Unveiling the Lifeworld of Educators’ Social Justice Journeys: A Phenomenological Investigation

Maria Rocas Halkias

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

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.
UNVEILING THE LIFEWORLD OF EDUCATORS' SOCIAL JUSTICE JOURNEYS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

by

Maria Rocas Halkias

Bachelor of Science
East Carolina University, 1996

Master of Education
Montclair State University, 2005

Master of Arts
Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2020

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education in
Curriculum and Instruction
School of Education
University of South Carolina
2023

Accepted by:
Linda Silvernail, Major Professor
Yasha Becton, Committee Member
Leigh D’Amico, Committee Member
Todd Lilly, Committee Member
Ann Vail, Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

MICHAEL, JAMES, AND THOMAS

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, whose support has been instrumental in my success as both an educator and a student. I especially want to thank my husband, Michael, who has had a critical but keen perspective on my career and educational studies. My two sons, my soul, and the lights of my life, I hope that my work has inspired you both to always pursue life’s challenges with determination and commitment. Your presence in my life has been a driving force behind my achievements and I am always thankful for the love and support you all have given me throughout this dissertation’s journey. Together, as a family, we can overcome obstacles and celebrate accomplishments.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to give a special thank you to Dr. Linda Silvernail for her guidance and support throughout my dissertation journey. Her mentorship and counsel have played an integral role in my doctoral studies. I am truly in awe by the depth of her dedication and detailed feedback, not only for me but also for my fellow cohort members. I would also like to convey my gratitude to Dr. Leslie Meskin, both my friend and teacher. You were the one who initially pushed me and ignited my interest in pursuing doctoral studies. I would have never considered myself capable of embarking on this path, but your constant belief that this was the right step for me professionally has been instrumental in this process.

In my capacity as an educator, I am constantly seeking inspiration from my interactions with colleagues. I have been fortunate to find such valuable perspectives in my professors and my doctoral committee. I would like to thank the dedicated members of my entire doctoral committee for their contributions and unwavering support. In particular, I wish to extend my appreciation to Dr. Yasha Becton and Dr. Leigh D’Amico, who not only served as exceptional mentors but also enriched the quality of my research with their unique perspectives. I also want to acknowledge Dr. Todd Lilly, whose teaching methods during a graduate class left a lasting impression on me. Your belief in my potential as a doctoral student, along with your encouragement to stay true to myself and maintain authenticity in my scholarly work, has been truly motivating and empowering.
ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative phenomenological action research was to explore the viewpoints of educators participating in a community of practice that integrates the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework with culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning. The study involved six teachers from a competitive public school district in New Jersey. Data collection methods encompassed weekly reflections, researcher’s field notes, audio-recorded sessions, and interviews.

The study yielded valuable insights into organizational frameworks and learning strategies that enhance educators’ ongoing reflective practices, while also advocating for districts to allocate resources to support teachers’ continuous personalized professional development. Analysis of the findings revealed four prominent themes that reinforced the concept of lifeworld and its impact on teachers’ outlook and experiences: recognition and validation of inclusive socially just pedagogies; fostering good humans and nurturing collaborative relationships with families; promoting openness, partnerships, and empowerment of culturally diverse voices; accountability; continuous culturally responsive learning; and time management. The teachers in the present study acknowledged individual student needs, cultural diversity, and UDL principles and the challenges of integrating multiple instructional approaches. They also recognized the significance of their agentic capacity within a community of practice, reinforcing their collective understanding of engaged participation and intentional choices in their professional development.
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

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

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

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

List of Tables ..................................................................................................................................... ix

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................... x

List of Abbreviations ......................................................................................................................... xi

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

1.1 Background Literature ............................................................................................................... 2

1.2 Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................................. 5

1.3 Purpose, Rationale, and Research Questions ......................................................................... 8

1.4 Positionality ............................................................................................................................... 11

1.5 Research Design ....................................................................................................................... 12

1.6 Setting ......................................................................................................................................... 17

1.7 Participants ................................................................................................................................. 17

1.8 Data Collection .......................................................................................................................... 18

1.9 Significance and Limitations .................................................................................................... 19

1.10 Organization of the Dissertation ............................................................................................. 22

Chapter 2: Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 23

2.1 Background on the Problem of Practice ................................................................................. 25
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Culturally Responsive Teaching</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Universal Design for Learning</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Community of Practice</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Personalized Learning</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Methodology</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Research Design and Intervention</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Participants</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Data Collection</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Research Procedure</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Data Collection</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Pre-intervention Survey</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Pre-Survey Community of Practice Discourse</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Exploring Lifeworld Experiences Through Themes</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Recognition and Validation of Inclusive, Socially Just Pedagogies</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Fostering Good Humans and Nurturing Collaborative Relationships</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Promoting Openness, Partnerships, and Empowerment of Culturally</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Accountability, Continuous Culturally Responsive Learning, and</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Table of Contents

4.8 Summary of Findings/Results ................................................................. 128
4.9 Analysis of Data Based on Research Questions ............................. 131
4.10 Summary ......................................................................................... 139

Chapter 5: Discussions and Implications ............................................ 143
5.1 Conclusions ..................................................................................... 147
5.2 Recommendations ................................................................. 157
5.3 Action Research Reflections ..................................................... 162
5.4 Limitations ................................................................................. 163
5.5 Future Research ................................................................. 165
5.5 Summary ..................................................................................... 166

References ......................................................................................... 169
Appendix A: Social Justice Education Playlist ........................................ 191
Appendix B: Culturally Responsive Google Presentation .................. 192
Appendix C: Recruitment/Volunteer Letter ........................................ 193
Appendix D: Consent Form ............................................................... 194
Appendix E: Pre-Survey Questions .................................................. 196
Appendix F: Breakdown of Survey Questions .................................... 199
Appendix G: Final Interview Questions .............................................. 200
Appendix H: Glossary of Key Terms .................................................. 202
Appendix I: Action Plan Recommendations ....................................... 204
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Weekly Objectives and Task of Community Members..............................................65
Table 4.1 Pre-intervention Excerpts from the LTSJ-B Scale ..................................................81
Table 4.2 Pre-intervention Excerpts from RAND Personalized Learning .........................84
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 UDL Cycle of Instructional Planning ................................................................. 38
Figure 2.2 Components of a social theory of learning ...................................................... 41
Figure 3.1 Phenomenological Research Process ............................................................... 63
Figure 4.1 Pre-intervention Excerpts from Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey ................................................................. 82
Figure 5.1 Teaching for Social Justice Education
Lifeworld of Teachers ........................................................................................................... 148
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRT.................................................................................................Culturally Responsive Teaching
CRPL.........................................................................................Culturally Responsive Personalized Learning
LMS ...............................................................................................Learning Management Systems
LTSJ-B..............................................................Learning to Teach for Social Justice Beliefs Scale
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We must show the way. There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures. Fundamentally, it is our collective responsibility as radical black people and people of color, and as white people, to construct models for social change (hooks, 1995, p. 198)

My Filipino heritage has had a significant role in shaping my identity, including how I approach my role as a teacher. At a young age, I would often witness how poorly and unfairly my own immigrant family was treated and it deepened my awareness of the inequities individuals in many cultural groups often confronted. It took many school years to recognize and value my own diversity. Nevertheless, simply having a sense of my own ethnicity was not enough for me to respectfully honor the diverse cultural backgrounds of my students. When I worked as a primary school teacher, designing lesson plans that encouraged critical thinking and reflection for all my students proved to be a challenge, particularly in addressing diversity in the classroom.

As a reading specialist, I now face new obstacles in providing personalized and culturally sensitive literacy instruction to each of my students while integrating socially just pedagogies into my teaching practice. Despite being a socially conscious educator, I have rarely spoken with colleagues about my cultural background and experiences in the educational system. This isolation has led me to engage in a solitary pursuit of
professional learning, but I recognize the importance of fostering open dialogue and mutual understanding among my peers. I often engage in reflective consideration of the diverse attributes of my students and my colleagues seeking to explore the ways to integrate the educational approaches that prioritize diversity, equity, and social justice across all academic disciplines.

In our current educational landscape, conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in school curricula have sparked cultural debates and counter-narratives concerning what teachers ought to be teaching in the classroom. The introduction of new learning standards on DEI has been met with negative attention and widespread misconceptions. This lack of consensus on effective methodologies and recognition that teachers require support in this area has left educators to navigate ways of becoming more culturally aware on their own.

My school district is taking positive steps towards improving DEI. The assistant superintendent has announced new initiatives to enhance the district’s understanding of DEI and establish sustainable DEI practices. To achieve this, the district hired consultants to conduct an equity landscape analysis and create a roadmap toward achieving the DEI goals. Alongside this effort, the district is implementing a 5-year strategic plan for personalized learning, which aims to enhance the role of teachers and promote collaborative and reflective professional learning.

**Background Literature**

Kindergarten through grade 12 school districts in the United States are growing increasingly diverse (Ukpokodu, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). By 2050, 66% of the U.S. population of school-aged children will be from minority communities (Ukpokodu,
Despite the increasing diversity of students and the growing importance of prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, schools have failed to adequately prepare and support teachers in establishing equitable classrooms, while also lacking opportunities for professional dialogue on race, ethnicity, and culture (Gay, 2018; T. Howard & del Rosario, 2000; Pearson & Cantu, 2013). Consequently, multicultural education has been largely overlooked, and educators have failed to develop their own cultural competence and awareness (Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Snyder & Fenner, 2021).

Given that teachers must work toward more equitable practices for students with diverse backgrounds, there has been an acceptance that teachers must become agents of change (Bourn, 2016; Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Pantić, 2021). Therefore, as teachers prepare to be agents of change within their classrooms, they are uniquely positioned to also be “ambassadors for global social justice” (Bourn, 2016, p. 72). According to Bourn (2016), socially just educators do not have to be political activists; they can work toward becoming agents of change within their classrooms, schools, and the wider society.

Pantić (2015) further clarified that a shift in professional development and teacher preparation programs is needed to promote teachers as agents of both change and social justice. Developing the agency of teachers is not simply about implementing change, but about giving teachers a sense of purpose, autonomy, and competency to critically reflect on the impact of broader educational policies. Teacher agency is seen as a process “whereby teachers act strategically to transform the risks of exclusion and underachievement into inclusion and improved outcomes for all students in contexts of cultural and social diversity” (Pantić, 2015, p. 759). Boylan and Woolsey (2015) argued
that teacher identity should play an instrumental role in teacher education programs committing to pedagogies that develop social justice teachers.

Recognizing the pressing need for school improvement regarding multicultural policies, it is essential to provide educators with a supportive space where they can explore their vulnerabilities, biases, and anxieties to foster the creation of more inclusive classrooms (Sleeter, 2012). To effectively prepare teachers to become socially just educators, a deliberate effort has been made to empower them with culturally responsive practices (Whipp, 2013). Culturally responsive teaching not only offers a transformative and intentional process for professional learning but also represents a comprehensive approach within the field of multicultural education (Ukpokodu, 2011). By addressing the diverse needs of students and promoting rigorous academic achievement, culturally responsive teaching plays a pivotal role in supporting educational success (Hammond, 2014).

Furthermore, Hughey (2020) justified the implementation of personalized learning, citing the necessity for a revolutionary transformation in education prompted by the changing educational landscape and global employment demands. Moreover, Ray et al. (2017) expanded on personalized learning as a collaborative teacher-student partnership that customizes instruction to address the unique needs of every learner. The lens through which educators view culturally responsive instruction is synonymous with personalized learning and belonging (Hammond, 2014; Manns, 2021). By embedding culturally responsive instruction into a culture of belonging and a personalized learning framework, teachers are addressing multiple areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Make no mistake: culturally responsive pedagogies are not only about acknowledging the
identities, experiences, and histories of students but, more importantly, how this connection and involvement leads to academic achievement (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Manns, 2021).

**Theoretical Framework**

McDonald (2005) emphasized the crucial role of a theoretical framework in shaping the content of social justice programs for teachers. Additionally, McDonald suggested that conducting further research on the implementation of social justice in various teacher education programs could enhance educators’ understanding and application of social justice principles. The proposed scaffolding for this action research emphasizes the significance of educators’ comprehension of essential concepts, including their historical contexts, which has shaped their professional identities. Specifically, the framework supports the cultivation of a consciousness that enables customized and personalized teaching approaches, while also valuing cultural diversity and inclusivity by encouraging collaborative professional learning experiences.

The theoretical framework guiding this action research is based on an integrated and multifaceted epistemological perspective that encompasses the following components: (a) culturally responsive teaching, (b) personalized learning pedagogy, (c) community of practice, and (d) Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The basic assumption at a theoretical level is that this holistic structure targets particular aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion to support educators in developing more inclusive practices, fostering cultural awareness, and becoming socially just educators.

Culturally responsive teaching is an extension of multicultural education, with a mindset toward improving equity in the classrooms (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Snyder
The influence of culturally responsive instructional practices in teaching diverse student populations has been well-documented through extensive research (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Prater & Devereaux, 2009). The term culturally responsive teaching has often been used interchangeably with culturally relevant pedagogy, and both frameworks have been seminal in the development of culturally responsive practices (Muhammad, 2020; Snyder, & Fenner, 2021).

Comparatively, personalized learning calls for a more democratic curriculum, where both the educator and students are active citizens and social agents of change (Giroux, 2010; Manis, 2012). Murphy et al. (2016) contended that student-teacher relationships, student engagement, and personal competences are integral facets of personalization. This qualitative action research will utilize the definition of culturally responsive personalized learning (CRPL) based on Ober et al. (2023):

CRPL is an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges how students’ personal, social, cultural, and linguistic contexts influence their educational experiences and their opportunities to benefit from instruction and that adapts instruction based on students’ strengths while striving to meet individual students’ needs within those contexts (p. 2).

More importantly, the CRPL approach recognizes that education unfolds within a social context, highlighting that the connections and exchanges students encounter are vital facets of the learning atmosphere (Ober et al., 2023).

Wenger (1999) posited that learning is not solely an individualistic endeavor but is guided by our social interactions. According to Wenger (2011), communities of practice are defined “as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something
they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). Such communities can provide educators with an opportunity to effect gradual changes, gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, and even develop new identities as teachers (Mortier, 2020). Wenger also outlined three key elements of a community of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Mutual engagement refers to the interactions and communication among community members, whereas joint enterprise involves working together to achieve shared goals. Finally, Wenger described a shared repertoire as a community’s way of doing things, encompassing its routines and actions. For the purpose of this study, these three domains will be utilized to facilitate the collaborative process of teachers’ learning and provide a platform for them to express their challenges and concerns regarding new programs and initiatives.

Lastly, as per Craig et al. (2022), UDL has been gaining popularity among U.S. educators as a framework that effectively addresses the diverse needs of students. UDL provides a means for educators to create inclusive learning environments that accommodate the wide range of abilities, cultural backgrounds, and family structures found in today’s classrooms (Craig et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2012). The fundamental principles of UDL have been recognized as powerful tools for fostering social justice in education (Adams et al., 2007). Essentially, UDL involves developing various options, instructional strategies, and tasks that cater to diverse learning preferences and needs to engage students through multiple channels of learning (Adams et al., 2007; Nelson, 2014). By incorporating culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL within a community of practice, teachers are equipped with a comprehensive pedagogical approach that emphasizes social justice advocacy.
Rationale, Purpose, and Research Questions

Planas and Civil (2009) asserted that social justice means providing equitable access to individuals to participate in shaping the social structure of society. Moreover, L. Howard et al. (2022) highlighted that social justice involves more than simply recognizing the need for change; it also involves a personal commitment to taking action to effect that change. The principal assumption of this research is that educators play a crucial role in promoting social justice by acknowledging existing inequalities and advocating for change.

Pantić (2021) discussed that one of the gaps in the professional literature is a lack of detail as to how teachers work collaboratively in order to “negotiate the meaning and purposes of policies and practices” (p. 4). She suggested that further research could investigate how teachers collaborate with individuals both within and outside of their school settings to implement or react to specific changes, as this is crucial for comprehending the mechanisms behind innovation and its impact. Similarly, Bell et al. (2016) explained that “social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, the environment, and the broader world in which we live” (p. 3).

The unique challenge facing teachers is making sense of national reforms calling for socially just educators, which often are in contradiction to prescriptive curriculums and localized school contexts (Flores, 2007; Francis & Le Roux, 2011; Reyes et al., 2021). Studies have addressed the need for targeted professional learning of teachers to enact socially just pedagogies; however, there is little research on the specific factors that
influence classroom practices and how teachers could work collaboratively to develop social justice education.

The rationale behind the present study was to address the existing gap in research regarding the implementation of social justice policies in teacher education and the development of teachers’ agency in incorporating social justice pedagogy. Despite the recognized importance of these themes, there is a lack of research on how these concepts are integrated effectively into professional development programs or the process model for their implementation. This knowledge will be invaluable in informing educational policies and practices, ultimately promoting the development of socially just educators who are able to navigate and address the challenges they face in their classrooms and broader educational contexts.

Furthermore, as a reading specialist in a New Jersey public school, I am actively engaged in our district’s 5-year strategic plan to implement personalized learning. The initiative includes refining the role of teachers in modernizing instruction and restructuring the teacher professional development framework to be more collaborative and reflective. Additionally, my district has taken significant steps to prioritize understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies by providing additional DEI workshops for faculty. Given these multiple reforms, I am eager to gain a better understanding of how our school’s goals align with socially just pedagogies.

The identified problem of practice for this qualitative phenomenological action research is that teachers lack a sense of agency and sufficient preparation to enact pedagogies related to social justice. As schools move toward adopting social justice perspectives, a practical gap exists as to how teachers exercise agency and translate
specific program practices to better serve both their school communities and classrooms (Flores, 2007; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; M.McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Pantić, 2021; Pantić, et al., 2021). Although the research suggests a need for social justice policies in teacher education, developing agency for teachers to incorporate social justice pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching practices, there is little research related to classroom implementation or the process model for incorporating these themes into professional development (Dover, 2009; Dover et al., 2020; Min et al., 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological action research was to explore the personal and collective experiences of teachers who are part of a community of practice centered around pedagogical approaches related to social justice education. The community of practice is conceptualized as a professional learning strategy that integrates culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning, with a foundation in the UDL framework. This qualitative phenomenological action research was focused on the following research questions:

1. To what extent does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of and commitment to social justice education?
2. How does participation in a community of practice shape teachers’ views of using culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning strategies to promote social justice education?
3. How does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of the UDL as an instructional tool to promote social justice education?
Teachers who are preparing to work with linguistically and culturally diverse populations must approach their pedagogies with a critical lens that addresses social justice and equity. With the increasing diversity of school populations, it is crucial for teachers to bridge culturally responsive pedagogies with more personalized instruction. Utilizing communities of practice and teacher education programs that prioritize developing personalized learning and a culturally responsive mindset could provide new approaches to meet the individual learning needs of students with greater flexibility.

Schnellert and Butler (2014) stated,

Educators value resources that offer new ideas and approaches that might help them address the questions or ‘problems’ they have taken up. . . Having choices in resources, and how to access them, enables educators to select what is best with their preferred modes of learning, the contexts in which they are working, and the time they have available” (p. 44)

The experiences that are gained from participating in a community of practice could both influence how teachers advocate for more equitable practice and provide a supportive structure for ways culturally responsive practices connect with students’ unique backgrounds, identities, and interests.

**Positionality**

According to Parson (2019), positionality refers to the comprehensive understanding of an individuals’ identities, which encompass their social, cultural, and personal attributes. Additionally, Parson emphasized the importance of considering the researchers’ identities when examining their connections with research participants. In
social justice-oriented research, it is essential to consider the experiences being examined by the researcher and to acknowledge the power dynamics and privileges with the identifies involved (Parson, 2019). As a reading specialist, my involvement in the present study is centered around fostering a supportive and collaborative relationship with the participants, without engaging in evaluative measures. Nevertheless, as a doctoral graduate student and reading specialist, this researcher brings valuable expertise in literacy instruction and social justice advocacy, which lends a certain level of authority on the subject matter.

Participants interested in professional learning should have shared beliefs, skills, responsibilities, and, above all, a willingness to make instructional changes (Lock, 2006). Since my participants are from the same school district, I may be viewed as an insider. In contrast, I may also be considered an outsider, as the researcher my role was to observe the interactions of the community and maintain notes on the dialogue between faculty members (Herr & Anderson, 2014). In my role as the action researcher, I had the dual responsibility of guiding discourse and serving as a facilitator to direct participants’ discussions within the community of practice. To achieve this, open-ended prompts that enabled participants to share their professional beliefs, personal perceptions, and historical context that influenced their instructional practices were offered. Their insights, concerns, and ideas that emerged from these discussions were then utilized to guide teachers as they designed lesson plans that incorporated the Universal Design framework.

**Research Design**

Using a qualitative phenomenological action research methodology, this study explored whether working in a community of practice influenced teachers’ perceptions
about culturally responsive practices and personalized learning approaches in relation to socially just pedagogies. Creswell and Creswell (2017) defined phenomenological research as an investigative approach that utilizes philosophical principles. In this design, researchers examine individuals’ firsthand accounts to capture and illuminate their lived experiences pertaining to a specific phenomenon. Vagle (2018) explained that phenomenological research aims to gain insight into the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals. He clarified that “we are trying to contemplate the various ways things manifest and appear in and through our being in the world” (p. 23).

Additionally, Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2020) explained the concept of the lifeworld as developed by the philosopher Edmund Husserl (1970). The lifeworld refers to the everyday world of human experience, the background or foundation upon which experiences and perceptions are built. Husserl argued that it is essential to investigate and understand the lifeworld through phenomenology and conscious reflection (Becker & Schad, 2022; Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020; Husserl, 1970). Moreover, in the field of phenomenological research, practitioners utilize Husserl’s approach of bracketing to temporarily suspend or set aside their preconceptions, beliefs, and assumptions about the world (Moustakas, 1995). This technique enables researchers to engage in an unbiased, open-minded exploration of phenomena, allowing researchers to explore phenomena with a fresh perspective (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020; Vagle, 2018).

Qualitative research is a less structured approach that provides a more holistic view focused on a few discrete variables about the topic under investigation (Mertler, 2019). In this action research, a pedagogical process model has been developed and implemented within a collaborative community of practice, with the goal of enhancing
teachers’ abilities to implement socially just practices. Furthermore, this qualitative study was concerned with the collective action of teachers within a community of practice to develop educational change within a localized setting.

The qualitative phenomenological action research was conducted in two phases and included six weekly community of practice sessions. The initial phase of the program was focused primarily on equipping teachers with essential knowledge pertaining to culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and social justice education. Additionally, it aimed to foster a preliminary comprehension of teachers’ lifeworlds, delving into their perspectives, personal values, biases, and professional beliefs.

In the subsequent stage, particular emphasis was placed on UDL, including its lesson plan formats and implementation strategies. Prior to the first phase of the study, participants were asked to complete an intervention pre-survey to assess their assumptions and perceptions concerning socially just practices. The pre-surveys served as a catalyst, sparking initial discussions on topics such as social justice, cultural responsiveness, and personalized learning.

In addition to the community of practice sessions, teachers were provided with a comprehensive resource binder containing printed articles on the various topics covered. Furthermore, teachers were provided with a weekly digital playlist similar to the one shown in Appendix A. In addition, I provided weekly Google Slides presentation to highlight the various weekly topics (for an example, see Appendix B). These topics encompassed social justice education, culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL.
During the initial phase, I conducted the first session in-person and centered it around an orientation session that I facilitated. The primary focus of this session was to introduce the goals and objectives of the community of practice to the participants. I also demonstrated how teachers could utilize the Canvas Online Learning Management System to access a wide range of digital resources related to the weekly topics. Additionally, the platform served as a means of communication, allowing teachers to post questions, share relevant links to additional resources, and upload weekly reflections.

I provided an overview of definitions and standards pertaining to social justice education. Finally, we discussed findings from the intervention pre-survey sections on social justice and engaged in thoughtful discussions regarding the integration of social justice principles into teachers’ daily practices. As the first session concluded, teachers were encouraged to complete weekly reflections and to document their newfound insights and understanding gained throughout their participation in the community of practice.

Following a collective decision by the teachers, the subsequent community of practice sessions were conducted online through Zoom. In the second and third sessions, I covered topics related to culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning, respectively. I also shared the intervention pre-survey responses derived from specific sections of two surveys: the Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey and the RAND Personalized Learning Survey. This approach enabled a deeper grasp of the perspectives and unique insights conveyed by the participants.

During the second phase of the research, Sessions 4 through 6 centered around UDL as an instructional tool for teachers to adapt their existing lesson plans. Toward the conclusion of the initial phase, teachers were asked to think about a lesson they wished to
modify using the UDL format. In addition, prior to the fourth session, teachers were provided with sample UDL lesson plans and blank templates to develop their own lessons. A presentation on UDL was delivered during Session 4, and teachers were encouraged to share their experiences and engage in discussions related to UDL.

As part of the intervention, collaborative efforts were made with teachers to generate ideas for written lesson plans using the UDL framework. Each teacher was subsequently requested to email or upload a lesson plan onto Canvas prior to the fifth session. In Session 5, the teachers were asked to share their lesson ideas and to talk about what aspects of these UDL lesson plans they believed were related to social justice practices. We also discussed how the UDL format allowed for culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning applications.

In the final session, we further investigated the ways in which the UDL framework facilitated culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning applications. In addition, each teacher had the opportunity to discuss the impact of implementing the UDL lesson plan in the classroom. Finally, individual exit interviews were conducted to further assess participants’ comprehension of culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL. These interviews provided a valuable opportunity to further elucidate each participant’s lifeworld, understandings, and perspectives, enabling a more comprehensive exploration of information.

The individual semi-structured interviews were in an open-ended format, which gave individuals an opportunity to voice specific issues or frames of reference pertaining to the theoretical framework of this study. Efron and Ravid (2019) explained that semi-structured interviews allow participants to co-construct narratives related to the research
study. Additionally, after the sixth session, the teachers wrote final reflections voicing their feedback about the strengths and weakness of using a UDL framework.

**Setting**

The in-person setting for this study is a top-rated New Jersey public school district that serves preschool through 12th grade, with an approximate student population of 2,500. The district currently includes two elementary schools and a single combination middle/high school. The standardized test scores in the district show that 77% of students are proficient in math and 83% are proficient in reading. In-person community of practice sessions were held in one of the three school buildings in the district, depending on room availability.

**Participants**

The community of practice members consisted of six participants from the researcher’s district. The participants were recruited based on volunteer and convenience sampling, and included both beginning and veteran teachers. An email was sent out district-wide to solicit volunteers for participation in a research study. Initially, the goal was to recruit teachers from diverse backgrounds, considering various factors such as gender, years of teaching experience, educational level, race, and grade level taught. This approach aimed to ensure a broader range of perspectives and experiences among the participants. Furthermore, the intention was to have a significant number of volunteers complete the pre-survey intervention through which participants could then be selected based on their demographic information; however, due to a limited number of volunteers, there were limitations in selecting participants from a wider pool.
As in previous research (e.g., Mertler, 2009), prior to the study, each community of practice participant signed an informed consent form outlining the description of the topic being researched in the study, the level of participation, and an offer to provide the results and findings to the participants. Participants were informed that the sessions and final interviews would be recorded in audio format and subsequently transcribed using Notta Audio to Text App. The transcripts would be made available to the participants for their review. Appropriate measures were taken in order to protect the confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of the participants. Additionally, teachers were given the option to utilize pseudonyms in the learning management system, thereby enhancing online security and further safeguarding their privacy. Furthermore, to ensure the participants’ confidentiality, the name of the school, district, and town were changed.

**Data Collection**

This qualitative phenomenological action research employed various methods for data collection, including a pre-survey intervention, field notes that encompassed transcriptions from weekly community of practice sessions, teacher reflections, and semi-structured exit interviews. The presurvey intervention was adapted from three other survey scales: the Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey, the RAND Personalized Learning Survey, the and Learning to Teach for Social Justice Belief Scale.

The surveys served as a catalyst for discussions, aiming to gather teachers’ initial perceptions regarding social justice education and the implementation of personalized learning, and assessing the level of support they received for curriculum and instruction. The above measures utilized Likert scales that require participants to respond to questions regarding the frequency of occurrence, comfort, and quality (Mertler, 2019).
Furthermore, all three surveys measure teachers’ initial perceptions about diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as aspects of cultural awareness.

In the final phase of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to understand how the community of practice may have contributed to teachers’ professional learning. Additionally, the participants were asked to post final reflections on Canvas Learning Management System. The primary data analysis was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA recognizes that individuals actively interpret and make sense of their experiences based on their unique perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and personal histories that shape their understanding of their worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

In addition, the most common method of data collection is through in-depth semi-structured interviews; however, it is also possible to collect data using alternative methods such as diaries or personal essays (Smith, 2017). In Alase’s (2017) work, the significance of multiple readings in the qualitative data coding process is highlighted. This emphasizes the need to engage thoroughly with the data prior to initiating the coding process. In this action research study, multiple readings were conducted, including an examination of the teachers’ discourse during the community of practice, their reflections, and the transcripts from the interviews. Through these readings, the initial coding process involved systematically analyzing and categorizing the data to identify patterns, themes, and concepts (Alase, 2017).

**Significance and Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a community of practice on teachers’ learning and to explore ways to incorporate more inclusive teaching
practices through the implementation of UDL. This qualitative research is significant in that it could provide a tested road map for school districts to implement improved professional development opportunities. Focusing on a community of practice as a way to engage in an ongoing cycle of reflection could offer teachers an opportunity that improves both student outcomes and pedagogical practices. In other words, establishing a mechanism for collaboration and a platform to explore aspects of socially just pedagogies could help many teachers feel less isolated and more supported by their school communities. Giving teachers opportunities to contribute to their work through diversity, equity, and inclusion practices may also work to improve school culture and morale. Opportunities to discuss more inclusive pedagogies as a part of a community of practice could also give teachers an enhanced sense of professional satisfaction. More importantly, teachers who have an interest in continuing to develop their cultural awareness to transform their teaching practices may no longer feel that they are alone in that endeavor. The journey toward more equitable and inclusive practice, including culturally responsive teaching, is a mindset that has far reaching impacts beyond the classroom.

Lovett and Gilmore (2003) explained that when teachers are able to reflect on and understand “what it is they are doing, what it means, how it came to be this way, . . . then [they can begin to understand] how they might do things differently” (p. 209). Moreover, the findings in this study may help to identify organizational structures and learning strategies that better support educators’ continuous reflective practices and encourage districts to allocate funds toward the continuous personalized professional learning of teachers.
There are limitations inherent in the design of this study. The qualitative action research focused on the perceptions of teachers rather than the quantifiable aspects or variables of a specific program. Although culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning could offer opportunities to impact student outcomes, it did not focus on how these models contribute directly to student achievement in a specific district. Those outcomes could be a relevant subject of a subsequent study, but the purpose of this qualitative case study was investigating the impacts of the professional learning of teachers seeking to promote social just pedagogies.

My own positionality is a limitation in this study. The selection criteria and the specificity of the community members are based on a convenience sampling. Teachers who were accessible and willing to participate in the research were chosen. Consequently, the researcher’s subjectivity and bias may not reflect the influences or variabilities of teachers across the entire study population’s school district. Etikan et al. (2016) explained that inherent to convenience sampling is researcher bias. Because I chose the members of the community of practice, the group unintentionally may be a more homogenous group of teachers in terms of beliefs and perspectives. Reliable data may be another limitation, considering the teachers are also colleagues with whom I may have had prior professional relationships. The teachers may feel compelled to answer surveys or reflections in a less honest way.

Another limitation of this study is the relatively short 6-week duration. Further, it is difficult to implement an in-depth understanding of socially just pedagogies in 1-hour community of practice sessions. It would likely be more beneficial for teachers to engage in collaborative discussions over an extended professional learning workshop throughout
the school year. Similarly, ensuring full participation and cooperation from all teachers in the community of practice was challenging and may have impacted the data’s completeness and reliability.

Likewise, culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning are approaches that could be extended over a longer length and duration for more meaningful collaboration and dialogues to occur. This study was conducted during the latter half of the school year, and teachers may experience time constraints attempting to prepare end-of-year events and activities, taking away from the teachers’ focus on participation.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

In the subsequent chapters, a clear synthesis of relevant research related to socially just education and its connection to culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning is discussed. A descriptive narrative was used to discuss the data collection tools, research procedures, and methods for data analysis. The final chapter reveals the results and interpretations of data for this qualitative phenomenological action research study. Additionally, descriptive paragraphs describe the experiences of the participants and concepts related to the specific aims addressed in the research questions. Lastly, the final chapter summarized the key themes, contributions to the field of education, and future recommendations for research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers lack agency and sufficient preparation promoting pedagogies related to social justice. Given the need for schools to improve their support of diverse student populations, educators should have a space to explore their vulnerabilities, biases, and anxieties in order to create more inclusive classrooms (Sleeter, 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of a community of practice on teacher learning and development. This literature review focuses on this identified problem of practice and details how communities of practice could influence teacher perception about culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning in relation to socially just pedagogies.

In order to address the problem of practice for this study and to provide a structurally oriented process for developing culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning, this study used the key features of the UDL framework. This intervention was delivered as a set of learning experiences to assist teachers in creating and modifying lessons using UDL. UDL can provide a cohesive plan for addressing diversity and equity (Chardin & Novak, 2020). The UDL framework can serve as a tool for intervention to help teachers create instructional assessments, goals, and materials that connect with socially just approaches (Bray & McClaskey, 2016).

A qualitative phenomenological action research study was used to expound on the experiences of teachers and provide a narrative of their beliefs, understandings, and challenges within a bounded system of a community of practice. The aim of this literature
review is to present a broader understanding of culturally responsive practices and personalized learning and conceptualize how they were framed within this qualitative study. Machi and McEvoy (2016) described literature reviews 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” (p. 5). The purpose of complex literature reviews is to both propose relevant knowledge about a topic and to argue a problem or question for further study (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

Machi and McEvoy (2016) outlined a three-step strategy for searching literature: (a) select the literature to review, (b) conduct a literature search, and (c) refine the topic. I used several search engines to conduct inquiries of peer-reviewed journals. The reference databases included but were not limited to USC Scholar Commons, ERIC, EBSCO, JSTOR, Mendeley, and Google Scholar. To find the most salient literature, search terms such as culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, socially just pedagogies, teacher agency, and Universal Learning Design were used.

This chapter begins with the background on the problem of practice and its implications for this study. Secondly, this chapter will examine the theoretical underpinnings of culturally responsive teaching, a community of practice, personalized learning, and UDL, as well as their relationships to professional learning and social justice initiatives. In addition, an overview of culturally responsive teaching, how it is defined, and the challenges of implementation will be presented.

The literature review also outlines the function of communities of practice in teaching and learning, focusing on the crucial role they play in empowering teachers’ agency. Lastly, this section outlines the defining characteristics of UDL, and the
instructional cycle associated with its effective implementation. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the research on how these interconnecting concepts contribute to an educators’ professional development with a central focus on social justice within one’s daily classroom practice.

**Background on the Problem of Practice**

Recent research has highlighted the need for teacher education programs to address pedagogies that relate to the aspects of equity and socially just practices more critically (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Min et al., 2022; Pantić, 2021; Whipp, 2013). Despite demographic shifts of racially and ethnically diverse students enrolled in U.S. public schools, there has been little systemic change in educational practices thus far (Min et al., 2022). Likewise, professional autonomy and teacher agency play important roles in influencing educational changes in innovation, pedagogical practices, and policies (Cong-Lem, 2021; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Min et al., 2022; Toom et al., 2015). Cong-Lem (2021) defined teacher agency as the “capacity of teachers in making choices and implementing actions to realize changes” (p. 718).

Imants and Van der Wal (2020) conducted a quantitative and qualitative research study examining the role of teacher agency on school reform. Using teacher agency as a theoretical model and analytical tool, Imants and Van der Wal studied 36 published articles on professional development and school reforms alongside the work environments of teachers. The major finding of this study revealed that teachers were “actors” not “factors” in professional development. The teacher agency model could serve as a dynamic, rather than linear, process for professional development, suggesting the complex relationships between outcomes and goals. In 32 out of 36 research articles,
this study revealed that teachers play an agentic and active role in professional development.

There is an increasing recognition that teachers must be active agents of change to accomplish school improvement and reform (Harris & Jones, 2019; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Nguyen & Hunter, 2018; Priestley, 2013; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). In relation to school change, there is the capacity for teacher agency to directly influence sustained professional development and professional identity (Luttenberg et al., 2013; Min et al., 2022). Hoekstra (2009) explained that active learning is shaped by teachers becoming active “interpreters of their work” (p. 294). Teacher agency can also be described as the intentional effort and choice of teachers to adopt educational innovations that impact their individual learning (Toom et al., 2015).

Under these circumstances, Sang (2020) explained that “teachers may exercise their agentic capacity to position or reposition themselves in line with their own goals within a community of practice” (p. 4). He further clarified that when teachers see themselves as agents of change, they become better equipped to work with underserved communities and apply broader social change. Moreover, when teachers become “mediators of reform” they may become more willing to implement the mandates that are externally imposed (Sang, 2020).

Bonner et al. (2020) presented a case study examining a New York City high-school STEM reform called PERC. The study explored the experiences of teachers who were using culturally responsive teaching. The teachers were given opportunities to reflect and conceptualize a deeper understanding of the reform initiatives. In other words, teachers’ implementation of reforms increased as their agency developed, and their
beliefs were better aligned with the principles of reform. A larger implication for this study revealed that as teachers’ learning processes developed so does their likelihood of enacting deep change. Calvert (2016) stated that teacher agency is the capacity for teachers to engage in purposeful and constructive work that expands their professional learning and that of their colleagues. Although increasing the agency of teachers is an important endeavor, the real work lies in enlisting teachers as active partners in social justice and equity-oriented reforms beyond the classroom walls (Datnow, 2020).

McMahon et al. (2015) suggested that wide reform has taken place around the world within the teaching profession. In order to re-conceptualize how teachers learn and bring about substantive change within the field of teaching, professional learning should be a collaborative practice that involves ongoing, career long development (McMahon et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light systemic inequities within Canadian education organizations and exposed a need to reexamine educational systems and reframe learning in teacher education programs (Rosehart et al., 2022). Rosehart et al. (2022) explained the need for explicit instruction on a wide range of issues related to cultural awareness and social justice issues within pre-service teacher education programs.

Accordingly, educators often believe that their needs are not being considered when changes are implemented externally using a large-scale or top-down approach (Mortier, 2020). When teachers have opportunities to engage in collaborative learning, their interactions can be influential to the implementation of not only local and state reforms but can also lead to societal change (Datnow, 2005). The present study sought to engage teachers’ voices through professional dialogue within a community of practice.
Communities of practice could help to empower individuals, granting ownership and voice over topics related to teaching methods and practices (Goodyear & Casey, 2015; Liu et al., 2016). Communities of practice also serve as vehicles to support professional autonomy and agency of teachers in support of larger reforms, building equitable and inclusive classrooms.

In order to provide more clarity about aspects of teacher agency, Pantić (2015) proposed a theoretical model for developing teacher agency in her exploratory case study. Pantić used an initial deductive coding to analyze and organize data by aspects of agency. The units of analysis and variables that impact teacher agency include a moral purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity. Specifically, Pantić pointed to teachers’ understanding of their own professional identities and moral purposes as guiding factors in developing teachers as agents of social justice. Pantić concluded that “engaging in discussions with colleagues is part of the process of building relationships that can become more stable features of the environment supportive of future agency” (p. 229).

Panthi et al. (2018) discussed the challenges for implementing equity and access as aspects of social justice in mathematics education. Panthi et al. conducted research using a qualitative interpretive inquiry approach to explore the experiences of how math teachers perceive social justice in their classrooms. Using thematic analysis, the study revealed five key emerging themes: equality, equity, fairness, social process, and caring students (Panthi et al., 2018). More specifically, the study emphasized teachers’ perception of building belonging, caring, and connection with their students as a means toward social justice practices.
Theoretical Framework

Grant and Osanloo (2014) argued that a theoretical framework provides a foundation for a study, guiding its philosophical, epistemological, methodological, and analytical approaches. For this research, the theoretical framework is informed by four interrelated aspects of socially just pedagogies:

1. Culturally Responsive Teaching
2. Community of Practice
3. Personalized Learning Practice
4. Universal Design for Learning

These dimensions are essential in promoting educational equity and inclusion. Socially just teachers set high expectations for their students, establish connections with both students and their families, and advocate for policies that promote equitable practices (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Whipp, 2013). To address the complex nature of socially just pedagogies, this study employed a multidimensional theoretical framework that considered these interconnected aspects. Specifically, this research examined how a community of practice influences teacher perceptions of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning within the context of socially just pedagogies.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Gloria Ladson-Billings’s (1994) influential work first introduced culturally relevant teaching, a pedagogical practice that empowers students of color. She lamented that schools have not prepared teachers to meet the needs of Black American learners. Ladson-Billings posited that culturally relevant teachers create a community of learners in which they work to make connections with all students. Specifically, she defined
culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy that challenges students “intellectually, socially, emotionally by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Lastly, Ladson-Billings (1995) contended that culturally relevant teachers (CRT) must continue to critically examine and redefine the content of curriculum to reflect the full range of students’ cultures.

As teachers begin to explore issues of race, identity, and ethnicity, “there is an urgent need to develop and support teachers’ cultural competence, which has been linked to students’ increased academic performance, self-esteem, and overall well-being” (Han et al., 2011, p. 1). Cultural competence is a necessary foundation for culturally responsive teaching. According to Ladson-Billings (2021) culturally relevant pedagogy can be described through three tenets of successful teacher education: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical critique. She indicates that academic success is focused on academic and learning growth of students, and that teachers must maintain high standards while utilizing constructivist positions as part of the inquiry process.

Another scholar in the field of culturally responsive curriculum, James Banks (1993), proposed a rethinking of multicultural education by advocating for a more comprehensive approach. Banks argued that, historically, educators have taken a limited view of multicultural education, oversimplifying its goals. He further elaborated that the goals for multicultural education were not only intricate but multifaceted. Banks identified a multicultural content model with five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school structure and culture (Banks, 1993). This model emphasizes the need for teachers to
understand the types of knowledge and structures necessary to transform multicultural curriculum.

Geneva Gay is considered a leader in multicultural education and curriculum and similar to Banks, Gay challenged the understanding of multicultural practices and competencies (Atwater, 2010). Gay (2018) explained that culturally responsive teachers take the cultural frames of references, knowledges, and experiences of diverse learners to connect with the unique learning styles of students. She also believed that culturally responsive teaching is inherently a multidimensional approach that requires using a variety of practices to promote higher learning (Gay 2018). Additionally, Bonner et al. (2018) suggest that in relation to teacher agency school districts should consider the development and support of culturally responsive teachers as a priority in their efforts to create equitable and inclusive learning environments. Teachers who work with diverse student populations and have training in culturally responsive pedagogy tend to feel more confident in their abilities and are motivated to further develop their expertise.

Gay (2015) asserted that culturally responsive teaching goes beyond the pursuit of diversifying instruction, but requires a “comprehensive and systemic knowledge, thought and action, complemented by an activated code of ethics heavily grounded in equality, justice, and empowerment” (p. 133). Gay (2002) also emphasized that “culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process” (p. 114). Most important is that no group should ever have more power than another, and that the plurality of cultures should be treated in a uniform manner as part of the characteristics of “humankind.” Therefore, CRT is considered both an ideological and ethical endeavor on the part of educators (Gay, 2015).
As suggested by Stembridge (2019), culturally responsive education is a mental model that features unifying themes aimed at promoting equity. In this approach, educators prioritize cultural awareness, as well as considerations of race, ethnicity, ability, gender, and identity to create an inclusive learning experience for all students. For instance, Min et al. (2022) utilized a constant comparative method to explore the factors that influenced teacher agency in adopting culturally responsive teaching practices. The study found that teachers who had prior experience working with students from diverse backgrounds, shared socially-justice oriented goals, and received support from school administrators were more likely to adopt culturally responsive teaching practices.

According to Zaretta Hammond (2014), another leading scholar in the field of culturally responsive teaching, explained that the factory model of teaching is outdated and does not emphasize enough the importance of caring and meaningful relationships. She further clarified that in order to improve the achievement gap in American schools and operationalize culturally responsive teaching, there must be synergy between aspects of student voice, student and teacher partnership, cultural awareness, and strengthening the intellectual capacity of students. Culturally responsive teaching “promotes[s] social justice through a focus on equality and celebration of diversity” (Ebersole et al., 2016, p. 97). Hammond presented the “Ready for Rigor Framework,” which includes four essential components to help operationalize the implementation of culturally responsive teaching:

1. **Awareness** – having cultural awareness or sociopolitical consciousness.

2. **Learning partnerships** – building positive relationships with students.
3. *Information processing* – integrates students’ intellectual capacity and cultural backgrounds to enhance learning.


Culturally responsive teaching is a student-centered approach that also focuses on meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Hammond, 2014; Harmon, 2012; Samuels et al., 2017). The focus is on building relationships with students and families, with teachers who utilize culturally responsive teaching practices, celebrate ethnically diverse students, and recognize the importance of a child’s family and community (Bennett et al., 2018; Gay, 2002). Gay (2002) also emphasized that “culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process” (p. 114).

Across the world, educational equity is one of the leading challenges requiring reform (Min et al., 2022). There is a call for teachers to be key actors or agents of change for social justice (Bourn, 2016; Min et al., 2022; Pantić & Florian, 2015). Pantić and Florian (2015) explained that there are “policies around the world [that] increasingly call for teachers to become ‘agents of change,’ [which are] often linked to social justice agendas” (p. 333). In order for teachers to promote inclusion and social justice goals, they need to reflect on their professional identity, develop teacher agency, and have a deeper understanding of inclusive practices (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

Similarly, culturally responsive teaching works to address the systemic and institutional inequality in educational settings (Min et al., 2022). Using a grounded theory approach, Min et al. (2022) conducted research to explore how teachers use culturally
responsive teaching to become social justice change agents. The Min et al. study used a constant comparative method to analyze interviews among 16 high school teachers. The findings of this study support Pantić’s (2015) teacher agency model addressed at the beginning of the chapter. Secondly, Min et al. suggested that “teachers’ personal experiences with [culturally responsive teaching] provide ideas for educational scholars to advance theoretical discourses about the concept of teacher agency for social justice” (p. 580).

Ladson-Billings (1999) argued that there is wide variability amongst teacher preparation programs centered on multicultural competence. Consequently, teacher education programs and in-service professional development lack a coherent, integrated approach for addressing the issues inherent in teaching about diversity, race, and culture (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Villegas and Lucas (2002) lamented that “many teacher-education programs have interpreted infusion narrowly to mean the sprinkling of disparate bits of information about diversity into the established curriculum, resulting in the superficial treatment of multicultural issues” (p. 21).

A qualitative study by Alhanachi et al. (2021) examined the extent to which a professional learning community helped teachers develop culturally responsive teaching competencies. One of the findings of the study indicated that teachers reported a lack of practical information or strategies for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices in their classrooms. The teachers also addressed that they faced many work-related demands and culturally responsive teaching lacked administrative support and was not considered a priority.
Another study by Samuels (2018) investigated possible strategies for facilitating culturally responsive teaching in a K-12 school setting. This qualitative study surveyed the perspectives of teachers attending an in-service professional development on culturally responsive teaching. The findings revealed both benefits and challenges to implementing a culturally responsive teaching approach. The advantages to using a culturally responsive teaching approach included empowering students, creating a collaborative culture, fostering positive student-teacher relationships, and improving student self-confidence.

On the other hand, Samuels (2018) also expressed the challenges of culturally responsive teaching practices. Teachers reported difficulty introducing potentially controversial topics about which they had limited knowledge. Some teachers feared that they may say something that would be misconstrued while some participants in the study reported that the process of reflective thinking made them feel uncomfortable. Several participants had difficulty analyzing their own biases and others believed their personal backgrounds interfered with their responsiveness toward issues raised by their diverse students. Teachers also reported a lack of sufficient time to implement culturally responsive teaching due to other curriculum demands that took precedence. Participants also believed there was a lack of resources and materials for implementing culturally responsive teaching.

Bassey (2016) asserted that culturally responsive teaching is a call for educational and civic justice initiatives and the practice helps teachers to develop a sense of political and self-consciousness. Hammond (2014) reminded teachers that they are able, through their positions, to influence change in policies and address structural inequities.
Culturally responsive teachers may have to take “emotional risks” and “confront [their] discomfort” by examining both implicit biases and cultural frames of reference (Hammond, 2014, p. 56).

More recently, there has been a focus on professional learning related to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within the school district from which participants were recruited. Given the comprehensive nature of culturally responsive pedagogies, teachers need collaborative learning opportunities to develop resources and strategies for implementation (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Communities of practices offer a professional space for teachers to develop socially just educational leadership within school communities (Scanlan, 2013).

The present action research investigated how a community of practice impacts teachers’ perspectives of culturally responsive practices within a socially just education. Teacher education programs that focus on socially just teaching should practice a structural orientated professional reflection model (Whipp, 2013). Whipp (2013) contended that teachers should “actively seek changes in school and societal policies and practices that unfairly marginalize some students by social class, race, language, and other markers of difference” (p. 455). Preparing socially just teachers requires teachers to become change agents and to build knowledge in culturally responsive practices (Whipp, 2013).

**Universal Design for Learning**

Likewise, Kieran and Anderson (2019) researched the use of connecting culturally responsive teaching with the UDL framework as an effective tool for planning instruction. Through an analysis of literature, Kiernan and Anderson described the
connection between UDL and culturally responsive teaching. The explicit connections to UDL and culturally responsive teaching include the following concepts:

*Multiple means of expression* provide for options for varying perception, language and symbols, and comprehension; *multiple means of actions* provide options for physical action, expressive skills and fluency executive functions; and *multiple means of representations* provide options for recruiting interest, sustaining effort, persistence, and self-regulation. (Kiernan & Anderson, 2019, pp. 1211-1212)

UDL is a research-based instructional planning framework that works to align multiple pedagogies in order to address the individual differences of students (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). UDL is a set of principles that can be used to plan more inclusive lessons that meet the range of all learners (McGuire-Schwartz & Arndt, 2007). Kiernan and Anderson (2019) contended that UDL and culturally responsive teaching work collectively to increase “students’ success in meeting teachers’ high expectations for the intended learning outcomes” (p. 1213). Chardin and Novak (2020) explained that social just educators implementing UDL work to personalize learning pathways for all students.

Rao and Meo (2016) explained that UDL can be integrated into every aspect of a lesson, including the objectives, evaluations, teaching strategies, and resources, with an emphasis on the competencies and ideas specified in an academic benchmark. Although lesson plans may vary in structure, they consist generally of four core components: establishing (goals), lesson goals and objectives that are in line with educational standards (methods and materials), designing instructional strategies and choosing appropriate resources, and (assessment) monitoring student progress and outcomes (Rao & Meo, 2016).
The instructional cycle, depicted in Figure 2.1, demonstrates how academic standards can guide the establishment of goals, which then inform the creation of assessments, methods, and materials. More importantly, Rao and Meo (2016) explain that “by considering UDL during the planning process and adding in flexible pathways to reaching the learning goals, teachers can reduce barriers that exist in curricula and increase opportunities that allow all learners to reach the same high standards” (p. 11).

Additionally, Courey et al. (2013) conducted a study to examine the impact of a three-hour training on the understanding of UDL among 45 graduate students specializing in special education at an urban university. The training focused on equipping the students with strategies and techniques to implement UDL principles in their lesson delivery. The researchers utilized a two-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures to compare the effectiveness of the lesson plans developed before and after the training.

Figure 2.1 UDL Cycle of Instructional Planning

The study findings indicated that the UDL training was successful in enhancing the participants’ ability to incorporate UDL principles in their lesson plans. Furthermore, the implications of this study suggest that teacher candidates may find value in designing lesson plans that offer a variety of options for representation, action, expression, and engagement. As Courey et al. (2013) explained, such lesson plans have the potential to be particularly effective “to students with less proficiency in English, students with cultural differences, or gifted students who can engage with more challenging material” (pp. 18-19). Further, these researchers described how “learning styles and preferences are present in all learners, not just in those with special needs; the multiplicity of methods and the variety of materials offered through UDL can provide universal academic access to all” (Courey et al., 2013, pp. 18-19).

Community of Practice

The design of the current study was based on the theoretical underpinnings of communities of practice, personalized learning, and culturally responsive teaching. Teachers tasked with implementing more equitable and inclusive pedagogies are looking for additional mechanisms for meaningful professional learning. The intention of this study was to promote teacher collaboration by offering the educators opportunities to learn from one another in a social setting.

A community of practice provides a professional space where individuals can learn together, engage in meaningful discourse, and follow reflective practices that support social justice advocacy (Campbell & Lavallee, 2020; Ukpokodu, 2007). Scanlan (2013) stated that communities of practice are a “powerful tool for analyzing learning” and for pursuing a path toward social justice education (p. 348). Educators who take part
in a community of practice and social justice learning are best supported through their cultivation of imagination, alignment, and active engagement (Scanlan, 2013; Wenger, 1999. More importantly, Ukpokodu (2007) expressed that social justice-oriented communities of practice have the potential to better prepare teachers for collective action in pursuit of educational change.

Furthermore, a community of practice can be used to promote and encourage the sharing of instructional practices and resources. In this action research, teachers were invited to work together as a team to develop a shared repertoire of personalized learning components that align with culturally responsive teaching practices. DuFour and Eaker (2009) lamented that schools have historically used either a top-down or an assembly line approach to teaching and learning. Today’s schools are “post-industrial” and exist in a “knowledge-based society,” and these historical approaches are no longer reasonable to sustain (DuFour & Eaker, 2009).

In 1991, cognitive anthropologists Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996) coined the term community of practice to explain a group of people coming together to create a collective body of knowledge (Goodyear & Casey, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2008; Sarid & Levanon, 2022; Webber, 2016). Communities of practice have roots in both constructivism and sociocultural learning theory, whereby the process of learning is seen as a social experience guided by an individual’s interactions with others (Luguetti, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2008; Sarid & Levanon, 2022; Webber, 2016). Wenger (1999) further detailed that “communities of practice present a theory of learning that starts with this assumption: engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn
and become who we are” (p. 4). Communities of practice focus on improving instruction and are often led by the members within the group (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007).

As depicted in Figure 2.2, Wenger proposed four foundational components of his social learning theory:

1. *Meaning* refers to the process of communication and negotiation of understanding, both on an individual and collective level.

2. *Practice* refers to discussing shared historical perspectives, social resources, and fundamental assumptions, allowing people to better understand and contextualize their experiences.

3. *Community* refers to a method of negotiating meaning through a group of people with similar practices and goals.

4. *Identity* refers to a way of expressing how learning and growth shape and transform sense of self.

From a sociocultural perspective, Woo and Reeves (2007) suggested that meaning is negotiated through meaningful social interactions and can include a wide range of activities: the sharing of multiple perspectives, engaging in authentic tasks, adding to existing strategies and ideas, and responding to competing positions.
Equally important are Wenger’s (1999) three components of community of practice: domain, community, and practice. Central to the concept of a community of practice is the construction of one’s professional identity (Goodyear & Casey, 2015; Luguetti, 2018; McMahon et al., 2015; Wenger 1999. Wenger pointed to a “shared domain” as building either an individual identity or a group identity through active participation within a community. Further, he indicated that a “community” must have members to engage in meaningful interaction or share information from which to learn. Finally, Wenger suggested that a shared “practice” refers to the development of shared experiences, stories, resources, or tools to address current problems within the field.

Having professional dialogue within a community of practice could help empower individual ownership and voice over topics related to teaching methods and practices (Goodyear & Casey, 2015; Liu et al., 2016). Liu et al. (2016) contended that instead of initiatives that boost student scores, a community of practice can be useful for focusing on what teachers need both cognitively and emotionally. More importantly, the needs of a community often change as it acquires new skills and interests. Rather than focusing on an “in the moment” job training or new classroom skills, teachers’ professional development should be about transformational learning and developing their “voice, their agency, and their professional capital” (Liu et al., 2016, p. 421).

Wenger et al. (2002) explained that one of the downsides of a community of practice can also be the members within the community. Participants may be experts in their fields, thereby creating unintentional organizational boundaries. As Wenger explained, “shared practice by its very nature creates boundaries” (p. 151). He further
lamented that these boundaries create issues of trust, and transferring knowledge becomes difficult to implement across an organization.

The same communities that propel changes can also cause rigidity. A community of practice may reinforce a collective perspective that makes it difficult for individuals to change without group support (Wenger et al., 2002). Pyrko et al. (2019) highlighted the struggle with power dynamics and tensions within a community of practice. Wenger (2002) also stated that although communities create distinct leadership roles, it is important to spread responsibilities across the members.

In this phenomenological study, the participants are engaged in a blended community of practice whereby meetings were held either in a traditional face-to-face setting or online using video conferencing platforms and learning tools for delivering content. Ghamrawi (2022) detailed the importance of virtual communities of practice as a tool for professional development that can be both readily adaptable and flexible. Blended communities of practice that include both face-to-face and online meetings have the potential to support teacher professional growth and learning (Trust & Horrocks, 2017). Communication tools for online communities of practice have included blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and online forums for discussions (Trust & Horrocks, 2017). As a result, teachers working with diverse student populations could benefit from virtual or online communities of practice that work to develop culturally relevant pedagogies and intercultural competences (Hajisoteriou et al., 2018; Trust & Horrocks, 2017).

Burns et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study that investigated the utilization of Wenger’s (1999) modes of belonging, engagement, imagination, and alignment in an
online course setting. The qualitative analysis revealed that the third space structures implemented in an online classroom for pre-service school librarians fostered opportunities to establish meaningful connections with each other. The Burns et al. study offers valuable insights into how aspiring school librarians cultivate their communities of practice through Wenger’s modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment.

Similarly, Azukas (2019) studied K-12 teachers’ professional development to implement personalized learning with a blended learning community or practice. The research used both qualitative and quantitative methods to measure teachers’ self-efficacy in implementing personalized learning. The results revealed an increase in perceived self-efficacy of teachers related to the planning, sharing of practices, and integration of technology. In addition, the blended learning community of practice cultivated a collaborative environment, communication, and connection with other teachers.

**Personalized Learning**

As our schools become increasingly diverse, personalized learning offers an opportunity for teachers to meet the specific needs and interests of students (Phan, 2020). Understanding the components of personalized learning and how it will work within diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives could shape and influence teachers’ perceptions about school reforms at the local level. Furthermore, Chadburn and Gratton (2021) suggested that in order to prepare students for the demands of personalized learning, educators must also prepare them for complexities of participating in conversations concerning matters of social justice. Personalized learning is a collaborative relationship which “requires teachers and students to form a partnership in which both parties are equally responsible for the learning process” (Chadburn & Gratton, 2021, p. 12).
Personalized learning emerged from the findings of educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom (Bloom, 1984; Morgan, 2019; Rawson et al., 2016). Bloom (1984) researched the learning outcomes of students in a one-to-one tutoring session versus those in traditional whole group instruction and found that 98% of students receiving one-to-one instruction outperformed those in group instruction in final achievement measures. Bloom thereby challenged the educational community to duplicate personalized learning by devising “teaching-learning conditions that will enable the majority of students under group instruction to attain levels of achievement that can at present be reached only under good tutoring conditions” (pp. 4-5). In keeping with Bloom’s vision, teaching practices that support personalized learning are focused on both student-centered and small group instruction (Bingham, 2019).

Historically, personalized learning models focused on customizing learning pathways for students considered technological innovation as an integral component to providing time, place, and pace to instruction (Lokey-Vega & Stephens, 2019; Murphy et al., 2016; Redding, 2013; Walkington & Bernacki, 2020). In addition, personalized learning approaches have used technology to provide real-time data, increase motivation, assess progress, and deliver immediate feedback (Lee et al., 2018; Rickabaugh, 2016). Hughey (2020) further justified the implementation of personalized learning by calling out how the “educational landscape and the employment needs of the global society [have] present[ed] the need for a revolutionary transformation in education” (p. 2).

Along the same lines, Phan (2020) explored how teachers implementing personalized learning initiatives used technology to amplify student voice and choice. Using quantitative and qualitative data analysis, one of the results of this study showed
that 26% of teachers were able to use technology to raise student voice and choices when using personalized learning practices. Personalized learning initiatives that integrate technology should also develop collaborative professional learning opportunities for teachers to share technology expertise.

School districts that have operationalized personalized learning have done so in dissimilar ways across disciplines, states, and local school contexts (Walkington & Bernacki, 2020). France (2019) expanded on the idea of personalized learning as more of a human centered pedagogy than a technologically innovative approach. Teachers engaged in humanizing instruction help learners to feel a sense of belonging. Within a humanizing personalized learning framework lies educational equity and justice by which teachers create inclusive practices through centering “student voice and choice, engineering an environment of options, and finding value in all methods and learning processes” (France, 2019, p. 99).

Ray et al. (2017) further described personalized learning as a partnership between teacher and student wherein the instruction has been tailored to meet the unique needs of each learner. Likewise, personalized learning is designed to meet both the demands for learning and the individual interests of students (Bray & McClaskey, 2013; Bray & McClaskey, 2016). Moreover, Redding (2013) expressed the importance of the relationship between teachers, students, and their families. Personalizing instruction must include the “use of multiple instructional modes to scaffold each student’s learning and enhance the student’s motivation to learn and metacognitive, social, and emotional competencies to foster self-direction and achieve mastery of knowledge and skills” (Redding, 2013, p. 6).
Personalized learning has been defined in varied and complex ways but there are similarities in its characteristics (Lokey-Vega & Stephens, 2019; Morgan, 2019; Walkington & Bernacki, 2020). The U.S. Department of Education (2021) defined personalized learning as “instruction in which the pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of each learner” (p. 7). Walkington and Bernacki (2020) further described personalized learning to include student ownership and choice. They explained that personalized learning “can vary with respect to ownership – the degree to which learners are given control and choice in the learning situation” (p. 239).

For the purposes of this paper, the working definition for personalized learning is adopted to incorporate culturally responsive personalized learning (CRPL):

**CRPL is an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges how students’ personal, social, cultural, and linguistic contexts influence their educational experiences and their opportunities to benefit from instruction and that adapts instruction based on students’ strengths while striving to meet individual students’ needs within those contexts** (Ober et al., 2023, p. 2)

Using a collective case study, Bingham et al. (2018) reported several challenges to the implementation of personalized learning. The research revealed that one of the primary challenges found among a population of 28 schools was difficulty in aligning the technology infrastructure to the needs of the teachers. A second issue was the lack of preparation for teachers to develop practices and strategies that support personalized learning. Lastly, the results revealed inconsistencies between how schools measure student successes and stakeholders’ understanding of student success. These challenges highlight the critical steps needed to implement sweeping reforms to a larger scale.
In a similar case study, Bingham (2019) identified other difficulties in implementing personalized learning. Schools that leveraged technology to deliver personalized learning environments reported that additional time requirements were needed to develop modules and analyze student data. The key finding is that personalized learning requires a great deal of teachers’ time on an ongoing basis. To make personalized learning initiatives more manageable, administration may need to modify school calendars or restructure student and teacher schedules, which may be difficult in traditional school settings.

Overall, teachers are faced with distinct challenges when implementing personalized learning initiatives (Bingham, 2019; Bingham et al., 2018; Cardno et al., 2017). Chief among them is that, due to variability in designs and definitions, teachers need more time to plan, reflect, and engage in discourse to develop new practices and pedagogies. Cardno et al. (2017) explained that school leaders and teachers need to determine a common working definition for personalized learning to be used. A clear communication as to the purpose, meaning, and intent for personalized learning should be delivered across all stakeholders, including students and teachers (Cardno et al., 2017).

The present study focused on the ways a community of practice could impact teacher perception in carrying out both local and state reforms related to educational equity and inclusive practices. The focal point in this action research was on the problem of practice that teachers receive little agency, voice, and preparation for implementing a wide range of district reforms. This literature review suggests that personalized learning and culturally responsive teaching have several common characteristics that can be developed through meaningful dialogue, social connections, and active engagement.
Teachers who receive their own personalized learning modules through a community of practice can develop a sense of agency, voice, and preparation over school reform initiatives.

The intention of this study was to give teachers an opportunity to express agency and preparation when centering social justice into their daily classroom practice. Educators preparing to incorporate socially just pedagogies into their classrooms could consider the UDL as a framework for applying both culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning in their lessons. The theoretical framework for this action research concerns teachers’ insight on the elements of personalized learning and culturally responsive teaching practices toward the larger context of educational equity.
CHAPTER 3

METHODODOLOGY

This study addressed the problem of teachers lacking agency and preparation to promote pedagogies related to social justice. A socially just approach to education involves recognizing and exposing inequities within educational systems, as it is a moral imperative to do so (Chardin & Novak, 2020). Using culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning, this action research study sought to explore teacher perceptions on promoting socially just pedagogies. As described by Mertler (2019), this study utilized action research as a methodical investigation aimed at improving educational practices, fostering teacher empowerment, facilitating professional growth, and advocating for social justice.

As school districts become increasingly diverse, teacher education programs must become better prepared to build programs that strengthen teachers’ understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Blum et al., 2015). Research suggests that teachers must be prepared to act as change agents and recognize inequitable educational practices within institutions and societal structures (Reagan & Hambacher, 2021). Communities of practice and professional development offer opportunities to develop pedagogy related to educational equity (Flores, 2007). Investing in the ways educators develop agency could help connect some of the gaps in teacher preparation to address equity and justice in PK-12 school settings. This qualitative action research collected data to investigate the following questions:
1. To what extent does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of and commitment to social justice education?

2. How does participation in a community of practice shape teachers’ views of using culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning strategies to promote social justice education?

3. How does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?

The theoretical framework underpinning this study integrates key components of a community of practice, culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL. A community of practice serves as a valuable platform for supporting teachers’ comprehension and implementation of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning strategies within their classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning share various interconnected elements that can be further explored through dialogue, collaboration, and active participation within the community of practice. According to France (2019), a crucial aspect of personalized learning involves humanizing the approach, which entails deliberately giving prominence to the perspectives of marginalized students. Similarly, Hammond (2014) stated that culturally responsive teachers who establish effective learning partnerships prioritize marginalized students.

Chapter 3 will explain a description and justification for a qualitative phenomenological research study design and present an overview of the intervention that supports the theoretical framework. The chapter also details the procedures for
recruitment and ethical consideration for participation in the study. Finally, chapter 3 describes the means for data collection and the procedures for data analysis.

**Research Design and Intervention**

This qualitative phenomenological action research focused on data gathered from teachers working in a PK-12 public school district, with the aim of addressing the challenge of promoting equity and inclusion in classrooms when teachers lack guidance from training programs and localized process models that facilitate social justice advocacy. The data have been analyzed to elaborate on the lived experiences of teachers and present a narrative of their beliefs, understandings, and challenges as members of a community of practice. Phenomenological research, as defined by Creswell and Creswell (2017), is an investigative approach that draws on philosophical principles. This research design involves examining and elucidating individuals’ direct experiences to gain insight into their lived experiences with a specific phenomenon.

Becker and Schad (2022) justified the need for phenomenology in educational research to understand subjective experiences. The authors explained that “phenomenological researchers in education choose to employ phenomenological methods to explore the nuances of the human experience in the context of education, a deeply human endeavor” (p. 299). In other words, phenomenological methods offer a fitting approach to capture intricate nuances that quantitative data cannot convey. Research in education is complex and would benefit from phenomenology’s ability to delve deep into the human experience within dynamic learning environments, providing insights into the essence of teaching and learning (Becker & Schad, 2022).
By examining specifically individuals’ lifeworlds, which encompass their pre-reflective understanding of the world, Neubauer et al. (2019) asserted that hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to explore how these factors shape and influence their overall lived experiences. In a phenomenological approach, researchers acknowledge that participants hold the most comprehensive understanding of their own lived experiences and perceptions. Therefore, researchers employ various measures, such as bracketing (also known as epoche), to capture the participants’ intended meanings as accurately as possible, in a realistic and practical manner (Chan et al., 2013). The purpose of bracketing is to temporarily set aside judgments and focus on the participants’ firsthand experiences. (Moustakas, 1995). By employing bracketing, researchers strive to minimize bias and interpretation, allowing participants’ authentic experiences to shape the research process. (Chan et al., 2013; Moustakas, 1995; Peoples, 2020).

Similarly, qualitative research explores participants’ meaning-making experiences within the context of their local settings (Brown, 2008; Merriam, 1998). Building on the ideas presented by O’Connor and O’Neill (2004), a qualitative research paradigm was employed in the present study to advance social justice issues by providing an opportunity to consider multiple voices and frames of reference through a community of practice. This research study focused on implementing pedagogies related to equity in education. Additionally, Lyons et al. (2013) proposed that the process of qualitative research could act as a mechanism toward social justice advocacy and further noted that qualitative researchers served to weave in social justice goals when they “promote equity, access, participation, and harmony for culturally diverse populations” (p. 10).
The setting of the present study was in a suburban New Jersey public school serving a town with a population under 14,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to the U.S. National Education Center for Educational Statistics (2021), the school district that serves as the setting for this research consists of four schools with a total of 201 classroom teachers. At the time of this study, the district had a total of 2,383 enrolled students, of whom 25.2% were classified as either non-White or of mixed race.

In order to address the problem of practice in preparing teachers for adopting socially just pedagogies, I reviewed the district’s identified strategies and core domains for personalized learning, and their connections with specific aspects of socially just practices. The district promotes inclusive practices through evaluation of diverse literature and mentor texts. I combined the district’s shared vision for building more inclusive practices with those principles established in the UDL framework. Using the district’s vision as a guide, a set of lesson plan templates and a Google Slides presentation were created to assist teachers with designing their own lesson plans using the UDL framework. I also shared an example using the district’s selected diverse text listed under their curriculum. Through a community of practice, the participants used the UDL framework as a collaborative learning tool to explore the overlap between the theory of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning.

Qualitative phenomenological research brings together teachers to participate in a community of practice model by which elements of shared inquiry, collaboration, and practice are strategic tools for professional learning (Wenger, 1991). By cultivating the values of a community of practice, teachers are encouraged to address areas of social justice education through problem solving dialogue and its applications into daily
practices. This study sought to explore how a teacher’s agency and professional learning play roles in preparing to enact aspects of social just pedagogies. Surveys and interviews provided vehicles for measuring the willingness or resistance of teachers to become social justice advocates. Teachers’ weekly reflections aimed to provide insights as to how their initial biases or assumptions may have been barriers to implementing socially just practices in their daily work.

This qualitative phenomenological study convened a community of practice to connect the principles of UDL and social justice pedagogies tools to guide professional learning. Using UDL as a lens for intervention, teachers worked collaboratively in a community of practice to create lesson plans that follow the UDL framework. To that end, community of practice members were asked to participate in collaborative discussions and provide feedback on the strengths and weakness of a UDL lesson plan as well as how the framework expands their agency and understanding of social justice teaching. Teachers also reflected on how the implementation of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning align with social just pedagogies. In addition, teachers had the opportunity to expand on their perspectives in their weekly written narratives or video reflections about the potential uses of a UDL framework.

**Role of the Researcher**

As a doctoral student and researcher, my goals for the study were to inform my practice, develop my professional identity, and to give voice to my own lived experiences. My role was to act as both an observer and facilitator to help guide the teachers’ dialogue within the community of practice, without being a participant within the discussion. Herr and Anderson (2014) contended that an ethical consideration and
goal of action research is to create authentic collaborations between the expert, participant, and the researcher. I sought to balance the different needs of the community and, in turn, promote positive relationships with its participants.

I also provided open-ended collaborative inquiry prompts so that the participants could provide historical context, professional beliefs, personal perceptions, and approaches that they believed would positively impact student achievement. I am an Asian woman; my viewpoints may differ from those of the participants or other educators generally. Similarly, work as a reading specialist has allowed for consistent work with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

More importantly, bracketing serves as a practice embraced by researchers to temporarily set aside their preconceived biases and judgments (Moustakas, 1995; Vagle, 2018). Consequently, in line with this practice, I have made a deliberate effort to shed light on any subjective perceptions, concerns, or assumptions that could potentially influence the overall credibility of the study. Throughout the research process, I have actively self-monitored myself to ensure awareness and attentiveness toward these factors.

Participants

Six teachers were recruited from a New Jersey public school district. The research participants were recruited based on volunteer and convenience sampling. An email was sent throughout the school district requesting volunteer teachers to participate in a qualitative study (See Appendix C). The letter informed individuals about the phenomenological research purpose, procedures, and requirements for participation. Convenience sampling was utilized to identify teachers who were available and willing to
participate. The initial goal was to recruit a diverse group of teachers from different backgrounds, considering factors such as gender, years of teaching experience, educational level, race, and grade level taught. The intention was to gather volunteers for a pre-survey intervention and select participants based on their demographic information; however, the limited number of volunteers made it challenging to gather a wider range of participants.

After the participants were selected, a separate letter (Appendix D) with an attached consent form was sent by email to the participating teachers. Consent forms from the participants prior to the first community of practice session were collected. It was also acknowledged that recruiting teachers for the study was difficult because of time and other personal factors that hindered participation. Therefore, a convenience sample was implemented, and the selection process included choosing teachers who were readily available.

Moreover, the researcher aimed for both objectivity and subjectivity in the selection of participants (Efron & Ravid, 2019). Walton (2016) provided additional insights into the concept of subjectivity in research, suggesting that it encompasses the subjective experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the participants. In my own efforts, my objective was to adopt a subjective stance by actively recognizing and considering the numerous ways in which teachers’ experiences may vary due to factors like grade levels, their diverse backgrounds, and the specific academic subjects they specialize in. To facilitate this, open-ended questions were employed in all forms of interaction, such as meetings, surveys, and interviews, without exerting any influence or guidance.
To ensure disciplined objectivity, it is important to acknowledge that the teachers involved in this study may have differing understandings, viewpoints, and perceptions from mine (Efron & Ravid, 2019). Furthermore, researchers must balance their personal beliefs and perspectives with objectivity, as emphasized by Efron and Ravid (2019). They should actively disregard any biases that could compromise the democratic validity of their work, and consciously address their roles, beliefs, and values (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

**Data Collection**

Mertler (2019) explained that narratives or words formulate the data collection techniques in a qualitative research study. Additionally, one of the purposes of using multiple pieces of data is to create accuracy and quality (Mertler, 2019). Data for this study were collected from four sources: pre-surveys, field notes (consisting of audio recording transcripts), weekly reflective teacher journals, and final exit interviews. The study was conducted in two distinct phases.

In the first phase, teachers who agreed to participate were asked to complete a pre-survey assessment in order to gain a better understanding of their perceptions on topics related to socially just pedagogies. Throughout the initial phase of the community of practice, the pre-survey intervention was utilized to initiate and foster dialogue on topics related to social justice education, culturally responsive teaching, and personalized learning. In addition, the survey questions were designed to align with the research questions of the study, ensuring a targeted and focused approach.

The pre-survey intervention results also provided a way to examine how educators perceived their agency, professional learning, social justice actions, and aspects
of community of practice. The survey was structured into three sections, incorporating questions sourced from the Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey, the Learning to Teach for Social Justice Belief Scale (LTSJ-B), and the RAND Personalized Learning Survey (as detailed in Appendix E). Questions 1 through 6 from the “Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey,” a survey designed to assess faculty perceptions of equity and inclusion within their school communities, were selected for use.

The Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey was created through a collaborative effort in association with Reimagining Integration: Diverse & Equitable Schools (RIDES). The goal of this measure is to gain a deeper understanding of teachers’ perspectives and values related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in educational environments (Panorama Education, 2019). By conducting this survey, educational institutions can assess the advancements made by integrating DEI initiatives and pinpoint areas that may need further professional development (Panorama Education, 2019). In addition, the validity of the “scales align with best practices in survey design and psychometrics” in providing information about teacher attitudes and beliefs about diversity, equity, and inclusion in school (Panorama Education, 2019, p. 9). Further, the researcher team’s assessment indicated “good reliability and exceeded the typical sufficiency threshold” (Panorama Education, 2019, p. 3). The survey provides information to determine the extent to which a school district creates equitable environments for students of all races, ethnicities, and cultures (Panorama Education, 2019).

Furthermore, questions 19 through 27 were derived from The RAND Personalized Learning Survey, which employs a Likert scale to measure attributes of
personalized learning and the implementation of related characteristics (Pane et al., 2015). The RAND survey includes the aforementioned Likert scale as well as short, write-in responses; it measures personalized learning attributes and implementation goals (Pane et al., 2015). Additionally, the survey obtains teacher background information, perceptions on the implementation of personalized learning, and perceived levels of curriculum and instruction support. The RAND Personalized Learning Survey was developed to better understand the attitudes and the specific strategies applied to personalized instruction (Kurtz et al., 2019). In the absence of literature pertaining to the reliability and validity, face validity was used to measure the accuracy and consistency of the RAND Personalized Learning Survey. Face validity is “the degree to which a measure appears to be related to a specific construct” (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 29). I reviewed the individual questions and determined their relevance to aspects of personalized learning.

Lastly, questions 7 through 18 from the LTSJ-B were used in the present study. Ludlow et al. (2008) stated that the LTSJ-B was “intended to define a continuum of questions corresponding to beliefs ranging from weaker to stronger commitment to teaching for social justice” (p. 210). This scale was created by Boston College Evidence Team to measure teacher beliefs that were consistent with social justice issues (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012). In particular, Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) explained that the survey measures the perceived importance of engaging in open discussions and taking action to tackle issues surrounding culture, equity, and race across all facets of the school curriculum. Ludlow et al. (2008) used the Rasch rating scale analysis model to endorse the LTSJ-B as an effective measurement scale. According to Cochran-Smith et al. (2012),
the LTSJ-B was designed to establish a range of inquiries that reflect beliefs ranging from mild to intense dedication to teaching for social justice.

In addition, Chang and Cochran-Smith (2022) reported the LTSJ-B shows potential use to address “the multiple dimensions of multicultural validity and thus have the potential to support the work of educators who are working with other stakeholders to challenge inequity” (p. 13). More importantly, as per Cochran-Smith et al. (2012), the social justice survey statements were designed to capture whether teachers viewed themselves as advocates for change in the classroom and society. The authors explained that the survey items included several essential notions about justice, including the promotion of equitable learning opportunities and outcomes, and the adoption of an asset-based perspective that acknowledges and embraces the wide range of cultural, linguistic, and personal experiences that students bring to the classroom (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012).

Moreover, the combined set of questions for the survey were constructed to learn how often teachers engage in culturally responsive teaching practices and to determine what specific topics of social justice education would be discussed in the community of practice. Another original intention behind the pre-survey was to gather valuable demographic information, such as teacher age, years of experience in the district, and grade level professional role. Unfortunately, due to a limited number of volunteers, demographic information could not be used as a criterion for participant selection. At the conclusion of the study, in order for the data to be reliable and consistent, members were asked to make sure that various teachers’ voices were accurately and well represented.
In the second part of the study, similar to the initial phase, data were gathered from various sources. Data included field note observations, which also encompassed transcriptions from the online Zoom community of practice sessions, weekly reflections, and semi-structured interviews. In the field notes, observations were made and details were recorded of discussions or conversations, patterns of behavior, interactions between teachers, and formal activities that took place. As per the teachers’ discretion, reflections could be expressed either through written narratives or voice-to-text reflections. Following each session, teachers were requested to share their weekly reflections either by posting them on the Canvas Learning Management System or by emailing them directly.

Teachers’ weekly reflections were prepared in response to situations, events, and activities that occurred as part of the community of practice. The weekly reflections also served as a mechanism to determine teachers’ perspectives on topics related to social justice education, culturally responsive teaching, and personalized learning. As detailed in Appendix F, guiding questions were provided to support educators in their reflective practice, including inquiries such as What insights have I gained about myself that could impact my teaching approach? And What further information or knowledge would you like to acquire regarding the subject matter? Mertler (2019) explained that journals could include some guidance. Participants were reminded that they could use these questions or provide feedback on their own. Overall, the purpose of these questions was to encourage participants to explore various facets of their teaching practice and enhance their comprehension of the discussed topics.
The final exit interviews were carried out face-to-face, aiming to facilitate an understanding of the impact of a community of practice on teachers’ grasp of social justice. As shown in Appendix E, semi-structured online interviews (used for flexibility and convenience) began with predetermined questions and allowed an option to ask follow-up questions depending on the teachers’ responses (Efron & Ravid, 2019; Mertler, 2019). All items were derived from the research questions and were left in an open-ended format to solicit in-depth responses. The interviews were recorded in audio format and later transcribed for data analysis.

**Research Procedure**

As depicted in Figure 3.1, this qualitative study was conducted in two phases. A pre-survey intervention was sent out to the selected participants of the study and delivered in a Google Forms format through their personal emails. The survey functioned as a mechanism for understanding what teachers’ assumptions were with recent district-led reforms and their current supportive structures for personalized learning. A second
goal of the survey was to detail staff’s preliminary knowledge of social justice advocacy and its relationship to equity and inclusion practices. Additionally, the topics covered in the survey were used as a basis for discussion during the community of practice sessions.

During the first session of the community of practice in the initial phase, participants were made aware that all sessions would be recorded in audio format and subsequently transcribed for future reference. Next, they were given an in-person orientation session to introduce themselves and to become familiar with the Canvas Learning Management System. This session included instruction about how to access the “playlists” containing the digital resource links related to each topic discussed in the community of practice. The purpose of the playlist document was to provide teachers with options for a customized learning experience that delves deeper into each topic. Additionally, binders containing printed articles for each session topic were distributed and participants were given the option to create pseudonyms in their Canvas online profiles. Finally, the researcher presented an overview of the community of practice’s functions and background.

Additionally, I guided teachers to apply Wenger’s (1999) community of practice learning cycle, which consists of three phases: learning as engagement, learning as imagination, and learning as alignment. During the learning as engagement phase, teachers engaged actively in discussions, exploring their assumptions, and uncovering new insights related to the weekly topics. Next, teachers employed learning as imagination to reflect and explore how the weekly emphasis shaped and impacted their professional identities. Finally, they embraced Learning as alignment by implementing actionable measures to align the weekly focus with their instructional strategies.
Throughout this process, field notes were audio-recorded to capture behavioral patterns, interactions with colleagues, and the collaborative dialogues that unfolded within the learning cycle framework. Furthermore, individualized professional needs were identified and catered to by providing supplementary resources after each session.

During the study, teachers determined how the key terms and resources related to their daily practice. As shown in Table 3.1, each session included key terms related to social justice education, culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and the UDL framework. These topics were presented using Google Slides and digital resources,

**Table 3.1 Weekly Objectives and Tasks of Community Members**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Number</th>
<th>Weekly Objectives and Tasks of Community Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1              | **Objective**: to discuss the survey questions from the Learning to Teach for Social Justice Scale, and discuss key terms related to social justice, definitions of social justice practices.  
**Task of Community of Practice**: learning as engagement, learning as imagination, and learning as alignment evaluate, self-reflect, and share on what aspects of social justice teaching could they apply in their classrooms. |
| 2              | **Objective**: to discuss the characteristics of culturally responsive teachers and to identify the key terms of building classroom relationships, learner profiles, and student choice.  
**Task of Community of Practice**: learning as engagement, learning as imagination, and learning as alignment evaluate, self-reflect, and share on what aspects of culturally responsive teaching could they apply in their classrooms. Discuss which materials they will use from the Learning Managements System online resources, |
| 3              | **Objective**: to discuss the characteristics of personalized learning approaches and to identify the key terms of building classroom relationships, learner profiles, and student choice.  
**Task of Community of Practice**: learning as engagement, learning as imagination, and learning as alignment evaluate, self-reflect, and share on what aspects of personalized learning could they apply in their classrooms. Discuss which materials they will use from the Learning Management System online resources. |
| 4              | **Objective**: to discuss the principles of Universal Design Learning and write a UDL lesson.  
**Task of Community of Practice**: learning as engagement, learning as imagination, and learning as alignment evaluate, self-reflect, and share on what aspects of UDL could they apply in their classrooms. Discuss which materials they will use from the Learning Management System online resources. |
| 5              | **Objective**: to modify their UDL lesson plan and discuss the experiences with their attempts to write a UDL lesson.  
**Task of Community of Practice**: learning as engagement, learning as imagination, and learning as alignment evaluate, self-reflect, and share what aspects of UDL they could they apply in their own lesson plans. Discuss which materials they will use from the Learning Management System online resources. |
| 6              | **Objective**: to discuss how successful were the UDL lesson when implementing in the classroom.  
**Task of Community of Practice**: learning as engagement, learning as imagination, and learning as alignment evaluate, self-reflect, and share what modifications did they make with the UDL. Discuss which materials they will use from the Learning Management System online resources. |
which were also made available to the teachers on a weekly basis as depicted in Appendices A and B.

Following that, each participant was asked to compose a reflective post or journal entry on Canvas or email it directly to the researcher. The latter part of Session 1 was focused on the findings of the surveys, outlined in Appendix E, focusing specifically on the statements in the pre-survey questions (7 through 18) of the LTSJ-B. Once the results were examined thoroughly, I delivered a presentation using Google Slides that provided insights into socially just pedagogies. This presentation included definitions of key concepts, such as agents of change, professional identity, and moral imperative.

Following this, the community of practice members worked together to discuss, review, and define social justice education. Finally, I shared additional digital resources and literature on social justice education available on Canvas. Before concluding the session, the participants were reminded to complete a written or video post reflection about the discussions.

At the conclusion of the first session, a playlist document that included linked resources for reference was provided. The purpose of the playlist was explained, emphasizing its role as a collection of accessible digital tools to support teachers in furthering their scholarly exploration of topics related to the study’s theoretical framework. The learning resources included a curated list of culturally responsive teaching activities, personalized learning instructional resources, and a selection of reading materials to deepen understanding of the concepts related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. The learning resources also included links to videos, websites, and podcasts on personalized learning and culturally responsive teaching. The researcher
reminded the teachers that the resources were created to assist them whenever they had time in their schedules to dig deeper into the topics that were covered in the session.

During Session 2, the community of practice members decided to meet using Zoom video call due to the difficulty in finding a location that would meet everyone’s preferred schedules. I revisited the outcomes of the pre-survey section that focused on the Panorama Equity and Inclusion scale. Following a thorough discussion of the survey findings, I proceeded to present the topic of culturally responsive teaching. Employing Wenger’s learning cycle, I facilitated collaborative exercises in which teachers had the opportunity to engage with the concepts introduced in the presentation. In addition, Canvas was used as a platform to facilitate professional learning by once again giving participants the choice to utilize the platform for posting questions, accessing the weekly playlist, or submitting their reflections.

In the third session of the initial phase, I addressed and presented resources related to questions 19 through 27 of the RAND Personalized Learning Survey and unit analysis of professional relationships, trust and influence, and teacher agency. Like the first and second sessions, these topics served as discussion points within the community of practice. At the conclusion of the first phase, community of practice members were reminded to provide reflective feedback on the resources and/or reply to additional comments posted on the site. These items were used as part of the narrative analysis. Reflective posts gave participants an opportunity to voice specific issues or frames of reference pertaining to culturally responsive teaching, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and personalized learning.
Furthermore, participants were reminded to consider lessons they wished to modify through the lens of UDL. They were also encouraged to revisit the UDL information provided in their binders and playlists, as these resources would be invaluable for the upcoming second phase of the community of practice. In the final sessions, participants were presented with additional information on UDL and guided in modifying a lesson plan using the UDL template.

During the second phase of the study, the primary emphasis was placed on UDL and its practical application within the classroom setting. With this in mind, as part of the fourth session of the community of practice, teachers were tasked with reflecting upon specific lesson plans that they aimed to modify in order to align it with the UDL framework. Each participant either adapted an existing lesson or created a new lesson using a UDL format, which would then be implemented in the classroom. Additionally, there was a discussion on relevant scholarship, specifically exploring the instruction cycle of lesson planning as outlined by Rao and Meo (2016).

In the fifth session, a demonstration and review were given on how a lesson plan could be modeled to incorporate principles of the UDL framework. Participants learned about UDL through a cycle of engagement and collaboration with their colleagues. They shared their thoughts about using UDL in the classroom and the development of the lesson plan. Furthermore, they shared any questions or confusion they may have had about how UDL can fit into their specific grade levels or academic subjects. At the conclusion of Session 5, participants were asked to post questions, ideas, or other resources they may have for UDL onto Canvas. They were reminded to try their lessons with students and to share the results at the sixth and final session.
In Session 6, participants evaluated and assessed how their lesson plans addressed aspects of culturally responsive instruction and personalized learning. They also discussed how UDL may contribute to successful outcomes for all learners. The teachers discussed UDL in their own classrooms and evaluated its use in the particular settings. The goal was to create lesson plans that promoted both culturally responsive practices and personalized learning approaches.

In the concluding phase, participants engaged in meaningful discussions about their experiences during their final weekly reflections, as outlined for Week 6. These reflections were submitted either on Canvas or sent via email to the researcher. As a reminder, I urged the teachers in the community to elaborate on their diverse experiences or perspectives and to articulate how the integration of culturally responsive practices and personalized learning could be implemented effectively in their daily instructional settings (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

I scheduled times to meet with each participant individually to complete the final exit interviews. All interviews were later transcribed, resulting in a narrative that allowed for multiple readings to describe the experiences of the participants more fully. The exit interview questions listed in Appendix D explored the problems or issues teachers faced, to gain deeper knowledge of teacher perspectives or experiences, and to further explore topics related to the study. The questions investigated what beliefs participants had toward the use of a community of practice, culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning practices, and the UDL framework in supporting social justice education. During the face-to-face interviews, I utilized an iPhone to audio-record each participant and then securely saved the files on a password-protected personal computer hard drive. Due to
logistical constraints related to interview locations, it was not always possible to conduct video recordings of the interviews. As a result, an audio recording app on the iPhone was utilized to capture all of the interviews. Finally, the Notta app was used to transcribe both the in-person interviews and video calls from the Zoom community of practice.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), employing member checking as a technique to enhance validity is recommended. To ensure the accuracy of the representation of teachers’ words and perspectives, member checking occurred by providing participants with the transcriptions from both the community of practice and semi-structured interviews. This process involved sharing all transcripts, as well as the final written Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, with the participants. This step was taken to validate the alignment between the collected data and participants’ viewpoints.

The identity of participants was protected and any identifiable personal information was removed. Additionally, teachers were able to use pseudonyms in the learning management system to protect their identities. The consent forms from this qualitative phenomenological study were kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home and were shredded following the completion of the study. Teachers’ reflections, online interviews, and the field notes have been stored on a hard drive in a password protected computer belonging to the researcher. This research proposal was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for the University of South Carolina to further ensure the welfare and rights of the participants.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis process in this study had a two-fold purpose: to systematically break down, code, and organize the collected information, and to gain valuable insights
and a deeper understanding of the experiences of teachers (Efron & Ravid, 2019). A three-step coding approach was utilized to first identify specific words, concepts, or phrases outlined in the theoretical framework. This process began with the use of discourse analysis, which aims at examining how language conveys meaning (Starks, et al., 2007). Second, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to delve into the lived experiences and lifeworld of the teachers. Finally, traditional open coding content analysis was conducted. The primary emphasis and vehicle for analysis was to use IPA in order to explore how teacher attitudes, perceptions, professional identities, and structural processes evolved throughout the community of practice (Alase, 2017).

Open coding content analysis was used to systematically break down and categorize data into meaningful patterns and themes. Concurrently, IPA was utilized as an iterative process of reading the transcripts. The focus was to gain a deep understanding of the subjective experiences of the teachers who participated in the community of practices. IPA allowed for the exploration of the nuances, meanings, and personal perspectives embedded within the qualitative data.

Furthermore, as noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), open coding involves maintaining a mindset of being “open to anything possible” (p. 204). Similarly, the technique of phenomenological reduction and bracketing emphasizes the importance of the researcher being receptive to the experiences themselves in order to uncover the essence of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2020). By adopting this open and receptive stance, I was able to engage more deeply with the data, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants’ lifeworlds and lived experiences.
In the first step of analysis, to address the elements outlined in the structure of the theoretical framework, the primary focus was on analyzing the discourse of teachers. This included the identification of central themes and recurrent patterns concerning culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and Universal Design for Learning within the dataset. Papaioannou’s (2023) research study emphasized the critical role of discourse analysis:

When carrying out research—especially in the field of social sciences—language has an essential role, as the means for the researcher to enter the participants’ lifeworld...Participants’ discourses unlocked a universe of meanings, connotations, and meaningful silences (p.8).

Therefore, through the use of discourse analysis the process involved understanding how the linguistic patterns were used to frame the perspectives of teachers, as well as identify the embedded assumptions through their language usage (Starks, et al., 2007).

Following the discourse analysis of the dataset, the focus shifted towards achieving a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the individuals engaged in the community of practice. This involved carefully reading through the entirety of field notes, transcripts from the community of practice, individual teacher reflections, and transcripts and notes from interviews. Open coding procedures were then utilized to establish a preliminary understanding of the data and create a structured database for organizing the information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After reading, I began to identify possible codes and relevant segments of the data, allowing for the development of meaningful categories and themes. By employing an open coding approach and discourse
analysis, a solid foundation was established to pave the way for later analysis and interpretation of the gathered data.

In the second step, I then coded the data by hand using index cards, highlighters, and color coded post-it notes. While reading the data from the pre-surveys, field notes, teachers’ weekly reflections, and semi-structured exit interviews, I made notations with any comments, impressions, or questions to determine the relevancy of the information to the research questions. Additionally, I reviewed field notes and saved interview audio recordings to identify and construct themes related to the patterns of behaviors of the participants and described any variations in a teacher’s voice, body language, and demeanor.

IPA was incorporated throughout each step of the data analysis. IPA involves a meticulous reading process that allows researchers to condense the information from transcripts and capture the essence of participants’ experiences. This approach also provides an opportunity to refine the initial statements or sentences into more concise and polished wording (Alase, 2017). Alase (2017) further emphasized the importance of multiple readings in the qualitative data coding process:

In a qualitative data coding process, researchers are advised to begin their data coding by reading the interview transcripts several times; at least, they are encouraged to read the transcripts three times to get a feel of what the research participants were saying verbally, and also to get a better feel of the participants’ ‘state of mind.’ (p. 16)

In the third step of the data analysis process, I proceeded to labeled and organized the specific categories that emerged from the coding. Additionally, the coding process
was expanded to include specific assumptions or beliefs that act as barriers and resistance to the implementation of socially just practices. This type of coding, known as value coding, allows for an analysis and exploration of cultural values and the intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences and actions of the participants within case studies (Saldaña, 2021).

During this step, I began synthesizing the generated themes and patterns, creating situated narratives that captured the essence of the data. Direct participant quotes were summarized, highlighting how each quote related to the identified themes. Furthermore, I examined each participant’s understanding of topics such as personalized learning, culturally responsive teaching, and UDL, breaking down each teacher’s perspectives and insights within these domains.

In the fourth and final step of the data analysis process, I synthesized all the final themes and incorporated them into cohesive narratives. This also involved weaving together the various threads of direct quotes and how each fit into the characteristics for each of the themes. By carefully examining and analyzing these quotes, I demonstrated how to exemplify the characteristics and attributes associated with each theme, such as inclusive socially just pedagogies, collaborative relationships with families, empowering culturally diverse voices, and accountability and continuous learning. Similarly, I provided a detailed description of how each teacher’s perspectives and insights were integrated within these overarching themes. By doing so, the participants’ viewpoints and experiences were fully captured.

Overall, the primary objective of the analysis was to gain insight into teachers’ perceptions and the meanings or processes they developed within their community of
practice. Drawing from the concepts outlined in the theoretical framework, I sought to identify relevant themes aligned with the research questions, which were derived from pre-surveys, teacher reflections, transcripts of community of practice sessions, and final interviews. This iterative process commenced from the first week’s data, with an understanding that codes would evolve as new data emerged (Knapp, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Multiple rounds of coding were conducted to effectively group codes into categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The resulting categories revolved around inclusive socially just pedagogies, collaborative relationships with families, empowering culturally diverse voices, and accountability and continuous learning.

To establish the credibility and internal validity of the research, I employed triangulation as a powerful strategy to connect, synthesize, and interpret the phenomenological database. This involved identifying any recurring patterns, ideas, or characteristics shared by participants that reflected culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, or approaches related to socially just pedagogies. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained triangulation as a “powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity of your research” (p. 245).

In this study, I collected multiple data sources to gain insights into teachers’ perceptions of implementing a UDL framework for lesson planning. To facilitate triangulation, I cross-checked and reviewed the various data sets, which included pre-surveys, participants’ weekly reflections, and exit interviews. These diverse sources allowed for the triangulation of different frames of reference and the identification of specific patterns expressed by the teachers (Efron & Ravid, 2019).
Summary

Chapter 3 has outlined the phenomenological action research methodology as an approach that captures the perceptions of teachers employed in a public school district in northern New Jersey. The theories of culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning approaches, and community of practice were applied as guides for choosing the appropriate tools for data collection and as a criterion for data analysis. Using a UDL intervention model, this study sought to describe the beliefs and challenges educators face when implementing lesson plans that align with culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning.

Chapter 4 focuses on qualitative data analysis, starting with an examination of the responses from the pre-intervention survey. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the teachers' participants’ lived experiences and their unique lifeworlds. Furthermore, the analysis explores the intervention survey results and the initial discussions that took place during the early stages of the community of practice. These sections provide valuable insights into participants’ perspectives. The subsequent sections shift the focus to the identification of themes through the analysis of descriptive and reflective field notes from the observations of the community of practice.

Chapter 5 discusses an analysis of social justice education, providing a comprehensive exploration of its definition. The subsequent sections examine the relationship between social justice education and teacher agency, analyzing how the identified themes from the phenomenological action research align with the core components of the theoretical framework. This includes an in-depth discussion of their connections to concepts such as community of practice, culturally responsive teaching,
personalized learning, and UDL. By establishing these connections, this chapter offers valuable insights into the ways in which future research findings can contribute to the understanding and implementation of social justice education, shedding light on its significance for effective teaching practices.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological action research was to explore the ways participation in a community of practice impacts teachers’ views regarding culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and the UDL framework in the context of social justice education in a New Jersey public school. The underlying problem of practice for this study was detecting how teachers can effectively promote equity and inclusion in their classrooms despite the lack of training programs and process models that guide social justice advocacy in a localized setting. This study utilized a UDL intervention model as an instructional tool to explore teachers’ beliefs as well as the challenges they face when implementing lesson plans that align with culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study involved a comprehensive and interconnected approach encompassing four essential components: community of practice, culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL. The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of and commitment to social justice education?
2. How does participation in a community of practice shape teachers’ views of using culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning strategies to promote social justice education?
3. How does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of the Universal Design for Learning as an instructional tool to promote social justice education?

This chapter presents the results of the study, which investigated the impact of engagement in a community of practice on teachers’ beliefs and commitment to social justice education. This phenomenological action research study incorporated a range of data sources, including survey responses, descriptive and reflective researcher field notes, teacher reflections, and a final participant interview. The findings illustrate how, and to what extent, participation in the community of practice influenced the teachers’ views and dedication to social justice education.

The following sections center on qualitative data, starting with an analysis of the pre-intervention survey responses. To gain a deeper understanding of teachers’ lived experiences and their unique lifeworlds, I separately analyzed the intervention survey results and initial discourse within the first half of the community of practice. The subsequent sections shift the focus toward the emergence of themes identified through the analysis of descriptive and reflective field notes captured during the observations of the community of practice.

The final section synthesizes the phenomenological interpretations from both the reflections and the concluding interviews of the six participants who took part in the community of practice. The study’s analysis concludes with an overall summary of its findings and a comprehensive discussion addressing the research questions that guided the investigation.
Pre-intervention Survey

Responses to the pre-intervention survey served as a catalyst during the first community of practice session to prompt conversations about social justice in the context of the school setting. It was administered to the six participating teachers through Google Forms prior to the start of the community of practice. The initial survey data incorporated measurements from the Learning to Teach for Social Justice Belief Scale (LTSJ-B), which gauged participants’ attitudes toward social justice (Ludlow et al., 2008). As part of the pre-survey measures, questions were also selected from the Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey (Panorama Education, 2019) and the RAND Personalized Learning Survey (Pane et al., 2015). These questions served as prompts for initiating discussions at the start of the second and third community of practice sessions.

As seen in Table 4.1, the six participants were required to respond to statements by indicating their level of agreement, using a Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. In some instances, statements were positively worded and expressing strongly agree or agree indicated a stance supporting the promotion of equity, inclusivity, and social change in educational settings. Conversely, other statements were negatively worded and required strongly disagree or disagree to signal endorsement of the principles of social justice. Participants expressed strong agreement with positively worded statements that reflected their endorsement of beliefs related to social justice as seen in questions SJ1, SJ2, SJ4, and SJ7.

Answers to SJ1 and SJ2, and also SJ4 indicate that both collectively and individually, participants recognized the significance of self-reflection and self-awareness in addressing issues of diversity and equity in the classroom. On the other hand, there
Table 4.1 Pre-intervention Excerpts from LTSJ-B Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An important part of learning to be a teacher is examining one’s own attitudes and beliefs about race, class, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation. (SJ1)</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues related to racism and inequity should be openly discussed in the classroom. (SJ2)</td>
<td>XXXXXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the most part, covering multicultural topics is only relevant to certain subject areas, such as social studies and literature. (SJ3R)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good teaching incorporates diverse cultures and experiences into classroom lessons and discussions. (SJ4)</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The most important goal in working with immigrant children and English language learners is that they assimilate into American society. (SJ5R)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students who don't speak English as their first language. (SJ6R)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of the responsibilities of the teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities. (SJ7)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should teach students to think critically about government positions and actions. (SJ8)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom. (SJ9R)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although teachers have to appreciate diversity, it’s not their job to change society. (SJ10R)</td>
<td>XXXXXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether students succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work. (SJ11R)</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistically, the job of a teacher is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead. (SJ12R)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. X denotes the number of responses in that category.

were instances of disagreement among participants on items featuring negatively worded statements (SJ6R, SJ11R and S12R) for which a response of strongly disagree or disagree reflected teacher alignment with social justice principles. For instance, the participants in the study displayed a tendency to agree with the two most challenging statements on the scale, which are associated with the belief that individual hard work is
the primary factor in achieving academic success—by “inappropriately” agreeing with SJ6R, SJ11R and SJ12R.

As seen in Figure 4.1, in the section from the Panorama Equity and Inclusion, in which participants were asked about the frequency that they were encouraged to engage in deeper thinking about race-related matters within their school (A4) specifically in the cultural awareness and action domain (A3), 4 out of the 6 indicated almost never on the Likert scale. Furthermore, when asked about the frequency of opportunities for students to learn about individuals from diverse races (A6), participants’ responses varied from sometimes to once in a while with 4 out 6 responding sometimes and the remaining 2 with once in a while. When asked about the level of input they had in personalizing their own professional development opportunities (A5), 2 responded with some input, 2 with a little bit input, 1 with almost no input. Only one participant reported having a relatively higher level of input, stating quite a bit of input.

Figure 4.1 Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey
The survey results from the RAND Personalized Learning Survey revealed important insights about participants’ professional development experiences and their overall perspectives on their school environment. When asked about their familiarity with a variety of approaches to instructional delivery (B7), 4 out of the 6 responding *strongly agree* with 2 remaining *neutral*. Similarly, when asked the statement, “I am comfortable being myself at this school” (B10), 3 out of the 6 responded *strongly agree* and the remaining 3 answered *agreed*. Furthermore, there was a considerable level of agreement among participants regarding the following statements, with 4 out of the 6 teachers either strongly agreeing or agreeing: “My assessment methods include multiple ways for students to represent knowledge and skills and allow for attainment of outcomes at different points in time” (B6). Additionally, 5 out of the 6 teachers either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement, “the learning atmosphere is one in which students and teachers feel respected and connected (B8).”

Similarly, participants also answered with a range of responses, which includes responses of *strongly disagree* or *disagree*. Conversely, there were three areas where participants did not achieve unanimous agreement on the survey statements. When asked about the statement "Have helped me implement technology in my classroom," 3 out of 6 *disagreed*, 2 out of 6 teachers *agreed*, and 1 remained neutral (B2). Regarding the statement “teachers at this school, myself included, treat all students equitably and invite them to point out behaviors or practices that discriminate,” 3 out of the 6 teachers responded neutrally, 1 *disagreed* and 2 *agreed* (B13). Lastly, there were varying responses regarding whether professional development opportunities have effectively assisted teachers in implementing technology in their classrooms.
Overall, participants expressed agreement with statements related to certain aspects of their professional development. They agreed that colleagues were highly committed to the mission of enhancing student learning, with 3 out of 6 strongly agreed, and the remaining 3 out of 6 agreed (B5). Significantly, the surveys also highlighted a notable area of disagreement regarding professional development. Participants expressed negative responses to statements related to strategies for collaborating with students and families to develop instruction. Specifically, 2 out of 6 strongly disagreed, 3 out of 6 disagreed, and 1 participant agreed (B4).

Table 4.2 Pre-intervention Excerpts from RAND Personalized Learning Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1. Have been useful for improving any instruction.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2. Have helped me implement the technology used in my classroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3. Have helped me understand how to personalize goals for students.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4. Have addressed ways to collaborate with students and families to develop instruction.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5. Teachers at my school are highly focused on the mission of improving student learning.</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6. My assessment methods include multiple ways for students to represent knowledge and skills and allow for attainment of outcomes at different points in time.</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B7. Have familiarized myself with a variety of approaches to instructional delivery.</td>
<td>XXXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B8. The learning atmosphere is one in which students and teachers feel respected and connected.</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B9. I emphasized the human purpose of what is being learned and its relationship to the students' experience.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B10. I am comfortable being myself at this school.</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B11. My opinions are respected in this school.</td>
<td>XXXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B12. My voice matters in this school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B13. Teachers at this school, myself included, treat all students equitably and invite them to point out behaviors or practices that discriminate.</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. X denotes the number of responses in that category.
Pre-Survey Community of Practice Discourse

As part of this qualitative research, participants actively took part in a community of practice aimed at exploring various topics such as social justice education, culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL. The initial session of the community of practice was conducted in person, whereas the following sessions were held via Zoom. Throughout the program, participants were provided with a thoughtfully curated playlist containing relevant resources and scholarly materials related to social justice education. The playlist was designed to empower teachers by offering them the freedom to choose how much they wanted to read and learn about each topic, considering their individual time constraints.

Session 1

In the first session, Olivia was unable to attend in person due to family obligations, and Stella joined the session remotely via Zoom. Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties or issues related to remote access, Stella faced challenges in actively participating in the discussion. It is important to note that throughout the study, there were numerous occasions in which certain participants took up most of the conversation, overshadowing others. Occasionally, when participants joined a community of practice late, they remained silent for a significant portion of the discussion, possibly because they were unsure about the topic or due to a hesitancy to contribute. Consequently, the lack of participation from these individuals may have later resulted in limited or incomplete reflections.

The survey responses and discussions among the participants during the first community of practice revealed a level of confusion surrounding some principles of
social justice. This confusion undermines the vital role that teachers play in confronting stereotypes and advocating for equity and inclusivity within their classrooms. Furthermore, the survey suggested that not all participants fully grasped the implications of these items with regard to their role as educators. When questioned about their perspectives on the statements *Realistically, the job of a teacher is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead*, *Whether students succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work*, and *It’s reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students who don’t speak English as their first language*, there was a notable emphasis on discussing and addressing the former statements, expressing ambiguity and confusion among the participants. Conversely, there seemed to be little to no emphasis for the latter statement.

Natalie expressed her difficulty in comprehending the first statement stating, “I think I had a really hard time understanding what the questions was getting at. I guess I didn’t understand the question.” She clarified her confusion by asking the group if it implied a broad assumption or if they were indicating that they are specifically training students to work low-paying service industry jobs. She asked whether the question was suggesting that a student will only work at a place like McDonald's and not pursue any other career or opportunities. “I just didn't understand it, so I went back and forth.”

Likewise, Emily expressed that the survey statements “could be open to interpretation.” She also alluded to a distinction in perspective dependent on grade level teaching regarding the question, expressing, “I feel like there’s a big difference between a high school teacher and an elementary school teacher because you would be closer towards whatever adult life, they would lead than as an elementary school teacher.”
Gabriel’s understanding held a more somber note as he contemplated the possibility that a student’s life may be cut short, which influenced his understanding of the question. He reasoned that since the question referred to the life a student is most likely to lead, it would likely pertain to the student’s adult life rather than the entire lifespan. He explained, “I just thought of preparing for adult life, not necessarily putting anything onto it. That’s how I interpreted it when I read the question.”

In contrast, Ava took a broader approach, focusing on the overall life of a student and the potential impact of literacy education on a student’s adult life. For teachers in the early or primary education stages, there is a significant emphasis on developing the fundamental skill of reading. Ava expressed her belief that the teacher’s role goes beyond mere instruction; it encompasses preparing students for their future lives, setting them up for success, and empowering them to become lifelong learners:

I feel I'm giving them the building blocks in order for them to build up the ability to learn. I also feel like I have that ability to set them up for their life, because if they don’t know how to read, then they can’t read to learn.

**Session 2**

During the second session conducted via Zoom, two of the participants faced some challenges in actively engaging in the discussion, as they needed to be muted or were unable to participate due to their respective environments. The participants started a discussion based on the six questions taken from the Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey. The discussions began with statements derived from the survey, posing their level of agreement with statements such as “At your school, how often are you encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topic?” and “How often are students
given opportunities to learn about people from different races?” The survey results were in stark contrast with what most teachers expressed in the community of practice—further emphasizing the notion that it is essential for all educators to be open and willing to engage in meaningful conversations with their students, without being invasive or insensitive.

Stella's upbringing was shaped by her parents’ strong emphasis on diversity and inclusion. Stella recalls how they openly shared their own experiences growing up in a diverse urban environment. This exposure was valuable and led to different perspectives and backgrounds:

Now, I grew up totally different. My parents were very vocal about my dad growing up in [a city] and having different-colored-skin friends, and it was just amazing to see his perspective, and it’s always been that way and my mom the same way.

She went on to say that because of her background, she engages in conversations with parents from diverse backgrounds. Stella has also observed that some parents actively promote their cultures by sharing traditions, values, or customs with others. On the other hand, she shared her surprise to discover there are families who choose to conceal or downplay their cultural backgrounds. She also noted that the degree to which cultural expression is embraced or suppressed can vary within the school community. Ultimately, Stella expressed a sense of hope that progress has been toward cultural responsiveness and inclusivity:

But I still talk to parents with all different backgrounds, and they either push their culture on people, or they just kind of hide it. It’s very interesting to see where
[our community] is taken off some ways and where it still is. We just don’t really want to talk about certain things to open Pandora’s box of being just not secure our knowledge or just not being comfortable talking about it.

Gabriel also reflected on the concept of culturally responsive teaching, recalling one of the community of practice video resources. He recalled that culturally responsive teaching involves not only imparting knowledge to students but also actively engaging in a process of learning oneself, suggesting that in order to better connect with and meet the needs of their culturally diverse students, educators need to be open to conversation and dialogue. He stated that “teachers in general really need to be able to [be] open to having conversations with their students.” He expanded this notion by saying, “Teaching kids how to be respectful but also inquisitive and willing to learn about other people’s cultures, respecting them, and seeing all cultures as inherently valuable.”

 Agreeing with the sentiment of the group, Ava clarified her thoughts about having conversations with students:

 I think there’s so much political anguish and everything in the world right now, and we can have tough conversations . . . but to just share their opinion and share their opinion of the world . . . the way they see stuff. This is great because conversations can really blossom from there, and they don’t have to necessarily be tough ones but just about anything. And it’s okay to feel like that. People have different opinions . . . some kids just want to talk . . . maybe at home, they don’t feel like they just have a space to do that . . . and so creating a classroom environment where they can—that’s precious.
Session 3

In this session, Natalie joined the Zoom meeting late, causing her to miss the initial discussions. Meanwhile, Olivia participated remotely from a noisy public space, which imposed environmental limitations hindering her active participation. Nevertheless, she was still able to listen to the conversations taking place. In the context of the RAND Personalized Learning Survey, the topic of technology implementation in their classrooms and potential inconsistencies or gaps in the professional learning opportunities was not specifically addressed in their discussions. It should be noted that the responses to the RAND Personalized Learning Survey showed variation among participants when indicating their level of agreement with specific statements concerning their professional development experiences during the 2022-2023 school year. This variation led to discussions during the community of practice sessions, particularly focusing on two statements. The first statement addressed teachers treating all students equitably and inviting them to identify discriminatory behaviors or practices, and the second statement pertained to collaborating with students and families to develop instructional methods. It is worth noting that most participants expressed disagreement with the latter statement.

Emily opened the discussion by suggesting that "personalized learning is a good way to maybe incorporate social justice . . . make sure it’s happening in the classroom . . . maybe the vehicle for it." She also indicated a belief that certain aspects of personalized learning may have a stronger connection to social justice: "I also kind of feel maybe there’s specific areas of personalized learning maybe that help with social justice more...like the flexible path and pace part might allow kids to show their knowledge in a
way that’s unique to maybe their culture, their background, or how it might highlight social justice a little bit more." Additionally, she acknowledged the need for curriculum modifications to ensure a coherent and impactful implementation of personalized learning: "If you were truly doing personalized learning completely in a deep way, curriculum would have to change somehow," but she was skeptical that "they’re going to completely overhaul curriculum enough in any kind of short period of time to incorporate that."

A couple of the teachers voiced their agreement with Emily’s sentiment. For instance, Ava stated that “if we’re really going to take this in, then maybe we need a program that’s going to do it.” Stella added that perhaps certain efforts to address cultural diversity and inclusion in the classroom may come across as superficial or merely fulfilling a checklist:

> It sounds like a check off sheet, let’s do a cultural fair or talk about your background for the day. But if it came up in a natural conversation, I feel like the kids would express themselves in a genuine way and I feel like there would be really intent listeners.

The teachers delved deeper into the topic and the challenge of identifying the specific skills students lack, making it difficult to provide them with the necessary support. Ava acknowledged that she is constantly customizing their learning experience every day to meet their individual needs, but it’s quite challenging. More importantly, Ave confidently emphasized her beliefs on the importance of reading skills and saw the lack of reading ability as a significant social injustice, saying, "I feel like reading is the biggest social injustice. These kids never learn how to read." She expressed the difficulty
of personalizing learning and goal setting for students who may not even be aware of what skills they lack. She agrees with the need for personalized learning within the curriculum, but she adds that “I think it’s more important for me to teach kids to read than it is for me to personalize their learning.”

Ava openly shared her struggles with prioritizing personalized learning in her teaching approach. She expressed that she tries to incorporate personalized learning in the classroom, but finds it more feasible during activities such as group projects or when co-teaching. She expressed her challenges in striking a balance between structured literacy instruction and incorporating personalized learning in different instructional contexts:

I have a hard time with personalized learning just kind of being the focus of where I am as a teacher and really doing structured literacy. I try really hard to incorporate it in sixth grade. I think it more so happens when and we’re doing group projects, maybe when I’m co-teaching, but it’s not as much in a small group. It’s a struggle . . . and I think I’m really hard on myself. I’m such a “Type-A” personality because I feel like I have to do it.

Furthermore, Gabriel actively discussed the importance of establishing strong connections with students and their families. He has language skills that present the opportunity to connect with students in their native language (i.e., he knows how to speak Spanish). Gabriel expressed his belief that this is a valuable chance to bridge the cultural gap and create connections with students:

I have an opportunity to connect with them in a language that they speak at home, and [the students] think this is maybe, I’ll speak English in school and Spanish at
home. I have the opportunity for these kids to reach out to them in school in their native language.

Emily raised a concern about the lack of clarity from administration in defining what is deemed acceptable, stating, “What’s acceptable? What’s not acceptable? And I think, especially in elementary school, more teachers are worried about parent repercussions when teaching about these things.” Ava challenged people’s fears of getting into trouble by highlighting how taking risks can lead to positive outcomes and rewards:

I think if we do take those risks . . . I think we’ll see that we won’t get in trouble for them, but maybe actually be praised for them. I think people are just so afraid. [Administration is] giving us the opportunity . . . I actually do think they’re giving us grace to fail a little bit and try the things but understanding that we can’t do it all.

Exploring Lifeworld Experiences Through Themes

Within the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus is on understanding how a specific phenomenon reveals itself and is experienced within the lifeworlds of individuals, rather than solely examining the individuals themselves (Neubauer et al., 2019). The aim of hermeneutic phenomenology is to explore how an individual’s lifeworld, which includes a person’s inherent, pre-reflective understanding of the world, shapes and influences that person’s overall experience. The community of practice was the phenomenon that brought educators from the district together to participate in discussions focused on social justice approaches. This collaborative space serves as a platform for individuals to explore and interpret how social justice issues
manifest. It also highlighted the interconnectedness between the lifeworlds of educators and the broader community, emphasizing a comprehensive understanding of these issues.

To explore both the lived experiences and lifeworld of the participants in this study, a traditional method of coding was employed, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Alase (2017) presented a thorough framework outlining the procedures employed in IPA for interviews. In the present study, the application of IPA is expanded to encompass not only the interview dialogue but also the participants’ reflections.

The initial step involved a careful reading of the responses to identify common themes through recurring words, phrases, and ideas. During this preliminary step, the audio recordings and field notes from the community of practice sessions were reviewed to uncover emergent themes among teachers engaging in discussions about social justice pedagogy. This approach allowed for a broader understanding of the interactions within the community and provided valuable insights into participants’ understanding of their lifeworlds. Through this methodical coding process, the data were categorized into four overarching themes:

1. Recognition and validation of inclusive, socially just pedagogies
2. Fostering good human and nurturing collaborative relationships with families
3. Promoting openness, collaboration, and empowering culturally diverse voices
4. Accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management

These themes highlighted how a community of practice strengthened participants’ confidence in their ability to utilize culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning to promote social justice education. By fostering an environment of inclusive voices and diverse perspectives, participants were able to draw upon collective
experiences, challenge existing perceptions, and develop expertise to navigate the nuances of social justice education within their lifeworlds.

In the following sections, I will present the findings according to these emergent themes derived from the participants’ dialogue within the community of practice sessions, individual reflections, and interviews. This organization allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the lived and lifeworld experiences of teachers, revealing valuable insights into the complex dynamics of teaching, learning, and the wider educational landscape. The themes also incorporated the voices of teachers to authentically capture their personal experiences and narratives.

**Recognition and Validation of Inclusive, Socially Just Pedagogies**

Throughout the community of practice sessions, teacher reflections, and interviews, the recurring theme of recognition and validation emerged. Teachers expressed their unwavering commitment to incorporating more inclusive socially just practices. The participants emphasized the significance of building strong relationships with students and actively engaging in reflective practices. Furthermore, they recognized their experiences in the world and their perception of the effectiveness of teaching methods or approaches. Likewise, the teachers also acknowledged ineffective practices or uncertainties within strategies, whether they proved successful or unsuccessful. In particular, they recognized a strong connection between social justice principles, their personal belief systems, and the methods they were already implementing in their teaching.

For instance, Ava emphasized the significance of relationships in social justice advocacy and expressed her awareness of the limited presence of non-Christian teachers.
She acknowledged her responsibility to make Jewish students feel comfortable and supported, drawing on her own lived experiences. She stated that, “I used to work in an urban public school—I get it.” Additionally, Ava acknowledged the scarcity of non-Christian teachers and recognized her duty in ensuring a welcoming environment for Jewish students, stating, "I always make sure that they know that I’m Jewish. You can feel comfortable talking to me.” Ava also shared her experience working with low-income students, emphasizing her ability to connect with them by mentioning, "If your mom makes tamales, I can make that connection.” In her view, building relationships is fundamental to her approach to teaching.

Emily agreed with Ava’s perspective and provided an example of a strategy she utilizes during morning meetings. This approach allows for organic discussions and opportunities to address social justice topics within the classroom. Emily explained, “I like using morning meeting a lot to either have conversations with the kids or do different activities. Sometimes things kind of come up organically, whether it’s conversation or something we’re reading.”

Likewise, Gabriel acknowledged the value of using personal experience to build relationships with students who speak Spanish as their primary language at home:

I have a good number of kids who do speak Spanish at home, and it’s their first language. I have the opportunity [with] these kids to reach out to them in school in their native language. And it goes back to what you said about creating connections. They feel like they could always probably come talk to you then. It’s a great feeling.
Emily expressed her support for Gabriel’s strategy by recognizing that even children whose primary language is English can grasp the significance of acquiring fluency in another language such as Spanish. “And I feel like that also shows the kids where English is their first language, they can fluently speak Spanish too, if they want to. It’s great for all the kids.”

Gabriel stated that although he had an intuitive understanding of personalized learning approaches and their connections with social justice, seeing them articulated and discussed clearly was enlightening:

It was quite interesting how personalized learning connected to social justice education. Social justice education sort of connected to having students be really in control of their own education, which again, linked back to social justice and again linked back to personalized learning. It was all interconnected. It was something that I didn’t think about, but it’s something that I kind of knew intuitively, but it was cool to sort of see it written out and then spoken about in such clear terms.

The teachers also discussed the significance of engaging in conversations with students regarding specific topics or issues and emphasized that without such interactions, people often overlook or deny the presence of certain elements. For instance, within the schools, individuals tend to adhere to particular norms or stereotypes linked to the community. Ava shared her reflection about a story called “The Proudest Blue,” which is read to students in class. Ava expressed her admiration for the narrative that revolved around a courageous girl who wore a hijab and faced instances of ridicule. She also affirmed her belief that genuine understanding emerges through open dialogue and
the acceptance of diverse perspectives. Recognizing the consequences of evading important conversations, Ava acknowledged the persistence of issues within various communities:

I might ask [the students] why do you wear a [hijab]? We’re trying to teach kids to understand each other, but if you don’t understand each other, the only way you’ll ever be able to understand people is by asking questions. I think it’s by accepting everyone in. I think it’s okay to ask questions. On Saturday was the International Day of Heat against Jewish people [which encourages] antisemitic things to happen by a White supremacist group. If we don’t talk about these things. Whether it’s a hijab, whether it’s an antisemitic thing. If we just let things happen and don’t discuss them, things are going to repeat themselves because they are on a daily basis in the Jewish community, in the Black community, in the Hispanic community, in the Muslim community.

Emily expressed her thoughts on the book as well as the broader topic of girls wearing hijabs, recognizing the significance of engaging in thoughtful conversations and asking questions:

I thought about the fact that it doesn’t say at what age the girls start wearing them, but I was thinking and wondering so girls wear them in elementary school? That is why I believe it’s crucial to ask people who have more knowledge on the subject. I don’t claim to be an expert in this area.

More importantly, teachers also expressed the value of recognizing and validating students’ authentic lived experiences through conversations. Olivia contributed by highlighting how teachers can demonstrate their appreciation for the diverse backgrounds
and perspectives of their students by recognizing the process of cultural adaptation and assimilation within families. The emphasis is on fostering inclusive and empathetic conversations.

To address Emily’s curiosity about the age at which girls typically start wearing hijabs, Olivia conducted a Google search and uncovered that girls between the ages of 7 to 12 often choose to wear either white or black hijabs. Reflecting on her past experiences and existing knowledge, Olivia acknowledged the possibility that girls might opt not to wear hijabs at all, depending upon the factions within their groups. Olivia shared with the other teachers about the existence of certain cultures choosing to assimilate aspects of American culture. Drawing from her understanding of the subject, Olivia speculated that individuals of Asian descent may adopt American names, as they could be simpler for Americans to pronounce and use. Olivia clarified that it is better to not shy away from discussions or overlook or deny subjects; rather, educators should advocate for conversations about these topics:

It’s important to have those discussions because if you don’t have them, then we pretend like it doesn’t exist. I found that people [in this town] conform to the norm or the stereotypical person.

Stella supported the discussion about cultural adaptation with her personal experiences growing up in a predominately White community. She also expressed uncertainty about certain aspects, such as the popularity of hijabs among children.

Over the last 5 to 10 years, that has definitely adapted and changed, because I know when I was in school it was pretty much all White. You conformed to whatever the stereotypical role was with one mom, stay at home mom, typically,
and then dad working in the city or wherever, and it was closed minded. When we were in school a long time ago, we didn’t talk about any of it.

Emily agreed, by sharing experiences in school, explaining that there was a lack of exposure to reading books from different cultures. Nevertheless, she believes that progress has been made since then:

[We did not] read books from different cultures. I feel we’ve moved the needle, since when I was in school. I am hopeful that things will improve and be more culturally responsive. I also don’t feel like I always have to write a ton in a lesson plan to make it a great lesson. I just feel like a lot of it is a part of best practices. We always give kids choice.

Gabriel further elaborated on his personal experiences and expressed the belief that socially just educators should prioritize addressing existing prejudices instead of merely teaching children about other cultures. He emphasized the importance of teaching children to be respectful, curious, and open-minded in their pursuit of knowledge. His concern lies in the fact that if misconceptions are allowed to solidify, it becomes difficult and time-consuming to unlearn them:

[We emphasize] existing prejudices instead of teaching kids how to be respectful, instead of being inquisitive and willing to learn about other people’s cultures, respecting them, and seeing all cultures as inherently valuable. A lot of it is a work in progress, but the issue is, if you let misconceptions like calcify, it takes so long to unlearn. I’m speaking from experience when I say that there are some things that I thought about cultures which are not my own, that I later found to be untrue.
The teachers also recognized their use of inclusive instructional approaches. Ava emphasized the importance of educators looking within themselves and engaging in self-reflection regarding their beliefs and actions. Although she recognizes and values the use of UDL as an inclusive approach, she acknowledged the potential differences that may exist within the broader educational community:

But the UDL stuff, it didn’t really mean as much to me, in all honesty, because we’re already doing it along with personalized learning. We’re already doing this. How many more things do we need to add? I really enjoyed the social justice part and really reflecting myself and about all of you and seeing that this is like a core group of people who really care about people’s social justice, but it might not be the makeup of the entire district.

Based on her own experience with inclusive practices, Emily expressed her firm belief that lesson plans do not necessarily need to conform to a specific format or framework. She affirmed that when it comes to inclusive practice, she recognizes the value of incorporating key components of UDL into her lessons. She explained, “I think in general lesson plans don’t necessarily need to be written a certain way or a certain framework. But I think no matter what kind of lesson plan I would write . . .I think there are certain aspects of the UDL I would definitely use.”

Stella agreed that a more successful implementation approach would involve the school district providing suggested elements or questions for inclusion in lesson plans instead of enforcing a rigid format. This sentiment highlights an overall emphasis on empowering teachers and advocating for flexibility in educational practices. The belief expressed is that granting teachers the freedom to choose their own lesson plans and
formats, rather than imposing strict guidelines, can lead to enhanced effectiveness, autonomy, and decision-making power for teachers. Stella explained further:

The big push 5 years ago was to have an essential question. But if the district were to say, “hey here are some things to try in a few of your lesson plans,” or “just make sure you have a few in your lesson plan,” I think that would go far, right? Rather than saying, “you have to do this format.” I think that’s when you get the pushback from the teachers. A power of choice with the teachers goes a long way as well.

In a candid moment, Gabriel acknowledged the difficulty he faces when it comes to lesson planning within the context of inclusive practices. He openly shared, “Whether it’s the UDL framework or backwards by design, writing lesson plans itself is definitely something that I kind of find challenging to do.” Despite the challenges Gabriel faced, Natalie agreed with his utilization of inclusive practice to encourage students to become more aware of each other’s backgrounds, viewpoints, and perspectives. She also shared in his perspective in the transformative potential of personalized learning as a catalyst for social justice, cultural exploration, and the cultivation of respectful conversations among students with diverse viewpoints. Both teachers once again emphasizing again how personalized learning can be used to promote social justice by helping to empower students to take charge of their learning and explore their own cultural backgrounds.

Finally, the teachers affirmed the effectiveness of their inclusive practices through their reflective observations. Emily wrote about her *The Proudest Blue* class discussion during a community of practice session. She found affirmation and connection with Ava’s perspective regarding the possibility that teachers could potentially ask offensive
or insensitive question during their discussion of the book. Emily integrated this newfound knowledge into her teaching approach, adding a valuable layer to her lesson:

What I was most excited to get out of the group’s last session, was what [Ava] was sharing about how teachers [should] ask questions after reading, *The Proudest Blue*. I could totally understand where [Ava] was coming from and [how we need to be aware of] offensive or a sensitive way to start discussing the topic.

She then wrote about how she was able to have a better discussion with students. She encouraged her students to share their thoughts and feelings about the book, fostering a climate of inclusivity and social justice. Emily’s enthusiasm for learning from diverse cultures reflects and commitment to promoting social justice. This was exemplified by having a discussion after reading *The Proudest Blue*. She believed that teachers could encompass real-life connections to the narrative:

I told them that I hoped they would really speak up and maybe even lead the discussion since this was not a topic I am an expert in, but I had a feeling some of them knew about it. [While] I was telling them this, one of my students chimed in that she knew about hijabs, and I let her know that is what I thought, and I hoped she would share her knowledge after we read the story.

In one of Emily’s other reflections, she identified elements or practices that were discussed during the community of practice sessions on the same topic. She wrote that “as I am learning about all these different [topics], I do see things that I already do which is exciting because I really do want to provide the best education for all my students.” Additionally, Emily reflected on the positive experiences she has had with her students,
particularly their willingness to engage in open and respectful discussions, which further inspires her in her role as an educator.

Additionally, Stella wrote about the significance of UDL, and specifically highlighted the importance of incorporating idioms to support students whose native language is not English, helping them grasp the subtleties of language. Stella reflected that her approach was validated when another teacher within the community of practice had affirmed using idioms as a strategic method. In her reflection on UDL she said, “If we could break down a lesson and then highlight all the components, because I think good teachers already do a lot of these elements [it would be helpful].” She also wrote that, overall, “I am learning a lot about social justice and UDL. I find that my peers have similar views that we are all trying our best to accommodate everyone, but it is challenging.

Similarly, in Gabriel’s reflection on UDL, he referenced his own inclusive teaching practice and acknowledged that he has already been incorporating certain activities and elements that promote socially just practices:

When it comes to creating lessons, I realized in my own practice I had incorporated some of these activities and parts of this framework in my own classrooms. I do provide different methods of communication, especially when it comes to getting the new vocabulary or syntax.

In his reflection, he recognized culturally responsive teaching as an inclusive approach. He shared that through his conversations with his colleagues and their personal experiences in the community of practice, he was able to get a sense of both successful and unsuccessful examples of its implementations. He remarked in his reflection that he
“was able to hear again from my colleagues and their own personal experiences with regard to culturally responsive teaching, what they saw or what they’ve seen done that did work and what they’ve seen that did not work.” In another reflection piece, Gabriel elaborated that he came to the realization that he had unconsciously incorporated certain aspects of culturally responsive teaching into his practices, which he attributed to the nature of his role as a world language teacher:

Although I did gain a lot of valuable insight into practices for being a more culturally responsive teacher including how to create a classroom that is culturally responsive, which I think I’ve been [already] doing that. I do have an advantage of being a world language teacher. Inherently, I think I do need to be culturally responsive.

Similarly, Ava justified under her UDL reflection piece that despite being a beginner in self-reflection, she has “consistently ensured accessibility for all students and implemented various methods to engage them. In my teaching approach, students are offered ample choices and autonomy, including the use of choice boards, games, and manipulatives.” Correspondingly, Olivia’s reflection also affirmed the community of practice’s belief that implementing flexible learning pathways as an inclusive practice can be a challenging task, even for motivated teachers. She suggested that it might have previously been less intimidating for teachers to embrace flexible learning because parents were less likely to assign blame to teachers and schools. Olivia’s wrote the following in her reflection:

I have to agree with the community of practice discussion that flexible pathways of learning are very hard for teachers to implement. I feel there is too much
pressure from the district and state to allow such control to students. Perhaps years ago, it would be less scary as parents then didn’t blame the teachers and school on all things.

Teachers also recognized their inclusive practices in their interviews. Emily reiterated how the community of practice topics were already in line with her personal beliefs and values. She stated that she “felt like a lot of [these] things I already believed in. I must be doing a good job, because these [ideas] are part of my views.” In Stella’s interview, when asked about the impact of the community of practice on her understanding of socially just teaching, she described how it had heightened her awareness of her own practices. She expressed, “I think it just made me aware of what I am doing and confirms that I’m doing [it].”

During Gabriel’s interview, he was asked if he could describe his understanding of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning, and how they relate to social justice education:

I would say personalized learning is the most important out of all of them. You can’t have [social justice and culturally responsive teaching], without personalized learning. Almost everything I do, or at least I attempt to do, is based on personalizing instruction.

He described his overall inclusive approach in the interview by saying, “I’m very project based. I’m very collaboration based. The arrangement of desks in my classroom is specifically designed to facilitate student connections, communication, and meaningful conversations.” Gabriel stated in the final community of practice that, although students
had an intuitive understanding of these connections, seeing them articulated and discussed clearly was enlightening and enjoyable:

It was quite interesting how personalized learning connected to social justice education. Social justice education sort of connected to having students be really in control of their own education, which again, linked back to social justice and again linked back to personalized learning. It was all interconnected. And also, it was something that I didn’t think about, but it’s something that I kind of knew intuitively, but it was cool to sort of see it written out and then spoken about in such clear terms.

Olivia conveyed that she had already made a commitment toward inclusivity by cultivating safer spaces and classrooms which facilitate open dialogue among her students despite not currently having her own classroom. She clarified this by stating that “during my student teaching experience, I was already using the UDL format in all of my lessons.” She explained that it became second nature over time: “it’s like training my brain to think in that manner. That’s how I kind of see the UDL.”

Finally, in Natalie’s interview she utilized one of the templates for UDL resources given at the start of the community of practice as a foundation and expounded upon it. She explained that it was helpful because she was incorporating many of the strategies and practices that she had already implemented. She stated that she “actually took one of your templates and just ran with it and kind of inserted a lot of the stuff that I was already doing and then tried to modify based on opportunities for engagement, representation, and expression.” Additionally, when Natalie was asked how helpful the community of practice had been in her understanding of social justice advocacy, she explained that “I
think it has made me more courageous in my advocacy, in that sometimes when you’re an advocate, you can feel alone standing up and standing out.” She clarified that being part of a collective that affirms her beliefs has contributed to her increase in confidence: Knowing and having it reaffirmed with what is actually right and what educators are actually about, we are for our students, is empowering. And so I feel like my confidence for social justice and advocating for that has increased through the strength in numbers.

**Fostering Good Humans and Nurturing Collaborative Relationships with Families**

The theme of nurturing good human beings was communicated repeatedly throughout the community of practice sessions, individual reflections, and interviews. Teachers discussed the necessity of becoming better human beings themselves, even amidst conflicts, in order to effectively educate children throughout the year. The teachers engaged in thoughtful discussions surrounding social justice education and its connection to the concept of racism. In line with the theme of collaboration with families, Emily emphasized the importance of working together with parents and families; however, she expressed her belief that instilling values of empathy and compassion in children should not be solely reliant on parents and families. She stated, “I don’t think you can rely on the parents and the families to teach [children] how to be good humans.” She elaborated on her thoughts when prompted within the group to provide further clarification regarding her beliefs:

Whether it’s originally meant to be a teacher’s job or not, I do think it is important for teachers to teach the children to be good humans. And that does start at any grade. I think there’s always aspects to all of this stuff that you can
teach the kids. Families don’t do that. I think not all families teach their children the things that they should or the right things. I think that it’s important that they’re exposed at school.

The teachers explored the importance of engaging in meaningful conversations about empathy with their students. Emily contended that it is crucial to create avenues for open and direct dialogue on significant topics, fostering empathy and compassion in order to cultivate individuals who exemplify goodness. She stated that “sometimes I think it is not necessarily about continuing on with the lesson, but to have different conversations with the kids that are more in depth and trying to again, build those good humans.”

The growing sentiment amongst the teachers in the study is that in today’s world, there are differing opinions that lead to parental conflict, and this only increases the importance of explicitly teaching students to be compassionate and empathic. During the second session of the community of practice discussion on culturally responsive teaching, Ava passionately argued her points with a sense of frustration:

It's just so scary when you think about what’s happening in the world right now, because people are saying when you look at teachers, they are trying to put all of these ideologies onto our kids. We’re trying to teach them to be good humans. We’re trying to teach them about history and what happened, but that doesn’t mean that we’re going to take away that history. No, we’re just trying to make them better people.

In another conversation, the group discussed a news event involving an active shooter who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Ava expressed her agreement
with the community of practice’s perspective on fostering empathy, emphasizing that incidents like these highlight the significance of embracing diversity. Ava shared that she had recently read the news article about the school shooting, and it profoundly disturbed her. She emphasized the importance of promoting acceptance and teaching individuals to be compassionate, stating, “just before our conversation or the start of this meeting, I came across the article and it deeply troubled me. I think a lot of it is for people to be more accepting, as we said, teaching people to be good humans.”

Natalie suggested that instead of emphasizing designated months, fostering acceptance and promoting the values of being good humans should be prioritized throughout the entire year. By actively recognizing and understanding the experiences of others, and practicing empathy toward one another, educators can contribute significantly to the overall well-being of society:

What there should be no emphasis on. We shouldn’t have a Black History Month. We shouldn’t have a Women’s History Month, because every month should be [integrated]. Human beings have that naturally occurring. There’s a whole subset and maybe a majority of human beings who don’t have that connection to other human beings. There’re other human beings on the face of the planet besides you, and it’s time that you acknowledge them. And that’s kind of an unfortunate social condition I think we live in.

Continuing along the same theme, the group revisited the questions posed in the initial survey regarding their roles as educators in effecting societal change. Natalie further commented on the pressure that educators face in balancing their own convictions about what is best with the constraints imposed upon them:
I completely understand the pressures that educators are under in order to execute what they believe is best, but also, they are affected by constraints such as curricula, such as the climate of the town they teach in, or even their own beliefs as human beings about what’s right and what’s not.

The parental conflict that Natalie commented on refers to the challenges faced by educators when trying to balance their personal convictions about what they believe is best for their students with the various constraints placed upon them. These constraints may include the prescribed curriculum they must follow, the attitudes in the community in which they teach, or even their personal beliefs about what is morally justifiable. Educators often find themselves in situations in which they must navigate these conflicting forces, which can create tension and dilemmas.

For instance, Natalie recounted a local news story and shared an incident of racial discrimination or unequal treatment involving two students. In the context of a high-school discussion about this event, her students delved into the diverse ways people communicate based on their cultural backgrounds. Natalie expressed her desire to have more opportunities to engage the students in conversations about family conflicts. She believed that such collaborative discussions with families would have been valuable for her teaching practice and would have provided her students with insights into the various ways families handle and communicate information. She stated that it would have “enlightened my students on different ways that different families handle information.” More importantly, Natalie addressed the need for further clarity as to how to address families to avoid issues in communication:
I wish I had spent more time with the whole class discussing, maybe breaking into small groups and discussing, how do you converse with your family members? And is it okay for you to interrupt? Or do you politely listen until the last moment that the person finished speaking?

In a final community of practice session, Ava argued that by teaching individuals to be good human beings and promoting acceptance of others, they will not harbor prejudice or discriminate against people based on their identities. Her emphasis is on starting this education from a young age to instill a mindset of inclusivity and embracing diversity:

If you can teach someone to be a good human and teach them to accept people, then they’re not going to be going after people because of who they are. When we’re really teaching them from a young age that we embrace everybody. I think if we don’t set that standard from Pre-K, we’re setting these kids up to become these extremists.

Overall, the teachers discussed the challenges they face and the diverse viewpoints they encounter while teaching children about certain subjects, particularly cultural differences and the integration of world and local news into their education. The discussions fueled their commitment to inclusive learning for their students, as Emily explained succinctly:

I feel like if we don’t, as teachers, appreciate diversity and also try to help future generations [to] appreciate diversity as well, we can’t move in the right direction. I think it’s important for parents to do it as well, but I think it’s important for teachers to be doing it.
The teachers also expressed the importance of nurturing good humans and collaborating with families in their weekly reflections. In Olivia’s first written reflection, she responded to a discussion about creating good humans and acknowledged that altering the home environment for students is beyond the ability of teachers:

Personally, my parents never explicitly taught me about any of this. I learned from some school teachings, but mostly from personal experience. We cannot change what is going on at home for our students, however, we can give them a chance to learn this at school and at least give them the information to make their own choice as they grow.

Oliva later clarified in another written reflection that it is easier for people to talk about disabilities and the visible differences, rather than addressing invisible differences such as linguistic nuances or variations in speech volume. There is hesitation among some individuals to approach these topics, and parents may be increasingly concerned about the information their children are exposed to at a young age. Parent may prefer to shield their children from news about the world and local events, which makes it difficult to incorporate certain information into children’s education. Olivia explained, “I think for me, a lot of times, I kind of approach the topics based on trying to get my students to kind of share their personal experiences with their culture and what their family does.”

Similarly, in one of her earlier reflections, Ava elaborated that she is someone who values acceptance of others, but that it is worth considering that adults sometimes burden children with expectations beyond their years. It might be beneficial for adults to work on their own attitudes alongside urging young people to do the same. She expressed
concern that children are absorbing messages from their parents that endorse viewing others as different:

I’m also petrified that these kids are learning from their parents that it’s ok to see others as different. We all need to accept everyone as they are, how we get there I’m not totally sure, but that’s the direction we need to move towards.

In their interviews, the teachers also stressed the significance of nurturing children to become good humans and the value of collaborating with parents. When asked during her interview if she could “describe her understanding of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning and its relationship to social justice education,” Ava remarked on the need for a shift in focus toward prioritizing the well-being and development of children:

I think it’s just becoming more aware and thinking kind of about the view that everyone in the country has about educators and realizing really what’s important is the kids and making good humans. And we’re not doing that right now because there’s so many things that we’re not focusing on.

On the other hand, Olivia stated that she believes that parents can sometimes be resistant to certain topics being taught to their children. She specifically mentions a situation in which parents expressed discomfort with a lesson she taught about the events of September 11, 2001. Olivia explained that dealing with parental concerns can be challenging, especially considering the different grade levels they teach:

I talked about 9/11 one time and parents were actually mad that I talked about it.

When I was teaching fifth grade [the parents thought] that was inappropriate. I’m
assuming a racial topic would also be something that a lot of parents would fight back at.

Olivia spoke about how her children’s school district is proactive in addressing certain issue or topics, whereas other districts may not be as open:

My kids’ school district is very forward about it. We have support. We have counselors. It’s kind of interesting to see how we can hide from it while [others] step forward into it. [Other districts] don’t want to have to deal with the parents because parents don’t want kids to learn about that [or it could] also be grade level, my kids are middle school and high school.

In another interview, Emily explored the impact of personal biases and how they can be shaped by one’s upbringing and exposure to diverse perspectives. Specifically, a lack of diversity can lead to a narrow view of the world and potentially reinforce stereotypes or misconceptions. She explained how upbringing influences values and beliefs, specifically highlighting the significance of instilling the importance of being a good person:

I’m sure there’s biases [that] I don’t realize I have, but [how] I was raised it was really important to be a good person. I was always kind of exposed to different people, even if it was only a little bit, because [where] I grew up there was only one Black family. There were some Asian families, but throughout the different experiences [for example] I went to sleep away camp, I met different people there. I would do other different camps that my parents would sign me up for to keep me busy in the summer. I would meet different people there. When I watched TV as a kid, I watched shows that were not just White families.
In Stella’s interview, when asked “how helpful was the community practice in your understanding of social justice advocacy?” she expressed a desire for a more dynamic and diverse exchange of ideas within the community. To cultivate good human beings, it is essential as teachers to encourage open dialogue, challenge assumptions, and engaging in constructive disagreement:

I think it was hard because there’s no one contradicting anyone. I think that’s hard for me because we’re all yessing each other. I feel that our goal [is that] we’re being better people, better advocates, and everything like that.

**Promoting Openness, Partnerships, and Empowerment of Culturally Diverse Voices**

The community of practice, reflections, and interviews consistently emphasized the promotion of openness, collaboration, and the empowerment of culturally diverse voices. For instance, Ava shared genuine surprise when discussing collaboration and the varying levels of contribution among colleagues. She expressed the belief that genuine collaboration requires collective work and effort to foster an environment where everyone can contribute their best. Ava explained, “It was just really interesting hearing peoples’ true perspective about their feelings about their colleagues, but it takes real collaboration and work to form collaboration in order for people to give everything.”

The teachers commended the group for their openness and transparency, which fostered a strong sense of partnership and acceptance among them, based on their shared perspectives. It is important to note that openness extends beyond being open-minded; it encompasses a willingness to take risks and embrace new ideas. The teachers deeply valued the collective voice of unity, recognizing the power derived from coming together
to exchange their thoughts and ideas. Conversely, they were also aware that beyond their community, there seemed to be limitations to their openness.

Emily highlighted the importance of promoting openness with families. She shared that developing a culture of inclusivity becomes challenging when children’s parents exhibit closed-mindedness or fail to teach them about acceptance and love for all, aligning with the community of practice’s emphasis on the theme of cultivating good human beings. She believes that if children aren't brought up in an environment that fosters open-mindedness at home or aren't instilled with certain values, they will face difficulties in understanding concepts of diversity and acceptance when they attend school. Emily’s perspective is that this disconnect has a historical presence in the United States, particularly within our educational institutions.

During a discussion between Emily and Ava, both individuals were exploring the concepts of being open and being flexible. Ava shared that it is not always about the importance of incorporating phonics and language arts instruction in her teaching approach. She acknowledged the equal importance of empowering culturally diverse students to connect with the material on a personal level and to see their own experiences and identities represented in the books they read. By encouraging students to find books that represent who they are, Ava is able to develop inclusion, belonging, and students’ personal connection to the literature:

It's not always [whether] they know the sound of /tch/? It’s important for them to see themselves in books. I want them to find a book at home that represents who they are.
In the same discussion, the group engaged in a meaningful dialogue regarding the importance of collaboration with students and their families. Several teachers shared their reflections, highlighting that during their own time in school, there was a lack of open discussions on various topics. Gabriel emphasized the need for teachers to be open and collaborative, stating that they should be both capable and willing to engage in meaningful conversations with their students. He explained that teachers should be open-minded and receptive to fostering meaningful dialogues with their students. He stated that as a “world language teacher in the middle school, I love that part of it. And I think teachers in general need to really be more able and open to having conversations with their students.”

Ava also added to this conversation by highlighting the need for teachers to be open and honest with their students. Openness and honesty in communication between teachers and students improve the overall quality of interactions. By being open and honest, teachers demonstrate a willingness to listen to their students’ perspectives, ideas, and feedback:

I have one student this year who has ADHD, and I have also struggled with behavior as a child. I explained to them I know what you’re going through. I really get it. I think it’s been a really powerful experience for me to be open and honest with the kids. I really never had to before, but I just felt so many kids are struggling with it, and especially now with how these kids are acting, they’re, like, lost.

On the contrary, Ava added that she perceives this school community as being conservative or traditional, where people avoid discussing certain topics due to fear of
getting into trouble or facing negative consequences for saying the “wrong thing.” This lack of open conversation leads to a culture of reluctance to openly address important matters and a hesitancy to engage in discussions that might be deemed too controversial or sensitive:

I feel like we’re a proper district. I feel like a lot of people just don’t talk about things because they feel they’ll get in trouble if they say the wrong thing. They don’t want to get in trouble. I feel like conversations just don’t happen very much in [our community] because everyone’s trying to protect themselves.

Overall, Emily summed up the openness of the community of practice. She expressed appreciation for the opportunities they have had to engage in various activities and discussions. She discussed the value of having a space where teachers could connect with one another, learn from each other, and gain a deeper understanding of their own teaching practices:

The things that we’ve done is really nice to feel like we have an open space to talk and explore and just kind of get to know other people better, get to know maybe ourselves better as teachers and just kind of have space to.

Stella agreed with Emily about her experience within the group and acknowledged that they were challenged in ways which she was not accustomed:

Yeah, I was thinking that, too, that this group challenged me, and I’m not really used to that. I do have a lot of flexibility in my classroom So, when we had to create a lesson, I was well [thinking] I could do anything.

In their reflections, teachers expressed the importance of fostering openness and collaboration, as well as empowering culturally diverse voices. Stella wrote about her
appreciation for the group’s openness and shared her aspiration to spread the knowledge she had gained. She pondered ways to encourage greater open-mindedness by questioning, “How can we eventually spread the knowledge we gained . . . to help staff be a little more open minded in their thoughts and actions?” Stella wrote, “I was raised with an open mind and being accepting of everyone helps me in my classroom and school.” In her subsequent reflection on UDL implementation, she expressed her thoughts on accommodations:

I have noticed that my peers share similar perspectives, as we all strive to accommodate everyone to the best of our abilities, even though it can be challenging. We all have implemented numerous strategies to provide support for universal tier one students.

In Stella’s following reflection, she wrote, “Having a true uncensored conversation with someone can be more meaningful to make connections and grow from one another.” During her interview, when asked about her views on promoting social justice through UDL, she expressed that a community of practice would be hindered if “individuals were unable to engage in respectful conversations with like-minded individuals or those who lacked open-mindedness.”

Along the same lines, Natalie wrote, “It was nice to meet other allies in the district and discuss their personal journeys in a collaborative environment.” She further emphasized the importance of being surrounded by like-minded teachers who are dedicated to supporting and amplifying the voices and experiences of culturally diverse students. She wrote that it was “beneficial to meet other like-minded individuals, learn their experiences and histories, and receive support from them reading UDL as a tool to
support all learners.” Additionally, in her interview, Natalie expressed appreciating “seeing faces and recognizing fellow champions of learning.” In her opinion, in order to optimize advantages for students, the focus must be on generating supporters and advocates. This enthusiasm could help to garner strength to those who may be neutral on the issue. In other words, to have advocates directly approach the opposed-minded could lead to exhaustion and frustration and impede progress toward a more meaningful change.

Gabriel shared his belief that educators should bring their unique experiences and perspectives into the classroom. He emphasized the need for openness and inclusivity, which are essential for empowering and amplifying culturally diverse voices in the educational context. Gabriel summarized how the community of practice was a positive experience: “I got a lot from talking to my colleagues in an environment without administrator oversight.” He reflected further, “it was really just a group of teachers talking, being honest and open about some difficult subjects. But we were speaking honestly, openly, and kind of without shame, without fear of retaliation or fear of saying the wrong thing.” Ava wrote succinctly about past conversations, that “everything kept coming back to trust. We had great discussion in our community of practice in that we were able to say it like it is.”

Moreover, during their interviews, teachers emphasized the importance of fostering openness, establishing partnerships with families and colleagues, and empowering culturally diverse voices in their educational practices. Ava shared that the community of practice “showed me that other people have similar viewpoints as me and that people feel pretty similarly about what’s going on here [district].” Ava discussed
how nice it would be if people would be able to express themselves more honestly and openly without feeling the need to modify their behavior or opinions to conform to the expectations of others. She implied that the current level of professional learning inhibits people’s ability to be genuine and transparent about what is truly happening. She clarified that a community of practice could work “if we could have more of these that weren’t as structured, it would almost be better because people could be a lot more honest about what was really going on and not feel like they have to change everything based on who’s watching.”

In his interview, when asked about future directions for a community of practice that could help support his professional work, Gabriel expressed a sense of openness and freedom in sharing his thoughts. He stated, “I felt very open to saying what I wanted to say and how it related to my own teaching and my own career and my students.” Gabriel further explored his personal biases and acknowledged that there are other teachers who share a similar level of awareness when it comes to biases:

I know for me and for the teachers that I know, we were aware of those biases, too. We are very in tune to things that are going to hurt, [or] that’s going to hurt another student’s feelings, or that’s insensitive. Yeah, there are definitely teachers who are socially, fiscally, and are just generally more conservative in way. And I think, unfortunately, in their case, that makes it harder for them to be open. I think there needs to be more openness.

Finally, Stella shared that as a tenured member of the faculty, she believes that she has the freedom and opportunity to explore new things or new teaching approaches:
Because [of] being tenured, I have that option of trying new things and being justified. But I even was open and honest with my students saying, I’m doing this. It might not be perfect, but I’m trying to do something different and trying to learn just like you are.

Stella added that being part of the community of practice greatly heightened her awareness of cultural biases and assumptions. She recognizes the significance of being open and honest with herself about these biases, and she commended herself for actively striving to incorporate what she has learned into her everyday life:

I think just taking a step back in social situations and asking myself if I had that biased be known, as well as kind of applauding myself for being open and honest with myself as well as trying to take what we learned and implemented in daily life and show my students and family that I am approachable to all.

**Accountability, Continuous Culturally Responsive Learning, and Time Management**

The teachers emphasized the significance of professional growth and the pursuit of continuous culturally responsive learning opportunities, along with the recognition of accountability and the acknowledgment of challenges arising from time constraints. Gabriel expressed his favorite aspect of being a world language teacher is the opportunity to continually learn and discover new things. He emphasized the importance for teachers to embrace lifelong learning and continuously expand their knowledge. He stated, “Yes, teachers have to teach, but they also have to learn.”
Stella wrote a second reflection about the need for professional learning and expressed her desire to improve her ability to understand and address the backgrounds of the students with whom she works. She wrote, “I need more tools to teach and recognize people’s backgrounds to make them feel more comfortable. I do have an awareness of multicultural groups dynamic, but I still have a lot to learn.”

Additionally, Stella highlighted her own accountability for the outcomes of her students, noting her sense of responsibility for their achievements and her concerns about time constraints and the pressure to make sure her students excel in a particular assignment. She further expressed how she would appreciate additional support from administration in a non-evaluative way. Stella explained that it feels “like teachers have to combine the curriculum to students’ background and make it into a huge teachable procedure. This sounds great but it is more for show.”

Similarly, Emily commented on the playlist of resources given on social justice education prior to the beginning of the community of practice. She expressed eagerness to delve deeper into the subject of social justice and a desire for more professional development hours to be able to further explore the topic of culturally responsive teaching; however, she also mentioned feeling overwhelmed due to time constraints. She discussed her enthusiasm for learning how she could integrate social justice into her teaching. She also agreed that she has a passion for learning and delving into more resources and articles about social justice but stated that she wished “I had more time to read and listen to all, but I am already overwhelmed. I wish I had more PD hours for this topic as it would greatly benefit all of our students.”
Finally, in Olivia’s first written reflection, she discussed her recent graduate work and how they had the same discussions. She remarks that “the discussion was quite interesting because everyone saw it from a different perspective. The biggest thing I remember is that we all agreed that everyone should have an equal opportunity to learn.”

Teachers recognized their accountability, need for culturally responsive learning, and time management in their interviews. Stella was asked, “What motivated you to volunteer to participate in the community of practice?” She discussed her openness to be learning from others while recognizing and navigating the challenges that may arise from cultural differences stating that “I felt like I can always learn things from groups and people.” She goes on to reflect on her relationships with students admitting that she realizes that some difficulties stem from cultural differences, while others are simply part of dealing with preteens.

Stella discussed the future directions for a community of practice when asked about professional development. She expressed that within the community of practice “we held each other accountable for timelines and discussions.” On the other hand, she commented that she rarely experiences such check-ins in her current professional development. She further explained that the prevailing approach to professional development lacks a continuous support system. Stella also discussed her feelings about the community of practice.

I just felt like someone was checking in on how we are growing. And I feel, at least with me, I feel like no one does that. I feel that professional development is one and done [mentality]. There is no continuum. If there was some way to have
accountability in your professional learning, whether it’s you or other people, in a couple of months, years, [then] show me the growth [once] you have this information.

In the same interview, Stella was asked to explain the meaning of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning. Instead of focusing on specific teaching practices, her response emphasized the importance of learning about each other to foster success. She suggested that throughout the year, it would be beneficial for everyone to get to know one another, enabling a comfortable environment for active participation and sharing. She answered, “I feel like we need to learn about each other to be successful. I feel like we [should] get to know each other through the year, [so that] everyone is comfortable to participate and share.”

When asked “Can you describe your understanding of universal design for learning and how that relates to social justice? Stella explained that UDL has not only instilled a strong sense of accountability in her but has also presented her with the opportunity to thoughtfully assess and cater to the unique learning needs of each individual child. Stella explains that “I think it’s a great change that challenged me to really look at each child and implement what I think would be best for each one.” She also credits her ability to cluster children together based on the UDL checklist which she could do for either for a whole group activity or side activities. She goes on to say that she felt a sense of accomplishment as she was able to check off completed tasks, and the visual representation helped her to recognize her effectiveness.

During Gabriel’s interview, he reflected on the conversation that took place during the initial community of practice session, focusing on the book titled *The Proudest*
Blue. The discussion centered around fostering student curiosity in a respectful manner. Nevertheless, Gabriel acknowledged a lack of training or guidance when it comes to effectively managing such situations. Moreover, Gabriel recognized the hesitancy among teachers to engage in additional professional development opportunities:

I remember the story where there was another teacher mentioned who had made a remark about how there was a girl or a woman wearing hijab in a story. . . . We don’t really have any training. There’s really not much professional development of this kind of issue. [Also], I think and there are a lot of teachers who are really hesitant to have more PD.

Gabriel also described in more detail his love of learning languages. He explained, “I love learning about different cultures. It was an interest that I had. My favorite subjects in school were history and Spanish. So, learning about different cultures, different histories, different ways that you took it all.” In the same interview, he reflected about the differences between his undergraduate work and the community of practice: “I think being in a space where we could talk about our own experiences, working in different school districts, and sharing our experiences gets very interesting. It’s something I wish I could have done in my undergraduate studies.”

When asked in the interview about the impact of the community of practice on his thinking about social justice advocacy, Gabriel expressed a need for more time and additional professional learning. He mentioned that he did not fully grasp the elements of UDL: “I’m still having trouble nailing down the key components. I feel like the issue stems for the [need] with more time.” When asked if he would be interested in delving deeper into UDL, Gabriel responded with “yes, I would do it.” He expressed his
willingness to engage in further exploration because his current understanding of UDL is at a relatively basic level. He clarified, “I think that would be beneficial not just for our community, but for my own professional learning in general.”

Natalie noted in her interview that the potential for peer observation in fostering professional learning could be helpful. She explained that having teacher observations, particularly “peer to peer interaction, is a way to really develop your craft, and it’s in a non-threatening way.” When asked about the role of the community of practice in enhancing her understanding of social justice advocacy, she expressed the importance of inclusivity by stating, “opening up the community of practice to whomever would like to be a part of [it].” She clarified that if the district were to incorporate a community of practice into our professional learning, “having the option to participate would be highly [beneficial].”

**Summary of Findings/Results**

Peoples (2020) described phenomenological data analysis as “the process of transcending the mundane nature of each description to reveal the essence of the phenomenon” (p. 59). By utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis to capture or bracket the narratives of teachers engaged in a community of practice, several themes emerged. To begin, the pre-survey intervention highlighted the teachers’ initial like-minded beliefs regarding social justice, equity, inclusion, and personalized learning. It also emphasized the confusion regarding the integral role played by teachers within and beyond the classroom, as well as their recognition of systemic racism, student marginalization, and their impact on their future employment. Furthermore, the pre-survey shed light on the diverse range of opinions regarding the level of input teachers
have in their professional development, their collaboration with families, and the extent to which students are provided with opportunities to explore race-related topics.

Multiple key themes emerged from community of practice sessions, written personal reflections, and interviews, providing valuable insights into various facets of teaching and learning, as well as the teachers lived experiences and lifeworlds. One prominent theme revolved around the importance of recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies and their connection to fostering strong student-teacher relationships. The teachers recognized that a fundamental aspect of inclusive practice was to actively involve students in meaningful and authentic conversations that fostered genuine connections. In addition, the teachers also acknowledged the importance of recognizing and validating their own teaching methods as well as those of their colleagues. This recognition of individual efforts and collective achievements fostered a culture of encouragement, creating a supportive and empowering learning environment. Moreover, teachers affirmed their personal commitment to social justice education and embraced the notion of ongoing growth in their pursuit of it.

Another noteworthy theme revolved around the teachers’ responsibility in fostering good human and nurturing collaboration with parents. The teachers emphasized their strong sense of accountability, recognizing their responsibility not only in imparting knowledge but also in guiding students’ character development. A focal point of this theme highlights the belief that teaching extends beyond academic instruction and includes the instilling of basic values, empathy, and social skills. Additionally, the teacher’s reflections addressed the challenges associated with parental conflict. Participants expressed concerns about navigating conflicts with parents or
guardians, recognizing the impact such conflicts can have on students’ educational experiences. This theme also shed light on the importance of effective communication and collaboration between teachers and guardians to ensure the best interests of the students.

The theme of *promoting openness, partnerships, and empowerment of culturally diverse voices* makes clear the importance of openly sharing personal backgrounds, beliefs, and fears about being a good teacher and connecting with students. Another noteworthy aspect is the willingness to be transparent with students regarding instructional methods and taking risks that align with their personal beliefs. In certain cases, teachers discussed their experiences with having a supportive and open-minded family background, while also noting a relative lack of openness within the school community. According to Welton (1995), in the context of adult learning, individuals’ lifeworlds encompass their understanding and perception of what life entails, serving as a unifying factor among people. In relation to teachers, openness within their lifeworlds entails a genuine willingness to acquire knowledge from others, an embrace of diverse perspectives, and an openness to receiving feedback and constructive criticism.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the theme of *accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management*, including teachers’ dedication to professional growth and the constraints imposed by limited time. The participants acknowledged the need for continuous professional development in the areas of culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL in order to enrich their instructional practices. They deliberated on the belief that educators should have the autonomy to
select the type of professional learning in which they engage and receive ongoing support according to their individual needs and preferences.

When Gabriel was asked during an interview how the community of practice helped him professionally, he stated, “There’s a lot of hesitation to do more PD, but a lot of teachers are very open more than I think we receive credit for.”

The community also recognized the challenges educators encounter in striving to balance various roles and responsibilities within the limitations of time constraints. In summary, the teachers engaged in a community of practice offered valuable insights into how teachers’ perspectives on social justice, equity, inclusion, and personalized learning can evolve. They emphasized the importance of affirming and validating their instructional approaches, as well as their role in cultivating good character. Through the exploration of the following themes of recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies; fostering good humans and nurturing collaborations with families; promoting openness; and navigating teacher accountability and culturally responsive professional learning, valuable insights are revealed into both the lived experiences and lifeworlds of teachers. Gabriel succinctly captures his thoughts in his interview regarding the role of the community of practice. He noted that he thought “the best part of the community of practice when it comes to social justice education was actually hearing from the other members of the community.”

Analysis of Data Based on Research Questions

In examining the first research question—to what extent did the community of practice influence teachers’ perspectives and commitment to social justice education? — the study found that the community of practice had a significant influence on teachers’ perspectives and commitment to social justice education, as evidenced by the appearance
of four key themes. These themes were interwoven to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the community of practice on teachers’ practices and beliefs. Additionally, employing a phenomenological inquiry and adopting the community of practice lens, the study further explored how teachers' lived experiences and lifeworld perspectives shaped their understanding of social justice education.

The first theme, recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies, highlighted how teachers within the community of practice acknowledged and placed value on pedagogical approaches that aimed to promote social justice in an inclusive manner. L. Howard et al. (2022) clarified that social justice involves more than comprehending inequality or acknowledging the need for change; it encompasses the conviction that individuals have a personal obligation to effect change by taking action. The community of practice discussions, reflections, and interviews provided evidence of this commitment through their efforts to cultivate meaningful relationships with students and engage in purposeful conversations.

Although there were initial misunderstandings in the pre-survey questions, participants recognized and valued the significance of fostering relationships with parents. They also recognized the crucial role they played in the lives of all learners. The community of practice conversations, along with reflections, and interviews, highlighted the vital theme of fostering good humans and nurturing collaborative relationships with families. Teachers developed a deep understanding of the importance of fostering positive character traits and cultivating strong partnerships with families. They acknowledged conflicts with parents as an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of areas that required improvement, with the ultimate goal of enhancing collaboration with parents. In
addition, teachers expressed a desire to learn more about effective ways to connect with families and culturally acceptable forms of communication.

In the third theme, openness, partnerships, and empowering culturally diverse voices, a community of practice provided a space where like-minded teachers could partner together and openly share their personal experiences, instructional approaches, and beliefs. In the lifeworlds of teachers, a significant aspect revolves around the connections they draw between their personal ethnic backgrounds or upbringings and their beliefs regarding social justice. These connections greatly influence their perspectives and approaches within the classroom. Furthermore, teachers placed value on employing strategies that fostered critical conversations addressing stereotypes and biases, aiming to create an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

For instance, Stella demonstrated her openness to sharing her own experiences. She acknowledged feeling somewhat unfamiliar when engaging with books and discussions that were not rooted in her own cultural background; however, she recognized the importance of this openness and expressed how it is crucial for her growth as an educator. She wrote, “I was raised with an open mind and having everyone feel accepted helps me in my classroom and school.” Stella emphasized building partnerships and acceptance among everyone, both in her classroom and the broader school community. She highlighted her personal experiences and how her upbringing contributed to her effectiveness in the classroom and school community. In short, teachers worked together as partners to construct and interpret the concepts of socially just pedagogies.
Significantly, the fourth theme, accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management, emerged in discussions held during the community of practice, as well as in reflections and interviews. The participants demonstrated a strong commitment to their professional growth, despite the constraints imposed by limited time. They acknowledged the importance of continuous development in culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL to enhance their instructional practices. Furthermore, the teachers deliberated on the necessity for educators to have the autonomy to choose their professional learning opportunities and receive ongoing support tailored to their unique needs and preferences.

Wenger (1999) defined a community of practice as a space that encompasses shared meaning, shared practice, identity, and community. Within this same framework, teachers’ lifeworlds refer to their subjective and lived experiences, beliefs, values, and how these fit into the context in which they operate as educators. When teachers participate in a community of practice focused on social justice education, it becomes a significant aspect of their lifeworlds, shaping their professional identity and practices. The question *How does participation in a community of practice shape teachers’ views of using culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning strategies to promote social justice education?* was addressed collectively, drawing upon the integration of the four themes.

The initial theme of recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies align with teachers shared values and comprehension of culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning in this context. Gay (2018) explained that culturally responsive teachers take the cultural frames of references, knowledge, and experiences of
diverse learners to connect with the unique learning styles of students. She also believed that culturally responsive teaching is inherently a multidimensional approach that requires using a variety of practices to promote higher learning. This is evident in the way teachers openly discussed the practices they employed to cultivate meaningful relationships and foster engaging conversations with students, recognizing these as essential elements of both culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning.

The theme of recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies focused on teachers’ natural inclusion of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning in their instructional practices. Gabriel stated that “it put a lot of things in writing that I knew intuitively.” He also affirmed the role of the community of practice and the provided literature and resources in helping him shape his perspective. Above all, he emphasized the importance of having professional development which allows “putting students in the driver’s seat of their own learning.”

The two pivotal themes below highlight the multifaceted role of educators, extending beyond simply imparting knowledge to children. Furthermore, in order for teachers to implement socially just practices, they must embrace openness and actively seek collaboration with families, recognizing the value of diverse voices in the educational journey.

1. *Fostering good humans and nurturing collaborative relationships with families:*

This theme emphasizes the role of educators in not only imparting academic knowledge but also in shaping students into well-rounded individuals. It points to the importance of building strong connections with families to support students’ academic and social development.
2. **Openness, partnerships, and empowering culturally diverse voices:** This theme reinforces the need for educators to be open-minded and willing to hear multiple perspectives, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, there is value in collaborating with all stakeholders, including parents, to ensure all culturally diverse voices are heard, thereby creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Olivia shared her perspective on the theme of *openness and transparency* in relation to culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning. According to Olivia, being culturally responsive and implementing personalized learning involves being open and recognizing that individuals’ perspectives may differ. She recounted that “I think it means to really be open and recognize that the way we see things is not the ways that everybody sees things, and we shouldn’t force our views onto everybody else.”

In another examples, Stella demonstrated her openness to sharing her own experiences. She acknowledged feeling somewhat unfamiliar when engaging with books and discussions that were not rooted in her own cultural background. Conversely, she recognized the importance of this openness and expressed how it is crucial for her growth as an educator. She wrote, “I was raised with an open mind and having everyone feel accepted helps me in my classroom and school.” Stella emphasized building partnerships and acceptance among everyone, both in her classroom and the broader school community. She highlighted her personal experiences and how her upbringing contributes to her effectiveness in the classroom and school community. In short, participants worked together as partners to construct and interpret the concepts of equity and inclusivity.
Additionally, one of the underlying theories of personalized learning is that the unique profiles of learners influence the way they interact with their learning environment, thereby calling on teachers to modify environments to adapt to the needs of the learner (Walkington, & Bernacki, 2020). According to Murphy et al. (2016), personalization involves crucial aspects such as student-teacher relationships, student engagement, and personal competences. In examining the impact of community of practice participation on teachers’ perspectives in regard to the utilization of culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning strategies to promote social justice education, the themes of recognizing inclusive practices and nurturing collaborative relations with families become instrumental. Culturally responsive teaching, a well-established pedagogical approach supported by research, centers on establishing meaningful connections with students based on their individual cultural backgrounds. This approach has proven effective in addressing the diverse instructional requirements of students from various ethnicities, by acknowledging the significance of a child’s family and community (Bennett et al., 2018; Hammond, 2014).

The theme of recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies became evident as teachers acknowledged their natural integration of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning in their instructional practices. Gabriel summarized this notion by reflecting on his overall community experience. During a department meeting, he also presented a video project assigned to some of his students, sparking discussions on various themes, including personalized learning, collaboration, creativity, and the essential role of empowering students to control their learning process. Gabriel summarized the view of his community experience, recognizing that these ideas
aligned with ongoing professional development initiatives within our school district. Most importantly, he perceived a strong connection between these concepts and the discussions in the community of practice, which he found particularly interesting and valuable.

Moreover, the findings from the pre-intervention survey indicated that teachers collectively affirmed the belief that they have developed multiple assessment methods and were familiar with various instructional approaches. Moreover, the teachers agreed, both individually and as a group, that they were implementing culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning strategies in their own individual ways. This analysis reaffirmed their belief in a need for professional learning in the area of collaboration with student and families to develop instruction. When Stella was asked during an interview about the aspects of a community of practice that were helpful in her professional learning, she answered, “the one challenge I put on myself is reaching back out to parents to see if I’m missing any gaps in their home life and if I could of service to them.”

Finally, to answer the research question, how does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of the UDL as an instructional tool to promote social justice education, it is important to consider the key theme of accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management. Throughout the study, teachers acknowledged the significance of being accountable for integrating the ideas that underpin UDL principles into their teaching practices. They also recognized that active engagement in a community of practice provided them with valuable feedback and support from their peers, which subsequently enhanced their understanding and implementation of some aspects of UDL.
Overall, this sense of accountability played a crucial role in shaping their perceptions of UDL as a powerful instructional tool for fostering social justice education. On the other hand, the teachers openly expressed their uncertainty regarding the practical application of UDL within their specific academic domains. Additionally, there was a notable concern regarding the time required to effectively address all the essential components outlined in the UDL templates. Nevertheless, Olivia, who had prior experience with the UDL format, elucidated that it gradually became intuitive, stating, “It’s like training my brain to think in that manner. That’s how I kind of see the UDL.”

Teachers acknowledged that due to time limitations, they would require additional professional development in this area. Nonetheless, they unanimously agreed that they are incorporating elements of UDL into their current teaching practices, and expressed challenges in finding sufficient time to incorporate all the checkpoints outlined in the lesson plans. Overall, Emily conveyed the group consensus that lesson plans do not necessarily need to adhere to a specific format or framework. Instead, the focus should be on utilizing certain aspects of UDL, such as effective strategies for engagement and representation, to enhance the quality of lessons. Teachers’ intentions should be to select and integrate those beneficial elements into their planning process, without necessarily adopting a completely new format.

**Summary**

The utilization of phenomenological inquiry and the community of practice lens can enable a comprehensive exploration of participants’ experiences and lifeworld perspectives. Through this research, a deeper understanding has been gained regarding the impact of the community of practice on teachers’ viewpoints, their dedication to
social justice education, and their implementation of culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL strategies. The study findings uncovered the emergence of four distinct themes.

Theme 1: Recognition and Validation of Inclusive, Socially Just Pedagogies

Through the narrative stories of teachers engaged in the community of practice, the theme of recognition and validation of inclusive, socially just pedagogies emerged from the data. Through collective sharing, openness, and transparency, teachers constructed and interpreted concepts of equity, inclusivity, and fairness, leading to a shared understanding. Teachers acknowledged their natural inclusion of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning strategies, validating their use of inclusive approaches and emphasizing the significance of the community of practice in shaping their perspectives. Furthermore, the findings indicate that teachers have developed various assessment methods and are implementing culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning strategies. Additionally, teachers emphasized the significance of cultivating meaningful relationships with students and engaging in genuine, organic conversations with all learners.

Theme 2: Fostering Good Humans and Nurturing Collaborative Relationships with Families

Through phenomenological analysis, the study delved into the connections participants made between their personal experiences and classroom environments. The findings highlighted that the teachers themselves acknowledged the importance of fostering empathy and character development within their students. Furthermore, teachers they also recognized the need to establish meaningful connections with families, even in
the presence of parental conflict, and to comprehend appropriate forms of communication with them.

Theme 3: Promoting Openness, Partnerships, and Empowerment of Culturally Diverse Voices

The third theme, promoting openness, partnerships, and empowerment of culturally diverse voices, emphasizes the teachers' commitment to sharing their personal experiences and forming partnerships with like-minded individuals. This theme aligns with the notion of promoting openness by fostering an inclusive and welcoming learning environment that recognizes and celebrates diverse voices. Teachers willingly shared their instructional practices and beliefs, thereby empowering culturally diverse voices among both students and educators.

Theme 4: Accountability, Continuous Culturally Responsive Learning, and Time Management

Lastly, this section focuses on the fourth primary theme, accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management, and its significance within the community of practice and social justice education. The teachers highlighted the importance of receiving ongoing supportive feedback and having autonomy in selecting professional learning opportunities. They expressed a specific need for professional learning in the area of collaboration with students and families. They agreed that they are currently integrating selected elements of UDL into their teaching practices but find it challenging to incorporate all the UDL checkpoints into each lesson due to time limitations.
Chapter 5 focuses on an in-depth analysis of the study’s four primary themes and their connections to relevant research, concepts in literature, and theoretical perspectives regarding the community of practice within the context of social justice education. Additionally, it emphasizes the practical significance of these findings in the field of teacher education, recognizes the study’s inherent limitations, and presents valuable suggestions for future research. In the final part of this chapter, all the preceding discussions are synthesized to offer a comprehensive summary of the practical implications, limitations, and potential avenues for further investigation in the area of social justice education.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Training in multicultural education has been largely neglected, and many educators have failed to develop their own cultural competence and cultural awareness despite the growing diversity of students in school systems (Prater & Devereaux, 2009; Snyder & Fenner, 2021). Teacher education programs, including in-service professional development programs, commonly lack a coherent, integrated approach for addressing issues of teaching about diversity, race, and culture (Farinde-Wu et al., 2017). Villegas and Lucas (2002) asserted that many programs barely scratch the surface of multicultural issues.

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers can successfully foster equity and inclusion within their classrooms, even in the absence of adequate training programs and localized process models that specifically guide social justice advocacy. By utilizing a community of practice and the UDL intervention approach, the study sought to gain insight into teachers’ perspectives, experiences, and specific obstacles they encounter when integrating culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning into their instructional practices. The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of and commitment to social justice education?
2. How does participation in a community of practice shape teachers’ views of using culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning strategies to promote social justice education?

3. How does participation in a community of practice influence teachers’ perceptions of the Universal Design for Learning as an instructional tool to promote social justice education?

Through a phenomenological inquiry lens, teachers were able to develop a deeper understanding of their own experiences and viewpoints. Four significant themes emerged from this study that further reinforced the notion of lifeworld and its role in the shaping of teachers’ experiences and perspectives. The research questions were addressed by exploration of the following themes that surfaced during the analysis.

1. Recognition and validation of inclusive, socially just pedagogies
2. Fostering good humans and nurturing collaborative relationships with families
3. Promoting openness, partnerships, and empowerment of culturally diverse voices
4. Accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management

These themes provide valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of the teachers within the community of practice.

In this phenomenological investigation, teachers engaged in collective sharing, openness, and transparency to construct a shared understanding of equity, inclusivity, and fairness. The theme of recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies emerged as the teachers acknowledged the inherent inclusion of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning strategies. Participants validated the use of inclusive approaches and highlighted the influence of the community of practice on their
perspectives. They also demonstrated the development of diverse assessment methods and active implementation of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning strategies.

Furthermore, teachers acknowledged the significance of promoting empathy, character development, and cultivating partnerships and relationships with families as key aspects of the theme *fostering good humans and nurturing collaborative relationships with families*. In addition, they actively promoted openness, partnerships, and empowerment of culturally diverse voices by sharing instructional practices and beliefs with like-minded professionals. Moreover, teachers acknowledged the need to establish meaningful connections with families, even in the presence of parental conflicts, and to navigate appropriate forms of communication with them. This theme aligns with the goal of promoting openness by creating an inclusive and welcoming learning environment that recognizes and celebrates diverse voices.

Additionally, participants emphasized the theme of *accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and effective time management*. The teachers strived for ongoing feedback, autonomy in professional learning opportunities, and the integration of UDL elements in their teaching practices, despite time limitations. They expressed a specific need for additional professional learning in the area of collaboration with students and families.

Overall, a community of practice provided affirmation and validation to teacher who prioritized and advocated social justice in their teaching practices. This support encouraged them in their pursuit of promoting equity and inclusivity. Furthermore, within a community of practice, teachers received guidance and support in nurturing students as
compassionate individuals who are aware of social issues. A community of practice fostered an environment of openness and transparency, allowing teachers to freely share experiences, challenges, and successes related to social justice education. More importantly, the community of practice addressed obstacles related to accountability, professional development, and time constraints in social justice education. Teachers’ lifeworlds are shaped by various factors, including their own educational backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, personal beliefs about education, and their professional experiences.

Additionally, these themes provide valuable insights into how participants internalized these experiences, shaping their sense of purpose and professional identities within the field of social justice advocacy. By conducting a thorough examination of existing literature, concepts, and theories, the study explored the connections between the identified themes and the collective efforts of educators in fostering social justice. The analysis provides a deeper understanding of how these themes align with established educational frameworks and contribute to the broader goal of creating inclusive and equitable learning environments.

The subsequent sections provide an analysis of social justice education, beginning with a comprehensive overview of its definition. This is followed by an examination of its relationship with teacher agency. Furthermore, it analyzes how the themes derived from this phenomenological action research relate to the core components of the theoretical framework: community of practice, culturally responsive teaching, personalized learning, and UDL.
By reviewing the existing literature, concepts, and theories, these sections explore the connections between the identified themes and the collective efforts of educators in fostering social justice. This analysis aims to provide a deeper understanding of how these themes align with established educational frameworks and contribute to the broader goal of creating inclusive and equitable learning environments. Additionally, it presents customized educational recommendations for the particular school district under study. Lastly, it acknowledges the limitations of the study, identifies potential areas for future research, and explores the educational implications and opportunities for further investigation.

**Conclusions**

**Social Justice Education**

Figure 5.1 summarizes the key phenomenological findings. Panthi et al. (2018) explained that social justice education centers on teachers taking on the pivotal role of fostering an educational environment where all students, regardless of their backgrounds, feel welcomed and supported, and are given equal opportunities to succeed:

Social justice might also include providing equal access to curriculum, resources and good teachers. It makes students feel that they are equally valued. Teachers need to make a commitment to transform educational fabric to develop, protect, and grow potential of their students. For this, they need to create a fair, just, and inclusive educational setting (p. 8).

Bell et al. (2016) expounded upon the concept of social justice education, highlighting its role in cultivating individuals’ consciousness, understanding, and methodologies to analyze matters of justice and injustice within their own lives,
Teaching for Social Justice Education Lifeworld of Teachers

Figure 5.1 Teaching for Social Justice Education Lifeworld of Teachers

communities, and larger societies. Additionally, L. Howard et al. (2022) provided further clarity by emphasizing that social justice encompasses more than simply recognizing inequality or acknowledging the necessity for transformation. Rather, it encompasses the belief that individuals bear a personal responsibility to enact change by actively engaging in action.

Increasing the agency of teachers is important, but the real work lies in actively involving teachers as partners in social justice and equity-oriented reforms (Datnow, 2020; McMahon et al. (2015) noted significant worldwide reforms within the teaching profession. To reimagine how teachers learn and bring about meaningful change, professional learning should be collaborative and ongoing throughout their careers (McMahon et al., 2015).
Recent research has emphasized the need for teacher education programs to critically address pedagogies that promote equity and socially just practices (Boylan & Woolsey, 2015; Min et al., 2022; Pantić, 2021; Whipp, 2013). Additionally, professional autonomy and teacher agency play a crucial role in shaping educational innovations, pedagogical practices, and policies (Cong-Lem, 2021; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Min et al., 2022; Toom et al., 2015). By empowering teachers with greater autonomy and agency, they become influential agents in driving educational change.

**Teacher Agency**

Teachers often experience a lack of agency and inadequate preparation in regard to promoting pedagogies related to social justice. In order to better support diverse student populations, it is crucial for educators to have safe spaces where they can explore their vulnerabilities, biases, and anxieties, ultimately enabling them to create more inclusive classrooms (Sleeter, 2012). Despite the increasing enrollment of racially and ethnically diverse students in U.S. public schools, there has been limited systemic change in educational practices thus far (Min et al., 2022). Additionally, professional autonomy and teacher agency play a pivotal role in driving educational innovation, pedagogical practices, and policies (Cong-Lem, 2021; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Min et al., 2022; Toom et al., 2015).

In the context of the fourth primary theme, *accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management*, teachers in this study provided valuable insights regarding the challenges posed by time constraints. Nevertheless, they also emphasized the significance of addressing personalized learning, culturally responsive teaching, and UDL in their instructional practices. By acknowledging the need to
consider individual student needs, cultural diversity, and UDL principles, the teachers demonstrated a commitment to fostering accessible and responsive education for all learners. They also demonstrated a shared understanding of their responsibilities and the challenges they faced in integrating multiple instructional approaches. In addition, the teachers also recognized the importance of continuous and ongoing support, including regular check-ins. As Sang (2020) explained, teachers have the ability to exert their agentic capacity by positioning or repositioning themselves in accordance with their own goals within a community of practice. This aligns with the present study’s the teachers' collective understanding of the need for proactive engagement and intentional choices in their professional development.

Additionally, teacher agency can be described as the active and intentional engagement of teachers in adopting educational innovations that shape their individual learning (Toom et al., 2015). Offering a choice in professional development that aligns with individual needs was seen by the participants as beneficial. Specifically, some teachers of the participants expressed frustration regarding the lack of a continuous and accountable process. As per Mortier (2020), educators frequently express a sense of neglect when external changes are imposed through broad-scale or top-down methods, leaving their needs unaddressed.

To demonstrate this point, the teachers emphasized the need for a system that allows for tracking and demonstrating growth over time, suggesting a desire for a more structured and effective approach to professional development. As Stella argued succinctly, “There is no continuum. If there was some way to have accountability in your professional learning, whether it’s you or other people, in a couple of months, years,
[then] show me the growth [once] you have this information.” Moreover, they emphasized the importance of the community of practice as a platform for discussion among like-minded teachers. Despite the consensus that certain colleagues held more conservative viewpoints, in the broader context, they expressed the need for continuous and sustained engagement throughout the year. Datnow (2005) explained that when teachers are given the chance to participate in collaborative learning, their interactions hold the potential not only to drive the adoption of local and state reforms but also to bring about transformative societal shifts.

**Communities of Practice**

Communities of practice draw upon the foundations of constructivism and sociocultural learning theory, highlighting the belief that learning is a social endeavor shaped by our interactions with others (Luguetti, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2008; Sarid & Levanon, 2022; Webber, 2016). Wenger (2011) defined communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). Furthermore, Wenger (1999) proposed four foundational components of his social learning theory: shared domain, meaning, practice community, and identity. During their discussions, reflections, and interviews, the teachers expressed the valuable opportunities provided by the community of practice.

The recurring of themes of *recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies and accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management* align closely with Wenger’s (1999) concept of identity. This concept encompasses the development of a sense of self and belonging that aligns with the shared values and norms within a community of practice. Additionally, the theme of professional
learning emerged, as teachers acknowledged their inherent integration of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning in their instructional practices. The teachers reflected on the impact that a community of practice could have as a potential space in which they can affirm the effectiveness of the instructional strategies they currently employ.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Gay (2018) explained that culturally responsive teachers take the cultural frames of references, knowledge, and experiences of diverse learners and connect them with the unique learning styles of students. She also believed that culturally responsive teaching is, inherently, a multidimensional approach that requires implementing a variety of practices to promote higher learning.

Moreover, in Hammond’s (2014) “Ready for Rigor Framework,” four crucial components were presented to facilitate the practical implementation of culturally responsive teaching: a) Awareness, b) Learning partnerships, c) Information processing, and d) Community building. This framework is evident in the context to the theme of recognizing and validating inclusive, socially just pedagogies; teachers demonstrated their commitment to culturally responsive teaching by establishing meaningful relationships with students and engaging in genuine dialogue that fostered safe learning environments for all.

In relation to the theme of promoting openness, partnership, and empowerment of culturally diverse voices, teachers in the study noted the importance of being receptive to taking risks and incorporating new perspectives. According to Hammond (2014), culturally responsive teachers may need to embrace “emotional risks” and “confront their
discomfort” as they explore their implicit biases and cultural perspectives. Additionally, teachers also shared in community of practice discussions, reflections, and interviews the importance of building partnerships with students and staff. They emphasized that socially just educators should prioritize actively addressing existing prejudices rather than solely teaching children about other cultures.

**Personalized Learning**

In this action research, personalized learning is understood as an educational approach that considers the individual characteristics and needs of learners. Ober et al. (2023) proposed essential personalized learning as a framework that fosters educational equity by cultivating culturally responsive learning environments and ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students. The theme of *fostering good humans and nurturing collaborative relationships with families* was explored in relation to personalized learning. When personalized learning is implemented in this context, instruction is tailored to meet the specific needs of each student, fostering a sense of inclusivity, motivation, and active engagement. By actively involving families in the personalized learning process, educators recognize and appreciate the essential role parents and guardians play in students’ educational growth. This collaborative approach empowers educators to develop a more comprehensive understanding of students, encompassing various aspects of their learning journeys.

Within the community of practice, teachers engaged in discussions, reflections, and interviews to describe instances of parental conflict and uncertainty regarding appropriate conversations with students. They also expressed a consensus regarding the importance of open communication with families to establish meaningful ways of
incorporating parental input into the decision-making process for personalized instruction. Moreover, in the lived experiences and lifeworld of teachers, there can be instances of parental conflict and confusion regarding appropriate conversations with students, especially when implementing personalized learning approaches. Despite encountering personal experiences with families and potential infringements on their worldviews or political beliefs, teachers unwaveringly upheld their dedication to championing social justice. They firmly recognized the significance of fostering fairness, equality, and inclusivity in education, even if it occasionally involves engaging in difficult conversations or encountering conflicts with particular families or societal norms. For instance, teachers aligned with one participant in the community of practice, Natalie, who expressed succinctly how the community of practice members embraced personalized learning as a catalyst for social justice:

Personalized learning can be a real driver for social justice. Having the steering wheel in the students’ hands can really open up the doors for their own cultural exploration and sharing and then making other students aware of where they’re coming.

*Universal Design for Learning*

According to Craig et al. (2022), the concept of UDL is being increasingly embraced by educators in the United States as an effective framework for meeting the diverse needs of students. UDL offers a method for creating inclusive learning environments that cater to the varying abilities, cultural backgrounds, and family structures present in modern classrooms (Craig et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2012). The
foundational principles of UDL have been acknowledged widely as valuable instruments for promoting social justice in education (Adams et al., 2007).

In the context of the theme of accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management, teachers expressed mixed feelings about incorporating UDL as an instructional tool for social justice practices. Whereas some teachers felt overwhelmed by the additional demands of fully adapting their lesson plans to UDL (in particular due to the time constraints associated with implementing lengthy UDL formats), others recognized the connection between certain aspects of UDL and culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning. Despite the challenges, most of the teachers found encouragement in utilizing select UDL checkpoints to modify their approaches and better meet the needs of the learners in their classrooms. This suggests a willingness among educators to explore and adapt UDL principles to enhance inclusivity and equitable education for diverse student populations.

**Lifeworld Phenomenology**

The phenomenological concept of teachers’ lifeworlds refers to the subjective and lived experiences of teachers within their professional context. It emphasizes the unique perspective and understanding that teachers develop through their interactions, relationships, and experiences in the teaching profession. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), phenomenology aims to explore the complex connection between individuals’ lifeworlds and their overall experiences. It investigates how their inherent, pre-reflective understanding of the world shapes and influences their perceptions, interactions, and interpretations of their lived experiences.
Through discussions within the community of practice, reflections, and interviews, teachers have gained valuable insights into social justice practices based on their overall experiences with families, prior professional development, personal identities, and upbringings. These collective experiences have provided the participants with a foundation to interpret new meanings and perspectives, shaping their understanding of how to incorporate social justice principles into their educational practices. Overall, teachers were willing and open to discuss their beliefs with like-minded professionals. In light of the themes explored in this action research, it becomes evident that effective professional development should encompass an understanding of the context and lived experiences of teachers to integrate new knowledge and skills into their existing lifeworlds.

The study’s conclusions demonstrate how the findings related to the posed research questions. The identified themes were used to examine the impact of participating in a community of practice on teachers’ understanding and commitment to social justice. This included exploring how such participation shapes teachers’ perspectives on culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning strategies for promoting social justice education, as well as their perceptions of the UDL as an instructional tool for this purpose.

The study revealed that teachers desired more autonomy and agency, becoming influential agents of educational change. They recognized culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning as existing strategies in their classrooms. Engaging with like-minded professionals in the community of practice deepened their understanding and fostered a greater receptiveness to shared experiences. While facing challenges in
implementing UDL, teachers acknowledged its significance and its connections to culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning. More importantly, teachers reflected on their own life experiences to internalize equity and inclusion in their daily practices.

**Recommendations**

Mertler (2019) advocated for the importance of communicating the outcomes of action research. According to Mertler, action plans serve as strategies for future implementation. These plans can be expressed as concise statements, charted action steps, or clear descriptions that outline the practical implementation of a new educational practice, strategies for exploring alternative approaches to address the problem, or plans for sharing the acquired knowledge with others. Although this study’s outcomes are specifically relevant for the study site, the findings could serve as a valuable resource to inform and guide future educational practices for other sites, enabling educators to effectively foster a culture of social justice within their classrooms and beyond.

The phenomenological inquiry revealed several noteworthy outcomes, encompassing the themes identified during the community of practice sessions, teacher reflections, and interviews. As a result of my district efforts to unpack a framework designed to integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, fostering safe, welcoming, and inclusive environments, a number of identified themes and recommendations have been developed to promote the integration of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning as effective strategies for social justice pedagogy.
The subsequent sections are categorized to encompass specific educational approaches and goals for future implementation.

**Goal 1: Develop Culturally Responsive Teaching Professional Development Alongside Personalized Learning with Ongoing Continuous Support and Accountability**

The district should develop culturally responsive teaching professional development alongside personalized learning with ongoing continuous support and accountability. For increased success, the district should aim for professional development that relates directly to teachers' relationships and conversations with students and ways to better collaborate and communicate with families. Leveraging the district’s existing commitment to personalized learning could help to ensure that teachers remain accountable for incorporating more inclusive practices.

In response to the discussions among teachers in this study, it is recommended that my school district work towards the integration of culturally responsive teaching as a key approach when assessing a school’s organizational capacity for learning, as seen in Appendix I. A subsequent yet related goal is to give precedence to culturally responsive teaching as a comprehensive strategy for fostering a community of learners. The emphasis lies in adapting a holistic curriculum that goes beyond a superficial check-based approach. Instead, it recognizes the nuanced and multifaceted role of equity which also takes into consideration various assessments, strategies, content, and resources that reflects a students' rich linguistic and cultural identity.
Goal 2: Promote Autonomy in Professional Learning to Foster a Community of Practice

Another significant theme that emerged from the study was the challenge of time management and the lack of sufficient time for ongoing professional learning. Therefore, another focus for the district would be to establish a cyclical feedback loop that fosters constructive feedback to teachers regarding their professional development and implementation of best practices is essential. A system should be created through which teachers can proactively seek support and guidance from administrators, aligning with their individual professional learning needs. Furthermore, promoting regular communication between teachers and administrators is crucial to ensure ongoing collaboration and growth.

Similarly, the district should strive to implement continuous professional development, and at the same time, a system of peer observation and feedback. Encouraging teachers to strive to actively participate in their own growth involves setting individualized self-directed goals and engaging in regular reflection on their learning progress. Supporting teachers’ professional development entails providing a diverse range of tailored opportunities that align with their unique interests and objectives. These may include interactive workshops, seminars, and ongoing support, all aimed at equipping teachers with the necessary tools and strategies to foster inclusive learning environments.

Goal 3: Cultivate Strong Connections Between the School and Culturally Diverse Families, Fostering a Collaborative and Inclusive Educational Environment
The district should work towards strengthening community building efforts. This includes establishing connections between the school and families, with the aim of prioritizing active involvement, fostering a sense of belonging, and cultivating collaborative partnerships among students, families, and the broader community. This objective is designed to integrate culturally relevant practices, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of students and their communities.

Additionally, my district could focus on establishing an advisory board consisting of parents, community members, and faculty members could contribute significantly to enhancing cultural awareness. This board can forge a partnership to dedicate time and effort to foster a more inclusive learning environment, as well as identify resources for professional development. Their collective efforts would contribute to the establishment of a more inclusive learning environment where diversity is celebrated, social justice is prioritized, and students from all backgrounds can thrive.

**Goal 4: Enhance Social Justice Education for Teachers by Deepening Their Understanding of Their Own Lifeworlds and Lived Experiences**

Another goal for the district is to focus on teachers’ understanding of social justice education by increasing their awareness and knowledge of their own lifeworlds and lived experiences. When applied to teaching and learning, this approach highlights the importance of reflection. Importantly, reflection is an ongoing process. This approach supports teachers as they navigate the changing landscape of education. By embracing a mindset of ongoing reflection and adjustment, educators can enhance their teaching practices and better meet the needs of their students.
In short, teachers enhance their reflective practices by integrating their lifeworlds and lived experiences. One effective approach is to pair teachers who are keen on exploring their own lifeworlds and experiences with experienced educators or social justice advocates. These mentors can offer valuable guidance, support, and constructive feedback as teachers engage in self-reflection and navigate their personal growth journeys. Within the context of this phenomenological study, teachers were keen to the theme of openness and transparency as they interacted with individuals who shared similar perspectives and goals.

Lastly with these objectives for my school district in mind, my intention is to share the outcomes of this study with the district administration. My objective is to propose and conduct professional development workshops that focus on social justice education, equity, and inclusion principles. Additionally, I aspire to collaborate with my district and other local school communities to incorporate my action plan into curriculum development, teacher training programs, and educational policies. Furthermore, I plan to develop and deliver targeted professional development workshops for educators, specifically addressing the principles of social justice education, equity, and inclusion. I also aim to integrate my role as a reading specialist into various aspects of social justice education.

As an adjunct professor at a local university, I have established connections there. Recently, I spoke with colleagues at the university and my next focus will be to submit a proposal to present my research at relevant educational conferences. I am hoping to continue to publish research related to diversity, equity, access, and belonging. I am optimistic that these connections will enable me to disseminate my findings to
professional associations, webinars, and practitioners in the field. While working at the university, I plan to continue to integrate my research into curriculum development, teacher training programs, and educational policies. I am also hoping to leverage my background in both higher education and the public elementary school system to provide enhanced support for teachers in diverse educational environments.

**Action Research Reflections**

Before undertaking the research study, I anticipated that the most challenging aspect would be separating my personal beliefs about social justice education; however, as the study progressed, I found it increasingly easier to genuinely listen to the teachers discussions. I learned to set aside my role as a reading specialist and truly comprehend their perspectives on the topic at hand.

Additionally, I had come to view the utilization of UDL as an essential component of social justice education. During my presentation, I highlighted several noteworthy research studies that supported the notion of UDL as a crucial instructional tool for promoting social justice. Nevertheless, it was surprising to discover that many teachers did not find it easy to comprehend how to construct their lessons using the UDL framework. As I was not an expert in their specific academic domains, I faced challenges in finding effective ways to assist teachers in developing UDL plans.

Initially, the concept of a lifeworld did not immediately resonate with my research. It was not until I engaged in phenomenological analysis and actively sought to understand the true meanings conveyed by participants that I fully grasped the impact a teacher’s lifeworld—encompassing more than individual lived experiences—could have on an educator’s instruction and relationships with students. The research underscored the
inherent value of teachers reflecting on their own identities and the unique identities of their students. This realization, I believe, is the true essence and significance of this research: we must have a deep understanding of who we are as teachers.

In the context of this research, the study highlights the significance of actively attending to teachers’ viewpoints and comprehending the obstacles they encounter when incorporating principles of social justice education, equity, and inclusion. The implications derived from this study can be applicable and advantageous to educators in various subjects, grade levels, and educational environments. By providing customized support and opportunities for professional development that address the integration of culturally responsive practices with personalized learning, teachers can enhance their capacity to effectively connect with and involve diverse student populations. Most notably, this understanding emphasizes the importance of teachers reflecting on their own identities as well as the diverse identities of their students, fostering inclusive and culturally responsive teaching methods that promote social justice education.

Limitations

Peoples (2020) explained the common limitations of phenomenological dissertations are “small sample sizes, time limitations, and bias in the participant sample” (p. 36). Consequently, the current study had limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample of teachers was selected using convenience sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the findings, although the sample was intended to have a diverse and representative sample by including participants with various ethnicities, years of education, grade levels taught, gender, and years of teaching experience. This limitation may have restricted the inclusion of teachers with different perspectives and experiences.
relevant to fostering equity and inclusion. In addition, this study focuses on teachers from a small but highly ranked school district in New Jersey. Teachers in larger districts may face different challenges and have access to different resources.

An additional constraint pertains to the relatively short duration of the qualitative action research, which was limited to 6 weeks and a total of six sessions. The teachers faced challenges in arranging meetings due to personal commitments and other time constraints. In line with this, they also expressed a preference for Zoom settings instead of in-person community of practice sessions. Consequently, an inherent limitation is that the research environment may not fully capture the unique richness of face-to-face interactions compared to online modes of communication. This particular limitation hinders a comprehensive understanding of the impact of online participation in a community of practice on teachers’ perceptions and practices concerning social justice education.

Additionally, it was observed that when teachers joined the community of practice late, they often remained silent for a substantial portion of the discussion. This silence could be attributed to their uncertainty regarding the topic or a hesitancy to contribute actively. Conversely, another limitation to address is the dominance of certain teachers in the study overshadowing others and potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives. As a result, the limited participation from these individuals may have led to incomplete reflections and a potential gap in the overall understanding of the topic.

Moreover, it should be noted that this study relies solely on qualitative data and lacks quantitative analysis. The data gathered encompassed dialogues from pre-survey information, community of practice discussions, reflections, and narratives obtained
through interviews. All the information analyzed was presented from the teachers' perspectives, portraying their lived experiences. Nevertheless, this reliance on qualitative data poses a limitation, as it may restrict the ability to draw statistically significant conclusions or establish strong causal relationships between variables.

**Future Research**

Based on the findings from this qualitative phenomenological research, there are numerous suggested areas for future research. For example, it is suggested that future studies expand the participant pool to include teachers from diverse backgrounds, grade levels, and school districts to enhance the generalizability of the findings. One of the limitations of this study was convenience sampling, which narrows the perspectives and perceptions of teachers engaged within a community of practice. As such, future researchers may consider recruiting a diverse group of teachers with varying levels of commitment to self-reflection and professional growth to ensure a balanced representation of perspectives.

Furthermore, it is recommended to consider incorporating quantitative data collection methods in future research. This addition would complement the qualitative data and yield a more comprehensive analysis. By integrating quantitative approaches, a stronger understanding of the relationships between social justice advocacy and teachers’ perspectives and professional growth can be established.

Equally important is the duration of the study, which was limited to a short 6-week period. To obtain a more accurate analysis of the long-term effects and sustained impact of participating in a community of practice on teachers’ perceptions and practices in relation to social justice education, it is recommended to extend the duration in future
studies. In addition to addressing the study’s duration, fostering an inclusive environment that encourages active participation from all members becomes critical.

Additionally, addressing the issue of silence among participants who join the discussion late is crucial. By doing so, it ensures that certain teachers are not dominating the conversation and overshadowing others. Furthermore, enhancing the support of less actively involved teachers can significantly uplift their confidence and level of engagement.

Moreover, the present study relied on data derived from the lifeworlds of teachers and their perspectives within a community of practice. To gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of teachers, their diverse viewpoints, and the influence of a community of practice on their professional development, conducting a comprehensive qualitative research study is suggested. This study delved into the unique lifeworlds of teachers across various areas of teaching, such as different grade levels and subject areas. By exploring how teachers’ lifeworlds differ based on the grade levels they teach (e.g., early childhood, elementary, middle school, high school) or their specialized fields, a more nuanced understanding can be gained.

**Summary**

This qualitative research using a phenomenological analysis was conducted in a New Jersey public school district to address the problem of teachers lacking agency and sufficient preparation to implement pedagogies focused on social justice. The phenomenological analysis uncovered four key themes that emerged from the participants’ experiences:

1. Recognition and validation of inclusive, socially just pedagogies
2. Fostering good humans and nurturing collaborative relationships with families
3. Promoting openness, partnerships, and empowerment of culturally diverse voices
4. Prioritizing accountability, continuous culturally responsive learning, and time management

The study highlights the importance of providing teachers with the necessary support, agency, and preparation to effectively implement pedagogies centered around social justice. Significantly, it emphasizes the incorporation of teachers' lifeworlds, encompassing their unique experiences and backgrounds, within the broader context of their lived experiences, to better inform the design and implementation of effective social justice initiatives in the field of education. In essence, the research stresses the necessity of offering comprehensive support and purposeful strategies to foster social justice within educational settings.

Social justice involves taking proactive steps, but this journey can sometimes feel isolating. What happens when we encounter individuals who are unwilling to participate in this endeavor? Can we better encourage school districts and educators to fully embrace this cause? As a reading specialist, I owe my work success to the collective efforts of teachers. I believe that achieving social justice in education is getting others to commit to work alongside you. Devoting time and energy to this work has an emotional cost, as it necessitates confronting one's own beliefs. Nevertheless, it’s work worth doing because it has long-term benefits and more successful educational outcomes. The question that arises is: How much time should we invest in educators who don’t think the same way? Is it worth trying to change somebody’s mind? I recognize that this is a philosophical debate, but if teachers become leaders and open their lives and classrooms
to others, we can secure the support we require. I've come across this messaging repeatedly in my research, but I believe it to be the closest to answering all of these complex questions - we need time and patience, for if we do nothing, then nothing will change.
REFERENCES


chercheurs en education, 1(1).


https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319842343


http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol18/iss30/1?utm_source=nsuworks.nova.edu%2Ft


https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1539664


https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979221136506


https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1604809


https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124518785012

Knapp, M. S. (2017). The practice of designing qualitative research on educational leadership: Notes for emerging scholars and practitioner-scholars. *Journal of
https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775116647365


https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-1179-6_271-1


https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X12456699


https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085911431472

https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262622


https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487113494845
# Social Justice Education Playlist

## Table A.1 Social Justice Education Playlist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session #1: Social Justice Education Playlist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Social Justice Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion &amp; Classrooms, Pedagogy and Practicing Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, Sexuality and Social Justice Intersectionality; Racial Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and Privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE GOOGLE SLIDES PRESENTATION

Figure A.1 Culturally Responsive Google Slides Presentation
Dear School Community,

My name is Maria Halkias. I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Practices and Innovation Department of the University of South Carolina College of Education. I am seeking volunteers for my qualitative phenomenological research as part of the requirements for my degree in Curriculum Studies. This research will be exploring the impact of a community of practice on teacher perception and beliefs about the use of culturally responsive teaching practices alongside a personalized learning framework and I will be asking participants to create a lesson plan using the universal design learning framework. The participants will be asked to complete a pre-survey, write weekly reflections, and a final interview online or face-to-face. The research is expected to last for 6 weeks.

I am seeking between four to six teachers to participate in this community of practice. Collectively, the information gathered over the Spring of 2023, will provide valuable information on how teachers implement socially just pedagogies. Your responses to the survey, teacher reflections, and interview will be completely confidential and will only be released only as narratives in which individuals cannot be identified.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate in this study, please send me an email.

Sincerely,

Maria Halkias
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of South Carolina
College of Education
Principal Investigator: Maria Halkias
You are invited to participate with no obligation in my qualitative action research which has its main purpose to analyze the following research questions:

1. To what extent does participation in a community of practice influence teachers' perceptions of and commitment to social justice education?

2. How does participation in a community of practice shape teachers' views on culturally responsive teaching along with personalized learning in the context of social justice education?

3. How does participation in a community of practice influence teachers' perceptions of the Universal Design for Learning as an instructional tool to promote social justice education?

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:
Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You are free not to take part, or to stop taking part at any time. If you withdraw from this study, the information you already have given to the study team will be kept private. If you wish to withdraw from the study, please call or email the main researcher who is listed on this form. If you choose to participate in this research study, I will ask that you create a lesson plan using the universal design learning framework. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a pre-survey, write weekly reflections, and a final interview. Your responses to the survey, teacher reflections, and interview will be completely confidential and will be released only as narratives in which individuals cannot be identified.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS:
The identity of participants will be protected, and any identifiable personal information will be removed. Additionally, teachers will be able to use pseudonyms in the learning management system to protect their identity. The consent forms from this case study will be in a locked filing cabinet in my home and will be shredded following the completion of the study. Teachers’ reflections, online interviews, and my field notes will be stored on a hard drive in a password protected computer belonging to me.
The research is expected to last for 6 weeks and is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Your name and the name of the school will be protected and not revealed when reporting the results of the study.

___ I understand the information above and AGREE to participate in the research project.
I agree to take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this form for my own records.

___ I understand the information above and DO NOT AGREE to participate in the research project.

**If I have any more questions about my taking part in this study, or a study related injury, I am to contact XXX at XXX or email XXX.**

If you wish to be in the study, you should sign below.

______________________________  ________________________
Signature of Subject / Participant  Date

______________________________  ________________________
Signature of Qualified Person Obtaining Consent  Date
APPENDIX E

PRESUVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

Survey Excerpt Panorama Equity Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Response Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A1) When it comes to promoting culturally responsive practices, how helpful are your colleagues' ideas for improving your practice?</td>
<td>Extremely helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How easy do you find interacting with students at your school who are of a different cultural background than your own?</td>
<td>Not at all easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How comfortable would you be incorporating new material from different background into your daily classroom practices?</td>
<td>Not at all comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At your school, how often are you encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topics?</td>
<td>Almost never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much input do you have into individualizing your own professional development opportunities?</td>
<td>A tremendous amount of input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often are students given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?</td>
<td>Almost Always</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Survey Excerpt the Learning to Teach for Social Justice Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Response Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An important part of learning to be a teacher is examining one’s own attitudes and beliefs about race, class, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues of related to racism and inequity should be openly discussed in the classroom.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the most part, covering multicultural topics is only relevant to certain subject areas, such as social studies and literature</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good teaching incorporates diverse cultures and experiences into classroom lessons and discussions</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The most important goal in working with immigrant children and English language learners is that they assimilate into American society.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students who don't speak English as their first language.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of the responsibilities of the teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should teach students to think critically about government positions and actions.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although teachers have to appreciate diversity, it's not their job to change society.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether students succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work.</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistically, the job of a teacher is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Survey Excerpt for RAND Personalized Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Response Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have been useful for improving my instruction</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have helped me implement the technology used in my classroom.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have helped me understand how to personalize goals for students.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers at my school are highly focused on the mission of improving students learning.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My assessment methods include multiple ways for students to represent knowledge and skills and allow for attainment of outcomes at different points in time.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have familiarized me with a variety of approaches to instructional delivery.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning atmosphere is one in which students and teachers feel respected and connected.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I emphasize the human purpose of what is being learned and its relationship to the students.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX F

### BREAKDOWN OF SURVEY QUESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Excerpt</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey | 1) When it comes to promoting culturally responsive practices, how helpful are your colleagues’ ideas for improving your practice?  
2) How easy do you find interacting with students at your school who are of a different cultural background than you own?  
3) How comfortable would you be incorporating new material from different backgrounds into your daily classroom practices?  
4) At your school, how often are you encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topics?  
5) How much input do you have into individualizing your own professional development opportunities?  
6) How often are students given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures? |
| The Learning to Teach for Social Justice Belief Scale RAND personalized learning survey *  
* Please indicate the level of agreement with each of the following statements about all of your professional development experiences during the current school year. | 7) An important learning to be a teacher is examining one’s own attitudes and beliefs about race, class, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation.  
8) Issues related to racism and inequity should be openly discussed in the classroom.  
9) For the most part, covering multicultural topics is only relevant to certain subject areas, such as social studies and literature.  
10) Good teaching incorporates diverse cultures and experiences into classroom lessons and discussions.  
11) The most important goal in working with immigrant children and English language learners is that they assimilate into American society.  
12) It’s reasonable for teachers to have lower classroom expectations for students who don’t speak English as their first language.  
13) Part of the responsibilities of the teacher is to challenge school arrangements that maintain societal inequities.  
14) Teachers should teach students to think critically about government positions and actions.  
15) Economically disadvantaged students have more to gain in schools because they bring less into the classroom.  
16) Although teachers have to appreciate diversity, it’s not their job to change society.  
17) Whether students succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work.  
18) Realistically, the job of a teacher is to prepare students for the lives they are likely to lead. |
| RAND personalized learning survey * | 19) Have been useful for improving my instruction.  
20) Have helped me implement the technology used in my classroom.  
21) Have helped me understand how to personalize goals for students.  
22) Have addressed ways to collaborate with students and families to develop instructional goals and approaches.  
23) Teachers at my school are highly focused on the mission of improving student learning.  
24) My assessment methods include multiple ways for students to represent knowledge and skills and allow for attainment of outcomes at different points in time.  
25) Have familiarized me with a variety of approaches to instructional delivery.  
26) The learning atmosphere is one in which students and teachers feel respected and connected.  
27) I emphasize the human purpose of what is being learned and its relationship to the students’ experience. |
APPENDIX G

FINAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What motivated you to volunteer to participate/join in a community of practice?
2. How has participating in a community of practice deepened your understanding of socially just teaching?
3. What does culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning mean to you?
4. In what ways has a community of practice made you more aware of your cultural biases or assumptions?
5. What are some of the aspects, goals, or values of a community of practice that you find particularly helpful to your professional learning?
6. Has CoP helped you address a specific cultural issue or challenge you faced in your classroom?
7. In what ways has your participation in the community of practice influenced your understanding of social justice education and your commitment to promoting it in your classroom?
8. Have you implemented any new teaching practices or approaches as a result of your participation in the community of practice? If so, can you describe them and explain how they relate to social justice education?
9. How have you applied what you have learned in a community of practice to your interactions with students or families in your classrooms?
10. How has a community of practice influenced your approach to curriculum or instructional planning?
11. What are some future directions for a community of practice to support your professional learning?
12. How helpful was the community of practice in your understanding of social justice advocacy?
13. Have you shared your learning from the community of practice with colleagues or other educators?
14. Can you describe your understanding of culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning, and how they relate to social justice education?
15. In what ways has your participation in the community of practice influenced your views on these topics?
16. Have you implemented any new strategies or practices related to culturally responsive teaching or personalized learning as a result of your participation in the community of practice? If so, can you describe them and explain how they relate to social justice education?
17. Have you observed any changes in your students’ engagement or learning outcomes as a result of implementing these strategies or practices? If so, can you provide examples?
18. Can you describe your understanding of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and how it relates to social justice education?

19. In what ways has your participation in the community of practice influenced your views on UDL and its potential to promote social justice education?

20. Have you implemented any UDL strategies or practices as a result of your participation in the community of practice? If so, can you describe them and explain how they promote social justice education?
APPENDIX H

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Social Justice Education
Howard et al. (2022) clarifies that social justice involves more than comprehending inequality or acknowledging the need for change. It encompasses the conviction that individual have a personal obligation to effect change by taking action.

Community of Practice
Wenger (2011) defines a community of practice as a group of individuals who share a common interest or enthusiasm for a particular undertaking to enhance their skills through frequent interactions.

Culturally Responsive Teaching
Gay (2018) explains that culturally responsive teachers take the cultural frames of references, knowledge, and experiences of diverse learners to connect with the unique learning styles of students. She also believed that culturally responsive teaching is inherently a multidimensional approach that requires using a variety of practices to promote higher learning.

Personalized Learning
Personalized learning is an approach that considers the unique profiles of learners (Walkington, & Bernacki, 2020). Ober et al. (2023) describes CRPL as an approach is an educational approach that recognizes the significant impact of students’ personal, social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds on their learning experiences. It is an approach that customizes instruction to leverage students' strengths, all while making sincere efforts to cater to each individual student's requirements within the context of their unique backgrounds.
**Universal Design of Learning**  
Universal Design of Learning is a set of principles that work to guide equitable opportunities for all learners (Bray & McClaskey, 2016). The UDL considers the lenses of *Access, Engage, and Expression* as ways teachers should approach their daily practices and instructional planning. (Bray & McClaskey, 2016).

**Teacher Agency**  
Cong-Lem (2021) defines teacher agency as the ability of teachers to make decisions and take actions to bring about change.
# APPENDIX I

## ACTION PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Actions Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Goal 1:** Integrate culturally responsive teaching with personalized learning professional development, ensuring ongoing support and accountability. | Develop and implement culturally responsive teaching practices alongside personalized learning strategies throughout the school district within a timeframe of 3-5 years. | **Teachers Actions Needed**  
- Develop open dialogue, active listening, and respectful communication.  
- Incorporate culturally diverse perspectives and voices.  
- Address personal biases  
- Foster a sense of belonging and connection among students  
**District leadership**  
- Communicate a clear understanding of teacher’s roles, responsibilities, and accountability.  
- Engage teachers in the planning and design of professional development opportunities by creating an advisory board  
- Support and encourage teachers in creating a culturally inclusive environment and provide necessary resources. |
| **Goal 2:** Autonomy for Professional Learning/Forming Community of Practice | Develop a sense of autonomy for professional learning and create a community of practice by providing a space for sharing best practices, facilitating collaboration on curriculum development, and encouraging the exchange of ideas among educators. | **Teachers Actions**  
- Clear communication and responsibilities.  
- Facilitate peer-observations and feedback.  
- Engage in self-directed learning opportunities  
**District leadership**  
- Support and encourage teachers in creating a culturally inclusive environment and provide necessary resources.  
- Allocate time for sustained professional learning  
- Develop community of practice in support of professional growth. |
| **Goal 3:** Cultivate strong connections between the school and culturally diverse families, fostering a collaborative and inclusive educational environment. | Promote community building and strong connections between the school and families. Continue to cultivate a sense of belonging, active involvement, and collaborative partnership among students, families, and the broader community. | **Teacher Actions**  
- Form partnerships with community and families.  
- Develop inclusive and respectful conversations or discussions with students and families  
- Present work with others through various means, such as delivering a conference presentation or publishing an article.  
**District Leadership**  
- Allocate necessary resources such as funding, personnel, materials, and technology.  
- Observe classrooms to ensure inclusive and respectful conversations or discussions  
- Encourage collaboration with parents, guardians, and community organizations. |
| **Goal 4:** Enhance social justice education for teachers by deepening their understanding of their own lifeworld and lived experiences. | Develop self-reflection and personal growth among teachers to deepen their understanding of their own lifeworld and lived experiences, with the aim of enhancing their capacity to promote social justice education. | **Teacher Actions**  
- Advocate for policies and practices that promote social justice education at the institutional and systemic levels  
- Practice self-reflection  
**District Leadership**  
- Develop surveys that provide teacher feedback  
- Develop revisions in curriculum to align with district-wide policies that explicitly prioritize diversity, inclusion, and social justice in all aspects of education. |