

Seek First to Understand:

Exploring the Implementation of Culturally Relevant Education in the District of Columbia

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Abstract

In the United States, a significant opportunity gap persists between elementary and secondary students holding marginalized identities and their more privileged peers. Overwhelming evidence suggests that this disparity in academic outcomes emerges not from an inherent difference in students' abilities or motivations, but rather from institutional racism within and beyond the public education system. Students of color often do not see their backgrounds represented in the books they read, the discussions in which they participate, or the role models whom they look to in the classroom. Literature suggests that to succeed, all students- regardless of race- must feel validated, supported, and empowered by their academic environments. However, in the District of Columbia, Black students indicate dramatically lower satisfaction with their school climates than their White peers. A growing movement toward culturally relevant education (CRE), a pedagogical paradigm seeking to celebrate diverse identities in the classroom, shows promise at reducing this systemic racial inequity. The focus of this research is the potential for CRE implementation to address and narrow the opportunity gap between Black and White students in Washington, DC. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the current application of culturally relevant educational practices among District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) teachers in order to better understand the extent to which DCPS educators address racial disparity within their classrooms. Data gathering consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews thematically coded to explore how teachers implement CRE techniques, what supports or barriers they experience in executing these methods, and how they respond to racially disparate DCPS student experiences. These insights strengthen our understanding of DCPS teachers' perceptions of CRE implementation in diverse classrooms in

order to inform future research and suggest methods by which the public education system can empower teachers to equitably educate all of their students.

Keywords: culturally relevant education, opportunity gap, Washington, D.C.

“When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don’t blame the lettuce. You look into reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce.” -Thich Nhat Hanh

Introduction

The public education system in the United States of America acts as a paradoxical mechanism of both social progress and social inequity. Across the nation, schooling remains shaped by both a legacy and a modern demonstration of institutional disparity on axes of race, culture and class; “as social institutions, schools reflect the perceptions and lived experiences of the dominant culture while leaving a multitude of voices unheard” (Peterson & Davila, 2011, p. 29). This educational prejudice manifests as a persistent opportunity gap between White students and students of color (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006).

Effectively educating students from all backgrounds is more critical today than it has ever been. In 2013, 50% of American public school students identified as people of color; that proportion is expected to rise to 64% by 2025 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). As schools across the nation become more diverse, educators must adapt curricula to recognize and embrace a variety of student identities. Otherwise, we will fail to tap into the full potential of the majority of our next generation. Cultivating cultural intelligence among students and teachers alike has the potential to change the way we educate, perceive, and empower one another, within and beyond the four walls of a classroom. By exploring this capacity within one diverse community, this thesis seeks to expand upon a growing body of evidence that by seeking to firstly, understand all students, teachers can in turn more successfully be understood by all learners.

Problem Statement

The focus of this thesis is the potential for culturally relevant education to address and alleviate the opportunity gap between Black and White students in Washington, DC. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the current application of culturally relevant educational practices among District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) teachers in order to better understand to what extent DCPS educators address racial disparity within their classrooms. This chapter seeks to frame the contents of this study by operationalizing the terms, “culturally relevant education” and “opportunity gap”; outlining the thesis at large; and, acknowledging researcher subjectivity.

Key Terminology

Culturally Relevant Education. This thesis employs the term “culturally relevant education” (CRE) to describe a paradigm grounded in the objective to effectively educate marginalized students by prioritizing social justice and collective empowerment in curriculum building and teacher training (Aronson, 2015). Gloria Ladson-Billings first defined CRE as a system “that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (1995, pp. 16–17). This educational model is also described in literature as culturally “appropriate” (Au & Jordan, 1981), “congruent” (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), “compatible” (Jordan, 1985), and “responsive” (Cazden & Leggett, 1981). These terminologies describe a spectrum of manifestations of an emerging philosophy, underscoring one of its critical limitations: a lack of a consistent definition, emerging largely from sporadic implementation across the United States (Peterson, 2011). CRE seeks to inform two distinct but complementary educational dynamics: teaching and pedagogy.

This thesis will attempt to further operationalize CRE to best fit the context of the District of Columbia.

Opportunity Gap. Researchers often erroneously interchange the terms “achievement gap” and “opportunity gap” to describe educational inequity among student demographic groups. Policy makers typically employ the term “achievement gap” to describe measurable disparities in student outcomes; for example, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) identifies evidence suggesting that “one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant” (2013, p. 210) as an indicator of an achievement gap. By contrast, critical theorists opt for the term “opportunity gap” to capture the political, economic, and social conditions that perpetuate disparate student outcomes. The term “opportunity gap” places responsibility for student outcome inequality on educational institutions, rather than students and families, “in recognition of the unequal schooling practices in the U.S. that consistently deny racial and ethnic minority students equal opportunities to receive a high quality education” (Pitre, 2014, p. 212). In acknowledgement of systemic educational inequity, this thesis will employ the term “opportunity gap” to describe demographic discrepancies in student outcomes.

Study Outline

To achieve a greater understanding of CRE implementation in DCPS, this study will first present existing literature on the state of the opportunity gap between Black and White students in the District of Columbia and across the nation; empirical evidence of the efficacy of CRE in closing opportunity gaps and improving student outcomes; and racially disparate DCPS student perspectives on their school environments. This review of the literature will reveal a lack of knowledge about CRE implementation in DCPS, despite an enduring opportunity gap.

To fulfill this gap in existing research, this thesis will conduct a qualitative exploratory study of current DCPS educators. Data gathering will consist of semi-structured interviews thematically coded to explore to what extent teachers are currently implementing CRE techniques, what supports or barriers they experience in executing these methods, and how they respond to racially disparate DCPS student experiences. These insights will inform and strengthen understanding of DCPS teachers' perceptions of CRE implementation in diverse classrooms in order to inform future research and suggest methods by which the district can empower teachers to equitably educate all of their students.

Subjectivity Statement

This subjectivity statement intends to make transparent my stances and related experiences in order to provide readers with context for my interest in this topic and clarity on any potential bias that could arise. I am a White, middle class, cisgender individual who attended public schools for twelve years. I strongly feel that a prominent factor in my elementary and secondary academic success was the dominant representation of my own cultural references throughout my educational experiences, at the expense of my peers of color. I hope to engage with local and national education policymakers in order to advocate to provide teachers, schools, and larger educational institutions with the support they need to close the opportunity gap between White students and students of color and ensure that every student has access to the high quality public education that I was fortunate to attain.

As a scholar of Human Services and Social Justice, I value equity and inclusion in academia and acknowledge that there exists an imbalanced power dynamic emerging from my authorship of this study, rooted in my own privileged identity. To the best of my ability, I will hold myself to the culturally relevant standard I seek to set for DCPS educators by firstly,

acknowledging that my frame of reference is not subjective; secondly, recognizing that I cannot speak for or empathize with people of color; and finally, conceding that I have personally benefitted from the institutional racism I criticize and seek to dismantle in this study.

Finally, I am an employee and future corps member of Teach for America, an alternative teacher certification program that employs culturally relevant recruitment and training practices. I acknowledge a potential for bias toward this organization's philosophy, and will attempt to negate any partiality by not requesting that teacher study participants disclose their paths to certification.

Literature Review

This review of the existing literature on the Black-White opportunity gap and CRE implementation will thoroughly explore what is and is not known about the potential of CRE implementation to reduce the opportunity gap in the District of Columbia. This chapter aims to lay the foundation for the qualitative exploration of DCPS educators' experiences by (1) identifying evidence and causes of a persistent disparity in outcomes between Black and White students on a national and local scale; (2) thoroughly evaluating CRE efficacy by drawing from a body of evidence that employs a variety of techniques to study a diverse range of school communities; and (3) examining quantitative evidence that suggests Black DCPS students currently have lower satisfaction with their school environments than their White peers.

The Black-White Opportunity Gap

Evidence of the Black-White Opportunity Gap. The discrepancy in educational outcomes between Black and White students is well documented by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), an annual standardized test conducted by the Department of Education measuring student proficiency in mathematics and reading at fourth and eighth grade benchmarks in participating states and school districts (including DCPS) across the nation (NCES, 2016). In every assessment year recorded, White students have performed significantly better than their Black peers. NAEP results collected over the past 30 years indicate that “there was some narrowing of racial ethnic achievement gaps since the early 1990s” (NCES, 2016, p. 152)- that is, scores for Black students are trending upward over time, reducing the racial disparity in test results. However, from 2013 to 2015, this trend noticeably stagnated; the fourth-grade Black-White opportunity gap narrowed only two points,¹ while the eighth-grade Black-

¹ The National Assessment of Educational Progress scores “are reported on a 0-500 point scale for reading and mathematics at grades 4 and 8” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

White opportunity gap reflected no measurable difference (NCES, 2016). The disparity in NAEP outcomes between Black and White students is amplified in District of Columbia Public Schools, which recorded an average opportunity gap over twice as large as the national average for both fourth and eighth grade assessments (See Figure 1).

This thesis focuses on the opportunity gap between Black and White students, but acknowledges that statistically significant gaps in student outcomes are apparent for a range of identities, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status (NCES, 2016). Generally, in the United States, deeply entrenched opportunity gaps primarily reflect “the discrepancy in educational outcomes between various student groups, namely, African American, Native American, certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and primarily White and various Asian American students at the higher end of the performance scale” (Howard, 2010, p. 10). While every student identity marginalized by stratified outcomes deserves academic attention, this thesis will isolate the Black-White opportunity gap across the United States and within the District of Columbia because Black students comprise the majority of the DCPS student body and are thus arguably the school district’s most significant stakeholders.

Causes of the Black-White Opportunity Gap. Student achievement relates to factors within and outside of the school environment. Historically, the Black-White opportunity gap was often attributed to external correlational factors rather than “in-school” dynamics; low performance among African American students was linked to poverty, single-parent households, and low parent participation (Pitre, 2014). However, modern leading educational scholars strongly reject these explanations, as they “blame students, their parents, and communities for

failure and underachievement” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 32) without acknowledging the significant institutional factors that limit achievement outside of students’ locus of control.

By focusing on internal systems that perpetuate inequality within schools, this thesis hopes to recognize that Black students are limited not by their own potential, but by a system that was not built for all students and historically failed to support people of color. In fact, researchers contend that internal factors tend to correlate more with student achievement factors than external influences. Educational policy expert and Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond identified unequal access to qualified teachers and lack of access to high-quality curriculum as two critical elements that perpetuate entrenched opportunity gaps (2010). Drawing from numerous social indicators, she determined that these components “[have] been found to matter more for school outcomes than students’ backgrounds” (p. 51). Stratified student achievement, she concluded, lies not in community deficits, but in inadequate instruction and pedagogy.

Researchers Boykin and Noguera expanded upon Darling-Hammond’s theoretical approach in their empirical research within schools where race and class were strong predictors of achievement. They found that biased teacher assumptions strongly correlated with disparate student outcomes. In their study population and, as they extrapolated, in similar communities across the nation, “the failure of students of color can become normalized as educators and others rationalize and accept low-performance as the by-product of factors they cannot control” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 33). When educators assume that their students of color will fail, often their lowered expectations become realities in a self-perpetuating cycle of negative racial stereotyping. On a macro scale, this can manifest as a primary driver of the opportunity gap.

Evaluation of the Efficacy of CRE

A rapidly expanding body of evidence strongly links CRE implementation with both narrowing racial and cultural opportunity gaps and improving student achievement across the board. This section presents a range of study design approaches, including (1) anecdotal teacher accounts; (2) qualitative classroom case studies; (3) wide-scale qualitative studies; and (4) quasi-experimental quantitative analysis in order to demonstrate that regardless of what communities are studied or how conclusions are drawn, CRE is a tested and proven successful paradigm.

Literature Inclusion Criteria. CRE aims to leverage cultural intelligence among educators in order to increase student achievement and minimize the opportunity gap. Determining whether or not current literature supports the claim that CRE is effective in achieving this outcome is challenging for two reasons. Firstly, the idea of CRE is often inconsistent across studies. Drawing from several theoretical visions of teaching for social justice, Aronson (2016) identified four key identifiers of CRE: drawing cultural connections with academic skills and concepts; engaging students in critical reflection about their own lives; facilitating students' cultural competence; and explicitly critiquing discourses of power in the classroom, expanded upon in Appendix A. This review of the literature will include studies that examine interventions including one, some, or all of these markers of CRE. Secondly, comprehensively measuring student outcomes is difficult. No one metric, including standardized testing, can truly capture educational quality. This review will incorporate studies that measure student success using diverse metrics including and beyond test scores in order to provide well-rounded metrics of student outcomes. While the focus of this thesis is the Black-White opportunity gap, this review will also include CRE applied to multicultural students in order to demonstrate its universal value.

Anecdotal Teacher Accounts. Anecdotal teacher accounts of classroom-level CRE implementation offer limited but richly detailed testaments to the potential of this paradigm to build classroom culture and improve student outcomes. For example, Robbins' (2001) account of incorporating CRE into a middle school writing classroom offers insights into educator benefits of leveraging cultural intelligence. He shared that after integrating culturally diverse texts into his curriculum, his students in turn "connected experiences with diverse peers to negative images which were/are present in media and in their parents' work places" (p. 25). Acting as both teacher and researcher, Gutstein (2003) attempted to more explicitly illustrate the connection between CRE and student achievement in his 2-year study of an urban, predominately Latino classroom. Based on his own observation, student surveys, and textual analysis, Gutstein found that 27 of his 28 students experienced academic success and better "[understood] the injustices in society" (p. 53). Feger (2006) built upon Robbins' and Gutstein's studies, anecdotally recording her 9th and 10th grade student responses to the incorporation of culturally relevant course material. She too reported increased student classroom engagement. While this study design captured a microcosm of CRE implementation, it influenced academic conversation around how culturally relevant pedagogy can encourage collaboration, understanding, and empowerment among diverse students. These studies are also uniquely powerful in that they directly leveraged educators' voices and experiences.

Qualitative Classroom Case Studies. Classroom case studies exploring different teachers' approaches to CRE furthered evidence that leveraging cultural intelligence made educators more effective and benefitted multicultural students. Among the grounding research of this nature was Tate's (1995) qualitative study at a predominately Black urban middle school. He collaborated with a recognized outstanding teacher who was committed to engaging students

with culturally relevant issues by applying mathematical concepts to topics such as the AIDS epidemic and sickle cell anemia. Tate concluded that teachers who frame community issues as educational content can improve student academic proficiency and engagement. Similarly drawing upon personal experiences within a classroom community, Civil and Khan (2001) studied one classroom teacher's community gardening project that engaged elementary school children and families. Through interviews with students and ethnographic observation, Civil and Khan concluded that collaboration with students' communities and inclusion of students' cultures made connections to academic concepts more "personal and meaningful" (p. 401). These qualitative accounts build upon the idea that drawing cultural connections, a tenet of CRE, increases student participation and enthusiasm.

Several researchers structured case studies to gain perspective about CRE from students, rather than from teacher observation, concluding that student confidence increased when teachers implemented culturally responsive practices and pedagogy. Dimick (2012) conducted a qualitative case study of a science classroom consisting of a White teacher and 24 Black students, nine of whom acted as study participants. He conducted pre and post-interviews and held five focus group sessions, exploring students' reactions to their teacher's implementation of culturally relevant curriculum. Dimick concluded that CRE "may provide spaces for students to experience academic empowerment alongside political empowerment" (p. 1010), noting that students' interest in academic content increased significantly over the course of the study. Hubert (2013) studied a classroom of students labeled "at risk" in an alternative Southern high school, examining student perspectives on CRE informed mathematics instruction. The case study consisted of semistructured and coded interviews with five students, which reflected improved attitudes and increased interest toward the subject matter.

Several case studies sought to expand on past literature by assessing CRE efficacy for English language learners (ELLs) at a classroom level, indicating that this approach was particularly effective for this student population group. Wortham and Contreas (2002) conducted a two-year ethnographic study of a paraprofessional's CRE practices in a predominately Spanish-speaking classroom within a small rural community. Her incorporation of students' home cultures encouraged engagement and motivation. Nykiel-Herbert (2010) evaluated CRE implementation for a cohort of elementary-age non-literate Iraqi refugees, a particularly vulnerable student population, within an urban U.S. classroom. After participating in a 10-month intervention program that fostered a learning environment "congruent with their home cultures that supported their native languages" (p. 4), student participants showed significant improvement on a language assessment post-test. Choi's (2013) qualitative case study examining an 8th-grade social studies classroom at an alternative public high school for newcomer ELL students found that a teacher's choice to "[shift his] approach to global, multicultural citizenship in order to better address the needs of his newcomer students" (Choi, 2013, p. 14) improved their academic achievement and classroom interest.

Wide-Scale Qualitative Studies. Qualitative studies exploring larger student populations provide insight into how educational systems beyond individual classrooms can effectively implement CRE practices. Ensign (2003) studied six Northeastern elementary mathematics classrooms wherein teachers and students connected word problems to students' lived experiences. Employing classroom observations and student interviews, Ensign found that time on task and student interest in mathematics "increased noticeably when students' out-of-school problems were included in classroom lessons" (p. 419). Martell (2013) conducted a practitioner research study surveying 49 students of color from Boston, MA to investigate their perceptions

of a U.S. History curriculum that attempted to cater to a diverse set of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The survey found that 71.4% of students of color in the study said that their enjoyment of history class increased, and that 87.5% of students found that the course helped them to see history through another cultural lens (Martell, 2013).

Mixed Methods Research. Mixed-methods research approaches such as Hill's 2012 dissertation study offer more comprehensive connections between CRE implementation and positive student outcomes. Hill examined 52 CRE strategies in a predominately Black high school, comparing the practices of two highly effective teachers with their peers using a quantitative survey instrument, observations, student focus groups, and semi-structured teacher interviews. Hill found that the most effective teachers were successfully able to connect lessons to students' personal lives, increasing student motivation and classroom engagement.

Quasi-Experimental Quantitative Analysis. Additionally, an emerging body of quasi-experimental quantitative research correlates CRE implementation to generalizable positive student outcomes. One of the first major studies of this nature linking CRE to measurably improved student outcomes was Rodriguez, Jones, Peng and Parks' (2004) longitudinal study of 193 low-income high school students from diverse racial backgrounds that enrolled in a six-week intensive curriculum promoting "students' academic and cultural identity development through the implementation of culturally responsive practices" (p. 47). Pre- and post-test results indicated a statistically significant increase in participants' mathematics and science competency. Bui and Fagan (2013) conducted a similar quasi-experimental study involving 49 participants from one urban elementary school that implemented a culturally responsive teaching framework. Students made significantly significant gains from pretest to posttest in word recognition and story retell, indicating a link between multicultural literature and improved outcomes.

Summation of Literature. This body of literature indicates that the efficacy of CRE has been observed repeatedly over the past twenty years employing a variety of methods and studying diverse student populations within geographically varied school environments. Academia overwhelmingly supports the notion that CRE implementation improves both analytic and affective outcomes for students of all backgrounds, particularly those who hold marginalized identities. While CRE implementation looks different from one study to the next, “overall, and no matter the outcome discussed, the research demonstrates that the engagement of CRE across the content areas resulted in positive increases in academic skills and concepts” (Aronson, 2016, p. 196).

DCPS Student Perspectives

Exploring CRE effectiveness by examining student perceptions is a technique employed by several prominent studies within the body of literature on this topic (Civil & Khan, 2001; Dimick, 2012; Hill, 2012). Isolating the results of a recent comprehensive survey measuring DCPS students’ satisfaction with their school environments to demonstrate racially disparate student experiences will inform this study about the need for CRE intervention within the District of Columbia.

Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey Description. During the period of May 2-May 13, 2016, DCPS’ Office of Data and Strategy (ODS) worked with an external contractor, Westat, to administer Stakeholder Satisfaction Surveys as part of an ongoing effort to gather feedback about school climate (DCPS, 2016b). Schools could elect to offer surveys online or on paper to student bodies. ODS provided incentives to schools that had the highest student response rates; the district-wide student response rate was 78% (DCPS, 2016b). Every student enrolled in a DCPS school in grade 3 and higher as of March, 2016 was eligible to participate in the 2016

Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey. Prior to survey administration, schools distributed passive consent forms so that families could opt out their child from taking the survey. Schools submitted a list of opted-out students, as well as students who could not complete the survey due to cognitive disabilities, to ODS, who in turn created an adjusted population for each school to ensure ineligible students did not impact a school's response rate.

Results Isolated by Race. ODS was responsible for data collection and analysis. The initial survey instrument consisted of 30 closed-ended Likert scale questions (Appendix B) addressing a range of school climate indicators. ODS ran a factor analysis on survey responses in order to sort items into groups "based on similar response patterns" (DCPS, 2016b, p. 22). Using this analysis, ODS grouped survey responses into five factors: Learning Environment, Safety, Student Satisfaction, Interpersonal Relationships, and Social Emotional Learning (DCPS, 2016b). For each question, student responses were scored as follows: 0 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree (DCPS, 2016b). Within each factor, scored student responses were averaged; if a student's net averaged score was greater than or equal to 2.5, their survey was coded affirmatively for that factor. ODS presented post-factored, post-scored results disaggregated by race, Ward, and school type; however, citing parental consent and student privacy concerns, Amanda Belknap of the DCPS Office of the Chief of Staff explained that disaggregated raw data for each question is unavailable for secondary analysis. For the purposes of this study, results are isolated to compare Black student responses to White student responses for each of the five identified factors.

Factored results indicate that for the majority of identified factors, Black students report a less favorable perception of school climate than their White peers (See Figure 2). Black students within DCPS are significantly less likely to be satisfied with their schools, perceive their schools

as safe, and have strong interpersonal relationships at school than White students. Black and White DCPS students have similar perceptions of the quality of their learning environment, and Black students have significantly stronger perceptions of social emotional learning than White students.

Implications of Survey Results. These findings will inform qualitative interviews with DCPS teachers because they provide insights into three school climate factors- school satisfaction, perceptions of safety, and perceptions of interpersonal relationships- by which Black students are significantly less satisfied than their White peers, supporting potential areas for growth that CRE practices could address. Factors in which Black and White students indicate equitable experiences, such as perception of learning environment and perception of social-emotional learning, also provide a basis to explore where CRE and other interventions may be effectively addressing and narrowing the Black-White opportunity gap in DCPS.

Relevant Gaps in Literature

A dramatic opportunity gap persists between Black and White students in the District of Columbia. There is significant empirical evidence supporting the claim that CRE is an effective tool for not only dismantling educational inequity, but also improving measurable outcomes for all students. However, there is virtually no literature on the current implementation of CRE methods in the District of Columbia, despite evidence that Black DCPS students are significantly less satisfied with their school experiences than their White peers. This thesis seeks to fill this gap in literature in order to contextualize the potential of CRE within DCPS and make recommendations to leverage this method to reduce the Black-White opportunity gap and provide high-quality education for all students.

Methods

Qualitative interviews with current DC Public and Public Charter School teachers sought to explore how CRE is implemented in the District, what supports or barriers educators experience in creating more culturally competent spaces, and how teachers react to racially disparate student perceptions of their classroom environments. By (1) justifying this study design; (2) clarifying the studied sample population and relevant recruitment techniques; articulating data gathering procedure; (3) communicating how the study protected participant confidentiality; (4) outlining relevant demographic information for study participants; and (5) outlining the process of compiling and presenting findings, this section outlines the methods employed to answer the research question: to what extent does CRE currently address and narrow the opportunity gap between Black and White students in Washington, D.C.?

Justification

Conducting qualitative interviews with teachers stands as a well-documented technique for exploring CRE effectiveness (Tate, 1995; Robbins, 2001; Civil & Khan, 2001; Gutstein, 2013; Feger, 2006; Hill, 2012). This method has the capacity to better explore the extent to which teachers employ CRE techniques on a micro level, as well as any institutional barriers to doing so effectively. Building upon the insights gained through empirical evidence of the racial opportunity gap in Washington, D.C. with deeper, more descriptive, and more nuanced qualitative exploration provided greater understanding of current CRE implementation in the District of Columbia from a critical stakeholder group.

Recruitment

In order to recruit interview participants, this study communicated via email (Appendix C) with D.C. Public and Public Charter school administrators at the elementary and secondary

level utilizing the DCPS 2016-2017 school directory available online (DCPS, 2016a). This initial email request appealed to administrators to distribute information about study participation and researcher contact information to current teachers. This study then followed up with interested individuals from several geographically and demographically diverse schools in order to capture a diverse range of experiences and insights.

Following this initial phase of sampling, this study employed a chain-referral sampling technique to recruit additional interview participants. Chain-referral sampling is similar to snowball sampling, in which “persons initially chosen for the sample are used as informants to locate other persons having necessary characteristics making them eligible for the sample” (Bailey, 1994, p. 438). Chain-referral sampling differs slightly from this model in that it intends to tap into more than one “network” of participants by initiating several snowball samples stemming from a diverse group of initial participants. I interviewed “seed” participants, requested interviewees to recommend potential participants within their own diverse networks in a follow up email (Appendix D), and thus accessed interested candidates from several networks by following up with these individuals (Appendix E). This method sought to inform the study with a greater breadth of experiences while taking advantage of strong professional relationships within teaching communities.

Several constituents were excluded from this study population. Firstly, the small sample of teacher interviewees by no means comprehensively represents the views and experiences of all teachers in the District of Columbia. This study intends to capture in-depth perspectives from a small teacher population to better understand microcosmic implementation of CRE, rather than to generalize responses to the entire population. Private school teachers were also not within the scope of this study’s sample; this research aims to inform public teaching practices, but

acknowledges that future research should explore CRE implementation within independent school settings. Additionally, students, parents, and school administrators- key stakeholders in public education and effective CRE implementation- were not be included in the study sample. Future exploration should focus more deeply on these key educational perspectives and experiences, particularly those of students in the District of Columbia.

Procedure

Qualitative information gathering consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in person or via video-chat drawing from an Interview Protocol (Appendix F), as well as relevant exploratory questions as they arose. Semi-structured interviewing allowed the flexibility to reorder or clarify set questions in the interest of participant comfort and understanding, as well as collect consistent information collection across respondents. Interviews took place at school sites with the permission of participants, virtually, or on campus at the George Washington University. Interviews took place over the course of January, 2017-March 2017. On average, interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes and were audio-recorded on a private, password-protected computer.

Interview questions addressed three components: implementation of CRE teaching techniques, evaluation of cultural competence-oriented professional development and expectations, and addressing the results of the Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey. Prompts such as, “How do you discuss values such as respect, empathy, and tolerance in your classroom?” and “How do students develop an understanding of inequality or prejudice at your school?” encouraged teachers to identify CRE techniques without explicitly labelling them in order to reduce researcher confirmation bias and participant social desirability error. Inquiry about factors that assist or hinder in CRE implementation provided valuable insights into the current state of

CRE professional development in D.C. Public Schools. Addressing quantitative evidence from the 2016 Stakeholder Satisfaction survey prompted teachers to respond to the racially disparate experiences DCPS students report and reflect on the Black-White opportunity gap within the District.

Data Management

To ensure that study participants feel safe to speak critically about their teacher preparation programs, school administrators, and school district, teachers' identities remained confidential in this study. I provided participants with an informational form outlining voluntary participation, confidentiality, and benefits of research (Appendix G) prior to conducting interviews and orally obtained consent before individual interviews took place using an informed consent verbal script (Appendix F). In order to protect participant confidentiality, I did not ask teachers to sign an acknowledgement of consent. Interviewees answered general questions about the age, subject matter and student demographic they teach; however, the study did not request identifiable information.

Prior to the publishing or presentation of this research, study participants had an opportunity to review the findings to verify that their confidentiality was protected and their responses accurately reflected their views and experiences. Research participants are referred to by pseudonyms that reflect their genders and cultural backgrounds in analysis and findings; additionally, the names of participants' employers, school sites, and teacher preparation programs have been changed in order to protect teachers' personally identifiable information. Correspondence with research subjects and interview transcripts will be stored on a private, password-protected computer. Audio interview recordings were stored on a private, password-

protected device until written transcripts and member checks were complete, at which time they were deleted.

Study Participants

Six current educators from D.C. Public and Public Charter schools contributed to this research as interviewees. Participants reflect a diversity of teaching experience, classroom demography, and personal identity that cultivated broad research insights. The following table displays assigned pseudonyms and relevant demographic information for each educator:

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Years in Teaching	Student Age	Black : White Students
Fatima	South Asian	Woman	6	5-7	25:0
Anna	White	Woman	14	15-18	37:0
Jonathan	Black	Man	2	6-8	7:1
Molly	White	Woman	5	5-7	5:23
Jasmine	Latina	Woman	3	3-4	5:0
Lisa	White	Woman	20	4-8	40:2

Data Analysis

I transcribed audio recordings of interviews, recording both verbal content and non-verbal features of the interactions such as pauses, gestures and other cues, exemplified in Appendix H. Non-verbal interaction provided additional research insights, such as interviewees' reactions to emotionally compelling questions. Transcriptions featured line numbering for ease of reference within coding and findings. I coded interviews focusing primarily on the research question, to what extent does CRE currently address and narrow the opportunity gap between

Black and White students in Washington, D.C.? Thematic coding analysis at the utterance level gleaned as many insights as possible from a limited subject pool.

This study initially employed an open coding method to inductively construct concepts that explain how CRE is implemented in the District, what supports or barriers educators experience to creating more culturally competent spaces, and how teachers react to racially disparate student perceptions of their classroom environments. Interviews were then deductively theoretically coded to highlight the presence of four key markers of culturally relevant teaching identified by Aronson (Appendix A): connecting students' cultural references to academic skills and concepts; engaging students in critical reflection about their own lives and societies; facilitating students' cultural competence; and explicitly critiquing discourses of power. The following chapter thematically presents these findings, featuring key interview quotations to support and exemplify broader insights.

Findings

Interview transcripts were reviewed and coded in full, both inductively and with a theoretical lens, several times by both myself and peer reviewers in order to gain nuanced insight and understanding into DCPS teachers' perceptions of CRE and racially disparate student experiences. By (1) presenting themes that emerged in the inductive coding phase of data analysis, (2) highlighting the presence or absence of Aronson's theoretical framework that emerged during the deductive coding phase of data analysis, and (3) discussing the intersection between these two sets of findings, this section seeks to present the compelling narrative about CRE implementation in DCPS the six study participants iterated in their interviews.

Inductive Findings

This study initially employed an inductive coding method to reveal themes that describe how teachers currently perceive the Black-White opportunity gap, what resources educators find most crucial to implementing CRE successfully, and what barriers educators experience to creating more culturally competent spaces. Four themes emerged, each of which study participants identified as essential components to practicing CRE in their own classrooms: (1) Identity Ownership, (2) Trust Building, (3) Access to CRE Professional Development, and (4) Efficacy of CRE Professional Development; educators also identified several barriers outside of the realm of professional development discussed in this section.

Identity Ownership. Unpacking one's own identity emerged as a thematic approach by which educators found they could address and empower their Black students. While White participants overwhelmingly acknowledged how their privileges limit their ability to empathize with challenges Black students encounter, participants of Color noted how their backgrounds could help them to better relate to this population and marginalization they experience. Several

educators also noted that identity ownership could help them to recognize their own internalized biases in order to limit inequitable treatment of their students.

The three White educators included within this study sample acknowledged the enormous amount of advantage built into their identities; in fact, Anna, Molly, and Lisa each used “privileged” and “sheltered” to describe their backgrounds. Anna expanded upon this reflection, stating:

I think of lessons as choosing from lenses and mirrors. I can never be a mirror, because I am a White woman. So I have to make sure I’m presenting information that acts like a mirror, where [my students] can see their own perspectives.

By contrast, educators of Color recognized that their own marginalized identities may inform their ability to educate marginalized students. Fatima spoke powerfully to how her own family influences her view of her Black students:

You know, I’m the mother of a Black child. I’m going to educate you the way I want my Black child to be educated. I want her to be empowered. I want her to be, you know, intelligent. I want her to be empathetic. I want her to be well-versed, and just culturally competent overall. And, I treat my kids the way I want to see my daughter treated in her classroom. I teach them the things that I think are the most important to them as Black children in America.

Jonathan related as well, stating that his identity as a gay, Black man enhanced his understanding of the “discourse around equality and equity of voice,” which helped him to balance perspectives and insights in his classroom in a culturally relevant way. He expanded that:

I think my identity has heavily influenced me, because it allows me to stay aware. To be a culturally responsive educator, not only do you really have to sit with yourself and think about how your identity plays into your classroom, but you also have to think about your biases.

Jasmine's identity helped her to understand what role she hoped to avoid in her students' educational experiences; she stated:

As an immigrant, as a Filipina, I can certainly understand how it feels to feel different and like you don't belong, and I never want my students to feel that way around me.

Fatima poignantly pointed out that despite her status as a person of color, continuing to recognize her own privileges and biases remains imperative. She elaborated,

We make our own assumptions with our biases and we don't realize how much that affects our, you know, our interactions with people until you're facing it head on. And, you know, it took a lot of unpacking for me to really see that I may have so many minorities represented in my family, but that doesn't mean that I don't have single stories and I don't have biases of other racial, sexual, ethnic groups, you know, that aren't in my family necessarily. I really had to tell myself, you don't know it all. There's still room for growth.

Trust Building. The establishment of trust between educators and Black students, and on a more macro level, school communities and communities of Color, emerged as a critical theme in effective CRE implementation. Jonathan touched on how mistrust manifests as a response to historic educational injustice, remarking that:

I think one difference, in terms of the families, is the degree of trust in education. I think African American families have been so mistreated by the education system, and kind of

slapped around, that there is a large distrust. And I know that's the reason our school does home visits, to regain that trust in our school.

Fatima added that mistrust can stem from environments within and beyond the school system that seem hostile and unwelcoming to Black students, particularly within the context of modern racial tension. Stated Fatima,

With all of the racial tension becoming more prevalent in our society today, the first thing that goes with that is trust. And if you don't trust the place that you're in, you don't feel safe. That ends up looking a lot different with a Black child, you know, like I said, especially with the political climate, Black Lives Matter, all of these different things that are going on right now. The education that we have to give our Black students looks different than the education that is given to a White student because, nine times out of ten, a White student is not going to be profiled for, you know, walking with their head down with a hood on. For that reason, there is a lot of distrust in society, and unfortunately school is no different.

Anna expanded on how privacy invasions within school environments can exacerbate this culture of mistrust.

Students feel it when they're going to school, and walking through metal detectors, and their bags are being searched. That everyday confrontation of being searched before you walk into a building, it flips things, and you lose an element of trust.

These observations

Access to CRE Professional Development. CRE professional development emerged as a key predictor of whether or not educators felt confident successfully implementing CRE techniques. However, the presence of CRE professional development varied dramatically among

participants. One educator received compulsory comprehensive CRE professional development throughout her career as an educator; two educators sought out access to CRE training opportunities without express guidance from their schools; and three educators indicated that they received limited or no meaningful CRE professional development throughout their careers as educators.

Fatima indicated that both her certification pathway training and professional development within her school provided her with a significant understanding of CRE practices; in fact, she stated that initial feedback she received centered around cultural relevancy, rather than more traditional educational markers. She stated:

Oh my god. I've got cultural competency training coming out of my ears! When I first started teaching, I thought I would be getting critiqued on my lesson plans and stuff like that. And, my first feedback was, "what did you do in your lesson to empower them as Black children?" And I'm like, what? You're not going to tell me anything about my actual lesson?

Fatima attributed these resources as a significant factor in practicing cultural competency, in conjunction with the identity and experiences she brings to the classroom.

While Anna and Jonathan did not receive CRE professional development as a component of compulsory training and preparation, they both took initiative to seek out resources that help them to recognize and incorporate CRE techniques. When asked if she had ever received cultural relevancy training in her career as an educator, Anna responded:

No, is probably the right answer. But, because I, like most teachers, seek out learning opportunities, it flips the answer to yes. Most of [CRE professional development] is self-

motivated, and it would be unfair for me to say I wasn't taught that, because I did seek out the resources that were there.

She acknowledged that "as far as a formal program, [CRE professional development] is very limited, if offered at all" at her school, but credited her own efforts to learn about the craft of CRE as an essential component to her success as an educator. Jonathan shared this experience, stating that while he "would like to say that there are opportunities to discuss cultural competency in [his] building, but it does not happen that way." However, he manages to access this information through alternate means, stating:

The only way I have access to [CRE professional development] would be if I were to request time off to go to a conference, like the one I went to, or if I do it on my own time.

By contrast, Anna, Jasmine, and Lisa indicated that they either did not have access to or the motivation to seek out CRE professional development resources. Lisa alluded to the potential for superficial CRE professional development, stating, "we might have a mini-PD where we read an article about race, but we do not directly receive any training on multicultural sensitivity."

Anna concurred, stating:

As far as being a DCPS teacher and receiving those resources, I've never been given them. So, I would say it doesn't really have a place unless the teacher goes out of their way to do it.

Jasmine also indicated a lack of CRE professional development, but stated that she felt that her school and supervisors were "incredibly supportive" of students and teachers of all backgrounds.

Efficacy of CRE Professional Development. Several participants observed that access to CRE professional development was not adequate to ensuring CRE techniques took place;

teachers also held the responsibility to “buy in” to training in order to effectively practice CRE.

As Fatima explained,

We’re telling the teachers to teach this way, and teach these things in particular, to empower the kids, but, you know, there’s some that only talk the talk and don’t walk the walk. And that’s really difficult.

Anna elaborated on this concept by remarking that educators who hadn’t personally benefitted from or experienced the need for CRE techniques may have trouble understanding its importance for marginalized students. She clarified this point, stating,

If you’re not a teacher who has been exposed to different cultures, or been exposed to culturally relevant teaching and learning yourself, then it’s probably not going to be a priority, because you probably haven’t been impacted by it.

Barriers to CRE Implementation. Educators identified several key barriers to successfully implementing CRE techniques in their classroom beyond significant lack of access to quality CRE professional development. These include the pressure to incorporate other techniques, emphasis on standardized test scores, and white supremacy in school structures.

Educators defended lack of consistent CRE implementation by first stating that they are under constant pressure to receive and implement feedback regarding a number of instructional measures, other than CRE techniques. Explained Anna,

There’s a lot of pressure to cover a lot of things in the classroom, and to do a lot of things every moment of every lesson. It’s easy to see how [CRE techniques] get lost, and just don’t happen.

Beyond this pressure to incorporate feedback exists a system-wide anxiety about standardized testing results, which can eclipse efforts to create more culturally relevant

classrooms. Anna remarked on how this focus on testing results can limit educators' ability to flexibly approach CRE implementation, stating:

There is a pressure to match standardized curricula, and standardized assessments, and sort of a top-down message of "this is what you should be teaching your children." It doesn't allow for as much reflection and processing, of how to be more culturally relevant to who is in front of me at the time.

Lisa further contextualized the sense of urgency she feels about standardized test scores in order to meet the bare minimum of education; she elucidated,

The reality is that, whether our school stays open or not, is based on standardized test results. I think that we're so driven by the need to... to use that horrible phrase, "get them educated," that we do not make the time to deal with the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of the kids.

Jonathan argued that this focus on standardized data- and the subsequent limitation of educators' ability and incentive to culturally empower students of Color- is rooted in historic and modern White supremacy. He reflected on this realization and his own reaction, explaining:

This whole year has kind of been a mind-boggler for me as I kind of try to... disenfranchise my subscription to my administration's work policies, which actually operate under, are rooted in, White supremacy culture, even though it's coded as, "we want to focus on academic outcomes."

Theoretical Findings

The inductive coding process revealed critical educator perceptions about the outlooks and resources they find most critical to successfully implement CRE. In order to best understand the extent to which educators are able to successfully incorporate these elements into their

classrooms, I relied upon deductive analytical methods to highlight the presence or absence of key elements of CRE implementation within educators' descriptions of their classroom techniques. I coded interviews to highlight the presence or absence of Aronson's (2016) four key markers of CRE (Appendix A) among each participant: (1) drawing cultural connections; (2) facilitating cultural competence; (3) critiquing discourses of power; and (4) engaging students in critical reflection.

Drawing Cultural Connections. Each participant interviewed successfully demonstrated the ability to draw cultural connections between students and academic skills and concepts, primarily through the use of culturally representative classroom materials. Educators incorporated this CRE by far the most effectively and consistently of the four studied, in part because executing this representation could be a relatively straightforward endeavor adaptable to a range of classroom contexts- even those wherein teachers did not have ideal access to CRE implementation resources.

Several teachers drew cultural connections for students visually by displaying a range of cultural identities on their classroom walls. For example, while Jasmine struggled to implement several markers of CRE with her toddler-age students, she found that she could draw meaningful cultural connections for them despite their young age. She stated:

It can be as simple as putting up posters on the walls with people that are representative of my students. Even though they are so young, that representation still means something.

Jonathan, too, found that posters were an effective way to increase representation in his science classroom as he had less agency over text choices. By hanging posters of prominent African American scientists, he stated that he intended to help students "visualize themselves in these roles; after all, you can't be what you can't see." He also reflected that this was perhaps a

“surface level application of cultural competency,” adding that he intended to continue to think critically about how to incorporate more cultural connections into his lesson planning.

Other educators utilized representative fictional text choices to draw cultural connections with academic content. Molly, who repeatedly referred to her frustration with the lack of dedicated resources and time her school allotted to support teachers’ CRE implementation, found that she could practice this element successfully as well by “[making] an effort to choose different texts, that have all different kinds of students’ cultures and whatnot.” Lisa, too, consciously chose texts that included diverse characters and backgrounds, but emphasized that she received little guidance from her school on choosing these texts.

Finally, several educators highlighted and explored the histories of people of Color in order to draw these cultural connections. Fatima focused on Black history in her classroom to respond to her 100% African American student body, emphasizing the importance of her students’ heritage and culture:

We do a lot of talks about Black history, and I tell my kids all the time that, you know, Black history is American history.

Anna, too, found that teaching Black history played a critical empowering role in her classroom. She emphasized that this dialogue must occur throughout one’s curriculum, rather than “isolating the story of a whole culture into one month or unit.”

Facilitating Cultural Competence. Three of the six participants interviewed for this study actively facilitated students’ cultural competence in the classroom by encouraging cross-cultural learning and communication. Those who did not implement this CRE marker acknowledged the importance of celebrating diversity, but predominately cited a lack of school-level intentionality and professional development as reasoning for why they were unable to do

so. Fatima in particular emphasized the importance of teaching cultural competence to her students, stating:

If I'm only teaching you strictly content, I'm not teaching you anything about yourself, or anything about the people around you, or anything about the people of the world, and I'm doing you a real disservice because when you leave my classroom, you're not just going to be sitting down with a book. You're not just going to be sitting down with me. You're going to continue to encounter people who look like you, and people who don't look like you.

The ease and strategies with which educators described their ability to facilitate cultural competence largely relied upon classroom makeups. Jasmine, whose students hold a diversity of racial and ethnic identities, noted that encouragement of cross-cultural understanding could be fulfilled within the context of her classroom. She explained,

Because my students come from so many different backgrounds and cultures, most of the learning they do about different cultures and people comes from playing and interacting with one another.

By contrast, Anna, who teaches a much more homogenous student population, described the range of creative techniques she chose to implement to effectively teach tenets of cultural competence to her students:

Our school is not a diverse student body, in terms of racial diversity. I work really hard to create experiences where they are doing things which take them all over the city... so they are experiencing, and being challenged, in conversations that do reflect diversity. For example, over the last three years, I've done a partnership with a private school in upper Northwest. So it can look like that.

Lisa, Jonathan, and Molly found limited success integrating this CRE marker into their classrooms. Jonathan attributed this gap to a lack of “intentional curriculum [and] discussion about diversity” at the administrative level, a sentiment echoed by Molly and Lisa.

Critiquing Discourses of Power. Three of the six educators interviewed expressed explicit dedication to the pursuit of social justice through the deconstruction of oppressive systems within their classrooms.

The timing of this study, with interviews conducted from January to March 2017, made the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump a key point of discussion among educators seeking to empower students by challenging oppressive dialogue. Jonathan, for example, discussed the election and underlying beliefs and fears with his students, stating that “we stopped, we talked about it, and we got back on track.” Fatima went further to discuss relevant her own response and fears to President Trump’s rhetoric that targeted her own identity:

I talked to my students recently about the recent immigration ban because, as I mentioned earlier, I am a Muslim woman. I wear a full veil, a full faced veil, and everything to work. So, I um, talk to my kids about the recent immigration ban and how it is affecting myself and my family.

One educator, Anna, took implementation of this CRE marker a step further by incorporating the discussion of oppressive systems of power that impact her own students on a more micro level. She stated,

[My students] come to the table with a very complete understanding about what it is like to be discriminated against. So, it’s creating space to share those experiences and to learn from them, and to then learn the root causes of them, so that they can find agency in changing them.

The successful incorporation of this CRE technique correlated completely with educators who had access to, or sought out, meaningful CRE professional development and resources. Anna, Jasmine, and Fatima, all of whom indicated that they have not received any formalized training, did not indicate successful critique of discourses of power; in fact, in reference to the election, Molly stated that her students were “too young” to understand or appreciate such discussions, despite teaching the same aged students as Fatima.

Engaging Students in Critical Reflection. Two participants were able to identify techniques by which they engage students in critical reflection about their own lives, primarily by prioritizing social-emotional learning alongside academic achievement. Fatima described her emphasis on healthy social-emotional interaction and reflection in the classroom, stating:

We talk a lot about putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, you know, when we’re trying to talk about empathy. We always talk about respect, treating others the way that you want to be treated.

Anna more explicitly described centering her teaching philosophy around emotional health. She expounded:

Giving space to ask the question, “well, how does this make you feel?”, is a key component to our classroom for both emotional and academic learning. That’s what you remember when you’re exploring new ideas. Giving kids space to make their thinking visible, whether or not it’s the academic piece or the emotional piece, is super important.

Jonathan noted that while he recognized and addressed the need for engaging students in critical reflection about their own lives, he received resistance from administrators against integrating these practices into his classroom. He stated:

Actually, even though I've brought it up- "where is our social-emotional learning?"- I was told by our Principal, "unfortunately, because of the academic needs of our students, there's no time for social-emotional learning."

Like the critique of discourses of power, interest in incorporating this CRE technique was limited to Anna, Fatima, and Jonathan, educators who had access to, or sought out, meaningful CRE professional development and resources. This correlation suggests that access to such supportive structures can better empower educators to, at minimum, recognize the need for engaging students in critical reflection about their own lives.

Intersection of Findings

The inductive findings presented in this chapter reveal clear disparities in quality CRE training and resources among DCPS educators. In coding for Aronson's four markers of CRE, it becomes apparent that this irregular access to quality cultural competency-related professional development and resources manifests as sporadic implementation of Aronson's markers of CRE implementation. While each educator expressed a sincere desire to more effectively relate to and empower their Black students, those that did not have the support structures to prioritize cultural intelligence could not effectively implement CRE. Thus, in evaluating the extent to which CRE implementation can address the opportunity gap between Black and White students in Washington, D.C., it becomes clear that CRE techniques will have a limited impact until every teacher is equipped to practice them successfully.

Discussion

Teachers of all backgrounds who effectively implement CRE play a critical role in building trust with Black students and communities, and thus have the capacity to contribute to addressing the Black-White opportunity gap in Washington, D.C. However, due to a lack of consistent professional guidance and resources, DCPS educators currently implement CRE sporadically, despite acknowledging its importance in confronting systemic disparity and empowering students of Color. This study fills a gap in existing literature about CRE implementation because it explores DCPS educators' attitudes and dispositions toward CRE, as well as the supports and barriers they face in practicing these techniques in their classrooms. Additionally, this study frames CRE implementation as a necessary component of disrupting and addressing the entrenched opportunity gap between Black and White students in the District of Columbia.

This section seeks to further discuss the influence of this study by (1) offering policy recommendations DCPS can employ to more equitably educate students of all backgrounds, (2) exploring this study's limitations, (3) providing a framework for future research regarding CRE implementation in the District of Columbia, and (4) concluding with the implications this work may have on future theory, research and practice.

Policy Recommendations

The District of Columbia can better support teachers in acquiring and implementing a CRE skillset by (1) investing in meaningful and consistent professional development resources, and (2) emphasizing CRE implementation as a critical component of teachers' evaluation measures.

Professional Development. This study's findings indicate that while DCPS teachers consistently recognize the importance of cultural intelligence in the classroom, access to CRE professional development resources from the school district is sporadic. This is not to say that DCPS does not invest in professional development at all; in fact, DCPS' primary professional development programming, Learning Together to Advance our Practice (LEAP), offers robust programming, including weekly seminars, classroom observations, and debriefs with an emphasis on seven objectives. At present, none of these objectives explicitly include cultural intelligence or relevancy (DCPS, 2017). The framework and resources already exist within the District to include high-quality CRE training alongside current professional development. DCPS leaders must choose to prioritize CRE as a necessary teaching strategy by incorporating its tenants- ideally as defined by Aronson's four key markers (2016)- into the LEAP framework.

Accountability. Evidence suggests that CRE practices contribute to increased academic outcomes for students of all backgrounds; in order to reap the benefits of this paradigm, DCPS ought to emphasize the expectation of CRE implementation by increasing the impact of cultural intelligence, or lack thereof, in evaluating educators' effectiveness. DCPS educators are currently evaluated with the The DCPS Effectiveness Assessment System for School-Based Personnel (IMPACT) that determines teachers' effectiveness based on a number of factors. The presence or absence of CRE practices can affect a teacher's evaluation score for 2 out of five total "essential practices," or components of instructional expertise, all five of which weight 30% of evaluations; comparatively, standardized test scores weight 35% of applications (DCPS, 2016). This emphasis on testing rather than cultural competency may discourage educators from investing in the time required to effectively practice CRE, even though that approach may achieve increased academic outcomes. CRE implementation ought to play a greater role in evaluating educators to

incentivize teachers, as well as certification pathways and administrators, to incorporate those practices into DCPS schools more prominently. It's crucial to note that this shift in accountability must be predicated by teachers' increased access to high quality CRE resources and training in order to be meaningful and fair.

Limitations

This study was limited by (1) a racially unrepresentative study sample, (2) reliance on self-reporting of CRE implementation, and (3) an exclusive participant pool.

Unrepresentative Sample. The sample population for this study does not reflect the racial makeup of DCPS educators. The table below highlights the racial demographic discrepancies between DCPS educators and the study population:

Table 2. Comparison of Study Sample to DCPS Teacher Demographics

	White	Black	Hispanic	Other
DCPS Teachers	36%*	52%*	7%*	5%*
Study Sample	50%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%

*Boser, 2014, p. 7

This table demonstrates this study's overrepresentation of educators who racially identify as White, Hispanic, and Other; perhaps more relevantly, this table also highlights the drastic underrepresentation of Black educators in this study. Considering this study's emphasis on the Black-White academic opportunity gap, this study's incorporation of Black teachers' voices and perspectives is inadequate. The study population does not reflect DCPS teacher demographics because race was not a factor in participant recruitment and selection.

Reliance on Self-Reporting. This study design relied heavily on educators' self-reporting of CRE implementation within their classrooms without collecting corroborating evidence that CRE practices were truly taking place. This absence of corroboration through

methods such as ethnographic classroom observation may have contributed to participants' over-reporting of CRE techniques. Modern educational research acknowledges this methodological limitation, attributing potential over-reporting of CRE techniques among educators to "social desirability bias or limited insight and self-reflection" (Debnam, Pas, Bottiani, Cash, & Bradshaw, 2015). Given the context for this study in particular, participants may have felt pressured or compelled to over-report their own cultural relevancy. In order to respond to this inclination, I sought to frame interview questions about CRE implementation with neutral language and protected participants' confidentiality so that they could feel comfortable sharing socially undesirable insights. Despite these provisions, readers ought to acknowledge the potential for inflated self-reported CRE techniques in this study's findings.

Exclusive Participant Sample. This study design only engaged current DCPS educators. Therefore, findings did not consider viewpoints from other critical stakeholders including students, parents, community members, and administrators. Additionally, this study limited recruitment efforts to current DCPS teachers and relied on administrators to circulate the message about the study. Therefore, many Washington, D.C. educators' viewpoints, as well as crucial community perspectives, were excluded from this study and were not included in these findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research ought to focus on: (1) Students', parents' and administrators' observations of CRE in DCPS; (2) the unique experiences and challenges educators of Color encounter; and (3) opportunity gaps experienced by other marginalized groups in DCPS. In order to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the capacity for CRE implementation to reduce the Black-White opportunity gap within DCPS, the voices of other school community

members- most urgently, the students that these techniques seek to empower- are essential. Exploring these perspectives through qualitative stakeholder interviews, student focus groups, and more targeted wide-scale surveys like the Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey would allow for greater understanding of how CRE techniques affect the school community as a whole, and how teachers can implement CRE more effectively. Additionally, several study participants indicated that there is a need for greater academic understanding of how teachers of Color are supported and perceived by their colleagues and superiors. Finally, other marginalized student demographics experience opportunity gaps in DCPS and across the country; these students, as well as their unique needs, deserve academic attention and consideration.

By continuing this discussion on how to empower students of Color in academic spaces, future research will expand our understanding of what educational systems, schools, administrators and teachers can do to address and ultimately dismantle systems of oppression within education. Further, by focusing on the unique context of the District of Columbia, research can contribute to alleviating the entrenched Black-White opportunity gap within our community.

Conclusion

All children have the right to feel supported, empowered, and understood by their teachers. However, the public education system in the United States continues to affectively and empirically marginalize students of Color, in part because teachers do not have the skills or capacity to leverage cultural intelligence as a mechanism for dismantling historic opportunity gaps. Teachers, administrators, and schools of education have an urgent obligation to explore how to best train and support teachers to effectively educate all students; equipping teachers to effectively implement CRE techniques can play a critical part in achieving this goal. Both in

Washington, D.C., and across the nation, we as researchers, educators, and citizens have the capacity to press to prioritize cultural intelligence and empowerment as an essential foundation to successful public education. In doing so, we can work to ensure that every student receives an equitable opportunity to succeed within and beyond their educational experiences.

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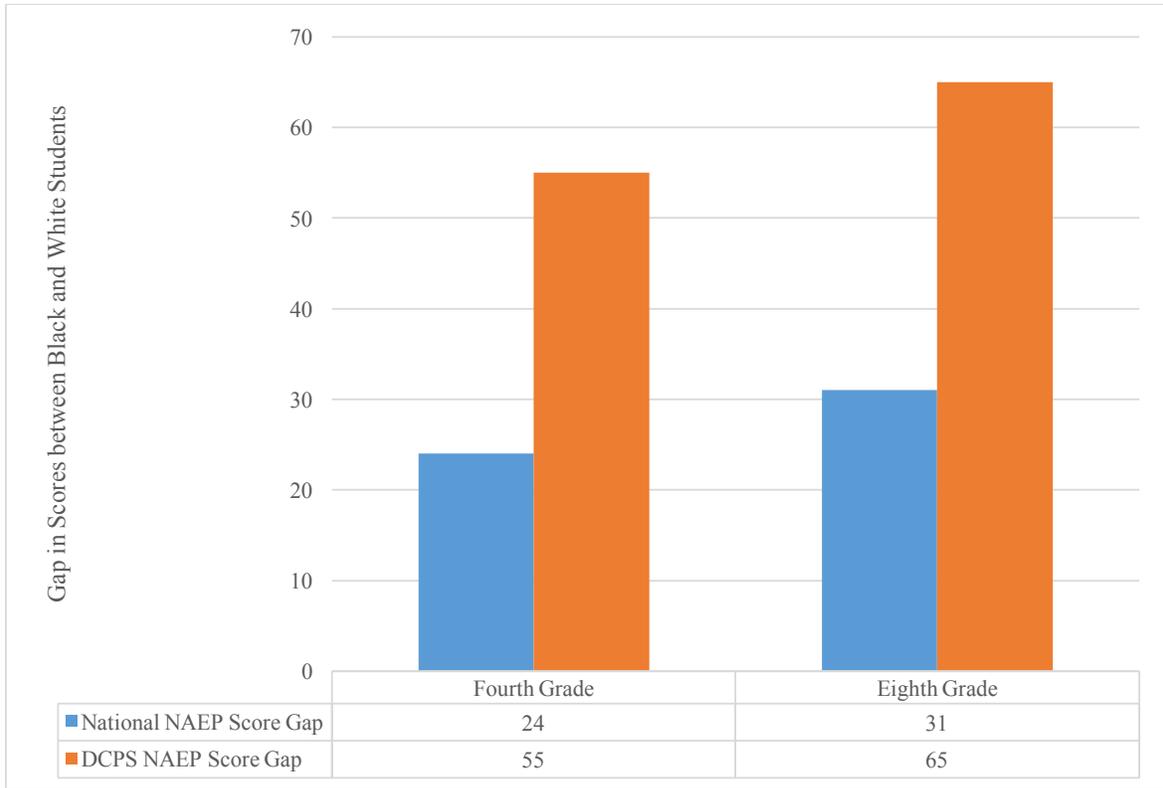
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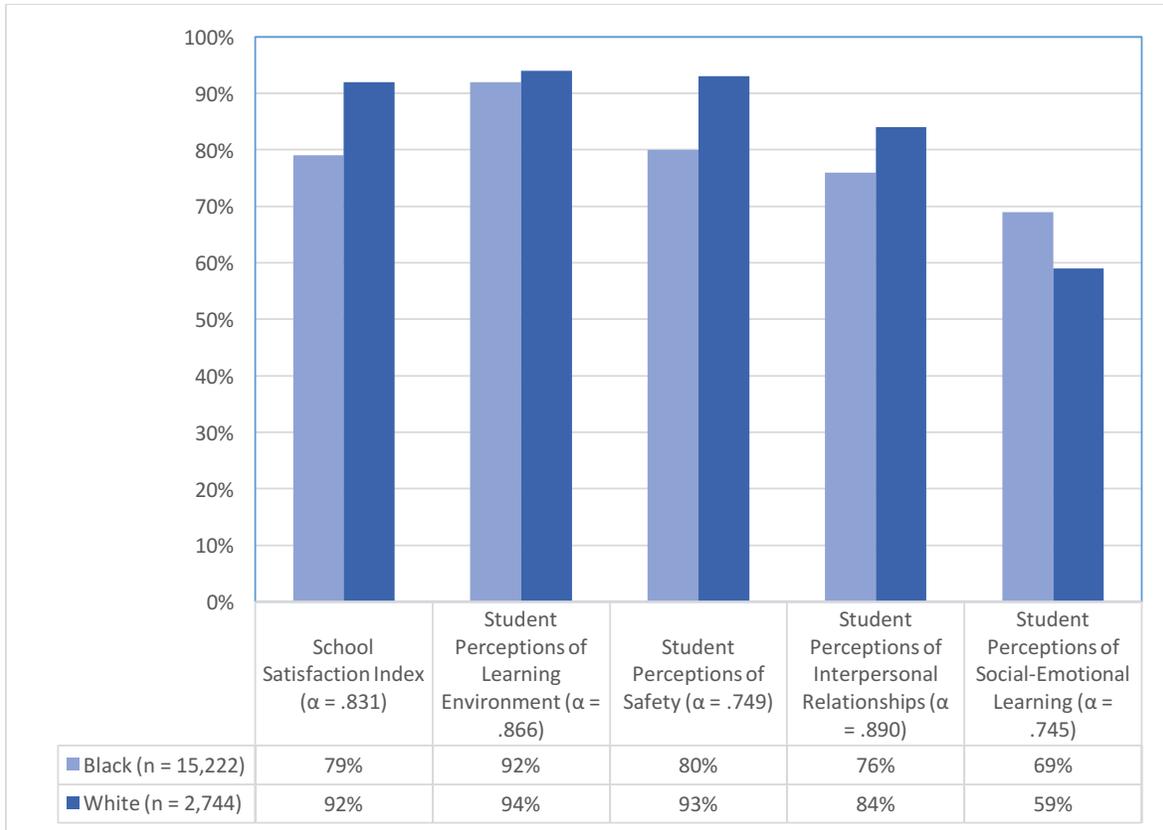
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Figure 1: Black-White Opportunity Gap on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress



*Obtained from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2016)

Figure 2: 2016 DCPS Student Satisfaction Survey Results by Factor: Comparing Black and White Student Responses*



*Obtained from the 2016 Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey Results Report (DCPS, 2016b)

Appendix A: Aronson's Four Key Markers of Culturally Relevant Education (2016)

Marker	Aronson's Definition	Implementation Examples
Drawing Cultural Connections with Academic Skills and Concepts	"Culturally relevant educators use constructivist methods to develop bridges connecting students' cultural references to <i>academic skills and concepts</i> . Culturally relevant educators build on the knowledges and cultural assets students bring with them into the classroom; the culturally relevant classroom is inclusive of all students." (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating texts that feature a diverse representation of experiences and cultures • Highlighting histories of People of Color and other marginalized groups
Facilitating Students' Cultural Competence	"Culturally relevant educators facilitate students' <i>cultural competence</i> . The culturally relevant classroom is a place where students both learn about their own and others' cultures and also develop pride in their own and others' cultures" (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussing and practicing concepts such as respect, tolerance and inclusivity • Exposing students to cultures different from their own
Explicitly Critiquing Discourses of Power in the Classroom	"Culturally relevant educators explicitly unmask and unmake oppressive systems through the <i>critique of discourses of power</i> . Culturally relevant educators work not only in the classroom but also in the active pursuit of social justice for all members of society" (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging assumptions about historical power and privilege • Unpacking modern social inequity
Engaging Students in Critical Reflection about their Own Lives	"Culturally relevant educators engage students in <i>critical reflection</i> about their own lives and societies. In the classroom, culturally relevant educators use inclusive curricula and activities to support analysis of all the cultures represented" (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawing connections between students' lived experiences and classroom content • Engaging students' social-emotional intelligence in academic spaces

Appendix B: Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey Questions Grouped by Factor (DCPS, 2016b)*Factor 1: School Satisfaction*

1. I would recommend my school to other students.
2. My family is welcome at my school.
3. My school is clean and well maintained.
4. I feel safe at my school.
5. Adults maintain control of my school.
6. We have enough teaching materials (like books, photocopies, and calculators) for all.
7. My school offers good after-school options.
8. I like my school.

Factor 2: Student Perceptions of Learning Environment

1. Teachers in my classrooms know my family.
2. There is an adult at my school I can talk to if something is wrong or I have questions.
3. Adults at my school care about students.
4. I am greeted or acknowledged in a positive way by a teacher or staff member every day.
5. Students are recognized throughout the year for their achievements.
6. My teachers display student work at my school.
7. Teachers at my school believe that I can do challenging work.
8. It is okay to make mistakes at my school.
9. Teachers at my school know when I need help with my work.
10. Teachers at my school make learning fun.
11. Teachers at my school want me to share my ideas and opinions.

12. I have at least one friend at my school.

Factor 3: Perceptions of Safety in and around School

1. I feel safe around my peers when an adult is not around.
2. I feel safe in my classes.
3. I feel safe in the hallways and bathrooms of the school.
4. I feel safe traveling to and from school.
5. I feel safe outside around the school.

Factor 4: Student Perceptions of Interpersonal Relationships

1. My school sets clear behavior expectations for all students.
2. At my school, there are clear routines and procedures which students follow.
3. When students misbehave, the teachers at my school are calm and respectful.
4. Adults at my school are friendly and helpful.
5. Adults at my school get along and work well together.
6. I can be myself at my school.
7. Adults at my school treat all students with respect despite their differences.
8. Adults at my school have made efforts to prevent bullying.
9. Teachers at my school are a role model of how to treat others.
10. Adults and students speak with one another in a respectful way.
11. Students treat their peers with respect despite their differences.

Factor 5: Perceptions of Social-Emotional Learning

1. Someone in my school is helping me learn what to do when I'm upset.
2. Someone at my school is helping me learn how to take responsibility for my actions.

Appendix C: Opportunity Sampling Recruitment Email

Dear ____,

My name is Victoria Rowe and I am a senior majoring in Human Services and Social Justice at The George Washington University. I am currently conducting research for my senior Honors Thesis on culturally relevant education. My thesis seeks to explore the techniques with which DCPS teachers address and alleviate the opportunity gap between Black and White students in Washington, D.C.

I am writing with a request to interview teachers at [name of school] for my thesis research. The in-person interview would be sixty minutes or less and address three major areas: teachers' general experiences in a diverse classroom, teachers' implementation of culturally relevant education practices, and teachers' perceptions of diverse student experiences.

I would greatly appreciate if you could forward this email on to teachers and encourage them to contact me if they are interested in participating. If you have any questions, please email me at torowe@gwu.edu or call at 303-828-6407. Please also feel free to contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Emily Morrison, at emily_m@gwu.edu.

Sincerely,

Victoria Rowe
The George Washington University
B.A. Candidate, Human Services and Social Justice
Anticipated Graduation Spring 2017

Appendix D: Snowball Sampling Request

Dear ____,

I'm writing to thank you for participating in my interview. Your responses and insights are incredibly valuable and are helping me to move forward with my research.

Additionally, I'm writing to inquire if you have any colleagues you would like to recommend for this study. If you feel comfortable sending me their preferred contact information, I would greatly appreciate it.

I will follow up with you via email once more with my research findings so that you may ensure your confidentiality is protected and your views are honestly and accurately reflected. If you have any further questions, please email me at torowe@gwu.edu or call at 303-828-6407. Please also feel free to contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Emily Morrison, at emily_m@gwu.edu.

Again, thank you for your time and your help!

Sincerely,

Victoria Rowe
The George Washington University
B.A. Candidate, Human Services and Social Justice
Anticipated Graduation Spring 2017

Appendix E: Snowball Sampling Recruitment Email

Dear ____,

My name is Victoria Rowe and I am a senior majoring in Human Services and Social Justice at The George Washington University. I am currently conducting research for my senior Honors Thesis on culturally relevant education. Your colleague, ____, recommended you as a highly qualified candidate for my study. My thesis seeks to explore the techniques with which DCPS teachers address and alleviate the opportunity gap between Black and White students in Washington, D.C.

I am writing to invite you for an interview you for my thesis research. The in-person interview would be sixty minutes or less and address three major areas: your general experience as a teacher in a diverse classroom, your implementation of culturally relevant education practices, and your perceptions of diverse student experiences.

If you have any questions, please email me at torowe@gwu.edu or call at 303-828-6407. Please also feel free to contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Emily Morrison, at emily_m@gwu.edu.

Sincerely,

Victoria Rowe
The George Washington University
B.A. Candidate, Human Services and Social Justice
Anticipated Graduation Spring 2017

Appendix F: Interview Guide

Script

Hello, and thank you for speaking with me today. I am conducting research about addressing the opportunity gap in Washington, D.C. and I am interested in your experiences as a DCPS teacher. I have provided you with a form outlining your role in my research in greater detail, but will briefly review some aspects of this interview with you now.

The purpose of my research is to explore the potential for culturally relevant education to address and alleviate the opportunity gap between Black and White students in Washington, D.C. Your participation will involve one informal interview that will last between thirty minutes and an hour. This research will benefit the academic community because it helps us to understand your experiences as an educator of a diverse classroom and what techniques and resources can empower teachers and students alike.

Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Your identity or personally identifying information will not be disclosed in any publication that may result from this study. Notes that are taken during this interview will be stored in a secure location. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop or take a break, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence.

To ensure that I understand and accurately write what you tell me, I would like to audio-record our conversation. After I finish data analysis, I will erase the recording. Do I have your permission to audio record this interview?

[If yes:] Thank you! Please let me know at any time if you want me to stop recording.

[If no:] Thank you for letting me know; I will only take notes of our conversation.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me? [Discuss questions]

Now, with your permission, I will begin recording the interview. [Begin audio recording if consent is given]

Let's begin with a few questions about your general perceptions as a teacher in Washington, D.C.

1. What brought you to your current role as a teacher at [name of school]?
2. What drew you to this work?
3. Are you more motivated or more frustrated with your experiences as a DCPS educator?
 - a. Why?
4. Are you more hopeful or more discouraged with the direction DCPS is going right now?

- a. Why?

Now, I have a few questions about your classroom.

5. Describe your students.
 - a. What age range do you teach?
 - b. What subjects do you teach?
 - c. How many students do you teach?
 - d. What is the racial makeup of your students?
 - e. What is the socioeconomic makeup of your students?
 - f. How prevalent are special student needs, such as IEP's?

Teaching in a diverse classroom like yours presents unique challenges and opportunities.

6. How do you discuss values such as respect, empathy, and tolerance in your classroom?
 - a. How do students respond to these conversations?
 - b. How do students demonstrate these qualities in the classroom?
7. What role do students' families play in their education?
8. How do students develop an understanding of diversity at your school?
9. How do students develop an understanding of inequality or prejudice at your school?
10. Does your curriculum incorporate material that represents the identities of the students in your classroom?
 - c. How so?
11. Have you found that students connect their lives and experiences outside of the classroom with their work in the classroom?
 - d. When and how does this connection happen?

12. How well do you believe your students understand other cultural backgrounds?
13. Have your students experienced any tension along cultural and/or racial lines in your classroom?
 - e. If so, how did you respond?
14. How do current events involving cultural and/or racial tension affect your students?
 - f. How have you responded to these concerns?
15. How has your own identity or background influenced your understanding of your students?

Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions about a new educational trend, developing cultural competence in teachers.

16. Have you ever received cultural competence training or professional development in your career as a teacher?
 - a. Please describe any relevant training you've received.
 - b. How helpful did you find this training or professional development?
 - c. Do you feel you are fully able to implement these trainings in the classroom?
 - i. Why or why not?
17. Does your school administration expect cultural competence from teachers and staff?
 - d. Please describe any relevant expectations your school employs.
 - e. How reasonable do you find these expectations?
 - f. Do you feel you are fully able to meet these expectations in the classroom?
 - i. Why or why not?
18. Do you feel you have the support you need from your school and district to practice cultural competence?

- a. Why or why not?

Now, I would like to discuss the findings of a recent survey DCPS administered to students with you. Are you familiar with the Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey?

[If yes]: Ok, great.

[If no:] The Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey is distributed annually to DCPS students grades 3-12 to measure different markers of school climate.

The survey conducted in the spring of 2016 found that on average, Black DCPS students were significantly less content than their White peers for three factors.

19. Black DCPS students are less likely to be satisfied with their schools than White students.

- g. Does this result surprise you?
- h. Why do you think this may be?

20. Black DCPS students are less likely to perceive their schools as safe.

- i. Does this result surprise you?
- j. Why do you think this may be?

21. Black DCPS students are less likely to have strong interpersonal relationships at school than White students.

- k. Does this result surprise you?
- l. Why do you think this may be?

As we wrap up, do you have any final thoughts you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your participation in this interview. I have provided you with my contact information and welcome you to reach out to me with any questions or concerns that may arise. Additionally, I will follow up with you via email with my research findings so that you may ensure your confidentiality is protected and your views are honestly and accurately reflected.

Appendix G: Consent Statement for Exempt Research

Title of Study: Seek First to Understand: Exploring the Potential of Culturally Relevant Education in the District of Columbia

IRB #: 121617

Principal Investigator Name: Dr. Emily Morrison

Version Date: 14-Dec-2016

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Emily Morrison of the Department of Sociology, and the George Washington University (GWU). Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. Further information regarding this study may be obtained by contacting Victoria Rowe, Primary Contact at telephone number (303) 828-6407 or via email at torowe@gwu.edu.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the current application of culturally relevant educational practices within District of Columbia Public Schools in order to identify methods by which DCPS can expand and improve its current implementation of this theory to best serve diverse students and reduce the existing opportunity gap between black and white students.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will participate in an interview inquiring about your experiences as a DCPS educator, your views on cultural competency professional development, and your responses to a recent survey of DCPS student experiences. The total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is the duration of this interview, at maximum one hour. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and you may stop your participation in this study at any time. Possible risks or discomforts you could experience during this study include loss of confidentiality.

You will not benefit directly from your participation in the study. The benefits to science and humankind that might result from this study are informing academic conversations about how to best empower students and teachers alike in the vibrant and diverse city of Washington, D.C.

Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential, however, this can not be guaranteed. Your personally identifying information, contact information, and links between your identity and research data gathered, will be stored offline on a private, password-protected computer. Audio interview recordings will be stored on a private, password-protected device until written transcripts are complete, at which time they will be deleted. If results of this research study are reported in journals or at scientific meetings, the people who participated in this study will not be named or identified.

The Office of Human Research of George Washington University, at telephone number (202) 994-2715, can provide further information about your rights as a research participant.

To ensure anonymity your signature is not required, unless you prefer to sign it. Your willingness to participate in this research study is implied if you proceed.

*Please keep a copy of this document in case you want to read it again.

Appendix H: Sample Interview Transcript

* Indicates that a name has been changed to protect confidentiality

- 1 **Interviewer:** Victoria Rowe (V)
- 2 **Interviewee:** Fatima Amad*, First Grade DCPS Teacher (F)
- 3 **Interview Setting:** Via Skype
- 4 **(Start of Interview)**
- 5 V: So, to get started, what brought you to your current role as a teacher?
- 6 F: Um, Teach Prep*.
- 7 V: Ok. And... so, the school that you were placed in, you're still... this is your second year, right?
- 8 F: Uh, this is actually my first year at this particular school. I was placed at um... Grove
- 9 Elementary*,
- 10 V: Mhm.
- 11 F: For my first year, um, of my Teach Prep obligation, and... um... unfortunately, I had some
- 12 issues with the ... um, Executive Director, who did not care for the fact that I was a... uh...
- 13 covered Muslim woman. So I had to change schools.
- 14 V: Ok... um, so, based on that experience, and now, at your new site, would you say that you are
- 15 more motivated, or more frustrated, with your experiences as an educator in Washington, DC?
- 16 F: Um, since the transition, I am more motivated, for sure.
- 17 V: Oh, ok. That's good to hear. And, would you say that you are more hopeful or more
- 18 discouraged with the direction schools in Washington, DC are headed in general?
- 19 F: I'm generally hopeful.
- 20 V: Good, ok. And now I just have a few questions about your current classroom. So... um...
- 21 what age range do you teach?

- 22 F: I teach first grade. So that's um... 5 to 7 basically.
- 23 V: Alright, and is that all subjects, or do you... um, do you compartmentalize?
- 24 F: I teach all subjects, yes.
- 25 V: Ok, great. And how many...
- 26 F: That's reading, math and writing.
- 27 V: Alright. And how many students do you teach?
- 28 F: 25.
- 29 V: Ok... and, what is the racial makeup of your students, generally?
- 30 F: The racial makeup... I have 100% African American.
- 31 V: Ok. And the socioeconomic makeup?
- 32 F: Um... I think... um... majority is low income, and then... the remaining percentage is, um,
- 33 middle class families.
- 34 V: Ok. Um... and how prevalent are special student needs, such as individualized educational
- 35 plans, in your classroom?
- 36 F: Um, I currently have four students with IEP's... um... and... have... two students who are
- 37 being evaluated for, possibly, for IEP's.
- 38 V: Ok, thank you. So, sort of transitioning into talking about culturally relevant education, how
- 39 do you discuss issues such as respect, empathy, and tolerance in your classroom?
- 40 F: Um, it's very interesting you should ask, that you ask this right now... because, um, we're
- 41 currently doing a unit, I mean, you know, I think every school does it, some unit during
- 42 February, um, currently doing a unit on black history.
- 43 V: Mhm.

44 F: In particular, um, I have, um, the unit in particular that we're doing, is like... um... black
45 history through music, right? So we're reading a lot, a lot, a lot of like, musicians, and stuff like
46 that. Um... I was doing some research today, actually, about, like books that I can read to my
47 students to uh, draw the connection between black history, um, and the current political state
48 with Black Lives Matter, canvassing, and the Civil Rights Movement. And I found this book,
49 this children's book, called um... "If you were a child in... If you were a child during the Civil
50 Rights Movement," um, that like, basically carries you through the day in the life of a child that
51 grew up during the Civil Rights Movement, and what it looked like, and um, the struggles that
52 you saw. Um... I talked to my students recently about, um, you know, the current political
53 situation, again about Black Lives Matter, and then also with the recent immigration ban
54 because, um, as I mentioned earlier, I am a Muslim woman. I wear a full veil, a full faced veil,
55 and everything to work. So, I um, talk to my kids about you know, the recent immigration ban
56 and how it is affecting myself and my family because my husband lives abroad. He works in
57 Saudi Arabia. And... I'm here for my Teach Prep obligation. You know, I talk to them about my
58 situation going on, uh, for myself and my family, that we can't travel, um, to visit our- my
59 husband because I may not be able to come back into the country, despite being a citizen. So, we
60 have a lot of talks about... um, the difficulties that different groups, um, are facing right now,
61 um, and have faced throughout history. Uh, we also do a lot of talks about black history, and I
62 tell my kids all the time that, you know, black history is American history. Um... you know,
63 black history as we know it, in America, is very integral to the American... you know, the
64 history in America as we know it. And... we talk a lot about um, putting yourself in someone
65 else's shoes, you know, when we're trying to talk about, um, empathy. We always talk about
66 respect, you know, treating others the way that you want to be treated. Um, we do a lot of

67 positive reinforcement with that, because we use Class Dojo for behavior management. So, when
68 kids are doing great, or, you know, we can earn points, and if they're falling short, they can lose
69 points as well. But also, we have a button on Class Dojo, that like gives them bonus points for
70 doing something that's thoughtful. So, if, you know, if I like notice may have tripped and another
71 one of the students would be like, "oh, are you ok?", like, "oh, thank you so much. That was
72 really great. That's a thoughtful point that you, you know, got up to see how your friend was
73 doing without somebody having to tell you. So, we do a lot of, um, we do a lot more, like,
74 implementation than, like, sitting down and having, like, a direct lesson. Um... and we also do a
75 lot of, um, you know, like, um, self-connections to the topics at hand.

76 V: That's great. Um, it's really interesting, I think, it's amazing that you're, sort of, incorporating
77 all of these modern discussions about race and equity into your classroom. I interviewed, a
78 couple weeks ago, another first grade teacher who teaches at a majority white school...

79 F: Mhm.

80 V: ... and when I asked her that same question, and asked her to sort of elaborate on how she
81 talks about diversity, she said that the kids were really too young to understand that. So... I was
82 just wondering if maybe you could respond to that, and, like, your experience is clearly very
83 different. Um... it's just interesting.

84 F: Yeah. That's really interesting that she- that, um, she felt that way, because, um, I have a four-
85 year-old, and I actually talked to my husband earlier today about some of like- how I was
86 mentioning that I brought these books too, "If you grow up during the Civil Rights Movement," I
87 brought a couple of other books, um, to read to my daughter in particular. One, about refugees.
88 Um, it's uh, called, "I'm New Here"- it's like, the cover has, uh, three young kids that look very
89 different from one another, um, talking about, like, their transition to a new place, and, you

90 know, having to leave their homes for whatever reason, and, um, you know, them having to
91 adjust and all that. So I was talking to my husband in particular about, um, speaking to my
92 daughter, like I said before, because, uh, I feel like it is extremely important to get them exposed
93 to this type of content early. Um, it's easier for them to make self-connections when they have
94 memories of it. You know, no matter how they feel, like, if I read the book to her now, and then
95 we come across something we want to discuss later on, about a refugee family, for example, I
96 can say, "remember when we were reading that book about the kids who were new, and it was
97 really hard for them to leave their homes?" Um... you know, then they will be able to make, like,
98 real live connections to the texts. Um, which is extremely important. And, also, a really great
99 skill academically. But, I don't believe there's an age... there's a minimum age to have these
100 types of discussions. Granted, it's not going to be the same discussion I'd have in a middle
101 school classroom, but it will, you know, you do need to have age-appropriate discussions about
102 these things because they will directly affect the type of child, you know, we are helping to grow,
103 to make a part of, you know, to make a productive member of society. Like, if I'm, if I'm only
104 teaching you, like, strictly content, I'm not teaching you anything about yourself, or anything
105 about the people around you, or anything about the people of the world, and I'm doing you a real
106 disservice because when you leave my classroom, you're not just going to be sitting down with a
107 book. You're not just going to be sitting down with me. You're going to continue to encounter
108 people who look like you, and people who don't look like you. And, you know, I try to... um,
109 keep the discussions open about you know, uh, religious differences, cultural differences, racial
110 differences. Uh, even some, um, you know, like sexual orientation differences. Like, um... not
111 to, not say specifically, like, gay or lesbian... um, you know, like, I wouldn't say we're using
112 that terminology. But, we're just saying, like, everyone's family looks a little different. Some

113 families have two mommies, some families have two daddies, you know. Some families have
114 mommies and daddies. Some families have grandmas, you know. Like, talking about what the
115 different families look like but more age appropriate. So I... I disagree that, um, you know, that
116 first grade is too young to have those discussions because I taught Kindergarten last year, and
117 when I taught Kindergarten, I had those types of discussions with my kids. Now, you know, like
118 I said, the level of discussion is very different, but the content itself remains the same. The
119 message remains the same. You know? So...

120 V: Yeah. It's almost a different vocabulary, a different set of terms, but you're still discussing
121 the same ideas.

122 F: Exactly, exactly.

123 V: Um... off of that, so, I think you spoke about this really powerfully, but if you could just
124 expand a little bit... how has your own own identity influenced your understanding of your
125 students, and really, your place in their lives?

126 F: So my... so, like I mentioned, I'm Muslim, born and raised. I wear a face veil.

127 V: Mhm.

128 F: So, you know, my religious identity is very apparent. Um... I'm ethnically Indian, um, from
129 India, born in the West Indies. Trinidad and Tobago. I'm an immigrant myself. I came up to
130 America when I was six months old and I've lived here ever since. I'm a naturalized citizen, but
131 all my siblings are born and raised here. Um... my husband is African American, from New
132 Jersey. So I have always identified as a person of color, um, but I grew up very privileged in that
133 I didn't see a lot of the struggles that people of color typically endure, um, especially coming
134 from lower socioeconomic, you know, lower socioeconomic statuses. Um... I, I saw my husband
135 struggle a lot. I met my husband at How- when we were students at Howard University. My

136 husband is um... a convicted felon, former drug dealer when he was a teenager. Um, spent three
137 years in prison, and, um, came out. Did everything the system, quote-unquote, wanted him to do.
138 The whole rehabilitation. Served his time, came out, went to college, graduated from Howard
139 University with a 4.0, got married, had a child, held down a job, for-what, seven years now, um,
140 and I see him struggle to find meaningful employment, um in the US. Um, like I mentioned, he
141 works overseas. Um, and it really bothers me that he did everything the system said he should
142 have done. You know? He made a mistake as a teenager, no doubt. He changed his life, you
143 know, he served the time, you know, he did everything he needed to do. And... there is still, uh,
144 you know, stigma attached, that he isn't able to get meaningful employment in the US. And
145 that's difficult for me to, to see. Um, I say always, that I'm a person of color, but that my more
146 powerful association is with my husband who is Black and, you know, I'm the wife of a Black
147 man and the mother of a Black child. And especially with all of the Black Lives Matter
148 campaigns going on recently, and the killings and stuff like that, you know, the encounters with
149 police. It's been very emotional for me. And that helps me to... I feel like that is a point I
150 connect to my students, um, a little stronger than the average person, because, you know, I see
151 myself in their, you know, in their parents' eyes. Like, I see me as the same exact way as I see
152 their moms. You know, I'm the mother of a Black child. I'm going to do the same- you know,
153 I'm going to educate you the way I want my Black child to be educated. I want her to be
154 empowered. I want her to be, you know, intelligent. I want her to be empathetic. I want her to be,
155 um, you know, well-versed and... and, uh, you know, just culturally competent overall. And, I
156 do, I treat my kids the way I want to see my daughter treated in her classroom. I teach them the
157 things that I think are the most important to them as Black children in America.

158 V: Thank you. I think... Thank you, that was just... really powerful. Um, so, kind of going off of
159 cultural competency... with Teach Prep, or with either of your schools, have you received any
160 formal cultural competency training or professional development?

161 F: Oh my god. I've got cultural competency training coming out of my ears! (Laughs) when I
162 came into Teach Prep, I thought I would be getting, like, critiqued on my lesson plans and stuff
163 like that. And it was like, "what have you done to empower them as Black children?" Like, my
164 first feedback interview. You know, my first feedback was, "what did you do in your lesson to
165 empower them as Black children?" And I'm like, what? You're not going to tell me anything
166 about my actual lesson and stuff? We're just going to talk... and I was like, oh, ok. So, yeah, but
167 plenty, plenty of, um, training, you know, all throughout, um, Institute, and, and throughout, you
168 know, my- my years in the classroom with coaching. I've gotten lots of culturally competent,
169 um, questions for sure.

170 V: Mhm. And, do you feel like with this training and support, you're able to fully implement
171 these trainings, and do you feel like you are successfully teaching and practicing cultural
172 competency in your classroom... from this help that you've gotten?

173 F: Um... I'll always say that there's always room for growth, no matter how much, um, you
174 think you're doing, there's always room to grow. But for sure, I do feel like they have benefitted
175 me a lot in the classroom. Um, they've also, you know... like, I've taught before I came to Teach
176 Prep. I've been teaching for about six years now. I used to teach in private schools, and Teach
177 Prep was a way for me to, um, really just expand my horizons in the world of education. So, it
178 was interesting that I... I came in and saw... the difference between, you know, just coming into
179 the classroom, giving a lesson, and walking out... and then, you know, the culturally
180 competent... you know, this cultural competency is just making my interactions with students so

181 much more meaningful. And... you... you see, like I said, there's always room for growth, and
182 I've seen myself grow significantly in that area. Um... and I am very satisfied with the
183 empowerment that I can, you know, offer for my students, but, um, like I said, always room for
184 growth. I'm always looking for new ways to, you know, empower them and inspire them, just as
185 much as they inspire me every day they come into the classroom.

186 V: Mhm. Um... So, for my final set of questions, um, I'm not sure if your school actually
187 participates in this... but, are you familiar with the, um, DCPS Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey?

188 F: Yeah, I am.

189 V: Oh, ok, great. Um, so, it's a little... I think it starts in third grade, so it's a little older than
190 your students.

191 F: Right.

192 V: But, it just tests different markers of school climate.

193 F: Right.

194 V: So, I was looking at the data from the 2016 survey, from this past school year, and they had
195 some results, um, aggregated by race. And I wanted to... present a couple of the findings of this
196 survey to you, and just get your general reaction and an idea of whether or not these results
197 surprise you.

198 F: Alright, sure.

199 V: So, for the first one... Black DCPS students, on average, are less likely to be overall satisfied
200 with their schools than White students. Does this result surprise you?

201 F: No.

202 V: And where- why do you think this may be?

203 F: I think that... as much as we are trying to teach cultural competency, to teachers and to
204 educators and everybody in the world of education, there's still a lot of work to be done. Um...
205 not just sitting in a training though. There's a lot of, um, single stories and biases that we have to
206 let go of in order to really embrace cultural competency, you know teaching culturally
207 competently. Um... I think that, that there's still a lot of work for us to do, first and foremost on
208 ourselves as individuals. Because as I said, I'm married to... my husband is Black, and you
209 know, my daughter is also, you know, she's half Black. And I came into Teach Prep thinking,
210 'yeah, you know, I'm not racist in any way. I don't have any biases.' I'm... you know, my
211 family and I represent just about every minority group you can think of. So I was like, yeah, I got
212 this. I came into the classroom and realized that that's not the case, that we naturally have our
213 own single story of people. We make our own assumptions with our biases and... we don't
214 realize how much that affects our, you know, our interactions with people. Um... until you're,
215 you're facing it head on. And, um, you know, it took a lot of unpacking for me to really, to really
216 see that, you know, I may have so many minorities represented in my family, but that doesn't
217 mean that I don't have single stories and I don't have biases of other, you know, racial, sexual,
218 ethnic groups, you know, that aren't in my family necessarily. I really had to tell myself, you
219 don't know it all. There's still room for growth. There's a lot of room for growth really. But
220 that... you, it humbles you. You have to come into this work knowing that you are not here to
221 save the kids. You're here to, to just ignite the fire in them for them to do the work themselves.
222 Because, you know, you give a man a fish, you feed them for a day, you know? You teach a man
223 to fish, you know, he can take care of himself. So... it's really, it was really an eye opener for me
224 that I 100% thought I was this... you know, uber-accepting person that would have no problem
225 with any race, racial, um, religious, ethnic group that came through my door and that wasn't the

226 case. And remembering to stay humble, and know that these kids have their own unique stories
227 that they're coming to my classroom with, and that I have to be ready to listen. You know? They
228 have their voice already. I'm not here to save them. I'm here to listen to them and facilitate their
229 learning in an empowering environment.

230 V: I definitely agree. Um, so then the other two results, if you have anything you'd like to add
231 for these two... Black DCPS students are also significantly less likely to perceive their schools
232 as safe, and to have strong interpersonal relationships at school. So... um, based off these results,
233 is there anything... any other reflections, I guess, you have on your experience in education?

234 F: It doesn't surprise me because... [sigh] with all of the, the, racial tension becoming more
235 prevalent in our society today, uh, the first thing that like, goes with that is trust. And if you
236 don't trust the place that you're in, you don't feel safe. Um... and that ends up looking a lot
237 different with a Black child, um, you know, like I said, especially with the political climate,
238 Black Lives Matter, all of these different things that are going on right now that... the education
239 that we have to give our Black students looks different than the education that is given to a White
240 student because um... nine times out of ten, a White student is not going to be profiled for, you
241 know, walking with their head down with a hood on. You know? Um, and, for that reason, there
242 is a lot of distrust in society, and unfortunately school is no different. Um, you have people that
243 don't look like you running the school, especially when we're talking about Black students
244 versus White students in the, you know, in DC schools. For sure, they're not going to walk in
245 feeling safe and secure and trusting everybody in the building. It's just not gonna happen. Not for
246 awhile. There's a lot of work we have to do as a district. There's a lot of work we have to do as a
247 country, um, before we can get to that place.

248 V: Definitely. Um, so, those are really all the questions that I've prepared, but is there anything
249 else that you feel like I should have asked, or that you would like to share with me?

250 F: Um... I can't really say that I have. I mean, I feel like I have expressed myself... maybe a
251 little too much, I apologize.

252 V: Oh no, I appreciate it.

253 F: Yeah, no I... I think... I think that one of the things that, um, that we need to evaluate is...
254 like, as a district, that I've seen a lot with, uh, just within my school, is we have to really work on
255 repairing the relationships between Blacks and Whites in schools. And I say that because,
256 especially in a district where we have, and where I work in particular in Southeast, a high
257 population of low-income, you know, low-income individuals, and then a high population of
258 African American students... um, I see on a regular basis, difficulties between my Black students
259 and their White teachers. And I think we have to work hard as a district, and work hard as a
260 country, um, to rectify this, because it's... it's a cycle that's going to perpetuate itself and not
261 lend itself to cultural competency because we're telling the teachers to teach this way, and teach
262 these things in particular, and empower the kids, but... um, you know, there's some that, that...
263 only talk the talk and don't walk the walk. And that's really difficult. Like, there was my old
264 school, Grove Elementary*, director... I had a difficult student... um, I loved him, Marvin*, a
265 sweetheart. He... he just had, you know, an issue hearing the word no. Um, and unfortunately, he
266 would have aggressive outbursts, like actually try and fight me and stuff. Um... and like, he ran
267 out of my classroom one time, and the director, um, was in the hallway. And I was like, "he's
268 running out of the classroom, do you know, what should I do?" And at this point, he's been
269 suspended two or three times already. And... His response was, "what are you worried about?
270 He's going to go to prison anyway." And I was like...

271 V: Wow.

272 F: What? You're the executive director of a predominately Black school. Not even
273 predominately. Of a 100% Black population school, and you just told me that this little boy is
274 going to go to prison in Kindergarten? That's ridiculous. And we will say, you know, and that
275 gentleman was former Teach Prep- I have no idea how. But I was like, how in the world did you
276 go to the same culturally competent professional development trainings that I did, and you fixed
277 your mouth to say something like that? As educators, we are trying to disrupt the school to prison
278 pipeline. And before we can even get to that point, we have to break down the walls and the
279 biases that we have ourselves, and we have to work diligently to repair the relationships between
280 Blacks and Whites in America. Unfortunately, the current political state does not lend itself to
281 that happening, but it is necessary for us as a country to continue to progress forward. You
282 know? The more that we isolate ourselves from groups of people who don't look like us, um, the
283 more mistrust we're going to have, and then ultimately it's going to lead to other terrible things,
284 like hate crimes, and you know, just... crime overall. And, you know, it's perpetuating the cycle
285 of school to prison pipeline and generating a generation of hatred. And that's the exact opposite
286 of what we need in this country, and in this moment.

287 V: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I truly want to thank you for participating in this interview. I'm
288 incredibly... honored to hear your story, and thankful that you were so sincere and thoughtful in
289 your responses. Um... if there's anything else you'd like to share with me, please, please feel
290 free to reach out. But, otherwise, I just am incredibly thankful you took the time to speak with
291 me today.

292 F: No problem, and good luck with the rest of your project!

293 V: Ok, have a good one, thank you!