EXAMINING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES IN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

Jennifer Jones Gorham

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Approved by:
Jocelyn Glazier, Chair
Silvia Bettez
Cheryl Mason Bolick
George W. Noblit
Dwight Rogers
ABSTRACT

JENNIFER JONES GORHAM: Examining Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices in Elementary Classrooms
(Under the direction of Dr. Jocelyn Glazier)

This qualitative study examines the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2010) within two African American elementary teachers’ classrooms. Teacher interviews, classroom observations, and classroom documents were collected and analyzed to examine the supports and barriers these teachers encountered as they attempted to enact culturally responsive teaching practices. The descriptive case study reveals that both teachers engage culturally responsive teaching in similar ways. However, the difference in school context makes this effort more challenging for one teacher than another. Barriers included institutional requirements, classroom disruptions, student issues, and teacher isolation. Additionally, by implementing a collaborative coaching model as part of the study design, I briefly explored the role a teacher educator might play in supporting practicing teachers’ engagement of culturally responsive teaching. Based on the findings, school structures are critiqued and suggestions for developing systems to support the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices are introduced.
To my parents, Barry and Diana, who have always provided unconditional love and support.

To my husband, Philip, whose countless efforts to support me throughout this process have not gone unnoticed.

And finally, to my son Oliver, may you have teachers who inspire a love of learning.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever grateful for numerous friends and family who have supported me along this path and I am forever indebted to the countless students who have taught me during my journey as a teacher. I am particularly grateful to the two former students, now teachers, who made this study possible. While I cannot thank you using your real names here, please know that this work is a reflection of your dedication to making a difference in the lives of students.

To my family for your continuous love and support:
Barry and Diana Jones
Philip and Oliver Gorham

To my Committee:
Jocelyn Glazier, my advisor and chair, thank you for your unwavering support and guidance.
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Silvia Bettez for being a friend, mentor, and colleague
George Noblit for instilling in me the importance of story
Cheryl Mason Bolick for providing me with opportunities to grow as a teacher
To my “girls”:

Kelley, Meghan, Peggy, Kari, and Sarah

Thank you for your friendship. You have helped me to persevere.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A Story of Hope

On a warm spring day I, then the assistant principal of an elementary school, stepped out of a small apartment with the special education teacher from the school where I worked. We had just finished another annual review of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) with a parent of a child who received special education services. Since the parent was unable to come to school due to lack of transportation and the need for childcare, we went to her. This small effort at accommodating the parent’s needs was an attempt, on our part, to enact culturally responsive practices. These efforts were not present at the beginning of my teaching career. I wasn’t aware that there was a need to consider the unique circumstances of each student and his/her family. Yet it was an incident in my first year of teaching that began my self-reflective journey and spawned my attempts to change my practices. I, like many others, continue to search for ways to incorporate culturally responsive practices, as it is a process that is continually evolving.

Starting Out

As I trained to become a teacher, the focus of my teacher education program was on having a solid knowledge of the content of the curriculum and the ability to enact best practices in teaching. I enrolled in a variety of teaching methodology courses that provided strategies for teaching reading, math, science, and social studies. I reflected
on videotaped lessons of my teaching. I attended seminars where we learned how to use a laminator, a ditto machine, and constructed interactive bulletin boards. I demonstrated in multiple ways that I was competent to teach.

What I was not asked to do within my teacher training was to examine who I was and how my own political and cultural understanding of the world would impact my teaching and the students within my classroom. I had been trained in best practices, yet competency to teach students that were culturally different from myself was not addressed. Although I was equipped with the fundamentals of teaching, the socio-political implications of the classroom remained unexplored. Therefore, during my first year of teaching, when a grandparent of one of three students of color in my classroom called me a racist, my very being was rocked to the core. I remember the tears welling up in my eyes, and the shame and disbelief that I felt: *I am not a racist. Racists were people who hurled hateful language and conducted unspeakable acts of intimidation. I loved my students.* My intentions were to provide each of my students with the best instruction I could. But love and good intentions were not enough. When I look back with a critical eye, I see the actions, or non-actions, that led to my racist label.

*Hope*¹ was a first grader who lived with her grandparents. *She was tough and strong-willed. There was often tension between the two of us as I was frequently discouraged by the lack of work she produced. We often conflicted over her work or the lack of it. It was late spring and the students and I had been working on taking a story through the stages of writing in order to have a published piece to share at our end of the...*  

¹ A pseudonym
year Author’s Celebration. This was to be the culminating event for our Writer’s Workshop sessions that we had engaged in all year. During these writing sessions, Hope often sat and did not work. I frequently went by her desk, trying to move her forward. I was frustrated at my inability to prod her into working. To be quite frank, I was often frustrated with Hope, frustrated by her attitude toward school, toward learning, and toward me. In retrospect, my frustration led to a very limited relationship with Hope. I believe it was this strained relationship that led to our continuous battles in the classroom.

My frustrations seemed to converge as we worked on developing our final publications of the school year. I sent notes home about my concern that Hope would not have a finished piece to share, which is exactly what happened. On the day that students and I had invited families to come and enjoy refreshments as they listened to our final pieces, our “published books”, Hope sat at the end of the row of chairs with nothing to read. Her grandparents were there and wanted to know why. Although I thought I had been proactive in letting them know of Hope’s lack of work, the notes never made it home, discarded somewhere between school and home. I had failed to really communicate with Hope’s family about my concerns and most of all I had failed Hope in allowing her to opt out of the work.

The next day, Hope’s grandmother confronted me in the hallway at the beginning of the school day, “You’re a racist!”

In hindsight, I recognize that I often provided Hope with “permission to fail” (Delpit, 2002, p. 110). By giving up and allowing her to sit and not work, I allowed Hope
to “determine her own demise” (p. 120). I had allowed her, at seven years old, to make decisions about her academic future. I should have been the adult in the situation and demanded her success, yet I did not. I know now that I should have attempted to engage Hope using her interests and life experiences and been more persistent and pro-active about building a relationship with Hope and with her grandparents. Yet I had not and what her grandparents saw that day was a white teacher who sat their granddaughter, one of the only students of color in the class, at the end of the row with nothing to share. I had allowed Hope to become an educational statistic, to join the many other students of color who are labeled “academically behind.” When I think back to that day, I wonder why I had never been asked in my teacher education program to consider how to be more culturally responsive to students like Hope. What would have made a difference? Why did my teacher education program not prepare me for working with students like Hope, who come from a different background than myself?

**The Demographics of Schools**

Unfortunately, I believe there is much potential for my and Hope’s story to be repeated in classrooms across America. Like Hope, the likelihood of a student of color to have a white female teacher is high (Cochran-Smith, 2004; NCES, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Beginning with the Brown decision in 1954, school desegregation changed the role of White teachers by requiring them to teach children of color, a job for which they were woefully unprepared. Studies during the 1960’s, 1970’s and 1980’s generally showed that White teachers “held lower expectations for students of color and often treated them less favorably” (Villegas, 2008, p. 553). Additionally, after 1954,
the presence of Black teachers was dramatically reduced through significant job loss in elementary and secondary public schools, effectively separating cultural connections between home and school for students of color. Another enduring problem to the mass firing of Black teachers in the mid-1950’s is the struggle teacher education programs have to attract and train people of color to enter into the teaching profession (Villegas, 2008).

The consequences of these changes are lingering. In 1991, the year before I entered the profession, 72.1% of elementary teachers were female; in 2001, the percentage of elementary teachers who were female increased to 79% (NCES, 2007, p. 104). Currently, 83% of elementary and secondary teachers are white, 8% Black, and 6% are Hispanic or multiracial (NCES, 2007, p. 45). In contrast to the demographics of the teaching force, student demographics in the United States are shifting in the opposite direction. In 1992, 67% of students were white, 17% were Black, 12% Latino/a, and 3% Asian. Yet in 2006, 57% of students were white, 16% Black, 20% Latino, 4% Asian, and 3% multiracial (Snyder, T. D., Dillow, S. A., & Hoffman, C. M, 2008). Furthermore, according to the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), “for the first time in history, public schools in the American South”, the area in which I work and live, “no longer enroll a majority of White students” (2010 report). According to SEF, this demographic shift in the public school population is converging with another statistic. In a 2007 report, the Southern Education Foundation reported that “low income students – children eligible for free or reduced lunch – had become a majority in the South’s public schools for the first time in more than half a century” (Southern Education Foundation, 2007). These statistics help to illustrate that while the teaching
force in America is growing more homogenous (white and female), the student population continues to grow more diverse, in particular, more poor and of color.

Although the racial diversification of the United States has increased significantly since the 1960’s, Whites have been able to insulate themselves from this diversity and maintain a sense of racial isolation (Frankenberg et al., 2003; Orfield & Lee, 2004; Smith 2004). This racial isolation means that for many teachers, despite living in a multiracial world, they most likely attended a segregated school, surrounded by people most like themselves (Smith, 2004, p. 30). This racial isolation is evident within the school population where “in 2000 through 2001, although White students constituted only 60% of the U.S. school population and minority students were 40% of the school population, the typical or average White student attended a school where 80% of the students were White” (Frankenberg et al., 2003). This statistic highlights a key issue in preparing white teachers for increasingly diverse classrooms; although our society and our schools are becoming more diverse, whites, and therefore white teachers, are more likely to have been insulated from this diversity. This scenario is significant because White students, who emerge from such a schooling model and become teachers, have experienced a very different model of school than the parents and students of color with whom they work have experienced.

The availability of resources highlight the differences between predominately White schools and schools of color. The differences in the types of resources and educational experiences that occur in predominately White public schools as opposed to schools that serve students of color are well documented by Jonathan Kozol (1992, 2005). Kozol (2005) illustrates inequities in funding and clearly describes the infusion
of private funding into predominately white public schools—"boutique schools"—which "enable parents of the middle class and upper middle class to claim allegiance to the general idea of public schools while making sure their children do not suffer gravely for the stripped-down budgets that have done great damage to poor children" (p. 49). As Orfield's (2001) work on the Harvard civil rights project highlights, "segregated white neighborhood schools were very likely to have middle class student bodies, but exactly the opposite was true for black and Latino schools" and indicated that "segregated minority schools had concentrated poverty nine times out of ten" (p. 38). Therefore, the experiences of students of color in public schools are not necessarily equivalent to those of students in schools that are predominately White.

The statistics listed above highlight what has been described as the "demographic imperative" (Banks, 2008; Cochran-Smith, 2004). The demographic imperative highlights the "disparities deeply imbedded in the American educational system" and is described as a convergence of three factors: (1) the diversity of the student population, (2) the homogeneity of the teaching force, and (3) the "demographic divide" which highlights the disparities in "opportunities, resources, and achievement among student groups that differ from one another racially, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 4). These three factors illustrate the necessity to continually address diversity and the need for culturally responsive practices within teacher education. If one of the goals of multicultural education is to promote social justice and equal opportunity for all, then actively working against these educational disparities is imperative in teaching and in teacher education, particularly in a democratic society.
**A Shift Toward Cultural Responsiveness**

After my experience with Hope, my journey toward more culturally responsive practices was due to a convergence of factors over a number of years. These factors included the relationships I developed with students and their families, changes to my instructional practices, and the different settings in which I worked as both a teacher and an administrator with students and families from many different cultural backgrounds and socio-economic situations. These experiences of working with people whose backgrounds and experiences were so unlike my own continue to impact my teaching, especially now as a teacher educator. Although I believe the changes to my personal and professional disposition and the shifts in my practices could be described as more culturally responsive, I did not have the name, “culturally responsive”, until I returned to graduate school.

My teaching experiences during my graduate studies have been primarily with pre-service undergraduate elementary education students. In addition to supervising student teachers, I teach courses focusing on culturally responsive practices. I find that my students struggle with implementing theory into practice. The theory-practice gap is not uncommon. It is a problem that seems to persist in teacher education (Brouer & Korthagen, 2005). Students comment: “All these readings seem to be theoretical. How do we do this? These readings seem to be written by people who are not teachers.” Even when presented with concrete examples, or teaching vignettes, the examples are often of just one lesson, therefore, questions still arise about how to make these practices sustainable throughout the school day in a meaningful way. Tripp (1993) echoes this dilemma when he asserts that “what is often perceived as a gap between the
application of a theory and practice is actually a gap between different theories, between the theory of researchers and the theory of teachers” (p. 147). My hope is that studying teachers who attempt to employ culturally responsive practices throughout the school day will help in “constructing the theory of the practice” of culturally responsive teaching and help “theorize teachers’ experiences” (p. 146). As Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts, “the place to find out about classroom practices is the naturalistic setting of the classroom and from the lived experiences of teachers” (p. 163). Additionally, I hope that the results of this work, through theorizing the experience of culturally responsive practitioners, will inform teacher educators in preparing teachers to enact culturally responsive practices within elementary classrooms.

**Research Questions**

While there have been many researchers who have examined the practices of culturally responsive teachers (Delpit, Delgado-Gaitan, Ladson-Billings, Nieto, for example), Ladson-Billings asserts, “this kind of study must be replicated again and again” (1995, p. 163). Therefore, the research questions guiding this study are: 1) What does culturally responsive teaching look like when it is embedded in an elementary school teacher’s professional practice?, 2) What factors are barriers to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practice?, 3) What factors are supports to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practice? and 4) What types of support can a teacher educator provide to help promote the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices?
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Multicultural Education

Multicultural education emerged from the movements of cultural pluralism, the intergroup education movement, and later, the ethnic studies movement\(^1\) (Banks, 2001). Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, philosophers argued that cultural pluralism should influence educational and public policies using the argument that “ethnic cultures would enrich U.S civilization” (Banks, 2001, p. 21). Cultural pluralism promotes the recognition and acceptance of ethnic and religious difference as an important part of American society (Applebaum, 2002 & Banks, 2005). Although not widely supported, this pluralistic viewpoint did serve as a basis for the intercultural and intergroup movements of the 1930’s, 1940’s and 1950’s.

Seen as a precursor to multicultural education, the intercultural educational movement was more focused on the inequities that immigrants faced while the intergroup movement focused on the inequities that people of color faced. Regardless, both movements focused on reducing stereotypes and promoting tolerance (Grant, 2008). Yet as immigrant groups assimilated into American society, the move towards focusing on inequities that immigrants faced become more broadly conceptualized and the focus moved toward multicultural education and a more broadly conceptualized focus on discrimination based on race, social class, gender, language, and

\(^1\) A thorough review of each of these historical movements is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
exceptionalities (Banks, 2005, p. 143).

Emerging from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, the ethnic studies movement also contributed to the development of multicultural education. The ethnic studies movement focused on more inclusionary educational policies and practices (Grant, 2008). Ethnic studies advocates argued for the “replacement of the primacy of whiteness in textbook content and illustrations and an increased accuracy in reporting the history and culture of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos” (Grant, 2008, p. 8). These goals, along with the increase in courses focused on the unique experiences of people of color, challenged the dominance of whiteness within education. Therefore, it is from the influences of cultural pluralism, the intergroup movement, and ethnic studies that multicultural education has emerged to focus on the changing needs of a diverse population.

Within the Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education (Banks & Banks, 1995) multicultural education is defined as:

A field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose, content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethnic studies and women’s studies. (Banks & Banks, 1995, p. xii).

Multicultural education has become a popular term in education whose meaning is varied yet “as a reform movement, [it] has been described as shifting the meanings of equality away from the emphasis on hierarchy and belonging, toward highlighting inclusion and community” (Appelbaum, 2002, p. 22). Overall, there are five main goals identified within the literature on “multicultural education: (1) promoting the strength and value of cultural diversity, (2) promoting human rights and respect for those who are different from oneself, (3) promoting alternative life choices for people, (4)
promoting social justice and equal opportunity for all people, and (5) promoting equity in the distribution of power among groups” (Sleeter and Grant, 2003, p. 156). While multicultural education is multidimensional, according to Banks (2008), its basic purpose is to restructure schools so that all students acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to function in a culturally diverse society. While these may be the goals and dimensions of multicultural education, its enactment in schools often falls short, usually because these goals and concepts become oversimplified. Therefore, having a clear understanding of how the principles of multicultural education might be robustly implemented through culturally responsive teaching practices throughout the school day is imperative if educators are to meet the goals of multicultural education.

**Theoretical Frameworks for Multicultural Education**

In reviewing the literature on multicultural education, Jenks, Lee and Kanpol (2001) assert that three theoretical frameworks emerge: conservative, liberal, and critical. Within these three frameworks, Jenks et al (2001) also cite examples from Sleeter and Grant’s descriptions of varying approaches to multicultural education, as well as James Banks’ work, to elaborate the descriptors of each framework. I will briefly summarize the three frameworks below in Figure 1 as well as provide further description in the subsequent paragraphs.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Critical</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Schools assimilate students into mainstream culture</td>
<td>• Acceptance and celebration of difference</td>
<td>• Knowledge is not value free</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Belief in meritocracy</td>
<td>• Ignores role of dominant culture</td>
<td>• Schools reinforce power relationships and social stratification of society</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Same academic standards for all students</td>
<td>• Curricular content includes focus on world cultures, specific groups/events (Japanese internment camps) and themes that focus on struggling against great odds</td>
<td>• Exposes the myth of meritocracy</td>
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<td>• Cultural differences need not play a role in achievement</td>
<td>• Limited analysis of why inequities exist</td>
<td>• Histories and narratives of subordinate groups are a part of school curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Measures of success are comparative and based in statistical measures</td>
<td>• Utilizes language such as <em>success for all, inclusion, and empowerment</em></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Utilizes language such as <em>success for all, inclusion, and empowerment</em></td>
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<th>Approaches:</th>
<th>Sleeter &amp; Grant</th>
<th>Banks</th>
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<td>Contributions</td>
<td>Culturally different</td>
<td>Additive</td>
<td>Additive</td>
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<td>Human relations</td>
<td>Cultural pluralism</td>
<td>Social reconstructionist</td>
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<td>Single-group studies,</td>
<td>Transformative</td>
<td>Social Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural pluralism</td>
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<td>Social reconstructionist</td>
<td>Culturally responsive teaching</td>
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Figure 1: Philosophical Frameworks and Models for Multicultural Education. Taken from Jenks, Lee & Kanpol (2001)
Conservative Multiculturalism

Jenks et al (2001) describes a conservative multiculturalist as someone who believes “the conditions for justice already exist and need only to be evenly apportioned” (p. 90). Ideologically based on a market economy, conservative multiculturalism supports cultural homogeneity while using language such as “success for all, inclusion, empowerment, and equity...and believe such ends are attained in an open, free, and competitive market economy” (p. 91). This type of approach might be summarized by the following questions: “How do we Americanize minorities (bring them into the mainstream culture)? How do we prepare them for a competitive economy? How do we standardize curriculum so as to give opportunities for all to compete openly for goods and services?” (p. 91). Fostering the idea of meritocracy, conservative multiculturalism “includes a commitment to the same academic standards for all students and the belief that cultural differences need not play a significant role in their achievement” (p. 91).

Within the approaches to multicultural education that Grant and Sleeter describe, conservative multiculturalism would be considered “culturally different” (Jenks et al, 2001). Grant and Sleeter (1987, 1988) describe “teaching the culturally different” as “attempts to raise the achievement of students of color mainly through designing culturally compatible education programs” (Sleeter, 1991, p. 11). Within this structure, it becomes the “teacher’s job to bridge the ‘gaps’ that exist between the mainstream culture and that of the ‘culturally different’ through remedial education that inculcates mainstream American know-how” (Jenks, 2001, p. 91). While conservative multiculturalism may be seen as a “contradiction in terms”, this type of approach does
often recognize cultural, racial, and social differences in the context of their ‘contributions’ to American society, though the latter are considered marginal, with little impact on social and political institutions” (p. 92).

Similar to Sleeter and Grant’s culturally different approach, Banks’ “contributions” approach of multicultural education can be described as, “content about ethnic and cultural groups [which] is limited primarily to holidays and celebrations” (Banks, 2008, p. 47). Within the contributions approach, these limited inclusions of minority cultures “attempt to sensitize the majority white culture to some understanding of minority groups’ history as a part of the American experience” (Jenks et al, 2001, p. 96).

Both the contributions and culturally different approach reflect a conservative multicultural stance which, when enacted, is reflective of a surface level implementation of multicultural education. For example, when schools and teachers see multicultural education as a cursory inclusion of different racial and ethnic groups into the curriculum, minority cultures are often included by incorporating different foods, holidays, and other customs within the curriculum. When this occurs, you may see multilingual labels and signs posted throughout the school (ex. “Welcome” in eight different languages) but official school forms and other communication with families offered in English only. In order to move beyond this limited notion of culture, teachers must “move beyond cultural fairs, ethnic celebrations, and multicultural feasts in order to diversify their curricula” (Howard, 2010, p. 75).
Liberal Multiculturalism

Liberal multiculturalism supports “the need for diversity and cultural pluralism and the acceptance and celebration of difference” (Jenks et al, 2001, p. 92). While ideologically based on tolerance, this approach “masks the conflicts and contradictions inherent in our society, ignoring what at times seem like irreconcilable and divisive identity issues revolving around race, class, and ethnicity” (p. 92). Within the liberal multicultural approach, power structures and the role of the dominant culture “in preventing equality and excellence for all” often goes unexamined (Jenks, p. 92). The liberal approach to multiculturalism is reflected in curricular content such as women’s history month and the celebration of varying world cultures. Similar to the conservative approach, “liberal multiculturalists assume that laws and policy decisions will bring about excellence and equity within the dominant culture and free-market economy” (p. 93).

Grant and Sleeter would describe the liberal multicultural approach as a “human relations” approach to multicultural education (Jenks, 2001). Sleeter (1991) describes the human relations approach as “teaching that ‘we are all the same because we are all different’” and as being more concerned with inner and interpersonal well being than with social change (p. 11). Characterized by a curriculum that focuses on cooperative learning, and challenging stereotypes and name-calling, the human relations approach of liberal multiculturalism “inadequately examines why inequities exist in the first place” and includes “simplistic conceptions of culture and identity” (Jenks et al, 2001, p. 93).

Complimentary to Sleeter and Grant’s human relations approach, Banks’ “additive
approach” is associated with the liberal approach to multicultural education. Within the additive approach, “cultural content, concepts and themes are added to the curriculum without changing its basic structure, purposes, and characteristics” (Banks, 2008, p. 47). The additive approach contains both conservative and liberal components: “conservative when its importance is viewed primarily as a perfunctory gesture toward fairness; liberal when its importance is viewed as a substantive addition to a study of the diversity of the American experience and when sufficient curricular time is devoted to doing so” (Jenks et al, 2001, p. 96).

**Critical Multiculturalism**

Jenks et al (2001) describe a critical multiculturalist as someone who believes “knowledge is not value-free but shaped culturally, historically, ethnically, and linguistically” (p. 93). Ideologically, critical multiculturalism is diametrically opposed to the conservative approach since it is built upon the belief that leaving “matters to the processes of free-market competition and upward social mobility will only deny the achievement of justice” (p. 93). This approach to multiculturalism might be summarized by the following questions: “Under what conditions and by whom are concepts of equity and excellence constructed? What do they look like for different groups and in different circumstances? Can all groups benefit equally from a particular construction of these concepts? What happens when different groups and individuals view these concepts differently? How can equity and excellence be achieved in a society in which historically the dominant culture has determined their meaning?” (Jenks, 2001, p. 93). Fostering the idea that knowledge is value laden, critical multiculturalism
promotes the transformative nature of curriculum and the inclusion of counter-narratives of subordinate groups.

Sleeter and Grant would describe critical multiculturalism using any one of three models “that, taken in order, become increasingly critical in their structure: single-group studies, cultural pluralism, and social reconstructionist” (Jenks et al., 2001, p. 94). The approach of single-group studies “explicitly [teaches] students about the history of the target group’s oppression and how oppression works today, as well as the culture the group has developed within the oppressive circumstances” (Sleeter, 1991, p. 11). Within a single-group approach, important distinctions are made between groups, the voices of each group are encouraged, and an attempt is made to increase the status of each group (Jenks et al., 2001). The second approach, cultural pluralism, “attempts to model an unoppressive, equal society which is also culturally diverse” although it “does not strongly teach social criticism and social change” (Sleeter, 1991, p. 11). While it may be defined as the “salad bowl” versus “melting pot” approach to education, cultural pluralism attempts to “reduce prejudice by helping students adapt to as much diversity as possible and to learn the importance of power equity and social justice for all groups” (Jenks et al., 2001, p. 94). The most critical approach, social reconstructionist, teaches “directly about political and economic oppression and discrimination, and [prepares] young people directly in social action skills” (Sleeter, 1991, p. 12). This approach directly “focuses on how groups can change structures” and therefore “community action projects are important, and active learning takes center stage” (Jenks et al., 2001, p. 95). While all three approaches (single-group studies, cultural pluralism, and social reconstructionism) are considered examples of critical
approaches to multicultural education, social reconstructionism is viewed as the approach with the most critical stance.

Banks describes two approaches, the transformative and the social action approach, that exemplify a critical enactment of multicultural education. Banks (2008) defines the transformative approach as one that “changes the canon, paradigms, and basic assumptions of the curriculum and enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from different perspectives and points of view” (p. 49). Within the transformative approach, the goal is the “transformation of students’ perspectives regarding issues of equity and justice” (Jenks et al, 2001, p. 97). The social action approach is defined as an extension of the transformative curriculum by “enabling students to pursue projects and activities that allow them to make decisions and to take personal, social, and civic actions related to the concepts, problems, and issues they have studied” (Banks, 2008, p. 49). Using learning as a tool to bring about change, the social action approach allows students to see “how the dominant culture perpetuates inequality and how even they are responsible for supporting oppressive institutions” (Jenks et al, 2001, p. 98).

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

While not identified by Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) as a model of critical multicultural education, I believe that culturally responsive teaching is yet another iteration of critical multicultural education. Banks (2008) asserts that the broad goal of multicultural education is to “increase the educational equality for both gender groups, for students from diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and for exceptional students” (p.
40). With this goal in mind, culturally responsive teaching provides teachers with a framework for accomplishing this task. Gay (2002) defines the framework of culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (pp. 106-107). Additionally, she outlines five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching. These elements include “developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in delivery of instruction” (p. 106). In addition to these elements, Gay asserts there are five dimensions that further define culturally responsive teaching. She describes culturally responsive teaching as: multidimensional, validating, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. These qualities and dimensions of culturally responsive teaching reflect the dominant goal of multicultural education, which is to transform learning environments for the benefit of all students (Banks, 2008; Nieto, 1999). For further descriptors of the dimensions of culturally responsive teaching, see Figure 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally responsive teaching is:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Validating</td>
<td>• Acknowledges the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Builds meaning between home and school experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Multicultural materials and resources are consistently incorporated into all subject areas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
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| Comprehensive | - Focuses on the whole child  
                 - Recognizes importance of academic achievement but also the maintenance of cultural identity and heritage |
| Multidimensional | - Includes curriculum content, learning contexts, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments |
| Empowering    | - Enables students to be better human beings and more successful learners  
                 - Promotes self-efficacy, student initiative, and academic competence  
                 - Teachers support students in efforts toward academic achievement |
| Transformative | - Respects the cultures and experiences of various groups and uses these as a resources for teaching and learning  
                 - Helps students develop skills needed to become social critics and make decisions for effective personal, social, political and economic action |
| Emancipatory  | - Does not solely prescribe to mainstream ways of knowing  
                 - Liberates students by guiding students to understand there is no single version of "truth" |

Figure 2: Summary of Gay's model of Culturally Responsive Teaching. Taken from Gay (2000).

Culturally responsive teaching that is **validating**, acknowledges the prior knowledge, cultural experiences and learning styles of students. Additionally, connections are made between home and school or between the real world and the world of school. The curriculum validates the students' existence by reflecting the cultural and ethnic background of the students. This validation is seen through all aspects and content areas of the curriculum (Gay, 2000).
Culturally responsive teaching that is *comprehensive* focuses on the whole child. By focusing on the whole child, the teacher also focuses on the child as a member of a larger community. In this sense, the teacher responds to the student’s need to belong and honors their human dignity by allowing the student to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity and heritage (Gay, 2000).

Culturally responsive teaching that is *multidimensional* is inclusive of many aspects of the teaching-learning process. These aspects include: the curriculum, the student-teacher relationship, the classroom climate, the instructional strategies, and the assessment of learning. It may also include the collaboration among teachers of different curricular disciplines on a singular topic. For example, teachers may focus on the concept of “oppression”. This idea would be explored through the arts, literature, mathematics, science, etc (Gay, 2000).

Culturally responsive teaching that is *empowering* not only instills students with a belief that they can succeed but also provides support systems to ensure students’ success. One example of an empowering school culture, would be a school that enacts changes so that all students (and families) have equal opportunity for success, perhaps by recognizing and allowing the use of home languages, when possible, in communication with students and families. Additionally, this would mean holding high expectations for students (of both genders) regardless of the student’s racial, cultural, socio-economic, or linguistic background. Maintaining this belief of high academic achievement for all students also means that school personnel would look critically at
the practice of academic tracking and how students are identified for gifted and special education programs.

Culturally responsive teaching that is transformative incorporates the students’ linguistic and work styles into the learning process. This may include more interactive communication styles (call and response) as well as more opportunities to work collaboratively (Gay 2002). Additionally, students are taught the skills to critique and engage the world around them in order to speak back to the world and enact change.

Culturally responsive teaching that is emancipatory challenges the notion that there is only one truth. Culturally responsive teaching promotes the idea that there are multiple lived realities and therefore, multiple ways of knowing about the world. This idea counters the mainstream narrative often promoted within schools and therefore allows students, particularly minority students to see themselves reflected within the curriculum.

Many may question that the pedagogy of critical multiculturalism generally speaking and culturally responsive teaching in particular is just “good teaching” yet I would argue that, while it is “good teaching”, it is more. I offer the following description of how I witnessed one teacher’s attempts to include multiple perspectives and promote an empowering school culture within her classroom, two important aspects that move good teaching into critical multiculturalism. I visited this particular second grade classroom on a weekly basis as part of my work with student teachers a few years ago. During one of my visits, I witnessed a lesson in which the students used literacy, math, and problem solving involving a recipe for cornbread muffins. These students
read the recipe, discussed the tools and materials they would need, discussed how to
double the measurements of the ingredients (which involved fractions), and shared
differing strategies for how to make sure that everyone would receive a muffin in the
end and what to do with the remainders, quite complex thinking tasks for a group of
second graders. While promoting collaborative learning and engaging students in
complex thinking skills, what struck me most was the simple question the teacher
posed when discussing the different tools needed to carry out the recipe. As she held
up various kitchen items, she asked, “What do you call this at your house?” I listened as
multiple names, including some in Spanish, were shared among the students. This
simple question provided the students with affirmation of their multiple uses of
language and an affirmation of family and culture.

In addition to this lesson, I also witnessed in this classroom the use of freedom
songs from the civil rights era used in literacy activities and the collection of family
histories and stories as a means for constructing narratives about the history of the
community, and saw non-Spanish speaking students encouraged to learn from their
Spanish-speaking peers through conversations at lunch. These practices highlighted
the strengths and resources of the community, provided the students with a voice in the
classroom, honored home languages and conveyed the idea that knowledge is
constructed through various means². It is clear to me that this particular teacher not
only planned this lesson with the needs of her students in mind but was explicit in

² While I feel the examples from this particular classroom are indicative of a critical multicultural stance, I
recognize that there is a lack of social critique and/or social activism.
including resources that directly related to their experiences at home and in their community, empowering students through the process.

From the description above and from the descriptors listed above in Figure 2, it becomes clear that the goals of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) and of critical multicultural education that Jenks et al. (2001) outline are similar. Both share the belief that knowledge is value laden and influenced by culture, ethnicity and language; that the histories of minority groups are a critical part of the curriculum; and that social change is possible through the development of critical thinking and other social action skills.

Since I believe that culturally responsive teaching is an iteration of multicultural education, I use the components of culturally responsive teaching as a measure of elementary teachers’ enactment of multicultural education. I have chosen to use culturally responsive teaching as a framework for this study since it served as a guiding principle for a course on culturally responsive teaching that both participants completed during their pre-service teacher education, a course I taught to them. This framework provided us with both a common experience as well as a common language for exploration and discussion.

**Multicultural Education in Teacher Education**

**How have teachers traditionally been prepared to address diversity?**

Reflecting back on my own preparation to teach, there was a lack of focus on how to address the unique needs of the potentially diverse students that would enter my classroom. This lack of preparation lead to Hope’s story. In order to avoid similar
stories, it is important to understand how multicultural education courses are typically enacted in order to understand the impact on a teacher’s practice. To begin to address inequities in education, teacher education programs often require a single course in multicultural education. One major reason why multicultural education courses exist is due to the adoption of a standard for multicultural education by The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in 1977 (Banks, 2008). The current NCATE diversity standard (standard 4) states: “The unit designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and provides experiences for candidates to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Assessments indicate that candidates can demonstrate and apply proficiencies related to diversity. Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher education and P–12 school faculty, other candidates, and students in P–12 schools” (NCATE, 2009). NCATE (2009) provides the following rationale for the inclusion of standard 4 for teaching candidates:

Regardless of whether they live in areas with great diversity, candidates must develop knowledge of diversity in the United States and the world, professional dispositions that respect and value differences, and skills for working with diverse populations...This goal requires educators who can reflect multicultural and global perspectives that draw on the histories, experiences, and representations of students and families from diverse populations. Therefore, the unit has the responsibility to provide opportunities for candidates to understand diversity and equity in the teaching and learning process.

Although these diversity requirements are required by NCATE for teacher education programs, “synthesizers of the research on teacher education have consistently concluded that despite more than two decades of multicultural reform, little has really changed in the ways teachers are prepared in college- and university-
based programs” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p.140). Often, diversity issues have been separated from the rest of the teacher education curricula and are generally inconsistent (Hollins and Guzman, 2005, p. 480). Additionally, Gorski asserts “what passes for MTE [Multicultural Teacher Education] in most cases is not multicultural at all – at least not when assessed against multicultural education paradigms...[but] tends to focus on celebrating diversity” (Gorski, 2009, p. 309).

This focus on celebrating diversity is reflective of the conservative multicultural education approach that Jenks et al. (2001) outline and is discussed earlier in this chapter. This idea, that most multicultural teacher education is reflective of a conservative approach, supports Sleeter and Grant’s (2003) assertion that, “multicultural education is an educational concept that most educators must profess to understand, even if they know little or nothing about it, because policy mandates require the inclusion of multicultural content in their courses” (p. 158). Therefore, its meaning often becomes superficial, reflecting an I’m okay, your okay approach. Additionally, Gomez (2008) claims a “single course or field experience in a teacher education program only rarely if ever has the power to interrupt or change values formed over a lifetime” (p. 57). Therefore, if most teachers experience this type of conservative enactment of multicultural education within their teacher education program, I continue to wonder about the questions that guide this study: 1) What does culturally responsive teaching look like when it is embedded in an elementary school teacher’s professional practice?, 2) What factors are barriers to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices?, 3) What factors are supports to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices? and 4) What types
of support can a teacher educator provide to help promote the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices?

**Critical Turn in Multicultural Teacher Education**

It is possible that in order for teachers to engage their students in critical multiculturalism and, specifically, culturally responsive teaching, they need to have experienced this sort of training in their own teacher preparation. It has been my experience that individuals who choose teaching often come into the profession because of a love of children and a desire to make a difference in the world. While I do believe it is important to hold these beliefs, I have found that many pre-service teachers do not identify teaching as a political activity that is value laden. Understanding the socio, cultural and political nature of education is important (Giroux, 1985), particularly if we want teachers to address the needs of learners who may or may not be racially, culturally and/or linguistically similar to them. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter and as Sleeter (2008) asserts, “White candidates enter teacher education with very little cross-cultural background, knowledge, and experience, although they often bring naïve optimism that coexists with unexamined stereotypes taken for granted as truth” (p. 559).

Additionally, Sleeter (2008) identifies four interrelated problems that affect teaching if not directly addressed in teacher education: (1) a belief that racism is a problem of interpersonal interactions, which [teacher candidates] believe that an open attitude towards others solves, (2) an assumption of lower achievement expectations for students of color due to a dominant deficit framework, (3) an overall ignorance of communities of color coupled with a fear of discussing race and racism, and, (4) for
white candidates, a lack of awareness of themselves as cultural beings. These issues highlight the need to move beyond the conservative approach to multicultural education, particularly in the education of teachers, to a more critical approach so that pre-service teachers become more critically conscious and adept at meeting the needs of diverse learners.

In order to address the issue of racism as an interpersonal problem, teacher education programs need to help pre-service teachers see the institutional nature of racism. By examining the historical roots of inequitable allocation of resources, which has impacted the access to quality schooling, pre-service teachers can begin to dismantle the myth of meritocracy and move beyond the view that just improving interpersonal relationships can combat racism (Sleeter, 2008).

Understanding the historical and institutional nature of racism is also instrumental in dismantling the deficit framework that many pre-service teachers hold. Unfortunately, many teachers “generally assume that underachievement of students of color, particularly African American students, is due to their families not valuing education” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 560). This unexamined belief that factors related to student success are not under the control of the classroom teacher can and should be interrogated within teacher education programs.

To combat pre-service teachers’ fear of communities of color and to interrupt the avoidance of race by proclaiming, “I don’t see color, I just see children”, teacher education programs must provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to have meaningful and sustained engagement within communities of color. One example of how this level of engagement might be accomplished is by having university
coursework and practicum experiences embedded in schools that predominately serve communities of color. This engagement would allow pre-service teachers to “hear what students or parents of color say about teaching and working with them more appropriately” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 560).

Helping white pre-service teachers identify their own cultural backgrounds and identify that they “tend not to have the same cultural frames of reference and points of view as their students” is imperative (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 6). What may be even more important is challenging what Ladson-Billings (1999) calls “the perversity of diversity” (p. 216) in which “White is normative and diversity is equated with depravity, disadvantage, and deficiency” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 144). Focusing on culturally responsive teaching practices within teacher education may help pre-service teachers use students’ own “funds of knowledge”, the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills students bring with them into the classroom, in the learning process instead of seeing difference as a deficit to overcome (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Incorporating students’ funds of knowledge is reflective of the validating, comprehensive, transformative nature of culturally responsive teaching which reflects a critical enactment of multicultural education.

One way of engaging White pre-service teachers in examining their own cultural frames of reference is through examining whiteness. As a society, we often do not engage in frank discussions about race because it of the tensions that are raised and the fear of saying the wrong thing. Therefore it is imperative to engage in such discussions in teacher education, particularly so White teachers—the predominant teaching population-- do not use their “unexamined frames of reference against which to judge
students, students’ families and their communities” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 561). These unexamined frames of reference tend to perpetuate white preservice teachers’ misunderstandings about different cultural ways of being (types of parental involvement, student communication styles, etc.) for students and families of color. More importantly, normalizing white cultural ways of being perpetuates cultural racism, which is the “belief that the cultural ways of one group are superior to those of another” (Diller and Moule, 2005, p. 43). These critical examinations are imperative since, as Sleeter (2005) asserts, a “pre-dominantly White teaching force in a racist and multicultural society is not good for anyone, if we wish to have schools reverse rather than reproduce racism” (p. 243). Yet these discussions are not easy. Sleeter (2005) explains, “White people usually seek to explain persistent racial inequality in a way that does not implicate white society” (p. 246) and that “whites so internalize their own power and taken-for-granted superiority that they resist self-questioning” (p. 252).

In reviewing the literature on multicultural teacher education, it predominately discusses the challenges of preparing white pre-service teachers for diverse classrooms. What is lacking is a robust conversation about continuing diversity education for in-service teachers. Additionally, as stated above, the majority of the literature discusses preparing white teachers for diverse classrooms. What is lacking from the conversation is how Black teachers fit into the conversation. For the most part, the experiences of Black teachers in the classroom are used as models for culturally responsive teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Foster, 1997). There is little to no discussion as to how to prepare Black teachers and other educators of color whose socio-economic and cultural backgrounds may differ from an ever-diversifying student body for those
challenges (Montecinos, 2004; Sleeter, 2001). Therefore, it is important for teacher educators to consider how to support practicing teachers and how to support Black educators and other educators of color in the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices. This study begins to consider this in part.

**Impact on Practice**

Teaching is a highly complex task. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the complexities of teaching in a culturally responsive manner. By attempting to uncover the complexities of enacting culturally responsive teaching practice, this study may help to better inform and reassure future teachers as they attempt to do the same as well as inform teacher educators how to better support such practice both inside and outside of teacher preparation.

While there is a significant amount of research on theories of culturally responsive teaching, less available are studies of what culturally responsive teaching looks like enacted in real classrooms. Too often, once having graduated from teacher education programs, teachers are left to fend for themselves in the classroom to enact the theories they have learned. Teacher educators have failed to consider in any systematic way what it would mean to support teachers – once in school settings- to enact culturally responsive practices. This study seeks to shed light on these areas.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This qualitative study is a descriptive case study of two elementary teachers in public schools within the Triangle area of North Carolina. Through a series of interviews, observations, and document analysis, I examined how these teachers attempted to employ culturally responsive teaching practices within elementary classrooms and the supports and barriers they encountered as they attempted to do so. My focus on culturally responsive teaching, as opposed to critical multiculturalism, was determined based on my use of culturally responsive teaching practices as a guiding premise for a course on multicultural education that both participants completed during their pre-service teacher education. The readings and class discussions completed during this course provide for a shared language—the language of culturally responsive teaching described in depth in Chapter Two--to engage in discussions of culturally responsive teaching practices. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What does culturally responsive teaching look like when it is embedded in an elementary school teacher’s professional practice?, 2) What factors are barriers to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices?, 3) What factors are supports to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices? and 4) What types of support can a teacher educator provide to help promote the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices?
Collective Case study

This study is an attempt to uncover the complexities of teaching in a culturally responsive manner. With this purpose in mind, I chose to conduct a descriptive case study. Case study “provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 181). Moreover, descriptive study “describes and interprets what is...it is concerned with conditions or relationships that exist, opinions that are held, processes that are going on, effects that are evident, or trends that are developing” (Best & Kahn, 2003, p. 114). Utilizing individual cases provides a means to document each teacher’s daily classroom experiences and to identify the supports and barriers of trying to enact the theories they have learned in their teacher preparation programs. Creswell (2007) defines case study research as “a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 73). I used a collective case study approach to examine the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices across different contexts, or cases, in this instance, across two different teachers’ elementary classrooms. This cross case analysis allowed me to gain insight into and address research questions concerning how elementary school teachers attempt to implement culturally relevant practices throughout the school day and the supports and barriers encountered as they attempted to do so.

Context

I purposefully selected elementary teachers for several reasons. First, as the researcher, my previous experience as an elementary teacher and administrator, as
well as my current work in teacher education of elementary education majors, allows me to have a deep understanding of the structures of elementary classrooms. Secondly, this work will continue to inform my own practice as a teacher educator focused on the improvement of instruction within elementary classrooms. Thirdly, elementary teachers have sustained contact with their students throughout the school day and teach across several content areas. Therefore, this setting allowed me to observe culturally relevant practices throughout the school day and across the varying content areas.

**Recruitment Strategy**

Two participants for this study were recruited from a pool of my former teacher education students. Using former students in this study accomplished many goals. First, we have a shared language, background knowledge and experience concerning culturally responsive practices with which we engaged in discussion. These former students learned about culturally responsive teaching in a class (or classes) and during the student teaching experience with me. Second, engaging in this study with former students allowed me, as a teacher educator, to consider how to better support in-service teachers in the field since after our students leave us, we seldom continue to have contact with them. In addition, observing my former students allowed me to observe how they moved theory into practice. Finally, this experience allowed both the teachers and myself to learn more about what it meant to engage in culturally responsive practices and to examine supports and barriers that existed.
Participants were identified using a three-tiered process. This process is described below.

**Tier 1:** All students that I had as a student in a course for culturally responsive teaching and for whom I served as the supervisor for student teaching were considered for inclusion into the study. I taught a culturally responsive teaching course for six years with an average enrollment of 20-25 students for an approximate total of 150, and supervised student teachers for five years with an average number of 6 students for a total of 30. Using these criteria in combination, there were approximately 12 potential participants. Of the twelve potential participants, 6 of the 12 individuals were either Black or Latina. This percentage of teacher candidates of color is higher than the average teacher population since I was often deliberate in selecting to supervise preservice candidates of color.

**Tier 2:** Once the 12 potential participants were identified, each teacher was contacted by email and apprised of the details of the study and were asked to self-identify if they were committed to culturally responsive teaching practices and were interested in the study. A commitment to culturally responsive teaching practices was defined as a teacher who identifies a commitment to culturally responsive teaching and considers it a part of his or her practice whether the attempted enactment is successful or not. A teacher who felt committed to the enactment of culturally responsive teaching and was interested in the study was asked to respond to the initial email indicating interest.

**Tier 3:** Of the teachers who indicated an interest in participating, based on their self-identification and willingness to consent, I anticipated potentially identifying more
individuals than needed for the scope of the study and therefore initially anticipated
narrowing the number of teachers in the following ways:

**First:** By identifying those teachers who work with populations of students who
are most often considered at risk, specifically students of color. This factor would be
determined by examining student demographic information on the school website.
After narrowing down the potential participants by those who serve the most at risk
populations, I planned to narrow the potential participants further by considering the
following:

1. Multiple interested teachers at a single school site;
2. Teachers at schools with similar demographics located in regions
globally close to one another;
3. Teachers at the same grade level, due to the fact that these teachers
work with the same curriculum.

As I began recruiting the twelve teachers, I learned that one individual was
teaching out of state, another had left teaching to return to graduate school, and yet
another had taken a non-classroom teaching position. After the initial email contacting
the remaining nine potential participants, I received three responses. All three teachers
were African-American women who worked in three different school districts and at
different grade levels. While the criteria for Tier 3 were important, other criteria
became more salient at this point in the recruitment process. Two of the three teachers
were from the same undergraduate class and student teaching cohort and thus were
chosen to participate since they had similar experiences in both their class for culturally
responsive teaching and the student teaching practicum and shared the same number of years of teaching experience. This narrowing enabled me to bound the study a bit more tightly, potentially limiting confounding variables that may have resulted from a difference in number of years of teaching, for example.

**Participants**

The selection of two participants was due to the nature of the demands of a descriptive case study. Since the goal of this study was to come to understand the complexities of enacting culturally responsive teaching practices, in order to provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of these processes, I needed to spend a significant time with each participant in order to understand how culturally responsive teaching was successfully enacted or the barriers that existed which prevented enactment of these practices.

The two participants were licensed and tenured teachers currently working within public schools in North Carolina. They were elementary classroom teachers who have a commitment to culturally responsive practices and were attempting to embed these practices within their classroom on a consistent basis. Both participants were African-American females with four years of teaching experience. The first participant was a Kindergarten teacher; the second participant was a third grade teacher. Both participants completed their pre-service training in the same elementary education program at the same time from the same university with the same instructor.
**Data Collection**

Data was collected from a variety of sources and at various points in time during the study. Types of data collected included teaching-related documents (such as lesson plans and student/parent communication), teacher interviews, classroom observations, audio-visual materials (such as photographs and audiotape) and email/text correspondences. Collecting diverse types of data at varying and multiple times of the study helped to develop a rich description of each classroom, including the instructional planning, the interpersonal interactions, and overall daily routines. Utilizing multiple and different forms of data provided for “richer data and more believable …findings” and served as a form of triangulation which “increases the confidence in [the] research findings” (Glesne, 1999, p. 31). Since triangulation is “an attempt to describe a phenomenon from more than one perspective”, multiple sources of data are imperative (Croll, 1986, p. 176). Additionally, Glesne (1999) asserts that “time at your research site, time spent interviewing, and time building sound relationships …all contribute to trustworthy data” (p. 151). Almost 90 hours of observations, over 7 hours of interviews, and positive relationships with both participants provides a basis for trustworthy data in this study.

**Interviews**

Interviews provide the “opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see” (Glesne, 1999, p. 69). Therefore, interviews were used as one source of data collection. Interviews were conducted
throughout the study including before the observational period, during the observational period, and after the observational period.

Before conducting classroom observations, I conducted an initial oral history interview that asked participants to describe how they came to teaching and to this particular teaching assignment, what their teacher education experience included, what they may be working on in their teaching, and their commitment to and description of culturally responsive practices. Oral history interviews “focus on historical events, skills, ways of life, or cultural patterns that may be changing” (Glesne, 1999, p. 68). These interviews provided insight into the teachers’ perceptions of culturally responsive teaching, from where those perceptions come and the opportunities and challenges the teachers were responding to in regards to the students. Additionally, the interview illuminated ongoing topics of discussion throughout the observational period.

During this open ended, semi-structured interview, participants were asked to define culturally responsive teaching and to identify personal actions that they considered to be evidence of culturally responsive practices. Additionally, participants were asked to identify any supports or barriers they may have encountered in attempting to enact culturally responsive practices. The pre-observational interview allowed the teacher to identify what practices she believes are indicative of culturally responsive teaching and are present in practice. The practices that were identified by the teacher provided one focus for the classroom observations. Another focus for the interview was the discussion of artifacts. Artifacts are items the teacher has identified
as evidence of culturally responsive practices. These artifacts included curricular materials, communication with students and families, lesson plans, and evidence of collaboration with other education professionals or community stakeholders. Interview questions examined the artifacts themselves as well as their history: how they were developed, when, etc.

The interviews conducted during the observational period allowed me to ask clarifying questions about what was observed in practice. These occurred regularly following classroom observations and were shorter than the initial and closing interviews. The final interview allowed me to probe further about supports and/or barriers to implementing culturally responsive practices. Additionally, this final interview allowed teachers the opportunity to further elaborate on previous discussions, revisit artifacts and allowed me to ask for deep reflection and analysis on the process of the development of a culturally responsive teaching practice. All interviews were audio taped and then transcribed.

*Classroom Observations*

After the initial teacher interviews were completed, observations were conducted to collect data about the implementation of teachers’ intended practices. Additionally, I made note of the presence of other components of culturally responsive practices, though they may have been unidentified by the teacher. Observations focused on the teacher, her practice, and her interactions with students at specific points throughout the day and across specific content times of the day such as “science time.” Initially, observations encompassed the entire school day but after each teacher
identified an area of practice to target, the observations became focused on these particular instructional times during the school day.

These observations were extended over several weeks and allowed me to observe and gather data primarily according to predetermined categories of culturally responsive practices (see Figure 2) with opportunities to expand these categories as needed. I observed in each classroom over a span of 9 weeks. The initial observations encompassed the entire school day in order to identify times in the day where the teacher and the students had direct interactions. As identified, subsequent observations encompassed just those instructional times when the teacher had identified a need for support. I observed in the Kindergarten classroom for a total of 13 observations; four entire school days and 9 partial school days. I observed in the third grade classroom for a total of 10 observations; four entire school days and 6 partial school days. The data collected during these observations provided a rich description of the classroom environment, teacher practices, and student/teacher interactions. Detailed field notes were completed for each observation period. These field notes were transcribed and coded using the qualitative software package, HyperRESEARCH 2.0.

Documents

Documents that were considered sources of data are any items the teacher selected as evidence of culturally responsive practices. Documents included but were not limited to newsletters, lesson plans, curricular materials, and communication logs. These items served as further evidence of culturally responsive practices that may not have been observable during the limited observation period. During interview
conversations, these items prompted the teachers to deeply reflect and use their voice to identify why and how the particular artifacts displayed an enactment of culturally responsive teaching.

**Audio-visual Materials**

Photographs of the classroom itself, including but not limited to the materials on the walls, the arrangement of furniture, the organization of materials, and the types of materials present, were used as an additional source of data. These photographs were used to document the presence or lack of presence of culturally responsive materials in the classroom. On occasion, audio recordings of classroom activities were used to document classroom happenings and to accurately record student-teacher interactions.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was ongoing and occurred throughout the observational period. I used the qualitative software package, HyperRESEARCH 2.0, to code and analyze the data. I chose the use HyperRESEARCH 2.0 for two main reasons. First, I have previously used the software on another research project and therefore have experience using it to code and analyze data. Second, it is one of the few qualitative analysis programs that run on a Mac OS without having to use a parallel operating system.

During the initial observational period, a first level of analysis occurred to identify what practices were or were not culturally responsive according to the teacher's own definition and from evidence seen during the classroom observations. This initial level of analysis used a priori codes to help identify culturally responsive
practices. These codes were based primarily on the literature of culturally responsive teaching. While the attributes of culturally responsive teaching practices provided a starting point for coding, once observations were underway, additional inductive codes were added based on classroom practices, artifacts, etc. through an iterative process.

A second level of analysis occurred after the interview and observations in the first weeks to identify supports and barriers to implementing culturally responsive teaching. Once the barriers in particular were identified, I worked with the teacher to help modify and/or implement new practices to further realize culturally responsive teaching practices. During this stage of the research, I was available as a resource for the participants and made note of my participation in a research journal to later examine my influence in the enactment of culturally responsive teaching. Additionally, a third level of data collection and analysis occurred at the end of the observational period to determine how attitudes, behaviors, and relationships may have shifted over time and how the shifts occurred. This ongoing analysis helped to answer the following research questions: 1) What does culturally responsive teaching look like when it is embedded in an elementary school teacher’s professional practice?, 2) What factors are barriers to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices?, and 3) What factors are supports to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices?

Throughout the data collection process, I maintained a research journal, which I analyzed as an additional piece of data. I compared my thoughts and reflections of interviews, observations and documents with the comments and reflections of the
participants using the same inductive and a priori codes. In particular, my reflections upon the process of providing support for the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices helped to answer research question 4: What types of supports can a teacher educator provide to help promote the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices?. Additionally, interview questions from the final interview provided insight into the participants’ opinions of what types of support a teacher educator may provide that are helpful. Overall, these varying levels of analysis allowed me to answer the questions guiding this study: 1) What does culturally responsive teaching look like when it is embedded in an elementary school teacher’s professional practice?, 2) What factors are barriers to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices?, 3) What factors are supports to infusing culturally responsive teaching into professional practices? and 4) What types of support can a teacher educator provide to help promote the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices?

**Limitations**

There are several features in the research design that increase the trustworthiness of the results. These features include multiple sources, as well as methods, for collecting data. Yet, I recognize there are limitations to this study. One limitation of this study is the use of two participants. While only two participants were selected due to the demands of a descriptive case study, it is also provides a partial view of the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices, mainly focusing in what these practices might look like in a Kindergarten and a third grade classroom.
Another related limitation is the nature of the classroom observations. While some of the observational period was spent in the classroom for an entire day, and thus provided a broad view of each teacher’s practice, a majority of the observations were conducted during a targeted time that was identified by each teacher as an area in which she wanted help. Therefore, observations were limited to the morning literacy block for Kindergarten and the math block for third grade. By focusing on these areas, while serving the needs of the teachers, it also meant possibly missing areas of practice that would have contributed to the understanding of how culturally responsive teaching was enacted in those classrooms. Due to the qualitative nature, small number of cases, and the limited focus on elementary classrooms, the results of this study can only describe the experiences of the teachers within this study. I can only hope that other teachers will find similarities in the experiences described and be able to apply lessons learned within this study to their own classroom practice.

Finally, as an active participant, serving as a collaborative coach, and as an instrument for data collection and analysis, my own positionality will no doubt influence what I see and how I interpret those results. As the teacher educator of the participants in this study, there is a chance for bias. While I was aware of this possibility, I tried to minimize the risk by objectively documenting the practices I saw.

**Positionality**

I thought my schooling experiences were normal until I entered my first public school. Having always attended private schools, it wasn’t until my student teaching experience that I spent any time in a public classroom. Once I began to work in that
rural school in the central part of North Carolina, I realized how privileged my lived experiences truly were. Additionally, due to my educational background, I had very limited exposure to diverse groups of people until I began my teaching career within the public schools both in North Carolina and in my home state of Tennessee. I am the White, middle-class female that is so often described in the multicultural teacher education literature and the beginning story about my experiences with Hope demonstrate why the need exists for cultural awareness within teacher education.

Over my career, as both a teacher and an administrator, I began to have opportunities to work with students and families from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds in very diverse situations including a rural low socio-economic status K-8 arts integration school, a new wealthy suburban elementary school, and an urban low socio-economic status elementary school. The experiences I had working within these schools led to a shift in my thinking and outlook on what matters most in education. What became important to me was building relationships and serving as an advocate for children and families in order to promote issues of equity and social justice. I am now more cognizant of my place within the dominant culture and realize how previously, I unconsciously participated in the subjugation of others by participating in maintaining hierarchical structures within educational settings. This understanding of self and the development of a social justice disposition was shaped through my personal interaction with others whose backgrounds were so unlike my own and I took this new understanding of self and now use it to serve as an advocate or ally for those who do not walk within the same privileged circles I do.
My desire is to work within teacher education programs that generate teachers who create positive relationships with students and families and who work as allies to promote equity and issues of social justice within schools and the larger community. Although I feel these goals are currently being accomplished on a small scale, it is my desire to provide pre-service teachers with the opportunities and experiences that would allow it to happen on a much larger scale in order to transform schools. I am aware that my own views and experiences may influence how I view the experiences of other teachers who hold dispositions similar to my own and that this may influence the lens in which I examine the experiences of others.

As a teacher educator, in particular as the former educator of the participants in this study, I have a vested interest in these teachers. Moreover, as an educator who is committed to the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices, I have an interest in how this work may help to inform and reassure future teachers as they attempt to do the same, as well as, inform teacher educators how to support such practices both inside and outside of teacher preparation.

Upcoming Analysis

In the following two chapters, I will introduce the reader to the two teachers who participated in this study. I will provide background information about our relationship, the setting in which they teach, and describe a typical day in their classroom. I will use their words to define their conception of culturally responsive teaching practices and will use examples from observations in their classrooms to
highlight the successes and barriers they encountered while attempting to enact culturally responsive teaching practices.
CHAPTER IV: MELISSA – LIFE IN KINDERGARTEN

*Just knowing their family life and that sometimes they need people to push them a little harder and be there for them... I don't let them fail...and I try to encourage the parents too as much as I can, you know, to just do their best and encourage the kids at home and that they need that support at home and not just from school.*

Melissa Moore

Melissa Moore is a former student of mine who is currently teaching Kindergarten in a small town in central North Carolina. Melissa felt a sense of responsibility to return to her hometown and teach in a local school that many would label as “high needs.” She agreed to allow me to observe in her classroom and engage in conversations about students and their needs in order to better understand the challenges she faces on a daily basis as she tries to enact culturally responsive teaching practices. What follows is a description of these observations and conversations.

**The Setting: Marian W. Edelman Elementary**

Marian W. Edelman Elementary\(^3\) is a small school of under 300 students, 93% of whom are of color, located in a rural area of central North Carolina, where the school district is the largest employer in the county. Located on the south side of town, you must cross over the railroad tracks to enter into the community where the school is situated. Surrounded by a mix of paved and dirt roads and mobile homes in all states of

\(^3\) The school name has been replaced with a pseudonym
disrepair, the school serves a low socio-economic population with over 90% of the students in the district receiving free or reduced lunch.

In previous years, the school has struggled to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the requirements of No Child Left Behind and as a result, has had a state assistance team assigned by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). While the team is no longer there on a daily basis, there is still one curricular specialist from DPI that conducts classroom visits on an ongoing basis and an administrative specialist that consults with the school’s principal and assistant principal on administrative duties such as teacher evaluation. As a result of the struggles to meet AYP, M.W. Edelman Elementary provides after-school tutoring two days a week that is available for all students in grades K-5.

A number of cost saving measures have been instituted within the schools in the district due to the economic difficulties within the county. First, there are no substitute teachers hired when teachers are absent from school due to illness. When a teacher is sick, another teacher or staff member covers the classroom. For example, when there are multiple teachers at a grade level, the students are distributed equally among the remaining teachers. Additionally, there is little to no money for professional development activities. For one of the required literacy assessments, one teacher from the school was sent to training and then returned to train the remaining teachers without the benefit of the materials being available for review. When there is professional development, it often is a PowerPoint with a voiceover focused on a topic that is played for all elementary teachers within the district at a few select school sites. Frustrated with the situation, Melissa Moore, my teacher participant, commented, “We
don’t get to go to many places and nobody comes here”, thus highlighting the lack of exposure to meaningful professional development opportunities.

Despite economic struggles, the district received federal funding through the Race to the Top grant. Of the money allocated to the district, approximately $60,000 was distributed to Marian W. Edelman Elementary for the current year. These funds allowed the administration to purchase and install interactive whiteboards in all the classrooms. While funds provided educational technology improvements, training on how to integrate the interactive whiteboards into classroom practice was not provided. Surprisingly, late in the school year, approximately $40,000 of the grant money is still unused despite remaining economic needs.

It is within this challenging environment that Melissa Moore commits to teach. In four years at Marian W. Edelman Elementary, she has bounced from grade level to grade level depending on need. Initially, she taught 3rd grade reading, then Kindergarten, back to third grade science and social studies before finally returning to Kindergarten. These constant changes have allowed Melissa to develop relationships with numerous students. For example, on my first visit to Melissa’s classroom, she took me on a tour of the school while her students were in the computer lab. As we walked around the school, it was like being escorted by a celebrity. Students of all ages went out of their way to say hello or stop for a quick hug. It is not surprising that Ms. Moore receives this type of attention from the students throughout the school, as she has made sure that she is an integral part of their lives. She fosters caring relationships with the students not just in her class, but also through afterschool tutoring, and as the faculty
leader for the SAVE (Students Against Violence Everywhere) club for students in grades 3-5.

**Background**

I first met Melissa Moore when she was a student in a course I co-taught during her junior year. She was enrolled in the Elementary Education program and this was her second semester in the program. The course was designed to integrate three bodies of knowledge: the social foundations of education, multicultural education, and social studies. Taught in a local elementary school, this course had a practicum component in which students were paired to teach at least one lesson within the classroom they were placed. As instructors, we observed each lesson taught and provided feedback. Since these lessons were often the first lessons students planned and taught, students often struggled with organization of materials, pacing, and classroom management. In reviewing some of these aspects with Melissa and her teaching partner, my co-instructor and I noticed that she remained very quiet and seemed almost annoyed with some of our feedback. Afterwards, we spoke with Melissa privately, saying it seemed that she had something to say but held back during the meeting. She acknowledged that she had brought up several of the points we did in the post-lesson conference during the planning process but her partner, a white female student, dismissed her ideas and did not incorporate her suggestions. From this encounter, I began to understand Melissa’s hesitancy, as a Black woman, to speak out in our classroom that was predominated by White, middle class women whose experiences and perspectives
seemed far different from Melissa’s. Though often quiet in class, Melissa generally had insightful comments and observations that she shared in her written work.

The following year, I supervised Ms. Moore during her student teaching practicum throughout her senior year. As a student teaching supervisor, I participated in the placement process for rising seniors. With this previous story in mind, I made recommendations to have Melissa placed with a strong cooperating teacher, an African American woman whom I had worked with during the past few years with other student teachers. I knew she would be an excellent model and push Melissa to become the best teacher possible. The two had a good working relationship in which Melissa developed into a confident nascent teacher. A few years later, I once again had Melissa as a student for a culturally relevant teaching course she took as part of her work as a Master’s student. Again, Melissa was generally quiet during whole class discussions but drawing on her classroom experiences, she made insightful comments in small group discussions and written work. Having had the opportunity to work directly with her for a number of years, I had gotten to know Melissa quite well.

Examining Practice

In the following sections, I will describe the context of Melissa Moore’s Kindergarten classroom, beginning with a typical day. Then, I will closely examine particular aspects of her day and provide further examples of how she employs culturally responsive teaching practices, and the areas that impede her attempts. Included in these descriptions are examples of how her practice developed with my help in the role of teacher educator.
A Typical Day in Kindergarten

It is 8:00 am, early in the month of December, and students begin to drift into Melissa’s classroom. In total, there are 22 students: one White, four Hispanic and 17 Black. The overhead lights are partially on and music is playing softly in the background as students drop off their backpacks and head back out into the hallway to the cafeteria for breakfast. Students who remain in the room work quietly at their seats, coloring a holiday picture. By 8:10, most students have returned from breakfast and are in their seats as the intercom comes on. The principal leads the school in reciting the school pledge and then the pledge of allegiance. This is followed by a moment of silence. Afterwards, the principal announces any student and faculty birthdays, reads the menu choices for lunch, and makes general announcements.

Following the announcements, the principal tells the students to “get ready to read” and the sound of barking dogs is played over the intercom, signaling the start of BARK (Be ready, Accessible to your book, Read quietly, Keep track of what you read), a thirty-minute school-wide reading program.

Melissa calls the students to the carpet. She begins by reading aloud the book, Whistle for Willie by Ezra Jack Keats. The class has read other Keats’ books and she reminds the students about previously reading, Peter’s Chair, which features the same main character, a young Black boy living in the inner city. Upon finishing the book, she asks students to give thumbs up if they know how to whistle. As students respond, the assistant principal (AP) enters the room and hands Ms. Moore a book in which to write

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4 I pledge as a student of ________, to respect others, to do my best and be responsible at all times. I promise to follow the “Perfect P’s”. To be polite, to be prepared and to be positive. Quality begins with me!
the name of a “good reader” for BARK. As the AP leaves, the principal comes into the room and asks to speak with the students. He asks the students about Christmas and what is on their Christmas lists. The students call out items such as a football, a bike, and an easy bake oven. He states that you have to “be ideal to get those gifts and work hard and do what you are suppose to do to get those gifts”. He then leaves the room. Finally, Melissa continues with the lesson by choosing another book to read aloud, *Puppy Finds a Friend*. Before she begins to read, she asks the students, “Do you think animals have friends?” The students take a vote before Melissa begins reading. The book is bi-lingual and as she reads, she asks questions about the Spanish words. For example, she asks, “How do you say ‘friend’ in Spanish” or “How do you say ‘cat?’” The Spanish-speaking students eagerly answer these questions. When the story is over, Melissa asks the students to briefly summarize the story by asking, “what animals did the puppy ask to be his friend?”

There is time for one more book and Melissa comments that because Christmas is coming, she has been trying to read one Christmas book a day but that it is not the only holiday that is approaching. She holds up a book about Kwanzaa and explains that it is an African holiday. She reads the book, which details the Kwanzaa traditions. Following the reading, she asks the students to share one tradition they learned related to Kwanzaa. At this point, the students have been sitting for almost thirty minutes and Ms. Moore asks them to stand and stretch, telling them to “reach up high, grab those stars so you can shine today.” During this time, the sound of barking dogs comes over the intercom to signal the end of BARK. The principal announces names of students
who were good readers during BARK and they are sent to the office to collect a small item (pencil, piece of candy, eraser, etc.) as a reward.

At the end of BARK, students return briefly to their seats to continue working on the worksheet that was on their desk at arrival in the morning. A few minutes after 9:00 am, Ms. Moore begins playing the song “Let’s Start This Day” which signals the students to begin cleaning up and gather on the rug. When the song ends, the students sit on the rug and Melissa leads the students in reading the posted classroom beliefs. At the beginning of the year, Ms. Moore reviews these beliefs with her students as she works with them to develop a positive classroom community and refers to them daily as a reminder of her expectations. Today, she provides examples of what it means to be responsible. For example, turning in their folder in the morning is a responsible act. Ms. Moore and her students continue to go through their morning routine by completing a number of activities related to the calendar, listening for the ending sounds of words, and playing a game about short vowels on the interactive whiteboard.

In the middle of this routine, a dad drops by the classroom to see his son. Melissa steps out into the hallway to speak with the student and his dad while the teaching assistant (TA) continues with the morning routine of reviewing the letters and their sounds. During this time, one student leaves school due to illness and another student complains of also not feeling well.

By 9:20am, Melissa is back in the room, ready to continue but a teacher comes in, interrupting the morning routine to ask Ms. Moore about progress monitoring reports.

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5 We are respectful. We are responsible. We will do our best. We will have fun. Work hard, be good, and Think!
for certain students. Despite the brief interruption, Melissa and the students continue with a shared pen activity in which the teacher and the students share responsibility of writing out a morning message for the day. After reviewing the activities of each center, the students move quickly into literacy centers. While a small group of students meets with Ms. Moore at a horseshoe shaped table at the back of the room, the rest of the students are at one of the following activities: listening center, computers, creating a story using stickers, exploring new vocabulary words (Vocabulary is Power: VIP), or completing an activity on the interactive whiteboard. Approximately every twenty minutes, the students rotate to a new center. Sometime during centers, one student has a bathroom accident but fortunately each student has an extra set of clothes that are stored in a filing cabinet in the classroom for just such an occasion and he is able to quickly change into a dry set of clothing.

At 10:30 am, Ms. Moore instructs the students to clean up as she announces the “group of the day”, the group of students who showed good behavior during center time. She tells all the students that they did better today with behavior and says, “so show yourself some love” and the students all give themselves a pat on the back. As soon as the students are settled back at their seats, Melissa passes out a handwriting sheet for the letter “n”, where the students are to practice writing the letter three times on each line on the paper. As the students finish up their letter writing practice, Melissa announces a “writer of the day” and presents the student with a pencil to continue writing at home and encourages the student to “keep practicing”.

After a quick review of her expectations for behavior at lunch and a trip to the community bathrooms in the hallway, the students head to the cafeteria for lunch.
Lunch is scheduled from 11:00 to 11:30. The TA remains in the cafeteria with the students while Melissa has lunch alone in her classroom. When the students return from lunch at 11:37, they sit at their seats, where they are encouraged to “rest” for a few minutes while Ms. Moore calls one to two students at a time to go to the bathrooms located at the back of the room in a space shared between two classrooms. At 11:50, the students line up at the outside door to the classroom to head out to the playground area for recess.

The playground area has only one piece of climbing equipment and there are few additional pieces of play items (balls, jump ropes, etc.), which cause a lot of crowding on the equipment, and arguments start quickly. Melissa plays a game of “monkey in the middle” with two of the girls from her class. The children are allowed to play until 12:20. At this time, they line up to go inside for Spanish class. Unfortunately, one of the student’s asthma has been triggered and Ms. Moore must take him to the school nurse for medication. Once the student is under the nurse’s care, Melissa returns to her classroom where she has thirty minutes to organize money and lunch orders for tomorrow’s field trip to the local nursing home where the students will sing holiday songs and pass out cards they have made.

When the students return from Spanish class at 1:10, they gather on the carpet for math instruction. Just as the students get settled on the carpet, the principal comes into the classroom asking to see two particular students who have had behavior problems all day and have apparently crossed a line during Spanish class. He takes them both back to his office and shortly afterwards calls the classroom to ask Ms. Moore for phone numbers so he can call the families. Similar to the morning meeting time,
Melissa leads the students through a routine where they count the number of days in school, look at how the numeral is constructed (tens and ones place), and sing a hip hop version of “1,2 Buckle My Shoe”. In the midst of this, one of the parents that the principal called comes to the classroom and once again Ms. Moore is pulled away from instructional time.

When Melissa returns from the hallway, she reviews the math stations for the day that the students will rotate through. The students will do one of the following activities: sorting attribute blocks, creating pictures with pattern blocks, attempting to write the numerals 1-100 on a blank 100’s board, playing math games on the computer, or reading math themed books. Approximately every ten minutes, the students rotate to a new station. During the students’ time at centers, the office calls over the intercom twice to request that a student be sent to the office for early dismissal.  At 2:30, Ms. Moore asks students to clean up and prepare for the end of the day. She makes an announcement reminding students about a food drive for people in need and asks students to bring in two cans of food, if they can. She also reminds them about the field trip scheduled tomorrow and prompts them to wear tennis shoes and blue shirts. Students are dismissed in two phases, except for Tuesdays and Thursdays when the majority of students remain after school for tutoring. At the end of the day, Melissa quickly leaves school to either attend graduate school classes or tutor at another elementary school. Since there is no weekend access to Marian W. Edelman Elementary, Friday afternoons are her only times to work or plan in her classroom.
Taking A Closer Look

When asked, why she chose to teach at Marian W. Edelman Elementary, Melissa responds, “just so I can give back to my community because I know how I had it growing up in that area and not having, you know, teachers who really care, so that was my main reason.” This commitment to her community and the students is reflected in her definition of culturally responsive teaching, something that she is dedicated to trying to enact. She asserts that,

being culturally responsive to me means that I am connecting with my kids and where they’re coming from, I know, like I KNOW them and I know what to expect from them and I feel like I use what I’ve gained, the knowledge that I’ve gained from them to use that to teach, to teach them better and to better reach them in that way.

While Melissa was already committed to engaging in culturally responsive teaching activities, when asked if there were any particular aspects of her practice she wanted to change or improve, she responded that she wanted to focus on two areas. She discussed wanting to find a way to incorporate social studies and science into her existing schedule and “trying to find a way to promote the good behavior ...throughout the whole classroom and ...getting the parents on board with me as far as working with the behavior.” In regards to promoting good behavior, Melissa remarked that she desired to find “strategies ... for children who are going through different things ... dealing with the newborn baby coming and ... poverty...and not having his dad there.” She questioned, “What are some specific strategies maybe for kids who deal with stuff like that, to help with their behavior?” As a teacher educator, I helped Melissa with these goals. In the following sections, I will take a closer look at the strategies Melissa enacts and the barriers she encounters in attempting culturally responsive teaching
practices. I will also describe how some of those practices emerged in new ways with collaborative coaching.

As will be evident, many of the strategies Melissa employed are reflective of the practices suggested within the literature on culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2010) describes culturally responsive teaching as multidimensional in that it “encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management, and performance assessments” (p. 33). In particular, Melissa’s culturally responsive teaching practices are most evident in her curriculum content and instructional techniques, her classroom climate, and her establishment of student-teacher relationships.

**Curriculum Content and Instructional Techniques**

Gay (2010) asserts that the culturally responsive teacher, “filters curriculum content and teaching strategies through [her students’] cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and easier to master” (p. 26). Melissa echoes this sentiment as she describes her approach to culturally responsive teaching practices:

being responsive to your kids and knowing what their needs are and trying to reach them anyway that you can, if you have to change a lesson, if you have to change the structure of the class or whatever it is you have to change...to make sure that they are learning.

Using music, dance, and poetry, Melissa provides a variety of materials and kinesthetic activities throughout the day to engage her students and offer them multiple ways to interact with the curriculum, a curriculum that includes culturally relevant materials.
Selecting Culturally Relevant Curricular Materials

Gay (2010) stresses, “curriculum content is crucial to academic performance and is an essential component of culturally responsive pedagogy” (p. 128). Due to its importance, Melissa was quite deliberate in her choice of teaching materials. There are several aspects of her practice that reflect Melissa’s purposefulness in selecting the type of materials or the manner of pedagogy in order to best meet the needs and reflect the cultural backgrounds of her students. One example is how she conducts BARK within her classroom. Every morning the entire school is engaged in thirty minutes of uninterrupted reading. Older students engage in independent reading but for Kindergarteners, Ms. Moore spends the time mainly reading to her students. Melissa is deliberate about her choice of books.

In order to supplement the limited book choices available in her classroom and the school library, she visits the county library every Saturday to select titles for BARK time. These weekly visits to the local library allow her to choose texts which reflect the cultural backgrounds of her students as she frequently chooses books that highlight characters of color, are written by Black authors, and/or are bilingual (Spanish/English) texts. Additionally, she selects story themes that reflect the lived experiences of her students regardless of their racial background (i.e. various family structures). These options are not available in the limited and outdated book collection within the school library thus making these weekly visits a necessity if Melissa’s students are to have access to culturally responsive materials. As Gay (2010) reminds us “multicultural literature and trade books are valuable content resources for culturally responsive teaching” (p. 142). Some of the titles on her bookshelf that feature
Black characters include; *Shades of Black, Caribbean Dream, The Black Snowman, The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom, and Caribbean Beautiful Daughters.* In addition to fictional texts, she also has poetry from authors such as Langston Hughes and non-fiction titles such as *The Story of Ruby Bridges.* It was clear from seeing the selection of reading materials that she brought into her classroom that she considered her students during the selection process. Reflecting on this process, Melissa says,

> even with the Hispanic children, I know that you know they have those 2 languages. They speak Spanish, they speak English. I try to even have books that are bilingual, even though I don’t know it completely, I give it a try and I’ll ask them to help me with the words so they feel like they’re teaching me something and I try to incorporate that.

Additionally, she invites students to bring books from home, thus allowing students to share their favorite stories with their peers. Frequently during these read alouds, Melissa encourages the students to share personal connections they have with the text.

*While Melissa made concerted efforts to provide books that reflected students’ own lived experiences, this was an area that we further honed together as Melissa sought books that both reflected students’ experiences and furthered teaching of social studies and science. One particular topic of interest was that of families since several family issues, such as a new baby at home or challenging parental work schedules were impacting her students’ lives. One book she chose that reflected the lived realities of her students was *Night Shift Daddy* by Eileen Spinelli. When introducing the text, she told her students that she “picked this book because some of our friends have a parent that works at night.” During discussion, many students shared their experiences with a parent or grandparent that worked in the evening and one student shared that her mom goes to school at night when she is in bed.* In another session, Melissa re-read
Peter’s Chair by Ezra Jack Keats, a story of a boy who is beginning to feel displaced by the imminent arrival of his new baby sister. During the discussion afterwards, she affirmed, “sometimes our family can make you feel certain ways” and encouraged students to share times when their families made them happy and sad. Students shared thoughtful experiences including feeling angry and jealous like Peter in the story. By allowing the time and space for students to honestly discuss their lives, as illustrated above, Melissa provides students with an opportunity to “feel recognized, respected, valued, seen, and heard” (Gay, 2010, p. 51).

Another literacy activity that Melissa incorporates into the week is a vocabulary building activity she has titled Vocabulary Is Power (VIP). During the time she focused on the concept of families, Melissa introduced five “feeling” words to her students. Using the interactive whiteboard, she listed the following words: love, happy, sad, safe, and jealous. With each word, she has a photo that reflects the meaning of the word, a sound (ex. a kiss sound for the word “love”), a definition, a sentence containing the word and synonyms (ex. affection). Throughout the week, she encourages the students to use their VIP words in related activities such as the writing station during literacy centers and during classroom discussions pertaining to the weekly topic. Each week, Melissa introduces a new set of VIP words to her students to continually expand their vocabulary. During another week’s lesson, one of the VIP words was “friend”. As she developed the students’ understanding of what it means to be a friend, she also taught the synonyms “comrade” and “pal”, thus expanding the students’ vocabulary even further, developing a language repertoire that would potentially enable the students to be able to speak across multiple contexts. Throughout these lessons, she continuously
highlighted the concept that words give you power, allowing you to have a voice in the world.

While it may not be unusual for a Kindergarten teacher to help students build their vocabulary, it is meaningful that she views the exercise as a way to empower her students for the future. While consistently accepting students’ home languages, as seen with the bilingual books she embraces and the acceptance of the speech patterns of her students, Melissa also realizes the importance of the breadth of a student’s vocabulary. With language and learning interconnected, words are important to school success. As Wink (2005) asserts, “As we increase our use of words, our thoughts deepen. The language that we use matters” (p.31). Gay (2010) reinforces this concept by asserting “the more communicative abilities one has, the more capable he or she is of functioning in social, ethnic, educational, and political boundaries” (p. 83). Helping students build their vocabulary is just one way Melissa works to provide her students with the tools to ensure future success both in and out of school. These practices are important, particularly when “students of color who are most traditional in their communication styles and other aspects of culture and ethnicity are likely to encounter more obstacles to school achievement than those who think, behave, and express themselves in ways that approximate school and mainstream cultural norms” (Gay, 2010, p. 77). With the VIP exercise, Melissa was attempting to empower her students to succeed in both academic and mainstream cultural settings. She was helping them develop codes of the culture of power (Delpit, 1995).

Music and movement is another prevalent feature of Melissa’s instruction. Throughout the day, music and songs are used both as transition signals between
activities and as instructional tools. The start of every morning meeting begins with a song of greeting and usually continues with songs and dances related to the alphabet, the days of the week, rhyming words, etc. There are songs during other portions of the day including math time and just for fun. Additionally, music is often played softly during arrival and work times as well. The choices include educational materials such as *Movin to Math* and *Flocabulary*, to popular artists like Destiny’s Child that are played as background music and are reflective of the cultural backgrounds of the students. During the day, as music and movement is incorporated, you see different students engage with the activities in varying ways. During times when music is used as a background event, students might be humming quietly along or bouncing to the beat. When music is used as a vehicle for the curriculum, you might see students engage their whole body in the activity and then later quietly revisit the movements as they remember the activity to help them through a learning problem at their seat. Gay (2010) confirms that incorporating “rhythmic patterns, music, and movement into learning activities” is “another teaching technique for improving the academic performance of African Americans” and thus a valid aspect of culturally responsive teaching” (p. 199).

**Classroom Climate**

Since Melissa grew up within the community in which she teaches, she feels a certain connection to the students in her classroom, particularly the Black students. She describes the connection in the following statement:

I know where they come from, the issues that they deal with (*begins to choke up, has tears in her eyes*)... just knowing their family life and that sometimes they need people to push them a little harder and be there for them, so I try to push
them a lot. You’ll see me - like momma hen, I don’t let them, you know, I don’t let them fail.

With this disposition, she holds high expectations of her students, which is often reflected in the language she uses to address the class and individual students. Overall, she addresses and refers to students as “friends” and encourages students to view each member of the class as a friend as well. Additionally, she provides many and varied affirmations throughout the day. Some examples include: “I want to hear you singing loud and proud; Give yourself some love, give yourself a hug; sit on your shining star because I want you to shine all day long; and refers to students as ladies and gentlemen.

While there was an existing focus on respect and responsibility, Melissa chose to concentrate on these areas during her renewed focus on behavior as we worked together.

One morning, during morning meeting time, Ms. Moore asked her students to “think about what it means to be respectful”. As a class, they completed the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Looks like…</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to your friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waving to your friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to your teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping friends who need help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Working quietly and doing your best | “do you need my help”

The following day, Melissa had the class complete a similar chart on responsibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Looks like…</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning your room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making your bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picking up trash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of pets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brushing your teeth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By generating concrete examples of respect and responsibility, these charts help young children build an understanding of abstract concepts, providing them with a clear sense of the classroom community’s definition of respectful and responsible behavior.

The concepts of respect and responsibility were reflected elsewhere in the new procedure charts Melissa and I developed to help focus on the goal of promoting good behavior. Melissa had identified certain times of the day or activities that seemed the most chaotic and together we developed procedures for each one. Procedures were developed for BARK, learning stations, lunch, morning arrival, moving in the hallways, using the restrooms, and afternoon dismissal. (See Appendix A) These procedures were written on chart paper and were reviewed before each relevant activity. In general,
Melissa began to proactively focus on student behavior rather than to reactively manage disruptions. With a renewed focus on respect and responsibility, Melissa was focusing on a main goal of classroom management, creating “an environment in which students behave appropriately, not out of fear of punishment or desire for reward, but out of a sense of personal responsibility” (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004, p. 28). Such focus is what Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran (2004), in describing a possible model for culturally responsive classroom management, identifies as a desire “not to achieve compliance or control but to provide all students with equitable opportunities for learning” (p. 27).

Overall, Melissa tried to promote a sense of a familial community, which promotes a sense of respect, responsibility and mutual acceptance of one another. These values reflect a sense of authentic caring which “views sustained, trusting, respectful, and reciprocal relationships between students and teachers as cornerstones of all learning” (Gay, 2010, p. 49). Finding ways for students to feel connected to one another seemed to dominate Melissa’s practice. While there is rarely a focus on classroom management within the culturally responsive teaching literature, Sheets and Gay (1996) described a possible descriptor as a teacher who “create[s] caring and nurturing relationships with students, grounded in cooperation, collaboration, and reciprocity “(p. 92). It seems that Melissa was attempting to create such relationships.

After the focus on families in her curriculum, Melissa focused on the topic of friendship in order to reinforce a common sense of kindness within the classroom. Similar to the charts on respect and responsibility, Melissa guided the class in making a chart focused on friendship.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friendship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Looks like…</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having friends come over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting friends to fun events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In tandem with the focus on friendship, Melissa introduced a “shining star” program in which she and the students can nominate students to have their name placed on a poster. A “shining star” could be given for “when you hear a friend using kind words” or for following the newly implemented procedures. With this program, students were encouraged to praise one another for showing respect, responsibility and friendship throughout the day, thus encouraging a positive environment. With Melissa’s commitment to enacting culturally relevant practices, her attempts to develop a sense of community are in line with what Gay (2010) asserts are central features of culturally responsive teaching: “cooperation, community, and connectedness” (p. 38).
Personal Connections

Related to the overall climate of the classroom is the notion of personal connections. These connections are vital to enacting culturally responsiveness since it “is validating and affirming because...it builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Melissa often sought ways for students to personally connect with the curriculum. Melissa frequently asked students to share their own experiences in relation to a story read in class. For example, a small group of students read a book titled, “The Parade”, and Melissa asked students to describe what they had seen at the holiday community parade that had just occurred. In another example, Melissa asked students to describe their experiences building a snowman before reading “The Snowman” in small group.

As we worked together to focus on the concepts of families to address and validate some of the family struggles her students were facing at the time, the connections became more personal and validating. After reading Simon's book All Families Are Special, which promotes that idea that all families are special and important, Melissa asked the students to think about how their family was special. Some of the student responses included living with Dad; treating each other nicely; moving to a new house with just Mom; and being adopted and moving to a new house. Students were encouraged to share other reflections on their families after reading The Grandma Book and The Grandpa Book by Todd Parr and to share any connections after reading books on adoption. Encouraging personal connections continued during the focus on friendship as well. In reflecting on this process, Melissa said, "I always try to
keep in mind, like you said, the audience that I teach and the different feelings and the
different home issues and everything when I am picking out books.”

Overall, Melissa attempted to put into place structures that would provide
students with a positive experience at school. The atmosphere she created was
influenced by the classroom expectations of respect and responsibility that she
promoted in order for all students to feel safe and secure at school. Additionally, the
curricular materials were carefully selected to mirror the students’ lives, thus validating
their home experiences. These structures, paired with her focus on positive and
reassuring language created a positive environment in which to learn.

**Student-Teacher Relationships**

Positive interpersonal relationships impact the classroom. As Gay (2010) states,
“students perform much better in environments where they feel comfortable and
valued” (p. 232). By watching Melissa interact with students throughout the school, it
was clear that she had developed meaningful relationships with them whether they
were her current students, former students, or students from the club she supervised.
When asked how she gets to know her students on a personal level, Melissa responded,

> For some reason they just open up to me. They like to talk to me about anything
and I make it clear that they can tell me anything whether they may need to stay
after school or what have you, they can always come to me. I try to get to know
the parents the best that I can, like you said doing home visits. I’ve done like 2 or
3 of those...they just open up to me for some reason, I don’t know why but
anything they feel like they need to tell me, they will whether they write me a
note, or I’ve gotten kids stay after school, anything...other friends talk for them
and say, "They need to talk to you, Ms. Moore"

Melissa went on to describe the importance of developing personal relationships in
regards to enacting culturally responsive practices with students,
So it’s just the relationship thing, getting to know them and you know finding what they like and incorporating your teaching into what they are interested in to draw them in. Like I’ve seen kids who you would have thought had never had learned a thing you know, when they come to you, the lowest of the low and you find that one thing that they like and it’s like, just take off with it so I think it’s really important.

She went on to describe how she tries her “best to be positive with the students with the language that I use, and try to be understanding in certain circumstances.” When asked what has influenced her to be this type of teacher, Melissa responded,

how I grew up and being from the same community and knowing that a lot of people from that community don’t do much (she began to cry) and you know it’s never really been taught or instilled in them to want to do more so that is mainly what it is for me and seeing other teachers come from other areas or other places and not really having that type of connection.6

Melissa’s belief in the importance of relationships extends beyond her students to parents as well. She asserts that she tries to “encourage the parents too as much as I can, you know, to just do their best and encourage the kids at home and that they need that support at home and not just from school.” Melissa reached out to parents through phone calls and parents often stopped by the classroom for brief visits or more lengthy pre-arranged conferences. Overall, her commitment to culturally responsive teaching practices is based in the importance of contributing to her community and the relationships formed within. She described the commitment as a way to “give back to my community ‘cus I know how hard it is growing up in that area and not having teachers who really care.” She went on to say, “I want to do all I can for my kids and you

6 In this quote, I recognize that Melissa seems to be critical of the community. While not commonly expressed by Melissa, frustration with her community was evident at times.
know reach them personally, I don’t want them to be just going through school and just going through the motions like I want them to connect with what is going on.”

**Barriers to engaging in culturally responsive teaching practices**

As I observed in Melissa’s classroom, it became clear that there were several challenges she faced as she attempted to enact culturally responsive teaching practices. In reviewing the data, four distinct themes emerged: disruptions, institutional requirements, student issues, and isolation.

**Disruptions**

After several days in Melissa’s classroom, the number of interruptions of instructional time became quite apparent. Throughout the time I observed in Melissa’s classroom, it was not uncommon for there to be a constant barrage of phone calls, intercom announcements, walk-throughs by other school personnel, and impromptu parental visits. During the thirteen observational periods, there were at least twenty-five documented disruptions. Melissa expressed her frustration with some of the interruptions by saying,

like [the principal] came on the intercom today and said, "Make sure you're doing your 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading" and I’m like ‘Are you serious? How can I when you are always calling me or coming in the room or somebody needs something or wants something?’ I don’t even know where he got that from but it is not uninterrupted.

Another significant disruption is when Melissa has to take over her teaching partner’s class because of the teacher’s tardiness or absence. During the time I worked with Melissa, there were at least three incidents of her teaching partner being late or
absent from school. Melissa describes one such incident after hearing the students in the hallway one morning.

I’m not going out there to get those children ’cause I just had them one day [during a previous week]... I was like, this is ridiculous. So I left them outside and they got real, real loud. And I said Lord, let me get these kids so I said ”Ya’ll come in here, come in here and sit down” and he [principal] had made the announcements and everything and I called up to the office and said "um excuse me is Mrs. Jones here?" and [the principal] was like "Oh, she’s not down there?", I said "No, I am down here with all the kids". "Is she coming to school today?" and he just acted like he had no idea so...I asked her assistant where she was and she was like, I don’t know, nobody has heard from her.

The teacher never showed up for school that day and Melissa had to wait until the teaching assistant, who is also a bus driver, finished driving her routes before she arrived at school and took the children for the remainder of the day. During the time that Melissa has both Kindergarten classes, the number of students doubles to over 40 children. Needless to say, the sheer number of bodies in one classroom makes quality instruction difficult.

Institutional Requirements

There are a number of institutional requirements that impede on Melissa’s ability to be responsive to student needs and thus her ability to enact culturally responsive teaching practices. These requirements are initiated at both the district and school level. One such example is a progress monitoring system for literacy called 3D DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills). While the program was initiated last year, Melissa has received no formal training on how to administer the assessment. On one occasion, I observed a teacher come into the room, asking if these assessments were complete. She then offered to help but before Melissa could answer,
she turned and left the room with a reminder to get them done as soon as possible.

Melissa remarked that these literacy assessments are to be administered either every 2 or 4 weeks depending on the competency level of the student. Since they are completed and submitted online, the county office continuously monitors the progress, even sending emails praising the completion of the assessments.

I was able to watch Melissa administer these assessments and on average it took 20 minutes per student to complete the current required assessment piece. Melissa was able to assess three students during her morning literacy time and two additional students during the afternoon math block. With 23 students, completing the required literacy assessments for all of her students requires several days. In addition to the literacy assessments, Melissa is also required to administer math assessments each marking period. While the math assessments have a portion that can be administered to the whole class, they too have a portion that must be administered individually as well. In general, as soon as she has completed the assessments for all of her students, it is time to begin again and thus Melissa remains in a perpetual cycle of assessment with limited time for instruction.

In addition to the assessments, the continued presence of personnel from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) also provides a continuing level of stress for the entire staff and Melissa as well. Just after I completed my observations in her classroom, the DPI personnel instituted new requirements concerning teacher assessment and lesson planning. In follow up interviews, Melissa discussed these issues extensively. She described one observation by the administrative coach from DPI
and the frustration she felt in the briefness of the observation and the conclusions
drawn.

I know when he came to me the first time I wasn’t using the computer because I
was doing a writing lesson and I had made a chart, like this was something we
had been working on all week so I didn’t want to be writing on the
SMARTBoard…I had it on chart paper so he questioned [the principal] Do I use
technology? .... you stayed in my classroom for like 10 minutes.

On another occasion, the DPI administrative coach commented that Melissa’s lesson
plan looked so different from her teaching partner’s plans that “our lessons look like we
are in two totally different schools.” She and her teaching partner were asked to turn in
more similar lesson plans. Melissa expressed that they would be “written up if our
lessons are not ‘similar’ again.” Melissa commented, “they want us to be so close that
everything I do, my team partner has to do.” She went on to say,

I mean I don’t mind sharing but I don’t, I just don’t feel like I can be my own
person and be creative with my class, you know if we’re both always doing the
same exact thing and like I told you she has way more Hispanics and I have way
more African American students in my class.

Here Melissa is referencing the idea that in order to be responsive to her students
needs, her lessons should look different from her teaching partner’s lesson plans. She
expressed her frustration this way,

it shouldn't have to be like that because some of the best things I've done
sometimes come off the top of my head...[in response] to something that
happened you know... so now I feel like I'm just in a box.
In demanding “sameness” in regards to the lesson plans, the administration was reinforcing the “notion that uniform mastery of ‘bits’ of information and knowledge is the goal of every lesson” rather than the idea that learning is “socially constructed through the transactions of teachers, children, and texts” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 47). When asked about how these restrictions were impacting her attempts to enact culturally responsive teaching practices, Melissa responded,

“I’m ...still going and getting the books (at the county library), I’m still doing that and thinking about well who will like this one, who would like that one, ...and different things like that.... how I am trying to be responsive, I still try to tweak the lessons as much as I can to fit my kids, but it is a lot of different constraints going on and holding me back from doing as much as I can, like I feel like I am not giving it 100% because I still have to do what I am told to do and I don't want to go outside of that too much.

Student Issues

While the students are the reason Melissa chooses to teach at Marian W. Edelman Elementary and the focus of her efforts to engage in culturally responsive teaching practices, there are some aspects regarding students that serve as barriers in reaching those same students. In particular, student attendance, health, and familial issues remained a concern in the classroom. All three concerns are interrelated with health and familial issues impacting school attendance.

I observed in Melissa’s classroom for thirteen days over a six-week period and for nine of those thirteen days, there were students absent from the classroom. Some students were out for just a day or two due to a minor illness, yet others were chronically absent with one student out for two and a half weeks. While Melissa is
committed to enacting culturally responsive teaching practices, it is hard to find consistent successes when the students are not present.

Students in Melissa’s classroom seemed to have a large number of ongoing health issues that impacted their consistent attendance at school. While I observed in Melissa’s classroom, students suffered from asthma attacks, conjunctivitis, ear infections, strep throat, lice, and ringworm. For highly contagious issues such as conjunctivitis, the students easily passed it to one another causing one student to be absent just as another returned.

Familial issues also impacted student attendance. For example, one student was absent for eight straight days. When he finally did return, Ms. Moore learned the reason why from the school social worker. The family was unable to pay the water bill and therefore, the water was shut off, leaving the house uninhabitable. The family moved in with a grandparent who lived outside of the school zone so there was no bus service and the family didn’t have the transportation to get the child to school.

Additionally, two other students experienced a great change in family structure. One student experienced a great loss when the grandmother he lived with suddenly died. The student was left to live with the grandfather whom Ms. Moore was unaware even existed. A second student stopped living with his biological mother and began living with a couple, possibly a foster family that lived in another county and drove him to school late every day.

These and other student issues were ever present in Ms. Moore’s conscious. She seemed determined to help these students but seemed, at times, overwhelmed trying to
meet their basic needs before beginning to address academic ones. It is important to note that students and families are not to be faulted for absences and illness. Their experience is part of a larger systemic structure that limits access to good healthcare and childcare for those like Melissa's students who are economically disadvantaged.

Isolation

Melissa experienced a great deal of isolation as a teacher. This isolation was evidenced by several factors including spending time by herself, her reflections, and her continued contact with me, even after the study, for ongoing support. This type of isolation is not uncommon within the profession. As Westheimer (2008) states, “isolation and a culture of privacy in teaching has been one of the most persistent threads of inquiry and commentary in the teacher community literature” (p. 768).

For Melissa, her isolation seemed to stem from feeling as if there were few others who held her point of view or her commitment. When asked if she felt supported in any way in her attempts to be culturally responsive, she answered, “not really, unless it is other coworkers who I talk to ... but administration, no”. When asked which coworkers she confided in or collaborated with, Melissa responded,

well one of them left me, she went to be a counselor at another elementary school and the other one I mainly talk to, she is a 3rd grade teacher so we was on the team together last year so we still kinda but...other than that, not really.

These comments support the notion that Melissa felt there were very few collegial colleagues from which to draw support. Melissa mainly kept to herself, always eating lunch in her classroom by herself. That is, she ate lunch when time allowed. She often
had interruptions to her lunchtime. For example, one day, on the way to lunch, a student had a bathroom accident. By the time she retrieved the extra clothes from the classroom, and then had an impromptu meeting with the Assistant Principal concerning math assessments, Melissa had 8 minutes left of her 30-minute lunch slot in which to eat.

During my time in Melissa’s classroom and during my conversations with her, I could discern the stress she was under. One day I asked myself if I was watching a teacher who was becoming burned out. I later asked Melissa about this. She responded, “Yeah, it is starting to wear…. It’s getting worse by the day… I feel like I might could quit. If I didn’t have bills to pay, if I didn’t love kids then I would be like ‘I’m out!'” As a teacher educator who has invested in the development of this particular teacher and who has observed her dedication and effectiveness, I feel frustrated by the systems that are pushing her out of the profession. These systems are particularly evident in high need schools like Melissa’s where teachers are provided limited opportunities to develop professionally, few resources and restrictions on their autonomy (Kozol, 1991).

After I left Melissa’s classroom, she continued to reach out to me to vent about happenings at school. Occasionally she reached out through text message. One day I received the following text message, “Omg! It’s getting worse by the day. I have lots to tell you. You wouldn’t believe some of this stuff.” When we were finally able to speak about what was going on in her school, we had the following exchange:

Jennifer: So it feels like you are under a lot of stress...
Melissa: I don’t feel like I would lose my job. I just feel like it is going to get worse. You know what I am saying (tearing up)...I am just ready for it to be over...it’s going, I mean it’s gotten a little better but....

From this exchange, you can discern the toll the ongoing stress has taken on Melissa’s demeanor and her commitment to teaching. Throughout the rest of the school year, Melissa continued to call and text in order to share her frustrations. I had become a trusting sounding board and continued to offer advice and support, even if it was just words of encouragement, whenever she reached out.

Melissa was clearly dedicated to serving her students and thus her community. Observing in her classroom, one could see how her attempts at enacting culturally responsive teaching practices through the curricular content and instructional strategies she chose, the classroom climate she cultivated, and the relationships she fostered with her students. Despite her attempts, she was also burdened by continual disruptions, restrictive institutional requirements that failed to consider her students’ needs, ongoing student issues, and a sense of isolation. Taken as a whole, I observed a teacher who was clearly dedicated to her students yet was struggling to remain positive about her current situation.

**Supports for Culturally Responsive Teaching**

*Collaborative Coaching*

While Melissa faced several challenges in trying to enact culturally responsive teaching practices, she had very limited support systems. During my time in her classroom, she was attending graduate school. The classes and the conversations she
had with classmates provided some support as she drew on those experiences for inspiration. Mainly though, she drew support from my presence in her classroom. Both of us, together, were able to discuss and strategize what instructional practices might best meet her students’ needs. Through this collaborative process, I was able to provide assistance.

As we planned to address the goals she identified for herself, implementing science and social studies concepts into her literacy block and addressing classroom management issues in a manner that was responsive to students, I provided support in many ways. Due to the limited resources available in her building, I researched potential instructional materials for the topics we identified and then gathered those materials to bring to Melissa. I provided pedagogical suggestions and provided feedback on her teaching and the students’ engagement. At times, when Melissa was disrupted from instruction, I moved from an observational role into a direct teaching one in order to continue instruction. Overall, I provided emotional support and served as a sounding board for Melissa as she struggled with the institutional requirements that were impacting her classroom.

Through this collaborative coaching process, I was able to counter the isolation Melissa felt. Even after I left her classroom, Melissa continued to reach out to me through phone calls and text messages to discuss the happenings in her classroom and school. These conversations provided Melissa an outlet for discussing the stressors she was facing with someone who had become intimately familiar with the situation.
Observing Melissa raised several questions for me as a teacher educator. I wonder if those of us who are promoting culturally responsive teaching practices in teacher education are truly preparing teachers for the realities of the classroom. Additionally, I question how we can support the teachers we train as they move from being pre-service to in-service practitioners. Next, I will describe the practices of another former student, Sharita Hammond, who was also dedicated to enacting culturally responsive teaching practices. The following chapter will describe her experiences and the supports and barriers she encounters within the classroom. Her experiences may provide further insights into enacting culturally responsive teaching practices or may raise additional questions for consideration.
CHAPTER V: SHARITA – LIFE IN THIRD GRADE

If you are not going to do it right (*chuckles*) then why be in the classroom.
Sharita Hammond

The Setting: William Jasper Elementary School

William Jasper Elementary School is a large elementary school of approximately 570 students located in the suburbs of central North Carolina. It serves a predominately middle class population where approximately 60% of the students are White, 18% are Black and 16% are Hispanic. Within the school, approximately 25% of the school population qualifies for free/reduced lunch rates. The school is newly constructed, having been in operation for only four years. It serves a wide range of families and is in close proximity to two large universities. The school is modern and built to take advantage of several green technologies, such as natural lighting and a cistern system for collecting rainwater for flushing the toilets. Additionally, instructional technology such as interactive whiteboards and classroom audio systems are installed school-wide.

Overall, William Jasper Elementary is a successful school with 80-90% of the students performing at grade level according to state testing and has met all of its Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) under No Child Left Behind. As a school, the

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7 The school name has been replaced with a pseudonym
teachers at each grade level form a professional learning community (PLC) that meets twice weekly for collaborative planning. Additionally, there is an equity team that meets regularly and conducts staff development throughout the year. Each year, the equity team focuses on one particular issue. Last year, the focus was on the book Choice Words by Peter H. Johnston, which describes how the language a teacher uses impacts what children learn. This year, the equity team is focused on the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model that addresses the academic needs of English language learners. The district office provides the funding for all the needed materials, such as books, for each teacher for these trainings. Sharita Hammond, my teacher participant, is a member of the equity team and comments that there are “trainings available, resources in the library, we have plenty of things to go to and think about. The E (equity) team is always giving teachers resources and sites they can go... everybody is willing to do lessons or present information in different ways.” Beyond these ongoing professional development activities, additional staff members such as literacy coaches, a math/science specialist, a Spanish interpreter/translator, a gifted education specialist, school counselor and a family specialist/school social worker provide support for classroom teachers.

It is within this supportive environment that Sharita Hammond commits to teach. In four years at William Jasper Elementary, she has taught second grade for the first two years and third grade for the second two years, looping with one class of students from second to third grade. Her current grade level team is comprised of individuals who all trained to be teachers at the same university and have graduated within a few years of each other. As Sharita describes it, “we all pretty much are on the
same page as far as... curriculum... I guess the thought process we were taught as far as thinking about teaching (*laughs*) is the best way to think about it.”

**Background**

I first met Sharita when she was a student in a course I co-taught during her junior year. She was enrolled in the Elementary Education program and this was her second semester in the program. The course was designed to integrate three bodies of knowledge: the social foundations of education, multicultural education, and social studies. She was in the same class as Melissa Moore, and since they were friends, they frequently sat at the same table during the university portion of the class. Sharita seemed confident and outgoing, was always quick to smile or laugh and frequently contributed to class discussions.

The following year, I also supervised Sharita during her student teaching practicum throughout her senior year. She was paired with an excellent cooperating teacher and the two of us pushed Sharita to excel as she struggled to balance the demands of work and school. After graduation, Sharita joined the faculty of William Jasper Elementary, along with her former cooperating teacher, who became her grade level teammate. Since I continued to supervise a student teacher under the direction of Sharita’s former cooperating teacher, I continued to see Sharita frequently during her four years at William Jasper Elementary, occasionally stopping in her classroom to see how things were going.
Examining Practice

In the following sections, I will describe the context of Sharita’s classroom, beginning with a typical day. Then, I will closely examine particular aspects of her day and provide further examples of how she employs culturally responsive teaching practices, and the areas that supported or impeded her attempts. Additionally, I will describe how her practice developed with the support of a teacher educator.

A Typical Day in Third Grade

It is 8:20 am, in the middle of the month of February, and students are on the rug in front of the interactive white board collaboratively completing a quick quiz on the topic of fractions on the number line. There are 20 students, 8 girls and 12 boys. Since Sharita has a cluster of ESL students, there are 7 Hispanic students, 3 Black, 1 Asian, 1 Lebanese, and the remaining students are White. Sharita takes advantage of the architecture of the building, which maximizes the natural light and keeps the overhead lighting off. Many of the students are just in socks with their shoes left underneath their worktables. Sharita says she doesn’t like to wear shoes so she goes shoeless in the classroom and allows the students as well, as long as they don’t slide in their socks. If so, they lose the privilege to be shoeless. Petite in stature, Sharita is barely taller than some of her students yet she commands respect despite her easy going nature.

Together, Sharita and her students navigate through the quiz questions, discussing each problem as they go. At the end of the quiz, Sharita informs her class that today’s math lesson is “a massive lesson, you need all the concentration in the world.” She uses the document camera to display today’s work and after reviewing how
many problems they are to complete, she releases the students to go back to their seats, calling one row of students at a time. By 8:30, she calls five students, one girl and four boys, all students of color, to join her at a small table in the corner of the room. With this small group, Sharita guides the students through the math problems by directly modeling each step. They begin by drawing a number line. The remaining class members work at their desks, which are shaped in a large U, in the middle of the room. As the students work, the teacher assistant (TA) circulates about the room, occasionally stopping to answer a question.

The walls of the classroom are absent of student-produced materials but filled with posters as guides for various social and academic tools. Posters include types of literature (fantasy, poetry, mystery, realistic fiction, informational, etc.); classroom rules related to the school-wide principles of Caring, Learning, Intelligent choices, Motivation, Being respectful (CLIMB); a list of “Ways to Have a Good Discussion”, “The Language of Response”; “Words Authors Use Instead of ‘Said’”; math terms and definitions; a chart with steps for solving conflicts; and a Word Wall of high frequency words (see Appendix B).

At 8:45, a maintenance worker comes into the room with a large ladder and goes into the storage closet located at the back of the room but the students don’t seem to notice the intrusion. A timer signals and Sharita indicates to the small group of students that it is time they return to their seats to finish the assignment. They all show hesitation about having to work independently but Sharita reassures them that “we’ve done the hard part, re-creating the number line, now all you have to do is…”. She
continues by going over what to do for the remaining problems before sending them to their seats.

At 8:50, Sharita announces to the class in general, “if you would like to come over.” This invitation is understood by the class and four students, 2 boys and 2 girls, all of color, come over to the table to receive some help. At 9:00, Sharita indicates math time is over. During the transition, the students watch the student-produced morning newscast on the interactive white board as they eat a snack. The newscast is produced by the fifth grade students and recorded early in the day but can be watched whenever a teacher chooses. The program provides a weather forecast, lunch menu, faculty and student birthdays, and any other pertinent announcements and ends with the salutation, “Have a great Gecko day!”, geckos being the school mascot.

By 9:10, the students are engaged in what is called CLIMB time. CLIMB stands for Caring, Learning, Intelligent choices, Motivation, Being respectful. This serves as the guiding principles school wide and the basis for classroom rules. During CLIMB time, teachers either provide academic interventions or extensions based on student need. Students may remain in their own classroom or go to another classroom for instruction by another teacher. There are eleven students that remain in Sharita’s classroom and they do one of several tasks. They have the choice to finish their math if needed, read a Time for Kids magazine, practice their multiplication facts, or complete a Wordly Wise (vocabulary) lesson. While students work quietly at their seats, there are two students who come into the class to meet with Sharita for remediation. Throughout CLIMB time, students come and go from the classroom. Overall, the TA circulates throughout the room, helping students as needed. All morning there are two Latino students who
appear extremely dependant on Sharita, seeking her out for assistance whenever possible. She constantly provides reassuring feedback and encourages them to “try first before getting help, get yourself ready.” Finally, at 10:10, CLIMB time ends and the students spend the next two hours out of the classroom at specials class, recess and lunch. As the students prepare to go to the lunchroom, I overhear them discussing their spring break destinations. For one Black male, it’s Norway; for one White male, it’s a trip through Europe.

During the two hours the students are out of the classroom, Sharita either meets with her grade level team for planning as a PLC, meets with other members of the equity team, or works by herself prepping for lessons, grading, etc. She tells me that due to the generous amount of planning during the day, except for required meetings after school, she rarely needs to remain at the end of the day for planning or other related schoolwork.

At 12:30, the students return to the room from lunch late due to delays in the lunchroom. As the students come into the room, Sharita has them gather on the rug in front of the interactive whiteboard. They revisit the topic of author’s purpose. During previous lessons, the students have learned that an author writes for three main reasons; to persuade, to inform, or to entertain. Sharita has used a picture of a slice of pie (PIE: Persuade, Inform, Entertain) as a visual to remind students of these reasons. For today’s lesson, there are four pictures of pies on the interactive whiteboard. As the students click on a pie, a story is revealed and the students must decide if the author’s purpose is to persuade, to inform, or to entertain. Sharita has a basket of clothespins; each clothespin has a name of a student. She draws a clothespin out of the basket to
randomly call on a student to have a turn at the interactive whiteboard. As she pulls the names out of the basket, she clips them to a folder to track who has had a turn. For this lesson, the students discuss their reasoning for choosing a certain answer. Sharita lets the students know that for tomorrow, they will be doing a similar activity but independently.

At 12:40, independent reading time begins. The class reads quietly at their seats while soft music plays in the background. Some students are reading an assigned text, while some are reading a self-selected text. There is a wide selection of reading materials in the classroom. On the shelves are boxes of books organized by genre, author or book series (ex. Nate the Great). There is another display of books, with the covers facing outward and are by theme – biographies. People highlighted include: Harry Houdini, Helen Keller, Albert Einstein, Ruby Bridges, Michael Jordan, Jobs & Wozniak, Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, Walt Disney, and Barack Obama.

During this time, Sharita meets with a small group of students. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, she meets with two reading groups. While these are the students who struggle the most with reading, they are on grade level. The students in these reading groups are mainly students of color. On Thursdays and Fridays, she meets with a different group of students, all of whom are proficient readers. There is an additional group that is called a “book club,” which meets with the academically gifted teacher and reads from the Great Books list.

The group Sharita is meeting with today is one of the groups that meet on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The group members are all students of color and have been reading a book titled, Felita by Nicholasa Mohr. The story is about a Puerto
Rican girl and the racism she encounters when she moves to a new neighborhood. Sharita opens the group discussion on the most recent chapter by asking, “Where does racism come from?” The group discusses that in the book all the kids were playing together until the grown-ups said something. One student asserts, “the kids didn’t care.” Sharita summarizes the discussion by saying, “these are things that are taught and learned.” She then asks the group, “What would have happened if the adults had never come over?” One student answers, “the kids would have kept playing”. Sharita continues the conversation, “let’s go a little deeper...would the kids have been out there if the parents knew?” Sharita and the students continue to discuss the story, often adding in their own personal connections. One student comments, “this was like MLK because....about people getting rights.” At one point in the conversation, a student postulates about if the police had been involved in the dispute between the White and Puerto Rican parents, what their role might be, “couldn’t call the police because police wouldn’t help in this neighborhood, police were White so whose side were they going to be on? If police wouldn’t help....”. Here, the student seems to reflect a distrust of the police. It is unclear whether this distrust comes from examining other forms of discrimination in which the role of the police was problematic or from personal experience.

Sharita begins to steer the conversation in a different direction, “we’ve talked about why a lot but what about how they are feeling?”. One student uses the words “sad” and “angry” and compares the situation to bullying. Sharita asks how the students think one of the characters, Papi, feels. One student responds, “[he] wants to go back to the old neighborhood... [he is] sad and disappointed”. Sharita goes on to ask, “How did
reading this chapter make you feel?" One student comments, "I’m glad my parents didn’t grow up here....". Another student says, "It made me cry in my heart."

At 1:00, Sharita dismisses the first group and calls the second reading group of the day over to the table. Meanwhile, the remaining students continue to read silently at their seats. Occasionally, students leave the room to visit the school library. After twenty more minutes, Sharita begins to transition the students into a new activity: a joint science and writing activity. At this point, not all of the students are in the classroom as some students are still with the academically gifted teacher. During this transition time, Sharita has the students get out their writing journal and science folder.

Over the past few days, the students have been studying the bones of the human body. On a previous day, the students counted bones using posters of different body segments (hand and arm, foot and leg, torso, etc.). Sharita had tallied the student responses for each body section to determine a possible total. They begin the lesson by looking at these numbers. She begins, "the lowest possible combination is 190 bones and the highest possible combination is 217. The actual number of bones in the body is 206 – 208 so we did a pretty good job of counting.". Next they revisit the question, "If all our bones are hard, how do we move?". One student pipes up, "joints", another student adds "muscles." Sharita goes on to ask the students to answer the following questions by "writing in complete sentences and since we are combining science and writing, I want a long paragraph or mini-essay. You should have 3 to 4 complete sentences to answer each of these". The following was on the interactive whiteboard:
Stop and Jot

1. What is the function of our skeleton (what does it do)?
2. What parts of our skeleton give us our unique human shape?
3. How does your skeleton give support? Give examples!
4. What parts of your skeleton provide protection and what parts of your body are protected?

Students begin to work as soft music plays and Sharita moves methodically down the row, checking on each student. Just past 2:00, Sharita asks students to work in pairs to check each other’s work. Students are to discuss if they agree or disagree with the thoughts presented and to check to see if their partner has complete sentences and to check for punctuation.

Quickly, the end of the day approaches. It is 2:20 and the students begin to clean up the room, straightening their workspaces as one student sweeps the floor. At 2:30, the bell rings and the students are dismissed. Beginning this week, after school tutoring, focused on reading and math, occurs on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3-4 pm.

Scheduled to help students prepare for the end of grade testing, these tutoring sessions last for ten weeks and are limited to nine students in each group. Sharita has agreed to lead a group and will be paid for her time.

Taking A Closer Look

Sharita liked the appeal of working at a new school. After meeting with the principal and hearing the vision she outlined for the type of school she wanted to create, Sharita felt that working at William Jasper Elementary “seemed to fit nicely”
with her philosophy of teaching. Sharita describes her commitment to culturally responsive teaching in the following way:

I guess to me, being a culturally responsive teacher is just making sure that I use what I know about culture, making sure that I am flexible in how I teach my students as far as from individual work to grouping to you know, are we going about it through music, are we drawing things, umm responding to what I feel like the way they learn best...we've been doing a lot of work lately on how we value what we know and what we have and how we can grow our brains to the next step of the thinking and I think that's a big part of thinking about what you can value in the student and then moving forward from there and how to get them to value themselves.

While Sharita was already committed to engaging in culturally responsive teaching activities, when asked if there were any particular aspects of her practice she wanted to change or improve, she responded that she wanted to focus on one area. She expressed that “math is something that we could work on, we do have flexible grouping and we do have individual work and group work catered to learning styles and stuff like that,” but she felt her instruction overall was heavily dependant on the adopted mathematics program, enVisions. In particular, she wanted to find a way to help students see the real world application of mathematics, particularly in regards to the upcoming unit on measurement. I helped Sharita with this goal.

In the following sections, I take a closer look at the strategies Sharita enacts and the supports and barriers she encounters in attempting culturally responsive teaching practices. I will also describe how some of those practices emerged in new ways with collaborative coaching. Similar to Melissa, many of the strategies Sharita employed are reflective of the practices suggested within the literature on culturally responsive teaching. Using Gay's (2010) description of culturally responsive teaching, that it “encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher
relationships, instructional techniques, classroom management, and performance assessments” (p. 33), I examine Sharita’s teaching practices. In particular, Sharita’s culturally responsive teaching practices are most evident in her curriculum content and instructional techniques, her classroom climate, and her establishment of student-teacher relationships.

**Curriculum Content and Instructional Techniques**

Gay describes teachers who truly care about their students as “persistent in their expectations of high performance” and “are diligent in their efforts to ensure that these expectations are realized” (p. 245). Benard (2003) echoes these sentiments by describing the attributes of successful teachers who promote high expectations and caring relationships as teachers who “are student-centered...[they] understand that successful learning means engaging the whole child, not just the cognitive, but the social, emotional, physical, and spiritual parts”(p. 121). Sharita reflects these attributes through her commitment to implement a variety of instructional techniques in order to provide students multiple access points to the curriculum. Additionally, she uses a variety of informal and formal assessments to ensure student mastery of the concepts presented. She describes her teaching in the following way,

> I feel like I do a good job of letting the students respond and get their thinking out and share their thinking. We do a lot of sharing...trying to make sure they have what they need to be successful in the tasks that I give them... keeping them interested during literacy, hopefully making things they can relate to, readings they can relate to and work with, groupings, share partner work and all that...making them responsible for what they need to do.

Sharita went on to describe other ways she is attempting to implement culturally responsive teaching practices,
reflection, communication, different learning styles, ways of grouping and flexible grouping...I think kids sometimes get stuck (chuckles) when they have to work with the same people all the time, so I do that quite a bit...I guess social studies- just making sure that we talk about how different people feel in different ways and kinda been doing a more step back and listening with them when it comes to social studies, right now we are doing communities and citizenship, so just posing the question, rather than giving the answer and seeing where they go with that in thinking about how different people feel at different times, when these things are going on and how you are involved with all of it.  

Within this description of her teaching practices is a commitment to “filter curriculum content and teaching strategies through [students’] cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and easier to manage” (Gay, 2010, p. 26).

While I observed in Sharita’s classroom, I rarely witnessed students in a passive mode. Whether it was jumping rope to observe which body parts were in action or deciding how much of a particular classroom object it takes to measure an ounce and one pound, students always seemed in an act of “doing.” Sharita seemed to focus on finding ways to promote active student participation, engaging the whole child. Favoring this type of learning atmosphere, it was not surprising that Sharita chose to focus on the one aspect of her practice that was most textbook dependent, mathematics. Addressing this goal will be discussed later in this chapter.

In addition to promoting active learning, Sharita often sought ways for students to find a personal connection with the material. One example of how Sharita promotes a personal connection with the curriculum is the discussion centered on the Felita text described earlier. When I asked Sharita about the discussion and why she chose this

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8 The language Sharita uses here, and Melissa uses elsewhere, reflects the concepts of culturally responsive teaching learned prior in coursework that both teachers had me.
text, she responded that as a class, for Black history month, they had been examining the Greensboro sit-ins and the Tuskegee Airmen and she choose the book specifically to help her Hispanic students feel a connection to discrimination, to acknowledge that racism occurs across groups. She went on to remark that the comment a student made about White police officers not being responsive to disrupt the racism that was occurring because they themselves were White, was not a theme in the book, but a personal connection from the student. Promoting such frank discussions on discrimination are central to the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices. As Gay (2010) declares, “Teachers can no longer be dispassionate and distant in their relationships with students, or attempt to avoid controversial topics and harsh social realities”. Overall, Gay continues, teachers must “teach knowledge and skills students need to negotiate in the society that currently exists” (p. 52). While Sharita may not have addressed how to respond to current racism, validating students’ experiences is an important first step. In addition, she admitted that while the discussion was very powerful, it was limited to a small group of students, all of color, and would have been beneficial had the remaining students, particularly the White students, been privy to the conversation.

Another example of how Sharita ensures student success relates to one particular student, a native Spanish speaker who has not been in the United States long. Due to the current language gap, Sharita supports the student’s use of his native language while also providing opportunities to expand his English usage as well. For example, the student, during independent reading, selects texts that are in Spanish. While I was observing, the student was reading a Spanish version of a Magic Treehouse
book. I also observed this student practicing English using the Rosetta Stone program. Additionally, Sharita has the student listen to the Spanish version of the topic introductions for the math curriculum before listening to them again in English with the whole class whenever possible. Honoring the student’s native language while providing support for expanding his understanding and use of English validated the student’s home culture while expanding his access to school culture. In addition to allowing students to use their home language, Sharita, able to speak some basic Spanish herself, encourages parents to use their native language as well. She explains, “I make sure my parents always know they can write whatever they have to write in their home language... that’s usually more comfortable for them”. By promoting the use of native languages, Sharita was building a caring and inclusive learning community, which is a primary element of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002).

“Culturally responsive teachers are aware of the risks involved in learning and the need for students to have successes along the way to mastery” (Gay, 2010, p. 34). Aware of this need, Sharita has developed multiple ways for students to experience academic success, through supportive factors such as differentiation, immediate feedback or guided support. One example of differentiation I witnessed in Sharita’s classroom related to the weekly word study activities. While the focus of the weekly lesson was the same, the word list was differentiated for each student. See the chart below for an example.
Week 24 Lesson 19:
Adding –er to verbs to make nouns

**Principle:**
add –er - if word already ends in e, add r only

**Application:**
This week you will practice changing verbs to nouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List 1</th>
<th>List 2</th>
<th>List 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read – reader</td>
<td>Teach – teacher</td>
<td>Employ – employer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play – player</td>
<td>Dream – dreamer</td>
<td>Destroy – destroyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jump – jumper</td>
<td>Clean – cleaner</td>
<td>Wiggle – wiggler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Build – builder</td>
<td>Squeeze – squeezer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As one can see from the chart, while everyone was learning the same lesson (adding –er to verbs to make nouns), the word lists were dependent on each child’s strengths as a reader and writer. In another lesson, Sharita was able to provide immediate feedback through the use of the technology available in the school. Using individual response handsets that are part of the interactive whiteboard system, Sharita was able to input the math problems from the textbook so that students were able to enter their answers and receive immediate feedback on whether the answer was correct or not. In addition to providing the students with immediate feedback, Sharita was able to see a synthesized report of how the students did overall, allowing her to quickly address any deficiencies. Finally, whenever students worked independently, Sharita was always available to provide one-on-one or small group support to students for any task. Each of these strategies allows students to experience ongoing success within the classroom. By providing immediate feedback and support, students never experience ongoing failure. These actions reflect caring in action, in which “the teacher creates an
environment...that has multiple entry points for learning and multiple pathways to success” (Ayers, 2004, p. 11).

Focus on Improving Instruction

Believing real world applications would help her students better understand mathematical concepts, in particular the concepts of measurement, Sharita wanted to improve her instruction on this topic. I helped her by suggesting some hands-on activities, providing a list of related literature, and other resources (websites, etc.). In searching for materials to share with Sharita, I made an effort to look for examples that reflected different cultural backgrounds. For example, how do different cultures view the concept of time or how do weights and measures vary in other countries. Additionally, we discussed inviting family members into the classroom to discuss the ways they use measurement. One such idea was to invite a parent who sews to share how measurements are important for successful projects. While these may be surface level applications of culturally responsive teaching practices, it was our first attempt in making change in the curriculum.

During the weight, capacity, and measurement portion of the unit, Sharita had students engaged in several hands-on activities. In addition to the weighing activity described above (How much is an ounce? How much is a pound?), students did a “guess and check” activity for capacity, guessing how much capacity a certain container has (cup, pint, etc.) before checking the amount using measurements of water. Later on in the unit, the focus shifted to time and temperature, for which I provided additional resources. Students had opportunities to examine American standard and metric units...
of measurement as well as various methods for measuring time and temperature around the world and through a historical lens. When I asked her how it went, she responded,

it went well, much better than last year... I mean just being conscious of the connections, using the literacy, some of the websites you gave me had different activities to use in centers, different cards like easy stuff I could use real quick, that we used... it really wasn’t an isolated event, this is how you tell time, this is how you do temperature. We talked about time all over the place, different things you feel in different temperatures and activities and these are things you do, like last year we just did one day because enVisions [the required curriculum] just has one day.

Sharita went on to describe the students’ success with the unit and some interesting outcomes,

it went really well, especially the last part with time and temperature, umm, I think everyone passed on retest so it was great but kids actually started checking out books on their own about measurement ...that was very interesting and they went and checked out books on their own about it, they were really interested in talking about the different time around the world because some of the kids.... I know Abby had gone to Italy for spring break and a few others kids had gone to different time zones and we talked about that and that made it really connected to what was going on and what they were doing and they found that really interesting.

In reflecting on what it meant to have my help in rethinking the measurement unit, Sharita responded, “I think [having someone to discuss specifics] was definitely the most helpful in this experience, you think a little deeper about your kids at that time you know rather than just, I am teaching time and temperature, no...I am teaching these kids time and temperature.” Reflected in this statement is Sharita’s reaction that it was not about rethinking the topic but rethinking the topic in light of who was receiving the information; that the students brought prior knowledge into the classroom that had to be taken into consideration. This attitude reflects a culturally responsive stance in
which teaching validates the experiences of students when “it teaches to and through the strengths of [the] students” (Gay, 2010, p. 31).

**Empowering Students**

Overall, Sharita tried to empower students in the learning process, particularly in regards to institutional requirements such as end of grade testing. Since standardized tests use the same measures to determine content mastery for all children, their implementation, while mandated, run counter to the goals of multicultural education. Part of the test preparation in which the school engages involves students practicing answering multiple choice questions based on a reading passage, a task similar to the test. In the past, Sharita has administered these reading passages as designed, as test preparation. This year, in an attempt to provide her students with a voice in the process, she tried a new approach to the reading packets.

I've made different types of study sheets. Last year I had one sheet and every kid did that sheet, this year I have my epic EOG booklet and it has, they can chart their progress, they write how they feel about each passage that we work on each day. We didn't do that last year and I've seen a...I mean it's interesting, it's very interesting to see how they feel about those passages and their explanation about why they feel that way about them

Here Sharita is reflecting on the changes she made to address test preparation and her students’ response to those changes. By considering her students’ feelings, Sharita is responsive to her students’ reactions to the learning process as she considers how to develop further her test preparation guides in an attempt to continue to meet their needs. While she is required to administer the test, she works to empower her students as much as possible in the process. She went on to describe further what she
was doing differently this year beyond adding an emotional component to the test preparation.

They make a plan now for their EOG test taking because some kids have to have a plan, last year we just followed one way to read the passage and do everything that had to be done, I think there was TPQRA, I don't know it was some long thing that just did not work out for everybody so I gave them some different options this year with that, umm we do the response, of course the clicker things \footnote{These are hand held devices that work in conjunction with the interactive whiteboard to provide immediate feedback on multiple-choice questions.}... they really enjoy those, it seems to work for all of them because all kids want initial feedback right then

She described further how the end of grade test packets worked in her classroom.

Well yeah, all the selections are the same but just how they practice progress and what they write about the things and how they feel about it and the strategies that they use and the question stems that they might get are a little bit different... they have to know that they are the boss of the test (chuckles) but yeah they are in control of what they are doing while they are practicing for what they need to do because I make sure I emphasize to them that in the end I will just be silently walking around, it will be all them and they have to be able to monitor what is going on and how they are feeling about it and you know the strategies they are using, are they using them successfully and are they using them consistently and all of those things

Here Sharita is attempting to help students see the test as not something that happens to them but something that they have control over, empowering them to take control of their educational outcomes. Sharita’s attempts to directly teach her students strategies for succeeding at standardized testing is reminiscent of Delpit’s (1995) concept of the “culture of power” in which explicitly teaching the rules of power to nonparticipants makes it easier for them to acquire power. These actions are particularly important for students who will be partaking in standardized tests for the first time as she is attempting to allay their uneasiness by teaching them the rules to the game.
Through the many and varied instructional practices Sharita implemented in her classroom, her overall goal was to promote active student engagement. She describes her overall teaching style in the following way.

being focused on each individual child and at the same time making sure the whole group is getting what we need from me and from each other, umm, just trying to make sure we have different approaches, even if you have one set program that you have to use...connecting, trying to connect it all...

Here Sharita reflects an important aspect of culturally responsive teaching, which is to have students "engage in more ways of knowing and thinking, and to become more active participants in shaping their own learning" (Gay, 2010, p. 38).

**Classroom Climate**

The literature on culturally responsive teaching is quite clear that creating a caring classroom environment promotes student engagement in learning tasks and leads to higher student achievement (Gay, 2010, p. 53). Sharita was mindful of the atmosphere she created. Overall, her classroom was a very calm and organized space. The students seemed very comfortable in the room. Everyone moved about the room with a clear sense of purpose and seemed aware of the expectations. Sharita described her students in the following way,

my kids are very *comfortable* is a good word. They think they really feel like it’s their class so in a good way and sometimes in a (chuckle) almost dominating way but that’s okay too. Umm they say pretty much whatever’s on their mind at the time, they don’t shy away from any questions.

When asked how she achieves such a student-focused atmosphere within her classroom, Sharita responded,

overall I feel like I do a good job of letting the students respond and get their thinking out and share their thinking. We do a lot of sharing. Umm, trying to
make sure...they have what they need to be successful in the tasks that I give them.... keeping them interested during literacy, hopefully making things they can relate to, readings they can relate to and work with, groupings, share partner work and all that, ummm making them responsible for what they need to do.

It was clear from observation, that she developed a learning community in which students often worked collaboratively in pairs or small groups. In addition, she had developed an atmosphere where students were encouraged to question one another and ask for evidence to support one’s thinking, as evidenced by the classroom posters on discussion and the expectations that students share and discuss their work. These types of practices are supported by the literature on culturally responsive teaching. Within culturally responsive classrooms, “students are held accountable for knowing, thinking, questioning, analyzing, feeling, reflecting, sharing, and acting” (Gay, 2010, p. 34). Gay (2010) goes on to describe “cooperation, collaboration, and community [as] prominent themes, techniques, and goals in educating marginalized” students for two major reasons (p. 187). First because “underlying values of human connectedness and collaborative problem solving [are] high priorities in the cultures of most groups of color.” Second because “cooperation plays a central role in these groups’ learning styles” and therefore, “should be key pillars of culturally responsive teaching” (p. 187). Sharita consistently expected students to share what they were thinking in order to draw upon the collective efforts of the group and promote a shared sense of learning.

**Student-Teacher Relationships**

Similar to Melissa, Sharita developed positive relationships with students. Both teachers were conscious to develop student centered classrooms in which they used positive, affirming language with their students. The student-centered classroom
described above is one indicator of these relationships. Another indicator is the type of language and affirming messages Sharita uses with her students. Resembling Melissa, Sharita also refers to her students as “friends” and often provides reassurance while promoting independence. On one occasion, a student remarked, “I’m not good at this”. Sharita answered back, “Don’t say that, say you aren’t good at it yet”.

While Sharita and her teaching assistant are always available to students, she tries to promote independence by encouraging students to rely on their own skills and try new challenges first. Often heard around the classroom were phrases such as, “ask twice before seeing me, work by yourself” or “you have to try on your own.” Despite promoting student independence, Sharita and her TA were always available to students who needed help. This was evidenced by the constant circulation around the room during times when students were working independently and by the general announcement of “if you would like to come over,” which indicated that Sharita was available to work with students on an individual or small group basis.

Throughout my time observing in Sharita’s classroom, it became clear that her attempts to develop positive relationships with students extended to developing positive relationships with parents. One example I witnessed was how she supported the use of native languages with not only her students but with the parents. She described how she worked to make sure parents were “comfortable at home with what the student is doing and what they have to do” in regards to homework. She didn’t want students to take advantage of the limited amount of English the parent may posses and attempted to avoid situations where the student misleads the parent. Therefore, she tried to “make sure my parents always know they can write whatever they have to
write in their home language” and she also made attempts to respond in the native language whenever possible. She explained, “What I write is usually pretty short and I have enough Spanish to figure it out (chuckles).” Additionally, the school has access to district resources for more extensive translation services when needed.

In addition to welcoming home languages, Sharita invites parents into the classroom for student-led presentations over a light breakfast on the topics covered each grading period. One morning I observed as parents came to the classroom for just such a purpose. Each student sat at a seat with a laptop on which the student had access to a student-developed portfolio of work. On the board, Sharita had the following written:

Ask your student about...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being a good citizen</th>
<th>The Greensboro 4!</th>
<th>Animals of Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similes</td>
<td>Fighting Hunger</td>
<td>Can you find the proof!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TFK Challenge | Human Body Poster | Joints/Bones slides | Poetry | Biography Glog | Math & Reading Journals |

Represented above are the various topics and projects developed during the current grading period. Students were to guide their parents through their digital portfolio and parents were asked to complete a reflection sheet with their reactions to what the student shared with them. Of the twenty students, twelve had an adult in attendance with four of the twelve being male. For students who may not have someone in attendance, Sharita had arranged for other teachers within the school to come by the
classroom and ask students about their portfolios so that each student had someone with which to share.

In general, Sharita created a classroom environment in which she provided support structures, such as small group instruction, differentiation, and immediate feedback, so that students experienced a high level of success. She built connections between school and home by welcoming parent involvement as well as the use of native languages. Overall, she attempted to help students feel empowered over their own learning outcomes by encouraging independence within a supportive environment. She is reflective of what Gay (2010) calls a “warm demanding” teacher whose “performance expectations are complemented with uncompromising faith in [her] students and relentless efforts in helping them meet high academic demands” (p. 75).

**Support for Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Overall, Sharita seemed to have a robust support system for attempting to enact culturally responsive teaching practices. From the like-minded grade level teachers who constituted her Professional Learning Community (PLC) to the Equity team that supported school-wide efforts to support diverse learners, Sharita seemed to have several resources to draw upon. Sharita reflected upon the support other staff members provided as she rethought the measurement unit,

For instance when you gave me a list of the books, I gave it to Gretchen (librarian) and she delivered the books and it was you know just that easy.... pretty much when I needed things for centers, I sent out an email, people sent me things for centers that I needed.... I think basically anything that I have looked up, tried to do differently, there is no one saying "no you can't", "you can't do this, you can’t try this", everyone is on the side of the kids so ... whatever I have to do in the classroom is supported.
Sharita went on to reflect on the collaborative planning she engages in with her fellow teammates and how it was different as she rethought the measurement unit.

I mean it’s pretty flexible. I just, for this particular unit, because I was changing things with you and what not and what we were tying to do I basically just shared this is what I am going to give a try, if it works out, you know (chuckles), if it doesn’t work we can try something different.

Even though the grade level team was supportive of Sharita attempting new strategies during the measurement unit, they are also supportive of making adjustments to the curriculum whenever it serves the needs of the students. Sharita discusses how they plan for mathematics instruction using the enVisions curriculum,

With the team I have, knowing that we have to do enVisions, we have to have an enVisions pacing, we adjust every meeting...did you make it to this lesson yet, do you need a few more days on this topic... so it’s very free flowing as far as if I feel like something needs to change, that’s easy for me to say, I don’t feel, you know, like this is what it has to be and this is only what it has to be but as far as being able to bring something different to the table as far as supplementing enVisions, I think we all do a pretty good job if something works, then we share and give it a try.

She also describes how the team is responsive to the flexible needs of the students.

We definitely have times when we say that, you know "I’m going to have to spend an extra day on this lesson, they just aren’t getting it that good", “Can everyone finish up by Friday?” Yup that’s good”, we just have a quick conversation about it making sure we stay on track and you know if it happens to be that we don’t really have the time for it then usually together we’ll pick out what is the most important stuff, do they have this part of it, okay that’s what most important for our curriculum and then move it on but we definitely are free enough to say and share those types of things without feeling the pressure to make sure we stay on pace no matter what.

Beyond the support of her grade level team, Sharita receives support from other school personnel as well. Besides the availability of language translators, which are provided by the school district, and the Equity team, which provides ongoing training and support for working with diverse students, Sharita also receives ongoing
professional development from a literacy specialist. On one of the days I observed in Sharita’s classroom, she was actually relieved from her teaching duties to observe the literacy specialist for grades 3-5 (there is another literacy specialist that works with grades K-2) teach a model lesson. Throughout the year, the literacy specialist works collaboratively with each grade level and plans lessons around varying literacy topics (theme, etc.). She then will conduct a teaching lesson within one of the classrooms so that the teachers at that particular grade level can observe. This resource coupled with the ongoing training by the Equity team meant there were numerous ongoing teacher development activities available within William Jasper Elementary.

In general, as I observed in Sharita’s classroom and observed the supportive measures already in place within the school, I questioned how helpful I would be to her. After reassuring her that I wanted an honest response and she could not hurt my feelings with her answer, I asked if my presence had been helpful or a hindrance since I felt “I wasn’t very helpful because I felt like there wasn’t a lot I could offer” since she had “a lot of support systems and a lot of resources.” Sharita chuckled as she began to answer,

I think most of all it was the conversations that were the most helpful because after the conversations, it doesn’t just stop there, I go home and you think about the things that we talked about and think about, think a little deeper on the kids because we are talking about the kids and I’m talking about what is going and how they think and how they work and all of that. I really think just the conversations about the different kids... were more important than only just a list of resources. I don’t think you were a hindrance in any way. It definitely made me be more conscious of what I was doing and how I was teaching you know when someone else is watching (laughs). So, umm you are right we do have a lot of support and we do have a lot of things here at [William Jasper]...but with that said it really was the conversations and the thinking about the kids in certain ways and thinking about what I was doing and how I could change it...that was the most helpful because had we not had.... if you don’t have the conversations to take it there, to think about changing it, then nothing changes.
Despite the supportive culture in which she worked, conversations about her particular teaching situation did make a difference in responding to the particular needs of her students.

_Collaborative Coaching_

As Sharita alludes to above, I provided her with support, particularly in relation to deepening her reflection on culturally responsive teaching practices. While Sharita already had a robust support system in place, I was able to supplement that support in a targeted way. My observations provided additional insights into the happenings of her classroom and we were able to discuss and strategize what instructional practices might best meet her students' needs. Through this collaborative process, I was able to provide support in varying ways.

As we planned to provide students with real world insights into the mathematical concepts they were learning, I provided assistance by researching topics, locating resources, making pedagogical suggestions, and serving as a sounding board for Sharita as she reconsidered her instruction. While these supports were similar to the ones her grade level PLC provided, as well as other support staff within her school, what was different were the insights I was able to provide that were directly related to the needs of her particular students. Observing in her classroom allowed me to be an extra set of eyes and serve as an additional “expert” on the needs of Sharita's students. Thus what was most helpful to Sharita were the collaborative conversations concerning instructional practices in relation to the students themselves.
**Barriers**

While Sharita felt well supported in her efforts to implement culturally responsive teaching practices, there were still times when she felt her focus shifted. In this instance, she was required to focus on prepping the students for the end of grade tests that were approaching. Weeks after I left Sharita's classroom, I asked how she was currently implementing culturally responsive teaching practices. Her response was as follows:

(chuckles) right now EOG prep, culturally responsibly (laughs and shakes her head)....got to do what the man wants you to do kids, that is what has to happen right now, umm no... I have been doing a lot of like with the reading EOG practice, I've been doing a lot of read alouds with EOG type questions but open-ended... I've made different types of study sheets. Last year I had one sheet and every kid did that sheet, this year I have my epic EOG booklet...

Despite being focused on preparing students for the end of grade test, Sharita did make accommodations in how she prepared her students by incorporating an emotional component and stressing personal connections to the text. Overall, Sharita emphasized that she was trying to put the kids back in control of the testing situation as described in the section above.

**A Continuing Commitment**

In the weeks following my observations in her classroom, I asked Sharita to describe what culturally responsive teaching meant to her at this point in time. She responded:

being more considerate than anything of the kids you have...the conversations you may have with yourself or another mentor or peer about it and being focused on each individual child and at the same time making sure the whole group is getting what we need from me and from each other...just trying to make sure we have different approaches, even if you have one set program that you have to use, you know... connecting, trying to connect it all...that was the big deal, trying to just make sure it gets all connected because that's when the best learning happens.
Sharita has developed a student-centered classroom in which she welcomes home languages, promotes positive interactions, and provides multiple methods for supporting student learning to ensure academic success. Additionally, her commitment to culturally responsive teaching practices allows her to honor the home lives of her students while beginning to examine social inequalities in a larger context. Furthermore, Sharita’s response above reassures me that she will continue to be mindful of the needs of her students as she continues to attempt to enact culturally responsive teaching practices.
CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Enacting Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching is a multidimensional process that is validating, comprehensive, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Gay, 2010). Taken as a whole, culturally responsive teaching “cultivates cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility for learning among students and between students and teachers” (Gay, 2010, p. 45). It is an iteration of multicultural education and a tool for social justice.

In chapter two, I reviewed several models of multicultural education, including culturally responsive teaching, as envisioned by Sleeter and Grant, Banks, and Gay. The different iterations were organized into one of three categories according to approach: conservative, liberal, or critical (see Figure 1). I initially set out in this study to determine when the participants practiced the various types of multicultural education, from liberal to conservative to critical. I thought I could lay this framework directly onto their practice as a way to see when and how they were enacting culturally responsive teaching in particular: if something seemed to be an example of a conservative practice, then that would mean they were engaging multicultural education but not necessarily culturally responsive teaching which is situated in the critical characterization. I thought there would be clear distinctions between the times when they enacted culturally responsive teaching and when they did not. What I have
come to understand is Tripp’s (1993) conception on the difference between the theory of researchers and the theory of teachers. While philosophically, it is easy to discuss discrete conceptions of practice, the real world of schools and classrooms is much messier. In reality, these teachers practiced many elements of multicultural education—at times liberal, at times conservative, at time critical. However, when examined together, these elements as a whole reflected culturally responsive teaching. Characterizing each individual practice as conservative or critical or liberal detracted from what was a single whole. I came to discover that there is fluidity to the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices as both teachers could engage in activities that might be considered anywhere on the multicultural continuum throughout the day. At times what impacted this fluidity was the influence of external forces such as scripted curricula and standardized assessments. Thus, what became more helpful than considering what was or wasn’t culturally responsive teaching was to look at the supports and barriers that existed for these teachers that either enhanced or challenged their enactment of culturally responsive teaching in total.

Both Melissa and Sharita were dedicated to the concept of culturally responsive teaching. They both focused on instructional strategies, creating welcoming and supportive classroom climates, and fostering positive relationships with students. Melissa, for example, put much emphasis on incorporating literature that was reflective of not only her students’ racial and cultural background, but also of their lived experiences. She welcomed the use of home languages and incorporated the use of a variety of materials such as music and poetry to engage students in multiple ways. She explicitly developed students’ vocabulary as a means for increasing academic success
and she encouraged respect and responsibility among the students. So too did she develop respectful relationships with families. She deeply believed that her efforts were in service to the community.

In her attempts to enact culturally responsive teaching practices, Melissa faced numerous barriers including disruptions to instruction, constraining institutional requirements, student issues that impeded engagement (e.g. excessive absences or health issues), and a profound sense of isolation. These barriers created a sense of frustration that took an immense emotional toll on Melissa. I will discuss this emotional toll in a following section.

Similar to Melissa, Sharita incorporated a variety of instructional techniques such as targeted small group instruction, differentiation, and timely feedback to promote independence and student success. She took on the challenge of engaging her students in discussions concerning social issues such as racism. She fostered a positive classroom environment, which resulted in affirming relationships between her and her students and between the students themselves. These relationships were strengthened by her acceptance of home languages and her inclusion of parents in sharing her students’ successes. Her practices were reflective of an overall school culture that supported inclusion of culturally responsive teaching.

Sharita experienced very few barriers to enacting culturally responsive teaching. The one challenge Sharita felt she faced concerned the use of the prescribed math curriculum. Even though she was required to use enVisions, she still had freedom to make adjustments and supplement with alternate materials as she saw fit. In contrast
to Melissa, she experienced few barriers as she worked in a school that offered ongoing professional development, colleagues who shared a commitment to enacting culturally responsive teaching practices, and an overall supportive environment.

While both teachers’ practices were reflective of their commitment to culturally responsive teaching, these practices look different due in part to the grade level context in which they were working. For Melissa, she was building a foundation for her students as she attempted to ensure that their first experiences in school were validating. She sought to make connections between students’ home and school lives and reflect their cultural backgrounds in the instructional materials she chose. By building students’ vocabulary, for example, she attempted to provide students with the language they would need to achieve in mainstream academic contexts.

Sharita achieved similar goals in that she too worked to provide validating experiences for students by honoring home languages, providing academic supports to ensure success and empowering students to feel in charge of their own learning. Due to the students’ age and maturity, Sharita was able to go further in her enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices by beginning to examine social inequities through the discussions she and her students engaged in concerning racism.

While Sharita was able to tackle social issues with her students, the discussion on racism occurred with a small group of students of color. When asked about how the other students in her class might have responded to the discussion on racism, Sharita responded that she agreed that her White students would have benefited from the frank discussion and the personal connections her students of color were sharing. This
highlights that while she was engaging in culturally responsive practices, Sharita, like Melissa, was still struggling to figure it all out.

**Context’s Emotional Toll**

Long before I began to transcribe my data, I knew that the emotional reactions of both participants helped to tell their story. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to convey their non-verbal reactions in my transcriptions and in the quotes used here. For me, the emotional component is significant as it helps to define the contrast between these two teachers. Melissa was almost always brought to tears during our discussion, her voice frequently reflecting her emotion. On the other hand, Sharita was always light, bubbly, and frequently chuckled as we spoke. I believe this contrast is due, in part, to the ways they felt either constrained or supported in their contexts as they worked to enact culturally responsive teaching.

It was clear from the first conversation I had with Melissa that her commitment to enacting culturally responsive teaching practices was a personal one. She had a profound sense of responsibility to her community and to her students. In contrast, while Sharita was as equally committed to enacting culturally responsive teaching practices, she was not teaching in her childhood community but instead was part of a school community in which these practices were part of an ongoing conversation. I believe these two environments heavily influenced the emotions connected to practice.

Melissa’s school, Marion Edelman Elementary, was experiencing state level interventions due to ongoing performance issues on state testing. These interventions meant that the administration, Melissa, and her peers were being scrutinized to
determine where the fault lay for the ongoing problems. In particular, the school
district, under direction from the state assistance team, was implementing scripted
measures for student instruction and assessment. With this type of scrutiny, there is
less teacher autonomy to determine what types of curricular choices are best for
students. With her sense of control taken away, Melissa felt frustrated that she was not
entrusted to make pedagogical decisions in the best interest of her students, whose
personal and academic needs she had gotten to know. Within this constraining
environment, Melissa’s frustrations often bubbled over during our conversations.

In contrast, Sharita’s school, William Jasper Elementary, experienced a high level
of academic success. Except for the requirement to use the enVisions program for
mathematics instruction, Sharita was not constrained in her choice of curricular
materials. Therefore, she was free to develop instructional activities using a variety of
materials, making decisions with her students’ particular needs in mind. Furthermore,
those materials were readily available to Sharita in ways they were not readily available
to Melissa. Within this successful environment, Sharita was supported and encouraged
by colleagues to change and adapt instruction as needed. Therefore, she was content in
her role as teacher, which frequently came through during our conversations.

Sharita worked within an environment that provided her with a “greater sense
of connection and community to achieve the kind of personal and professional
satisfaction that will keep [her] in the profession” (Westheimer, 2008, p. 765). In
contrast, Melissa felt a profound sense of isolation. This isolation contributed to
Melissa’s doubt concerning her ability to remain in her current position. Unfortunately,
teacher isolation is such an embedded part of a teacher’s experience that it can “greatly [impact] novice teachers’ decisions about whether to stay in teaching or move on” (p. 765).

For both of these teachers, their particular context influenced their emotional state. For Melissa, her commitment to culturally responsive teaching practices deepened as she struggled against the confining practices that were enacted in a failing attempt to increase her student’s academic performance. These frustrations threatened to push Melissa out of her school and potentially out of the profession. For Sharita, the academic success her students experienced and the supportive environment in which she worked, seemed to allow her to develop her culturally responsive teaching practices over time. These successes were supportive in maintaining Sharita’s dedication to teaching. For both teachers, this was a cyclical process. As Melissa experienced more constraints on her teaching, it pushed her further from engaging in culturally responsive teaching practices, which moved her students further from experiencing academic success. The less academic successful they were, the more constraining the environment became which caused Melissa to experience more frustration. For Sharita, the support she received and the success her students displayed helped to create a work environment that perpetuated her freedom to engage in culturally responsive teaching practices. This successful and supportive environment made Sharita want to stay. In these environments, success beget success and failure and frustration perpetuated failure and frustration.
Implications for Teacher Educators

As I worked with both Melissa and Sharita, I continually thought about my final research question: What types of support can a teacher educator provide to help promote the enactment of culturally responsive teaching practices? In many ways, the support I ended up providing to both teachers was less about deepening culturally responsive teaching practices and more about providing support to teachers who are still new to practice. In Melissa’s case, it was about providing emotional support and being a like-minded colleague with whom she could collaborate and plan for instruction. In particular, I located resources, brought materials to the classroom, and made specific pedagogical suggestions in response to what I observed in the classroom. Occasionally, due to the number of disruptions she experienced, I stepped in and provided direct instruction when she was unavailable. Additionally, I provided encouragement and emotional support. For Sharita, my role was to help her consider the specific needs of her students in order to rethink practice. Once again, I located resources and made specific pedagogical suggestions in response to what I observed in the classroom. Overall, I worked in a collaborative role, coaching them as a veteran teacher and teacher educator to rethink certain aspects of their practice.

I asked them both about how the collaborative coaching influenced their teaching, if at all. Sharita responded,

It really was the conversations and the thinking about the kids in certain ways and thinking about what I was doing and how I could change it that was the most helpful because had we not had... if you don’t have the conversations to take it there, to think about changing it, then nothing changes. I just think the biggest thing is if you don’t talk about it, try to define it, see what it means to you, see

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what it means for the students then you kinda dally along hoping you are hitting it...but that is the biggest, I think that is the final thought that I really have about this whole thing, even if those conversations just have to happen with myself at the end of the day just talking about [culturally responsive teaching] and making sure you are talking about it in an explicit way....

Here Sharita expressed the importance of the conversations we engaged in. Our conversations were different from the ones she engaged in with her grade level PLC as they extended beyond more general ideas of practice to include the specific needs of her students. Also reflected in her quote is the belief that these explicit conversations pushed her to be more mindful of her decisions as they related to enacting culturally responsive teaching practices.

In response to the same question, Melissa responded,

Going back to how I said you helped with the resources and helped me think of different things that I probably wouldn't have thought of on my own, just getting me to stretch a little bit and push a little more I think and just being extra eyes sometimes for me.

For Melissa, like for Sharita, my role was to push her further in her thinking, to, as she says “stretch a little.” Since she expressed how helpful an “extra set of eyes” was, I asked Melissa to describe further what type of ongoing mentorship would be helpful.

She replied,

If I had a mentor or somebody, I would want somebody who actually comes and spends time with my class and sees what I am doing, actually watch me on a regular basis, not every day but you know just to get a true feel of what I am doing and what is going on in the classroom and I think that is one reason why Ms. Jones (DPI) isn’t able to help me like she should because she is not there and she doesn’t really know. And I feel like just being able to talk to me and bring the resources and actually think about, you know, sit down and say let’s think about this, well how could we change that, or what do we need to take away... when you actually sit in there and your watching and you are like Oh, I think Ms. Moore - that would help her out or I wonder if she is thinking about this, let me
jot that down and we can talk about it later. So that's how I feel mentorship should be.

Here Melissa expresses a sentiment similar to Sharita. What was important to Melissa was not just the additional resources I provided but the consideration of how those particular resources would benefit her particular students. Again, being able to have deep and meaningful conversations about specific classroom issues is what was meaningful for both teachers.

What is reflected in both of these responses is a desire not just for someone with whom to collaborate, as Sharita already experiences collaboration with her colleagues, but to have someone who can become intimately involved in the particulars of the classroom. It was a powerful realization for me, as a teacher educator, that despite their very different experiences, both teachers expressed the same desire: a desire to work with someone who sees the students and learns their needs just as they, the classroom teachers, do and can suggest pedagogy to meet those very unique needs. For me, this suggests a new conception of teacher preparation.

**Implications for Teacher Education**

In chapter two, I discussed the lack of discussion in the research literature on the preparation of Black teachers for diverse classrooms. Often the classroom experiences of Black teachers are held up as the model for multicultural teaching practices but how they get to that point is discussed minimally at best. Further, there is an assumption in the literature that this work comes naturally for Black teachers, that simply due to their race they will necessarily be able to easily meet the needs of their Black students in
particular\textsuperscript{10} (Montecinos, 1999). Little regard is paid to the challenge of this work for Black teachers in particular. What I believe the stories of Melissa and Sharita, both Black teachers, illuminate for teacher educators is the emotional toll this work can take and the support that might be needed in order to sustain culturally responsive teaching practices, even for these teachers to whom the literature suggests culturally responsive teaching comes easily (Montecinos, 1999). While they were both adept at using the students’ cultural backgrounds as a basis for instruction, the need for collegial support was critical in their maintaining the emotional grit to do this work. Sharita got that support in part from her colleagues and, to an extent, from me. Melissa relied heavily on me for collegial support. In her case, she needed help navigating within a school culture where the external constraints of standardized assessments and scripted curriculums only compounded her feeling of isolation.

The expressed needs of both of these teachers, despite their varied settings, suggest a deficit in teacher education programs. I argue that one of the things lacking in teacher education is preparing teachers to contextualize their practice: to take theories and practices learned at the university and apply them in context. In part, it’s helping teachers embrace the theory of researchers that they learn in teacher education programs and transform it to a theory of teachers and teaching that is necessarily contextualized. Both of these teachers completed the same teacher preparation program. Over two years, they completed methods courses, internships, and student teaching. As one of their instructors, I felt, as they did, that when they graduated, they

\textsuperscript{10} I am not implying that enacting culturally responsive practices was easy for either of these teachers. As one of their teacher educators, I know the work we engaged in to develop these practices.
were prepared to teach. Yet what came to matter most in this study was the explicit conversations linking specific student needs to specific pedagogical choices. Sharita and I discussed the idea that not everything can be taught during the pre-service experience. She had this to say:

"Until you get in there and have to do it, it's just.... I understand why we learned a lot of theory and all of that, I understand all of that and I think the student teaching part is the very most important... before that it's just, I don't know, it's just you can't do it until you do it."

What Sharita hints at here is that ultimately, in teaching, context matters. She is suggesting that until a teacher enters the messy world of the classroom, one cannot begin to conceptualize the work that will be needed. It is in this new and messy context that practicing teachers need the continuing support of a teacher educator.

One model for supporting this type of extended contact with our students is for teacher educators to follow their students into the first years of practice as collaborative coaches. It must be clear that this type of extended contact has no evaluative consequences for employment and is strictly for further development of practice. Melissa provides insight as to why the lack of evaluation is necessary as she describes her response to my presence in her classroom,

"it just took getting used to and me having to get out of the mindset of you are not there to grade me you know (tearing up again) so I just had to get in the mindset of [Jennifer]'s not here to grade me because I'm always feeling... felt a little pressure to do everything right"

Here Melissa is describing the pressure to perform that many new teachers experience. Thus, by eliminating the evaluative properties, collaborative coaching can occur. In
addition to collaborative coaching, teacher educators need to help teachers learn to foster relationships with other colleagues, near and far, so that the isolation felt in school contexts by teachers like Melissa can be overcome. If teachers such as Melissa are pushed out of the profession, the effort to recruit and retain teachers of color becomes thwarted.

Perhaps teacher educators can help to foster the development of collaborative communities with our pre-service teachers in the hopes that the support developed may continue as teachers move to in-service. One such possibility is the use of blogs as a space to foster support, solve problems of practice, or even view vignettes from each other’s classroom in order to better understand the context in which each teacher is working. These online spaces may help to counter the sense of isolation for teachers such as Melissa. For more description of developing online professional communities of practice, see Anderson, Justice, Jones Gorham, et al (2013).

One other critical element missing from teacher education is attention to the emotional toll of teaching. While teacher education does recognize and acknowledge for future and current teachers the challenge of teaching, it is identified as an abstract challenge, not one that hits home in the way it does for Melissa. How could I have better prepared Melissa for what to expect when she stepped back into the struggling community from which she came? To be honest, I’m not quite sure. Her situation in particular raises the question as to how we prepare teachers to survive in not only challenging, but isolating contexts.
Implications for Schools

In examining the contexts that both Melissa and Sharita work in, it becomes apparent that there are larger systems at play. While to an outsider, both contexts may look similar, structurally, they are quite different and it is these differences that impacted both teachers. Both classrooms had interactive whiteboards, both teachers had a teaching assistant, both classrooms had an average number of students, both had a variety of instructional materials on the wall (word wall, math terms, etc.), yet looking deeper beyond these outward comparisons, one finds many differences.

Sharita had a larger system of support. There were mechanisms for providing ongoing professional development, collaborative planning, and access to materials that promoted Sharita’s growth and development as a teacher. In contrast, Melissa had little to no access to professional development activities, worked in isolation, and lacked a support system for professional growth. If Melissa had access to the supports Sharita had, she too might would have had a more successful experience.

While both schools served a racially diverse population, the income levels of the students’ parents vary significantly. These varying income levels reflect the available funding each school received. In Melissa’s case, the school district was the largest employer in the county. With a lack of major employers, the county had a less robust tax base with which to fund educational programs as witnessed by the lack of available funding for substitute teachers and meaningful professional development. Even with the infusion of federal money, there never seemed enough to address long-standing deficits in funding. These deficits are by no means the fault of the parents or students.
within this district but reflect ongoing structural issues that relate to power and privilege. Kozol (1991, 2005) has extensively documented these structural inequalities that reflect the differences in Melissa and Sharita’s schools. It can be summarized by the following, “Inequality is not an intentional thing...you have schools that are empowered and you have schools that have no power at all” (Kozol, 2005, pp. 48-49).

Melissa’s school was a school with no power at all. For Melissa, working in an academically at-risk school that served a large population of poor students meant that she worked in an environment that was more likely to be scrutinized. This scrutiny meant that her efforts to personalize instruction for the needs of her students were overridden by individuals who were not expert in her school’s unique context. As external generic recommendations for instruction were applied, the culturally responsive teaching practices Melissa worked so hard to implement were pushed out and her students' potential for academic success were undermined.

In contrast, the supportive environment that Sharita worked within provided her with all the necessary tools for continuing the academic success her students experienced, though it’s important to note that the students who were struggling the most were the students of color in Sharita’s classroom. They too experienced academic success but not at the rate of the white students in her class, a troubling historical trend that continues to hold true (Orfield, 2001). Overall, if all schools provided such a structure, then all teachers could have the potential to successfully develop their practice as Sharita did. All teachers should have access to ongoing and meaningful professional development activities. Additionally, all teachers should have the ability to
work collaboratively and be provided support systems to counter the sense of isolation that Melissa experienced. Changing schools in these structural ways would greatly impact teacher development and satisfaction and perhaps allow for greater ease in implementing culturally responsive teaching. Providing teachers with these support structures would have positive impacts on students.

**Future Research**

There was much I learned from working with both Melissa and Sharita. In particular, I was reminded that context matters. While this is a concept I have often stressed in my courses on culturally responsive teaching, this experience brought to the forefront how little I have prepared teachers for the context in which they may teach. It reminds me, as a teacher educator, that I must continue to find engagement in actual classrooms in order to continue to understand the complex environment of classroom teachers if I am to help them to contextualize the theory of their practice.

While I gained a deeper understanding of various aspects of culturally responsive teaching, what was most illuminating, were the barriers and supportive factors to engaging in such practices that emerged. Therefore, in the future I would like to replicate this study using a larger sample size in an attempt to uncover new understandings about the barriers and supports that exist to enacting culturally responsive teaching practices in varying contexts. These additional insights may provide new understandings of other barriers and supports that might exist and suggest the development of new support systems for both pre-service and in-service teachers who are attempting to engage in culturally responsive teaching practices.
This would necessarily include examination of how teacher educators might better foster the development of community, either online or in real life, in an attempt to counter the sense of isolation that Melissa felt. Within this collaborative community I would like develop further the concept of collaborative coaching to extend beyond the work of a teacher educator to promote its use among and between teachers.
BARK Procedures

1. put on your magical listening ears
2. sit on your bottoms
3. if you have something to say, put it in your pocket and save it

Learning Station Procedures

1. stay in your station at all times
2. work quietly and do your best
3. share with your friends
4. if you need help, raise your hand

Lunch Procedures

1. we are silent in the lunch line
2. sit on your bottom
3. talk to the people next to you or in front of you

Morning Arrival Procedures

1. back pack
2. turn in home folder
3. take worksheet and begin work from basket
APPENDIX B: CLASSROOM MATERIALS

We promise to

C take care of our school & the people in it

L use what you know & resources you have to be a learner

I follow directions

M do our BEST (Better Every Single Time)

B keep our bodies to ourselves and use the right voice at the right time

Ways to Have A Good Discussion

1. Be prepared

2. Sit so everyone can see each other

3. Get started right away

4. Look at the person who is talking

5. Listen to understand

6. Ask questions to better understand

7. Speak clearly but not too loud

8. Wait for the speaker to finish

9. Be sure everyone gets a turn

10. Build on each other’s ideas

11. Stay on topic

12. Provide evidence of your thinking

13. Respect each other’s ideas

14. Use the Language of Response
The Language of Response

I agree because...

I disagree because...

I also noticed...

I'd like to add that...

I didn't understand...

Say more about what you mean...

I don’t understand what you mean...

Can you show where that is?

What is your evidence?

Why do you think that?

I think the author meant...

How do you know that?

We’re getting far away from the text

What does the author say that makes you think that?
For help with conflict management the following was posted:

Step 1: Get the facts!


Step 2: Madness Management!

Rules: No Fouling!

1. You may not hurt yourself *Teasing
2. You may not hurt others *Name-Calling
3. You may not hurt property *Bossing

You May Choose To: 1, 2, 3 *Bullying

1. Stop and Count to 10 *Hitting
2. Talk with someone about anger
3. Do something to get your angry energy out (exercise, drawing, etc.)

Step 3: Caring Communication

Speaker: Use an I Message

1. Tell the person how you feel
2. Tell them what you don’t like
3. Tell them what you want them to do instead

“I feel ________ when you ________. I want ________”

Listener:

1. Eye contact
2. Body language
3. Say something back
### Timely Tools

Which tool will help YOU to solve your conflict?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Take turns</th>
<th>Chance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Help</td>
<td>Avoid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk it Out</td>
<td>Apologize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


REFERENCES


