and feel about the course content. This is key in developing culturally based instruction, since teachers can incorporate students' cultural strengths into the learning process if they know who their students are.

Tiffany, reflecting on her experience in the class as a female student, said:

> "After a while, I felt like she wanted me to learn for my benefit and my future. It was not just that she wanted to have good test scores for a report. It was not just about tests. That was different. Other teachers talk about doing good on tests for the school and the community. She wanted me to know how to, in her words, 'master the art of language' so that I could express myself. This made me want to work harder because I could see she took her time and chose stuff that was true to my life, like sneakers and sports. She is a female, but she knows about sports and shared her knowledge about Black athletes and other stuff that made me proud. I do not know if another teacher from a different race would do that. I am used to male teachers trying to chop it up or get to know me. Not someone who could be my moms."

Tiffany discussed in her entry how the art of language and words matter in expressing herself. She also shared how sports impacted their relationship, and although she appreciates her wanting to have good test scores, she knew that her teacher wanted more for her.

Whitaker wrote in his journal:

> "If the teacher had not used stories and subjects that I knew about to get me interested in classwork, I feel that I would have just seen her as another teacher who did not listen to what students wanted to read about. Because she has listened to music that I listen to and grew up kinda like I did, she knew what would interest us because she is like us. Other teachers have you read stuff that they like or that they know about. We did a whole project about sneaker fabric technology because we teased her about her sneakers. She asked what kind she should have and let us research the best sneaker for her dollar and her style. It was like she trusted us to be the experts. She did not get mad when we teased her about her shoes."

Whitakers' response shows how impactful relating to students can be. She points out that her teacher listened to similar music that she does, and her childhood also was important because it was just like hers. Allowing students to be themselves and share their experiences that engage the content and real-life helps increase self-esteem and a high regard for others in the classroom.

Students also shared perspectives about the impact virtual learning has on establishing and maintaining a positive teacher-student relationship.

Will shared the following:

> "I think virtual learning has definitely affected the student-teacher relationship. I say that because some of my teachers don't even know what their students look like because when

> they do turn on their camera, the camera is always pointing to the ceiling, or their room is really dark. I think students feel since it is not really needed to show their face because we are on the computer, students and teachers cannot build that bond. In conclusion, I think it is different because we choose to show our face in virtual learning, but in person, we have to deal with it."

Interestingly enough, Eric shared a similar response related to virtual learning on building a positive teacher-student relationship and compared it to the classroom experience.

> "I think as far as a teacher and student interaction for virtual learning, for me, the thing that makes learning still fun is when the teacher actually talks to the students and even asks how our day or weekend was. I think an excellent example of this is when you teach and ask us about certain things and relate it to the topic we are learning about, and it feels more like we are in an actual physical classroom instead of when we get the information without having any sort of conversation in the chat and learning about everyone's opinions about certain things."

The responses from the student journals answered the second sub-research question. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed to identify patterns, which included a search for rich themes and patterns to explain how a teacher's use of culturally relevant instruction positively impacts the teacher-student relationship. The responses to

the student journals also supplied insight that contributed to the findings' development and analysis. The data indicated a difference from the start of the study in how a student perceived a teacher being an active participant in developing the teacher-student relationship. These results illustrate the necessity for culturally relevant classroom settings to build teacher-student relationships that provide students with a feeling of being valued as a person and a student.

Intervention

Before collecting data, I examined the course content to understand the teaching and learning provided in this class. Additionally, I provided the teacher with ways to implement culturally relevant strategies into the lesson plans. During the time that the study took place, students were learning about Emphasis and Parallelism in writing. During the first observation, I observed effective teaching by the teacher and positive student interactions with the teacher; however, students were not grasping Parallelism and other concepts. After this first observation, I met with the teacher to provide her with the culturally relevant strategies (discussed in Chapter 3) that she could implement to help students better understand the content that might be more relevant to them.

During the second observation, I saw the teacher begin to implement these culturally relevant strategies in a very intentional manner. This pedagogy was new and different for the students, and they appeared much more interested in the content. After the second observation, I asked the teacher her thoughts about the new way we were teaching Parallelism. She stated that it felt strange, but she could see the excitement in the students' faces (as I did), so we agreed to continue using these strategies to see what else might happen. As indicated earlier, the teacher and I discussed multiple strategies, but we

agreed to focus specifically on hip-hop as an intervening factor for this content. I chose this because I believed this would influence and increase students' engagement with the content.

While the teacher was a bit hesitant, she agreed to move forward with the recommendation. As indicated earlier in Chapter 3, hip-hop culture was created by African American people and is still relevant today. Many young people find it relevant to them and their social groups. As a result, I chose hip-hop culture because it is one that many of the students at my school identify with. As such, I believe using hip-hop culture was something that students could immediately and easily connect with.

During the third observation, I noticed the teacher provide students with the background knowledge that helped them begin to make connections to the content. While the teacher believed strongly in using the state-adopted textbook, she was open to other resources to help engage her students in the content. She did this because she felt that the textbook examples were not familiar or provoking interest in her students. For example, the textbook's parallelism examples were from literature excerpts:

> "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . . ." *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens
>
> "I'll give my jewels for a set of beads, My gorgeous palace for a hermitage, My gay apparel for an almsman's gown, My figured goblets for a dish of wood . . . ." *Richard II* by William Shakespeare

These examples were foreign to the students, as none had even heard of either work. As a result, they were struggling to understand the content because they could not connect with it. However, as the teacher began to infuse the hip-hop culture into the lesson, she

started using examples that students could connect to. She used an example of Parallelism from the famous rapper Pharrell Williams. The example the teacher used was from his most famous song, *Happy*.

> "Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof / Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth. . . ."

The teacher played an excerpt of the song, and the students sang and cheered excitedly, since it was something they knew. After the teacher related the parallels in the song to the quote from Dickens, students started to connect. Students began to ask more questions and wanted the teacher to provide other song examples that showed they understood Parallelism. The teacher said, "Of course. I have an even better one for you." The students were looking around, snickering and mumbling, "I wonder what she is about to play now." The teacher played the song *Fly* by another famous rap artist, Nicki Minaj, to show how Parallelism is used in everyday life. The students started screaming with excitement when they heard the beat, and almost everyone began to sing the lyrics as the song played.

> "I came to win, to fight, to conquer, to thrive, I came to win, to survive, to prosper, to rise, to fly, to fly."

As the clip of the song concluded, the students' faces were beaming with surprise but contentment. Several of them shouted, "How do you know that song?" One response in particular that stood out was, "My mom made us listen to this song because she said we could do anything we put our mind to." It was at that moment that the implementation of culturally relevant strategies made complete sense to the teacher. The students were

relating to the content by using their own experiences and learning what Parallelism was through those experiences and the hip-hop culture.

After the last observation, the teacher and I reviewed the content and observation notes. We thought about ways to alter the Emphasis and Parallelism lesson to include connections with hip-hop culture for future classes. The teacher decided to create an independent practice assignment where students had to find songs they were familiar with that demonstrated Parallelism.

When I followed up with the teacher after the intervention to see how things were going, she indicated that students enjoyed this new way of learning the concept. She said that students were elated and were begging to get started. This change in the pedagogy allowed the students to bring their experiences to the classroom through the song of their choice and share it with their teacher and peers to build a community of learners that capitalized on their cultural styles and strengths.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative action research case study was to explore how six eighth-grade Magnet Program students perceive their teacher-student relationship through the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Teacher-student relationships are often based on caring, respect, and trust. According to Downey (2008), a teacher's personal interaction makes a significant difference because "Students need teachers to build strong interpersonal relationships with them, focusing on strengths of the students while maintaining high and realistic expectations for success" (p. 57). This study describes experiences and procedures that guide the development and continuance of the teacher-student relationship. The results support the answers to the research questions. By

conducting an action research study, I investigated the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on teacher-student relationships. For this study's purposes, I used a small sample that represented the overall population of the students; all participants were Black students but very diverse in socio-economic status and cognitive ability. Overall, the results were positive and indicated the likely success of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in positively impacting the teacher-student relationship. The following chapter will provide a summary of the overall study, findings, and conclusions, including recommendations for future research and practice.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative case study sought to explore how students perceive their teacher-student relationship through the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as well as examining how virtual learning plays a role in the teacher-student relationship. This case study provided me an opportunity to gain a more profound, comprehensive view of the research. "Case studies are responsive to changes during the course of study and to the needs of the stakeholders" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 1). While being immersed in the research and data collection, I gained a greater understanding of how to infuse Culturally Relevant Pedagogy into the classroom. In keeping with Johnson and Onwuegbuzie's guidance, this chapter will discuss the major points of the study and what was revealed throughout the action research process. This chapter will also include my perspective, which has influenced my thoughts throughout the study. At the end of the chapter, the action plan that grew out of this research will be discussed and which will be shared with other teachers.

Summary of the Study

This study was conducted because of my interest in how teacher-student relationships help students learn better. With the implementation of culturally relevant strategies in the classroom, this relationship develops by the teacher's intentional practices to learn more about the students' background and experiences. This type of pedagogy is currently becoming increasingly popular with the rise of social justice issues

across the country. Teachers who implement these Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies are beginning to see improvement in students' academic achievement and engagement levels because of employing these strategies (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Additionally, these strategies are beginning to give students a voice in and outside of the classroom.

My purpose for this study was to explore how six eighth-grade Magnet Program students perceive their teacher-student relationship through the lens of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The research questions I wanted to answer were:

1. How do eighth-grade Magnet students perceive their teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as impacting the teacher-student relationship?
2. What impact, if any, does virtual learning affect students' perceptions of their teacher-student relationship?

To answer these questions, I conducted a case study at a middle school in central South Carolina, collecting qualitative data through surveys, observations, and semi-structured interviews with a Magnet English teacher and six of her students. As a person who recognizes the importance of relationships, I genuinely believe in the value of students having a positive relationship with their teachers. Therefore, I designed this action research to see whether the teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies could help bolster the teacher-student relationship's creation and sustainability.

I collected data for two weeks during the 2020-2021 school year with one middle school Magnet English class during a global pandemic that forced students to learn virtually. The six student participants were a sample that represented a population of all

the eighth-grade students in the Magnet Program. The students varied in academic ability, gender, race, and socio-economic status.

Students participated in a pre-survey that gauged their perceptions of how engaged they felt they were in the classroom. After the pre-survey, I began observing the virtual classroom's interactions between the teacher and students, looking specifically for the implementation of culturally relevant strategies. I also made interpretations from the observations. Observations were conducted for clarification and explanation of teacher and student interactions. After observations, I held one-on-one semi-structured interviews with all six students participating in the study and with their teacher. The semi-structured interviews provided opportunities for obtaining information and insight from the study participants. Once the semi-structured interviews were finished, students wrote journal entries reflecting on their interactions with the teacher and described how they felt about their relationship with her. To compare the pre-survey baseline data, the study concluded with a post-survey to see if students had changed their perceptions of their relationship with their teacher.

The study revealed that students believed they had good relationships with their teachers, but they became better as they experienced the infusion of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in their classes. Three themes emerged during data collection: 1) desire for teacher authenticity, 2) desire for teacher affirmation, and 3) relevance. Each of the themes offered understanding in answering the research questions about the impact of culturally relevant strategies on the teacher-student relationship. Students believed that teacher characteristics affected the teacher's ability to employ culturally relevant strategies. All six students responded with a "yes" on the post-survey item: "My teacher

plans and assesses if Culturally Relevant Pedagogy practices have helped students learn." In addition to survey responses, observation notes, semi-structured interviews, and student journal entries indicated that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy positively impacted the teacher-student relationship.

Implications of the Findings

The literature review for this study explored the research on Ladson-Billings Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1995), particularly as that research expanded to the study of teacher-student relationships (Marzano, 2003), to determine if CRP has an impact on teacher-student relationships. Classrooms across this country will continue to become increasingly diverse, and therefore, teachers will need to be able to relate to all students. As a result, training and professional development will be needed on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to provide teachers with the support and tools to meet all of their students' learning needs. Strategies are needed for teachers to adjust classroom instruction for diverse learners (Tatum, 2006). The researchers theorized that several factors contribute to the establishment of teacher-student relationships. Several studies seek to show how teacher-student relationships impact student achievement, engagement, and motivation in a class. The goal of this study was to identify how Culturally Relevant Pedagogy impacted the teacher-student relationship. Data analysis suggested that the strategies had a positive impact on the relationship. The implications of this study include increases in teacher's approach to the lesson content with cultural references, classroom environment, course materials, and cultures represented in the classroom.

Furthermore, students showed a change from the pre-survey to the post-survey in their responses in the teacher's ability to implement Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The

pre-survey was administered at the beginning of the study, and the same survey was administered as a post-survey at the end of the study. The post-survey responses indicated that students perceived the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy had a positive impact on the teacher's ability to develop a relationship with the student. Students felt that if their teacher used Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the course, they could relate and engage better with the content. The teacher used culturally relevant strategies during the lessons, and students' interactions with the teacher were also observed.

The data collected from observation notes showed a theme of engagement where students showed signs of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, signs that were less present before the implementation of culturally relevant strategies. After the observations were completed, the participants took part in semi-structured interviews, which showed that students' perceptions of the teacher-student relationship were positively influenced by the teacher's ability to engage them in the classroom through the use of culturally relevant teaching strategies, to which the students responded positively. An analysis of the students' comments revealed three overarching themes. Students stated that the culturally relevant strategies helped them connect more with their teacher, understand the content better, and engage more with the content. The observation notes and interviews revealed a positive relationship between Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and the teacher-student relationship.

The teacher-student relationship is a significant part of the development of a student. All six students felt that teacher-student relationships can positively impact a student's academic career if the teacher viewed the student as a person rather than as a faceless number. There is a connection between Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and the

teacher-student relationship, and this study showed that it also impacts student achievement and engagement in the classroom. This study supports the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to support and enhance the teacher-student relationship. The two research questions were answered as follows:

1. Eighth-grade Magnet students perceive their teacher's use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as positively impacting the teacher-student relationship.
2. Virtual learning positively affects students' perceptions of their teacher-student, culturally relevant-relationship

Methodological Limitations

Methodological limitations are limitations that impact the data collection process. In this study, several limitations possibly affected the findings. This study's limitations include the study's selection of students and teacher, participant perceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, analysis methods, and interpretations of findings.

A limitation in this research was the study's selection of students and teacher. While the teacher has some knowledge and training in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, she was not an expert and had not systematically implemented CRP in her classroom. The nomination process allowed me to identify interested teachers in the study. An improvement in the process would allow for the validation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy qualifications in teachers to strengthen the study.

The second methodological limitation was the participant perceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The interviews showed that many students were unfamiliar with the term. This lack of an understanding of these strategies in the classroom could limit the validity of this study's overall findings.

The third methodological limitation is the data collection and analysis methods. During the data collection process, I collected survey data, observed the teacher-student interactions, interviewed participants, and read student written reflections about implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom. This limitation creates a chance for a biased approach to the collection and analysis of the data. Adding additional perspectives and data analyses could improve the reliability of coding and strengthen data collection in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

The final methodological limitation is the interpretation of findings. My bias and position of being an educator and researcher add to data collection and analysis complication. However, this position is not a complete representation of the education profession. Adding input from others such as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy theorists, school administrators, and parents could strengthen the validity of the study. Continued research and practice in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy would allow multiple perspectives to ultimately contribute to developing multiple perspectives to enhance the teacher-student relationship.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and teacher-student relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on the teacher-student relationship. The research aligned with this study's purpose, but other potential subjects began to look interesting as the study developed. The researcher's most challenging task is to design sound research that will direct the looking and thinking enough—but not too much (Stake, 2005).

However, to stay focused on the initial research and research question, other subjects would have to be researched later.

As I investigated the impact of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy on teacher-student relationships, I became even more interested in how a teacher's relationship with parents could impact student learning and could constitute important information in education. While many teachers often develop relationships with parents, this is not always done intentionally. I believe this area has the possibility for further research as a possible resource for the teacher and the student in the classroom.

Another opportunity for future research would be to create a screening process for culturally relevant characteristics in teacher applicants and their development of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Different types of training could be identified along a development continuum for teachers at different levels of understanding and experience with culturally relevant teaching strategies. An aspect of this development would be to research and examine modifications to teacher preparation programs that promote Culturally Relevant Pedagogy by including more systematic experiences, reflections, and racial identity evolution.

A final suggestion for future research would be to validate teacher practices identified as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies. Continued research would confirm that these strategies are directly related to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and expand other practices and resources to support all of the diverse students in the classroom.

Action Plan

Action research will result in some action as a consequence of the study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). I developed an action plan that teachers can utilize to help shape

their development as professionals and the understanding of their students as related to the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The researcher's action plan consists of sharing the results of this study with other teachers and sharing the results with appropriate audiences at the school and district's administration level.

The findings suggested that the use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy positively impacted the teacher-student relationship. The findings also indicated that many students felt that they found the strategies valuable and beneficial in connecting with the teacher and engaging with the content. The ways that the strategies benefited the students are essential for other teachers to implement in their classroom. By staying relevant in the profession, teachers can learn more about the diverse needs of students and trends in the field to better support and meet those needs.

Sharing the study results with other teachers is planned to occur at a school-level professional development day. Because this study took place in that school, the content and results should relate directly to that school's teachers. As the researcher disseminates this information to teachers, teachers can begin to plan together on how to implement these strategies in their classrooms. As someone knowledgeable of CRP, the researcher will provide teachers with feedback and insights on best practices that make the strategies practical in all content areas. The dissemination of information to the school and district's administrators is to make them aware of the benefits of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and its impact on teacher-student relationships. This study captured the students' voices and their perceptions; therefore, the student's voice is symbolic of the use and implementation of these culturally relevant strategies. By sharing this information with

the school and district's administrators, teachers can advocate for more funding and professional development in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Conclusion

This action research study explored how Culturally Relevant Pedagogy strategies impacted the teacher-student relationship in a virtual classroom. Students articulated the benefits of using these strategies. All the students in the study felt that implementing culturally relevant strategies was important. This study used an intervention as a form of social justice, as the methodology honored the voices of students and the teacher. The teacher's goal in the classroom is to help students of diverse backgrounds and cultures reach a level of engagement in the classroom that provides them comfort and excitement to learn the content. This clearly shows that we have more work to do in ensuring that all teachers are prepared to utilize strategies that meet all students' needs. Teachers should be trained and adequately equipped with the tools to employ these strategies in their classrooms.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

1. My teacher recognizes and values the cultures represented by the students in my classroom.

YES **NO**

2. My teacher is knowledgeable of the various cultures represented by the students in my classroom.

YES **NO**

3. My teacher takes time to learn about the cultures represented by the students in my classroom.

YES **NO**

4. My teacher recognizes and considers my own cultural influences and how they affect the way my teacher communicates, my expectations, and how my teacher teaches.

YES **NO**

5. My classroom is decorated in ways that represent multiple cultures and global awareness.

YES **NO**

6. The books, handouts, and other materials my teacher uses reflect multicultural and global awareness.

YES **NO**

7. My teacher plans and assesses if culturally responsive teaching practices have helped students learn.

YES **NO**

8. My teacher makes an effort to educate families about our school.

YES **NO**

9. My teacher builds strong, positive working relationships with the parents of their students.

YES **NO**

10. My teacher knows the students and builds positive working relationships with them.

YES **NO**

APPENDIX B

EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS OBSERVATION TOOL (ELEOT)

Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT)

The purpose of this tool is to help you identify and document observable evidence of classroom environments that are conducive to student learning. Results of your observations will be used to corroborate information obtained from interviews, artifacts and student performance data. Please circle the number that corresponds with your observation of each learning environment item descriptor below. As needed and appropriate, briefly make inquiries with students.

Date _____ **School** _____ **City** _____ **State or Province** _____ **Country** _____ **Grade Level** _____

Time In _____ **Time Out** _____ **Check ALL that apply:** **Lesson Beg.** _____ **Lesson Middle** _____ **Lesson End** _____ **Subject Observed** _____ **Observer Name** _____

Student-focused Observations	Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
A. Equitable Learning Environment:				
1. Has differentiated learning opportunities and activities that meet her/his needs	4	3	2	1
2. Has equal access to classroom discussions, activities, resources, technology, and support	4	3	2	1
3. Knows that rules and consequences are fair, clear, and consistently applied	4	3	2	1
4. Has ongoing opportunities to learn about their own and other's backgrounds/cultures/differences	4	3	2	1
B. High Expectations Environment:				
1. Knows and strives to meet the high expectations established by the teacher	4	3	2	1
2. Is tasked with activities and learning that are challenging but attainable	4	3	2	1
3. Is provided exemplars of high quality work	4	3	2	1
4. Is engaged in rigorous coursework, discussions, and/or tasks	4	3	2	1
5. Is asked and responds to questions that require higher order thinking (e.g., applying, evaluating, synthesizing)	4	3	2	1
C. Supportive Learning Environment:				
1. Demonstrates or expresses that learning experiences are positive	4	3	2	1
2. Demonstrates positive attitude about the classroom and learning	4	3	2	1
3. Takes risks in learning (without fear of negative feedback)	4	3	2	1
4. Is provided support and assistance to understand content and accomplish tasks	4	3	2	1
5. Is provided additional/alternative instruction and feedback at the appropriate level of challenge for her/his needs	4	3	2	1
D. Active Learning Environment:				
1. Has several opportunities to engage in discussions with teacher and other students	4	3	2	1
2. Makes connections from content to real-life experiences	4	3	2	1
3. Is actively engaged in the learning activities	4	3	2	1

	Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
E. Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment:				
1. Is asked and/or quizzed about individual progress/learning	4	3	2	1
2. Responds to teacher feedback to improve understanding	4	3	2	1
3. Demonstrates or verbalizes understanding of the lesson/content	4	3	2	1
4. Understands how her/his work is assessed	4	3	2	1
5. Has opportunities to revise/improve work based on feedback	4	3	2	1
F. Well-Managed Learning Environment:				
1. Speaks and interacts respectfully with teacher(s) and peers	4	3	2	1
2. Follows classroom rules and works well with others	4	3	2	1
3. Transitions smoothly and efficiently to activities	4	3	2	1
4. Collaborates with other students during student-centered activities	4	3	2	1
5. Knows classroom routines, behavioral expectations and consequences	4	3	2	1
G. Digital Learning Environment				
1. Uses digital tools/technology to gather, evaluate, and/or use information for learning	4	3	2	1
2. Uses digital tools/technology to conduct research, solve problems, and/or create original works for learning	4	3	2	1
3. Uses digital tools/technology to communicate and work collaboratively for learning	4	3	2	1

APPENDIX C

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What should every teacher know about working with students?
2. What do you like about your favorite teachers?
3. What behaviors do you dislike in some teachers?
4. What is the ideal relationship between teachers and students?
5. Are there some things teachers do that actually stir up student misbehavior?
6. How should a professional teacher act?
7. What impact does a teachers' efforts to build a relationship with you by learning about your culture have on your perception of them as teachers?

APPENDIX D

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Does your interaction with students support an orderly and disciplined classroom?
2. Do you inspire creative thought and the desire to learn?
3. Do you model quality?
4. Do you display clear and meaningful core values?
5. Do you bring out the best in your students?
6. Do your relationships energize others?
7. What should every teacher know about working with students?
8. What do you like about your favorite teachers?
9. What behaviors do you dislike in some teachers?
10. What is the ideal relationship between teachers and students?
11. Are there some things teachers do that actually stir up student misbehavior?
12. Identify three interpersonal skills that are essential for teachers to promote productive student learning.
13. Identify three “tips” that teachers can do to promote healthy teacher/student relationships.
14. Identify three “don’ts” of teacher/student relationships.

APPENDIX E

STUDENT JOURNAL TEMPLATE

Think about your experience this year. Reflecting on your interactions with your teacher, please answer the following questions and provide examples to help me understand your answer.

- Did your teacher demonstrate high expectations for all students?
- Did your teacher value and make use of the language and culture students bring?
- Did your teacher demonstrate personal connectedness with all students?
- Did your teacher exhibit a genuine caring attitude toward all students?
- Did your teacher recognize and gives voice to differing perspectives and worldviews?
- Did your teacher distribute questionnaires asking about interests?
- Did your teacher administer surveys to gather information about your learning styles?
- Did your teacher hold open discussions, allowing students to talk about positive experiences from past classes?
- Did your teacher use media that positively depict a range of cultures?