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Perceptions of Educators and Families of Urban Middle School Students' Connectedness Related to Culturally Responsive Teaching

Abstract

The study collected data on culturally responsive teaching related to educators' and families' perceptions of academic programs for urban middle school students. Middle school students of color are academically 2-3 years behind their peers who are in predominantly White suburban districts. Current research indicates that teaching from a culturally responsive perspective can help students build relationships with their teachers and connect to their education. Additionally, current data signifies students perform better when their family is engaged in their education. This qualitative research study collected data from a combination of 12 educators and family members in an urban middle school setting. Four findings emerged from this study. First, infusing student voice and pop culture can introduce cultural inclusivity to an otherwise Eurocentric-based curriculum. Second, teachers can create a culturally responsive environment by acting on knowledge and interest in students' lived experiences. Third, all school relationships drive student connectedness. Lastly, well-planned, intentional family and school initiatives create a living curriculum that can make a lasting difference. In addition to diversity, equity, and inclusion training, recommendations for future practice include instruction for all school staff on building authentic relationships with students and family members that create culturally inclusive spaces for students. Finally, recommendations for future research include quantitative and mixed-methodology studies and the triangulation of educators, parents, and student's voices.

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Perceptions of Educators and Families of Urban Middle School Students' Connectedness
Related to Culturally Responsive Teaching

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Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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Dedication

First, I would like to thank my heavenly papa for the ability to complete this life-changing opportunity. Second, I would like to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Susan Hildenbrand, for their dedication and attention to detail throughout this process. I am a better writer because of both of you. Dr. Cianca, for your wisdom and careful attention to all the details, Dr. Hildenbrand, for getting me and clearly explaining my brain when I couldn't. I cannot thank you both enough. I could not have done it without you.

Next, I would like to thank my family and friends for allowing me to say no and accepting my absence from countless get-togethers and family functions. Thank you for all the encouraging words and prayers as I meandered through this journey.

Lastly, I want to thank the fantastic, fabulous 14—my cohort, and the fantastic foursome; you know who you are. You have helped shape me into a better leader and hopefully a better person. Through laughter, tears, a worldwide pandemic, devastating circumstances, and exciting new chapters, we have proved we can do anything.

Biographical Sketch

Diane Bardeen started her career as an early childhood educator and early childcare center director. Through experience and education, she has transitioned into Director of Youth Services for Action for a Better Community, Inc.

Ms. Bardeen received her undergraduate Bachelor of Science degree in Community and Human Services with a concentration in Managing Children's Programs. She completed the first 2 years at Roberts Wesleyan College and finished through Empire State. She then received a master's degree in Education and Learning in 2017, from Empire State College.

Ms. Bardeen enrolled at St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2019 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. She pursued her research on perceptions of educators and families of urban middle school students' connectedness related to culturally responsive teaching under the guidance of Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Susan Hildenbrand. She received the Ed.D. degree in 2021.

Abstract

The study collected data on culturally responsive teaching related to educators' and families' perceptions of academic programs for urban middle school students. Middle school students of color are academically 2-3 years behind their peers who are in predominantly White suburban districts. Current research indicates that teaching from a culturally responsive perspective can help students build relationships with their teachers and connect to their education. Additionally, current data signifies students perform better when their family is engaged in their education. This qualitative research study collected data from a combination of 12 educators and family members in an urban middle school setting.

Four findings emerged from this study. First, infusing student voice and pop culture can introduce cultural inclusivity to an otherwise Eurocentric-based curriculum. Second, teachers can create a culturally responsive environment by acting on knowledge and interest in students' lived experiences. Third, all school relationships drive student connectedness. Lastly, well-planned, intentional family and school initiatives create a living curriculum that can make a lasting difference. In addition to diversity, equity, and inclusion training, recommendations for future practice include instruction for all school staff on building authentic relationships with students and family members that create culturally inclusive spaces for students. Finally, recommendations for future research include quantitative and mixed-methodology studies and the triangulation of educators, parents, and student's voices.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Students of color make up 51% percent of the student population living in poverty in the US. (Aud et al., 2010). Current data show a growing list of disparities in public education among students of color (Sparks & Klein, 2018). National education data from 2015-2016 show there are 50.6 million students from kindergarten to 12th grade in the United States. Among these students, 15% are students of color. However, 27% of the 15% of students account for school-based arrests, displaying behavior that causes law enforcement to get involved and brings about academic suffering academically (Sparks & Klein, 2018).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), affluent students with high socioeconomic status have a graduation rate that is 16% higher than their counterparts with low income (Williams et al., 2017). In 2012, high school graduation rates among students from high-income families were 29% higher than students residing in low income communities (Williams et al., 2017).

Gay (2018) stated that students of color have been underperforming academically for decades. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), on average, middle school students of color in public schools are 2 to 3 years behind their White counterparts academically (Sparks & Klein, 2018). The consequences of this achievement gap result in many disparities in diverse under-resourced urban communities, including the lack of school connectedness, higher education, and high school dropout rates (Wiggin & Watson, 2016). Wiggin and Watson (2016) argued the

quality of culturally responsive teaching is lacking in public schools. Gay's (2000) research supported this claim that necessary measures need to be taken to meet the needs of students of color.

Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as a pedagogy that looks through the lens of the students who are being taught. Using CRT enables the educator to teach responsively to ethnically diverse populations, understanding the cultures and ways of each student's life. However, appropriate instruction continues to be a significant problem in educational institutions, along with the need to recognize the demographics of students that educators are serving (Gay, 2000; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Some educators struggle with teaching ethnically diverse students due to a lack of cultural understanding and limited knowledge of the students' culture. This lack of knowledge affects teachers' relationships with the parents and family, creating a gap between ethnically diverse students and their education (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Educator and parent perceptions of student efficacy can also affect how students view themselves and connect to school (Biag, 2016).

Urban Student Connectedness

There is a growing concern around the connectedness of urban middle school students of color in the United States (Ashley et al., 2012). The term school connectedness refers to students' perceptions that school staff, including teachers, faculty, and administration, care about each student's well-being and academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Students primarily perceive academic success as maintaining a high grade point average (GPA) and receiving recognition for academic accomplishments such as placement on the honor roll (Gore et al., 2016). Kennedy-Lewis

(2013) found that middle school students' connectedness to school significantly declines after elementary school. Several factors may play a big part in this decline, including transitioning from one classroom in elementary school to multiple teachers and classes in middle school. The lack of school connections continues throughout high school (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Niehaus et al., 2012).

Other issues rise to the surface for diverse student populations in conjunction with a lack of school connection. Students with low income in urban schools face additional obstacles such as detachment from school, low academic achievement, behavioral problems, and lack of high school completion (Anyon et al., 2016; Ashley et al., 2012; Niehaus et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2010; Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015). Students of color in urban communities are challenged by stereotypes that may lead to a different school view in comparison to their White counterparts (Murphy, 2015).

Research provides evidence that supports that students of color who had a negative school experience underperform when compared to students who feel connected to their school. Several studies conducted on school connectedness suggest that a sense of belonging is essential for all students (Anyon et al., 2016; Ashley et al., 2012; Gay, 2000; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Murphy, 2015; Niehaus et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2010; Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015). Educators have a responsibility to provide the necessary connections to make students feel a sense of belonging. However, students of color in low income urban communities disconnect from education when instruction is not relevant to their culture (Gay, 2000; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). A qualitative study of urban middle school students in a low income district connected students' negative behavior to poor teacher-student relationships, boring instruction, and referrals (Kennedy-Lewis,

2013). Kennedy-Lewis (2013) interviewed 11 students of color who confided that their teachers lacked understanding of who they were and why they had difficulty in class.

As a result, behavioral issues resulted in numerous disciplinary referrals and students sent out of class, missing much-needed instruction. Students also reported that they did not receive the help needed to succeed. One student said that he was not a bad kid and wanted to do well in school but did not feel supported by his teacher (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Several of the interviewees stated that teachers taught strictly from the text without any creativity. Evidence suggests that teachers struggle with instructional practices responsive to the cultures represented in urban settings (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013).

Educator Perceptions

Classrooms look different today in the United States due to increased cultural and economic diversity in the public school system (Bonner et al., 2018). However, not all educators have attended or may have been offered the necessary classes or training to effectively educate students with diverse backgrounds (Bonner et al., 2018). There is little research on educators' perceptions regarding the connectedness of students of color in low income communities. Not having the necessary skills to facilitate instruction through a culturally diverse lens may influence an educator's ability to teach students of color effectively (Biag, 2016; Bonner et al., 2018). Bonner et al. (2018) discovered when teachers committed to embracing students' culture; they became engaged in their home life, helping build relationships with their students' families.

Some middle school educators struggle with transitioning students from elementary to middle school. Educators can become tunnel-visioned, focusing on students achieving satisfactory grades rather than mastery of the concepts needed for

academic success (Fahey, 2012). Additionally, Kennedy-Lewis (2013) stated educators' perceptions of student outcomes are based on the class without really fostering the relationships and individual cultures of the students. Specifically, White or new educators in urban districts can be overwhelmed with systemic issues of race and meeting the needs of culturally diverse students (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Educators who are not familiar with the culture of their students may lack proper training and display biased opinions (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). Shifting educators' mentality to be culturally aware and include the family in the classroom may benefit underperforming students. Including the students, family, and culture in the classroom may give students the support needed to succeed (Ferrara, 2011).

Family Engagement

One of the most under-researched topics regarding student connectedness is the relationship between the family, school, and the student (Bahena et al., 2016). Through their research, Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) suggested that school counselors can bridge parents and families with the school to better the students' education. Evidence indicates that parent or family involvement impacts the development of students securing connections to school and academic mastery (Bahena et al., 2016; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Fifolt et al., 2018; Foster et al., 2017; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Gore et al., 2016; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Perry et al., 2010; Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Parent involvement is defined as meaningful communication shared between the parent and child, showing genuine interest in learning activities in their children's education (Jeynes, 2012). Ferrara (2011) stated that all family members can create a caring school climate for students. Some students may live with a family member other

than a parent or friend who is the primary caregiver. Using the term family engagement instead of parent involvement may better describe the concept for students who may not have a parent in the home (Ferrara, 2011). The following study demonstrated how family support affected student achievement.

A study of 282 fifth' and eighth-grade students revealed how family support was a factor in the students' efficacy beliefs in their ability to succeed (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Children showed academic success when parents and guardians supported their children by helping with homework and believing in their children. Some family members used control methods such as punishment or force during homework time to motivate students. When family members used control methods to motivate students, it did not increase their children's academic achievement, revealing that family members who believed their children would succeed had a positive result in academic success, not parents who used control methods (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). However, there is limited research on other vital factors, such as student attitudes, learning, and motivation (Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

Problem Statement

Students of color in low income communities struggle connecting to school and instruction and maintaining positive peer relationships (Biag, 2016). Issues with student connectedness can hurt students' academic success, also weakening the quality of their education. School connectedness problems can lead to other concerns regarding transitioning students from elementary school to middle school and then from middle to high school (Biag, 2016). School disconnection has led to a disproportionate school dropout rate for students of color in low income neighborhoods (Biag, 2016; Tomek et

al., 2016). Biag (2016) suggested that to make a positive change for middle school students of color, various perspectives need to be explored. Currently, there is a gap in the literature regarding the perspective of families of ethnically diverse students and the difficulties they face with school connectedness. There is a need for research on the perceptions of school educators and parents, including family members, regarding their thoughts on school connectedness for middle school students of color in underserved communities (Biag, 2016).

The college preparatory program called Upward Bound determined that students' relationships with parents and school staff profoundly affected their motivation toward seeking higher education (Tomek et al., 2016). Middle school connectedness, absences, and school violations were variables used to predict whether these criteria impacted student dropout rates in high school. Middle school students with a connection to the school, with fewer absences and fewer behavioral issues, were students who had the highest percentage of high school enrollment in their junior and senior years. Research suggests that dropping out of high school is not a snap decision but, more accurately, could result from a lack of connectedness and other social factors and behaviors during the middle school years, including the lack of parent or family engagement (Tomek et al., 2016).

Family engagement is defined as meaningful communication between parent/guardian and child, showing genuine interest in learning activities in their children's education (Jeynes, 2012). Family engagement in middle school students' education is crucial for their academic success and mental health. Still, family engagement is not as prevalent among students of color in communities with low income

(Wang et al., 2019). When parents and/or guardians invest in their children's education, these students experience a continuum of care between school and home life (Wang et al., 2019). Research discussing the presence of the parent or family for urban middle school students of color is rare; nevertheless, evidence suggests there are advantages of including the family dynamic in the students' instruction (Fifolt et al., 2018; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

Providing opportunities for family inclusion for students of color in under-resourced communities may enhance students' social-emotional growth. This growth could help students make those necessary school connections. However, family inclusion among students of color in middle school is not common due to transportation, language barriers, childcare, and other issues regarding communities with low income (Fifolt et al., 2018; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Qualitative research on education achievement among urban students and perceptions of their instruction, teacher relationships, and experiences regarding race and cultural inclusion is minimal. More in-depth research is needed (Wiggin & Watson, 2016).

There is a growing concern regarding the level of educators' cultural understanding when working with urban middle school students of color (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). Hunter (2015) stated that education reform is flawed as it has not addressed the requirements that students of color need to excel academically. Some Black families struggle connecting to their student's schools, possibly due to a predominantly White staff, who may be perpetuating a racially-biased education system (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). Because of this disconnect, implementing culturally inclusive instruction can become problematic for White educators teaching in urban communities.

Many White educators believe that celebrating Black holidays and incorporating rap or poetry into the classroom creates a diverse learning experience. However, culturally responsive instruction goes beyond implementing a few surface activities and learning objectives (Irvine, 2010).

Biag (2016) reported some of the perceptions of school staff reveal they believed that parents do not care about their children's education. Although the school staff reported caring about the students' needs, their methods may not have fostered a caring school climate for students of color. Furthermore, the inclusion of families and culture into the classroom was not apparent in the research data. There is a need to examine family and educator perspectives on urban middle school students' connectedness, giving families a voice regarding their children's education (Biag, 2016).

Theoretical Rationale

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a theory of instruction that may give voice and validity to students of color who may not connect to traditional methods in the education system (Vakil, 2014). CRT is the instruction that is derivative from the work of Paulo Freire, a principal researcher in the field of pedagogy for the oppressed (Kirylo, 2012). Freire explored themes related to social, political, and educational systems that marginalized certain people, specifically people of color (Kirylo, 2012). Like Freire, Gay (2000) researched methods that teach ethnically diverse students through their culture and way of life, defining the theory of culturally responsive teaching. Hammond (2015) added to Gay's definition as a relational pedagogy that incorporates a social-emotional connection with students of color. Using a framework that secures this connection may

give students of color in underserved communities the leverage needed to succeed academically (Hammond, 2015).

According to Irvine (2010), culturally responsive teaching goes beyond implementing diverse activities and learning objectives. Irvine (2010) suggested that culturally responsive educators have a solid knowledge base and understanding of the population of students whom they are serving. CRT requires educators to go outside the classroom, engaging the students' home life, community, and understanding of their world (Irvine, 2010). Complementing this understanding, Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019) concluded that educators could not fully execute CRT without considering the "social-emotional dimensions of the students, the teacher, and the classroom community" (p. 158). Educators who pay attention to the culture of their students may have a better chance of making the necessary academic connections for the success of students of color from diverse backgrounds (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Irvine, 2010).

Gay (2018) promoted a culturally responsive framework that includes a cycle of caring. Educational institutions that have successfully taught students from diverse backgrounds provide a learning environment that enables students from all cultures to feel safe. To create this environment, Gay (2018) placed the responsibility on the teacher to provide a space where students feel recognized, valued, seen, heard, and respected. Gay (2002) stated five elements that promote CRT in the classroom. The first was knowing and understanding cultural diversity is crucial. This goes beyond just head knowledge; rather, the teacher really understanding where students are coming from. Second, Gay stated that selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture may reach students who are not connecting to traditional methods of instruction. Next, Gay

(2002) emphasized the need for teachers to develop a multicultural curriculum, providing inclusive instruction using language and life situations that connect to the students' schematic lens. The fourth of the five elements consist of instituting supportive learning communities. This element includes the family and sharing of the students' culture in and out of the classroom. Lastly, the fifth element uses appropriate communication as the key to develop trusting relationships with students and the families they serve. All families communicate in different ways. The teacher's responsibility is to learn the best form of communication for all the students they instruct. Gay (2002) stated that educators should have the content mastered before instructing students, following the five elements of CRT.

Gay (2018) indicated teachers must include instruction that goes outside the school day. This motivates students to think critically about who they are and what they can achieve, giving students of color hope for the future. CRT reaches beyond the classroom, encouraging educators to know the students' background and family life, showing genuine care between the teacher, student, and family. Engaging the family in the students' academics may create a culturally responsive environment that provides an avenue of academic success among students of color (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Gay, 2018).

Statement of Purpose

This study examined how teaching methods and strategies used in an urban middle school classroom aligned with the five elements of CRT. The study gathered data on the perceptions of educators and family members of middle school students of color. Data on practices and perceptions, along with comparisons to the five elements of CRT,

were collected. This data may provide answers to student connectedness relating to CRT. Short (2016) concluded that parents' and educators' support in students' lives affects students' academic success and connectedness and their drive toward their education.

Research Questions

The research questions were developed to examine the perceptions of parents and educators related to their student's instruction regarding culturally responsive teaching:

1. From the perspective of urban middle school educators, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?
2. From the perspective of urban middle school parents and family members, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?
3. From the perspectives of urban middle school educators, parents, and family members, what classroom activities and initiatives most engage urban middle school students and connect them to school?

Significance of the Study

The knowledge gained from the study helps to fill a gap in current research. Research is needed on the educator's perspectives and the family of middle school students of color regarding CRT. Furthermore, the study begins to provide a baseline of information on the perceptions of families and teachers related to culturally responsive teaching methods. The results of this research may help educators improve culturally responsive instruction that effectively connects middle school students of color to their education.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions are terms directly connected to the study. The focus is on school connections for students of color in underserved communities and perceptions of educators and families on culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally Responsive Teaching – a pedagogy that looks through the lens of the students who are being instructed. The five elements of CRT place the responsibility on the teacher to provide a space where students feel recognized, valued, seen, heard, and respected. (Gay, 2000).

Family Engagement – meaningful communication shared between parent/guardian and child, showing genuine interest in learning activities in their children's education (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010).

Low Income – (for the purpose of this study) students who qualify for free or reduced school lunch (Vega et al., 2015).

Students of Color – students who identify as African American, Black, Hispanic, or mixed-race (Sparks & Klein, 2018).

Student Connectedness – students' perceptions that school staff, including teachers, faculty, and administration, care about each student's well-being and academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Urban Students – students who attend public schools in urban districts (also known as city school districts) (Fifolt et al., 2018).

Chapter Summary

Middle school students of color in low income communities are underperforming compared to suburban areas (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). The disparity in the quality of education for students of color in urban districts has been researched but remains an

unresolved issue. One consistent variable in the research is the level of connection between students of color and their education. One of the challenges middle school students of color face regarding connectedness is the transition from elementary to middle school. Students typically transition from one teacher to a setting of multiple teachers, affecting their connection to the educators and their classrooms (Biag, 2016). Adding to the vulnerability of the transition is the disconnection to the content in the instruction. The curriculum taught and sometimes the cultural inexperience of the teaching staff adds to the disconnection, affecting students' academic success (Irvine, 2010). Teaching through the cultural lens of the student population, including the family dynamic, may better connect students to their education. However, studies of family and educator perceptions regarding culturally inclusive instruction are limited regarding students of color in under-resourced communities. (Irvine, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that can be used to connect students of color to the curriculum, engaging students from diverse backgrounds while embracing their family dynamic and history into the classroom. (Gay, 2002, 2018). Through current research, Puchner and Markowitz (2015) stated that culturally responsive teaching impacts connecting students of color to their education. However, minimal research is available regarding the perceptions of educators and families on students of color through the middle school years. The following chapters discuss the research behind the problem statement, the methodology of the research study, the findings of the study, the discussion, and the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Wiggan and Watson (2016) stated that the quality of culturally responsive teaching is lacking in public schools, resulting in students of color having difficulty connecting to their education. Gay's research (2000) supported this claim, citing the need for CRT to be embedded within the classroom. Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogy that looks through the lens of the students who are being instructed. CRT enables the educator to connect to ethnically diverse populations by understanding the culture and ways of each student's life. With growing disparities for students of color in many communities with low income, there is a great need to determine why middle school students of color are underperforming.

Research suggests students need to connect to school to achieve academic success (Anyon et al., 2016; Ashley et al., 2012; Bahena et al., 2016; Fifolt et al., 2018; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Niehaus et al., 2012; Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015). Several studies show that middle school is when students disconnect from school and their education (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Niehaus et al., 2012). The following research addresses connectedness in students of color in under-resourced communities, primarily among students in middle school. The compiled studies examine culturally responsive teaching and the perceptions of parents, teachers, and students regarding students' connectedness to school.

The research questions were developed to examine the perceptions of parents and educators related to their student's instruction regarding culturally responsive teaching:

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2. From the perspective of urban middle school parents and family members, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?
3. From the perspectives of urban middle school educators, parents, and family members, what classroom activities and initiatives most engage urban middle school students and connect them to school?

The first section of the chapter focuses on students of color and their connectedness to their education. The next section reveals the importance of the family dynamic in the classroom for middle school students of color and their families' perceptions of their children's education. This section is followed by discussing family engagement and educator perceptions regarding urban middle school students of color. Finally, the chapter concludes with the relevance of culturally responsive teaching for students of color in under-resourced communities and its impact on students' academic success.

Connectedness in Urban Middle School Students

There is a growing concern around the connectedness of urban middle school students of color in the United States (Ashley et al., 2012). Student connectedness refers to students' perceptions that school staff, including teachers, faculty, and administration, care about each student's well-being and academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Students perceive academic success as maintaining a high grade point

average (GPA) and receiving recognition for academic accomplishments such as placement on the honor roll (Gore et al., 2016).

Kennedy-Lewis (2013) showed that middle school students' connectedness to school has a significant decline after elementary school. Factors such as the transition from elementary school and one classroom and teacher compared to multiple teachers and classes may play a big part in this decline. The lack of school connection continues throughout high school (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Niehaus, 2012). Students living in impoverished neighborhoods are at a higher risk for detachment from school, resulting in low academic achievement, behavioral problems, and ultimately dropping out of high school (Anyon et al., 2016; Ashley et al., 2012; Niehaus et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2010; Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015). Other protective factors, such as health and wellness, contribute to students' personal connections with the school and teaching staff (Ashley et al., 2012; Song et al., 2018).

A quantitative study examined 109 urban middle school students in the southern United States, capturing the perceptions of students' wellness and how the students' health contributed to the connectedness of each student (Ashley et al., 2012). The study revealed a significant relationship between personal wellness and middle school students' connectedness to school. When students perceived, they were healthy emotionally, physically, and socially, their thoughts of school belonging and attachment were healthy. Conversely, students who did not have a secure connection to the school had a lower perception of health and wellness and lower academic achievement (Ashley et al., 2012).

In another aspect of health and wellness, Song et al. (2018) surveyed 429 students in an urban middle school in China to see how their attachment to their parents

and grandparents affected their self-esteem, life satisfaction, and school engagement. The Behavioral Systems Version measured the grandparent-child relationship, and the Family Adaption and Cohesion Inventory measured the parent-child relationship. The students involved were in two categories, 224 students were left-behind children (LBC) whose parents had migrated to urban jobs with grandparents as the caregivers. The other students were non-LBC with parents as primary caregivers.

Self-esteem was measured to understand the students' positive or negative views and overall life satisfaction (Song et al., 2018). Students who reported a positive relationship with their parents and grandparents had a direct correlation to life satisfaction. LBC's school engagement was dependent more on the relationship with the grandparents than the parents. For non-LBC, the parent-child relationship had the opposite results. The results for non-LBC reported that only self-esteem positively affected student engagement. Therefore, in both groups, students who had stable connections with a family member had a positive self-efficacy; however, only positive self-esteem predicted school engagement for non-LBC.

To gain a different perspective from the United States, a longitudinal study that spanned a year collected data from 330 Midwestern sixth-grade students predominantly of color and measured the perception of student and school support (Niehaus et al., 2012). Like the findings of Ashley et al. (2012), outcomes revealed the more connected the students were to the school, the healthier the choices, positive behavior, and higher academic results. Out of the 330 students who completed the surveys, 98% of them qualified for free or reduced lunch (Niehaus et al., 2012). The additional obstacles associated with low income communities can add more stress to urban students of color,

such as lack of health care, parental support, and lower attendance rates (Niehaus et al., 2012; Vega et al., 2015). However, a critical factor in the study of the 330 students revealed that socioeconomic status did not determine their academic success. If the students felt connected to the school, they performed well academically (Niehaus et al., 2012). Niehaus et al. (2012) and Vega et al. (2015) found that the more students of color connect to school, the more likely they are to be healthy, well-rounded students who can achieve academic success, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Discipline Impacting Connectedness

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), on average, middle school students of color in public schools are 2 to 3 years behind academically when compared to their equal White counterparts (Sparks & Klein, 2018; Vega et al., 2015). Gay (2018), the researcher behind the theory of culturally responsive teaching, stated that students of color have been underperforming academically for too long. Gay (2018) argued the consequences of this achievement gap add too many disparities prevalent among diverse under-resourced communities. Among these disparities, students perceive they are disproportionately discriminated against when it comes to disciplinary action, adding to the disconnectedness they feel toward their school and educators (Anyon et al., 2016; Fifolt et al., 2018; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Tomek, 2017).

The adverse school experience students of color face in the urban community can affect the education gap in many forms. Kennedy-Lewis (2013) examined urban middle school students in a low income district and their perceptions of why they had behavior issues. Students reported their negative behavior was due to poor teacher-student

relationships, boring instruction, and referrals. Kennedy-Lewis (2013) interviewed 11 middle school students of color who were having behavior issues during class. The students reported their teachers displayed a lack of understanding of who they were and why they had difficulty in class. Instead, behavioral issues resulted in many student referrals and students being sent out of class, missing much-needed instruction. Students also mentioned they did not receive the help necessary for them to succeed. One student said he was not a bad kid and wanted to do well in school but did not feel he had support from his teacher. Some interviewees stated the teachers taught strictly from the text without any creativity (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Evidence suggests teachers struggle with instruction that is responsive to the cultures represented in urban settings, creating a more significant disconnection for students of color already struggling with connection to their education (Anyon et al., 2016; Gay, 2018; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013).

Anyon et al. (2016) sought to determine how adults treat students during the school day concerning students' comfortability in talking to the teaching staff or adults in the school. The study examined 107 schools in a large urban district in Denver, Colorado. For comparison samples, out-of-school suspensions were measured between Black and White students to see a correlation between school connections and those having behavioral issues. Students of color reported significantly higher levels of disconnectedness than White students, and disparities in out-of-school suspensions were negatively associated with all students' perceptions of connectedness (Anyon et al., 2016). Findings showed a significant relationship between students who felt connected to the school and their academic success. However, success was more prevalent among White students than students of color. Additionally, middle school students reported the

highest disciplinary action resulting in referrals and school suspensions (Anyon et al., 2016).

In contrast to the sample size of Kennedy-Lewis (2013), the sample from Anyon et al. (2016) was extensive. The sample included 29,148 students between sixth and 12th grade, and quantitative measures were used instead of narrative responses. The study also included the racial disparities students of color face compared to White students and school connections versus behavioral problems that lead to out-of-school suspensions. Schools that did not have a diverse population did not take part in the study. Student participants completed an anonymous survey that measured perceptions of trust and the relationships they had with their teachers. Both studies showed students' perceptions of color aligned with the belief that White students encounter different treatment when it comes to disciplinary action. Evidence from both studies suggests school adults do not consider the cultural differences between White students and students of color, resulting in miscommunication and lack of understanding of the students in question. This lack of cultural competency results in a more profound disconnection between teaching staff and students of color, ultimately adding to the disparities students of color face in education, resulting in low academic achievement (Anyon et al., 2016; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013).

The similarities between Kennedy-Lewis (2013) and Anyon et al. (2016) are substantial as they focused on the same under-researched demographic of students and comparable results in school connectedness. Both studies showed perceptions of students of color aligned with the belief that White students encounter different treatment when it comes to disciplinary action. Evidence from both studies suggests school adults do not consider the cultural differences between White students and students of color, resulting

in miscommunication and lack of understanding of the students in question. This lack of cultural competency results in a more profound disconnection between teaching staff and students of color, ultimately adding to the disparities students of color face in education, resulting in low academic achievement (Anyon et al., 2016; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013).

Connectedness and Motivation in Education

In the last decade, there have been few empirical studies that have investigated the effects school connectedness has on middle school students of color, and recent studies on their motivation toward high school and higher education in recent studies are minimal (Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015). The low academic performance among students of color in communities with low income has a negative effect on their motivation for high school and furthering their education at the college level (Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015). Vega et al. (2015) argued that more studies related to this gap in the literature will help minimize the disparities for students of color with low socioeconomic status, helping them reach their full potential.

An exploratory study rooted in the critical race theory obtained the perceptions of 20 high school students of color located in the Midwest (Vega et al., 2015). Before conducting the study, Vega et al. (2015) considered who provides students of color with the most support and how they provide students of color with support. The focus of the study aimed to help underprivileged students succeed in pre-college academia with the intent to pursue higher education after high school (Vega et al., 2015). Of the 20 students, 10 identified as African American, two biracial, and eight as Latino. All program participants indicated they received free or reduced lunch. The Upward Bound program offered weekly support and summer sessions in all subject areas. The interviews

indicated that the students' school experience was enhanced primarily because of their relationships with their families and the Upward Bound staff. Students revealed that their parents' homework support, and the belief they could get good grades, motivated them to continue pursuing their education. Parents and family members encouraged their children with words of affirmation. Many of the participants' family members did not attend college. However, students indicated their family placed high regard on postsecondary education, desperate for them to do better than they had (Vega et al., 2015). Although this study interviewed minority urban students of color, the sample may not embody the most vulnerable student population. The outcomes may be different for students with language barriers who did not have positive academic outcomes (Vega et al., 2015).

Tomek et al. (2016) looked further into school retention, collecting information in an urban district in Alabama, measuring longitudinal information on students of color from middle to high school. Middle school connectedness, absences, and school violations were variables used to predict whether these criteria impacted student dropout rates in high school. Tomek et al. (2016) analyzed the students by researching middle school students' connectedness and how it affected high school enrollment. They gathered information on how middle school connectedness predicted school violations and suspensions in high school and if the number of middle school absences, school violations, and suspensions predicted high school enrollment.

Surveys were administered by the district to the students every summer throughout their middle school and high school career. The restrictions of the sample required students to have completed the surveys at least once in middle school and twice in high school. The last restriction required survey participants to be those who identified

as Black Americans. The final sample involved 524 Black American students and included both middle and high school data points. All students qualified for free or reduced lunch at least once during their participation.

Tomek et al. (2016) found the following variables significantly related to enrollment in the last 2 years of high school: school absences, disciplinary violations, suspensions, and school connectedness. Middle school students' connection to the school, fewer absences, and behavioral issues had the highest percentage of high school enrollment in their junior and senior years. Tomek et al. (2016) suggested that dropping out of high school was not a snap decision but, more accurately, could result from their connectedness and other social factors and behaviors during the middle school years.

Limitations included the sample size of 524 students. The number was small in comparison to the complete data set of 10,000 students. Additionally, the data from the survey were self-reported and reliant on students as young as 10 years old. Complete understanding of the questions may have been a challenge depending on the cognitive growth of the individual students (Tomek et al., 2016). Qualitative and quantitative research methods, in different parts of the United States, provide evidence that positive school experiences impact the connection students have to school, including their behavior and motivation to further their education (Anyon et al., 2016; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015).

Parent Perceptions

The United States public education system continues to have disconnectedness among students of color in under-resourced communities (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Vega et al., 2015). Parental or family voice is one of the most under-researched populations

regarding student connection and how it impacts the development of relationships and secure connections to school and student academics (Bahena et al., 2016; Fifolt et al., 2018; Foster et al., 2017; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Perry et al., 2010). The literature on parent perceptions consists of two themes: parental perceptions of student achievement and project-based parent and family engagement concerning school connectedness.

Parental Perceptions of Student Achievement

While there is little research on the perceptions of parents or families on students of color, specifically during the middle school years, evidence suggests there is a positive effect on performance when parents are active in students' education (Bahena et al., 2016; Fifolt et al., 2018; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). For instance, a study took place in Michigan with a sample size of 282 middle school students in fifth and eighth grade and one parent per child. The impact parent involvement had on the students' academic performance grades was evident throughout the students' middle school years (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Gonida and Cortina (2014) had three main goals for conducting the study. The researchers measured parental involvement in homework and achievement goals to predict student outcomes. Gonida and Cortina (2014) also examined the parent perception of students' academic efficacy and how the parents relate to students during homework, and how it translated to the students' efficacy beliefs. Finally, Gonida and Cortina (2014) explained efficacy as having the ability to achieve the desired result. The last component investigated was the extent these perceptions and actions of involvement had on the students' academic success (Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

Recruitment took place in eight public urban schools in the fifth and eighth grades. Parent participants completed a set of self-report Likert-type surveys measuring the level of their homework involvement, achievement goals for their child, and their perception of their child's academic efficacy (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Students completed a similar tool scaled to the appropriate cognitive level, measuring their perception of academic efficacy and their parents' involvement techniques. The results revealed a positive or negative relationship depending on the parents' efficacy beliefs for their children. There was a direct correlation between parents who believed their children would succeed and the student's belief that they could achieve academically (Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

Furthermore, parents who controlled homework time without meaningful interaction pushed students to strive toward academic success, but it did not translate into a higher GPA (Gonida & Cortina, 2014). In contrast, parents who encouraged their children and displayed a high perception of their children's academic efficacy mirrored the student's belief in themselves. Parent involvement with homework support dropped in eighth grade compared to the fifth-grade students, but parent perception of efficacy beliefs remained. A longitudinal study measuring parental practices through the middle school years would give a broader perspective on the decline in eighth grade and a better picture of the connection to academic achievement (Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

The research of Bahena et al. (2016) was gathered from parents across the country in three different areas and three different times throughout the year. Bahena et al. (2016) measured parents' perceptions to gain their input on whether their children's school was a good fit. School fit relates to the theory of person-environment fit, which concentrates on

the transactional relationship between individuals and their social context (Hunt, 1975). School fit includes the school, family, and the neighborhood giving well-rounded insight into the lens of the student (Bahena et al., 2016). Through researching this subject, Bahena et al. (2016) stated that most of the studies on school fit have been from the perception of teachers and students.

Bahena et al. (2016) sampled a total of 1,544 parents in three different studies of elementary, middle, and high school students. Parents of the middle school students reported significantly lower school fit scores than parents of elementary students, regardless of their level of income. The scale development process showed that parents focused on social and emotional well-being and perceived their child's academic experience through an ethnic and racial lens. Bahena et al. (2016) stated they might have limitations due to the lack of national representation as they only focused on three different locations. Another limitation was the population of parents was predominately from a higher income bracket due to the request that all participants have access to high-speed internet. The information is relevant for student connectedness but is limited due to the demographic of the student population.

School fit and school connectedness both define students feeling connected socially, emotionally, and academically (Bahena et al., 2016; Gonida & Cortina, 2014). Gonida and Cortina (2014) and Bahena et al. (2016) have similar conclusions in their studies regarding a decline in middle school students' connection to their academics, educators, and the school. Both studies suggested a shift from elementary school into middle school for students regarding fit, connecting to their classroom environment, teachers, and school. Lastly, they concluded that longitudinal research would provide a

clear picture of the decline of connectedness for this student population (Bahena et al., 2016; Gonida & Cortina, 2014).

Project-Based Parent and Family Engagement

Based on the results from several research studies, students from ethnically different backgrounds may struggle connecting to school, their teachers, and instruction (Anyon et al., 2016; Ashley et al., 2012; Bahena et al., 2016; Fifolt et al., 2018; Gay, 2018; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Gore et al., 2016; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Niehaus et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2010; Tomek, 2016; Vega et al., 2015). The emerging gap in school connectedness research is how or if the presence of the parent or family in students' education influences school connectedness in middle school students. Some research suggests there are advantages of including family dynamics in the students' instruction (Fifolt et al., 2018; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Therefore, providing opportunities for family inclusion for students of color in under-resourced communities may enhance students' social-emotional growth. This growth could help students make those necessary connections to school and their teachers (Fifolt et al., 2018).

More than ever before, educators are looking for new and innovative ways to engage students of color in high-poverty urban districts. To reach this population, educators need to create an environment conducive to learning (Fifolt et al., 2018). Jones Valley Teaching Farm in Birmingham, Alabama, is an organization that provides evidence-based services through school-based urban farming. Urban agriculture is not a new concept but recently is considered a contribution to public health, economic development, and education (Williams & Dixon, 2013). Fifolt et al. (2018) examined 33

students and 25 parents to explore their experiences with the Jones Valley Teaching Farm (JVTF). The students and families involved resided in high-poverty urban districts. The selection of participants came from two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. Student and parent focus groups were the sources of the data collection. Fifolt et al. (2018) sought to learn the experiences and perceptions of the students and the parents involved in the Jones Valley project.

Three themes were developed from student and parent focus groups interpreting their experiences with JVTF. These themes included responsibility/accountability, relationships, and self-efficacy (Fifolt et al., 2018). Students and parents/guardians verbalized that they learned how to be responsible for more than just themselves. They learned how to be accountable and keep up with assigned roles and procedures to ensure a successful farming experience. One student stated an appreciation for the adults' trust in running every aspect of the farmers market club, an active fruit and vegetable stand. Parental observations included the transferable skills continuing outside of the school and community-based project. Students were becoming more responsible at home and picking up after themselves. Students also became interested in creating gardens at home and expanding on the vegetables they usually consume (Fifolt et al., 2018).

Students in the middle and high school age bracket reported that their relationships with their peers became more of a family relationship (Fifolt et al., 2018). Parent reports were similar; they were happy their children had formed positive bonds with students and noticed their children's anticipation in attending these activities every week. Parents and students both reported that the JVFT staff attended to the needs of the students and formed relationships with them, showing genuine care and concern for each

student involved. One parent commented, saying her child had not missed a day of school since her involvement with JVTF. The general view and outcome of the project are consistent with the literature on school connectedness and how school needs to provide creative opportunities for students to develop meaningful relationships with their peers, the school staff, and inclusion of the family dynamic (Fifolt et al., 2018).

Some of the drawbacks mentioned by the parents included the need for male parental involvement (Fifolt et al., 2018). They stated that the JVTF study had only one male parent participant. Male students commented on the instructors who were part of JVTF; they appreciated their relationship with the male staff. Male parent representation may have added a different perspective and a more reliable connection with the male student participants. Findings are limited primarily because the sample came from one place; therefore, the outcomes cannot be generalized (Fifolt et al., 2018).

While Fifolt et al. (2018) examined students and parents in a project-based intervention, the study conducted by Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) focused solely on Latino parents in a low income community. Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) sought to include parent voices in creating student engagement activities while partnering with the school and a community-based organization. Prior investigative research led Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) to understand that schools that partner with community organizations will help respond to the needs and challenges of minority families with low income.

In this ethnographic study, a joint parent engagement program designed to unite vulnerable Latino parents provided service to themselves and each other (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Communication barriers may keep families of color from

attending school events (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Vega et al., 2015). The concept behind this program inspires to engage underserved families in school participation activities with their culture and demographics in mind. Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) guided the research study with questions examining what organizational conditions facilitated the development of a school-linked engagement program for parents. They also wanted to learn what resources were gained from this experience for Latino families. Lastly, the research team sought to learn how the collective parent engagement design created pathways linking the school, students, and community. The first sample was randomly selected from 100 Community Action Network (CAN) parents for a total of 20 parents, 12 to carry it out, with eight as a backup. The CAN parents designed, implemented, and operated all the activities and functions of the program.

The second group was selected from a sample size of 841 parents who had engaged in activities of the CAN project. Twenty parents were selected to participate in this portion of the study. Both groups participated in 1-2 hour semi-structured interviews (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). All the parents involved were undocumented individuals who immigrated from Mexico. Throughout the interviews, a common theme of the hardships they faced came to the surface, including the fear of being undocumented, the language barrier, distrusting neighbors, health care, and their children connecting to their education. The activities included learning necessary skills such as interviewing, sewing, hairstyling, cooking, and some cosmetology. These activities helped them navigate some of the social issues they were facing (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012).

Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) revealed ways parent leaders help bridge gaps for other parents, navigate through common issues together, and show how school connectedness was achieved through this initiative. The program data showed that CAN parents became the most involved members of the parent-teacher association (PTA). One of the significant changes occurred during parent-teacher conferences. Parents no longer had to worry about the language barrier because project staff could help translate if assistance was needed. Another development from this transformational research was forming a youth soccer team, tutoring and mentoring children and youth, and family-focused services located at the community action network location. Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) suggested that through these parent partnerships and school-linked collaborations, parental engagement may enhance child wellness, reducing the number of school absences.

The program did improve economic opportunity for some parents; however, the increasing fear of immigration policy change and checkpoints had the program's families in fear of deportation. One similarity to Fifolt et al. (2018) was that the parent participants of the Jones Valley Teaching Farm had only one male participant. In the Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) study, no males participated in the study. Both research teams viewed not having a strong male presence represented as a drawback.

Student Perceptions of Parent Involvement

In researching student connectedness, there is little data on students of color regarding their perception of parent involvement and how it affects their education (Perry et al., 2010). Youth who feel connected to their family and school may not suffer from other risk factors such as bullying, depression, self-injury, or suicidal thoughts that

negatively affect their education. A secure support system that fosters healthy relationships between school and family life can act as a protective shield for students, guarding them against such risk factors. Current research suggests youth in affluent communities are more connected than students of color in communities with low income. (Foster et al., 2017).

Examining students in under-resourced communities is crucial to identifying why students of color struggle to connect to their school and education (Foster et al., 2017). Foster et al. (2017) surveyed 224 urban middle school youth in a high crime, impoverished community. The recruited students were labeled as high-risk for bullying perpetration, victimization, or social disconnectedness. These students all came through an urban medical emergency center for various trauma-enforced reasons (Foster et al., 2017).

Through quantitative measures, Foster et al. (2017) hypothesized the stronger the family bond, connectedness to school, and community engagement, the less likely the students would suffer from emotional and behavior problems. The researchers sought to learn how connectedness to family, school, peers, and the community affected youth who face social challenges while living in under-resourced communities. The instrument used included questions on how much their parents or guardians cared about them and if family members understand them. Other questions included inquiry on school connections and peer relationships (Foster et al., 2017).

The cross-sectional study results revealed a significant relationship between the level of connectedness to family and schools on the youths' level of adjustment (Foster et al., 2017). Youth who reported a sincere parent and family level of connectedness had

lower levels of depression, suicidal thoughts, self-injury, and family-related behavioral problems than students who reported a low level of parental connectedness. The youth who experienced strong connectedness reported higher levels of self-esteem and better use of their time out of school. However, peer relationships did not show a significant difference in youth adjusting to the pressures of adolescence (Foster et al., 2017).

Some limitations included how data collected in the study came from only one point in time for the youth involved (Foster et al., 2017). Suggestions for future research included longitudinal research assessing youth connectedness to obtain a more profound measurement of family, school, and community impact. Another suggestion was to research what different forms of connectedness can be used as intervention methods that may have lasting outcomes for under-serviced youth in high-risk situations (Foster et al., 2017).

Like Foster et al. (2017), Perry et al. (2010) measured students' perceptions regarding parental and school engagement. However, the 285 students in the sample were from diverse backgrounds living in under-resourced communities in the Midwest and ranged from 11-19 years of age. The parental portion of the study was measured through a 23-item self-report assessment, measuring how students perceived their parent's or guardians' provision of support towards a career. Results showed 71% of the students reported their mothers were providing support academically and towards their future careers. Students who felt connected to family and their teachers were more engaged in school activities. However, while both were significant, teacher support had a greater effect on students' connection to their education and academic performance than parent support (Perry et al., 2010).

Perry et al. (2010) suggested that a mixed-methods approach may give a clear view of student perception. Continued research and a larger sample that includes multiple variables for urban youth may give insight into issues students of color face in communities with low income. Learning from past studies and implementing necessary changes to help students improve their connections to school may be a more realistic and cost-effective way to make positive change.

Educator Perceptions

Many classrooms look different today in the United States due to increased cultural and economic diversity in the public school system. However, not all educators have attended or are offered the necessary training to meet the needs of students with diverse backgrounds (Bonner et al., 2018). In addition, little research can be found on teachers' perceptions regarding students' connectedness of color in communities with low income (Biag, 2016; Bonner et al., 2018). Bonner et al. (2018) concluded through teacher perception, to help students connect to their education, the needs of minority students on a cultural level needed to be addressed. By embracing the students' culture and building relationships with the students' families, students felt a sense of class ownership. In contrast, Biag (2016) reported some of the perceptions of the school staff revealed the belief that parents did not care about the students' education. Although the school staff reported caring about the student's needs, their methods may not have fostered a caring school climate for students and families of color.

School Staff and Student Connectedness

In response to this growing need, Bonner et al. (2018) surveyed 430 urban teachers in 83 middle schools in Southern California. Bonner et al. (2018) wanted to

determine what teachers in urban public schools thought about instructing diverse students using culturally responsive teaching. CRT is a relational pedagogy that incorporates a social-emotional connection with students of color, going beyond implementing a few diverse activities and learning objectives (Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive educators have a strong knowledge base and understanding of the population of students they serve. CRT requires educators to go outside the classroom, engaging the students' home life, community, and understanding of their world (Bonner et al., 2018; Gay, 2018; Irvine, 2010).

The teaching staff that completed the surveys and narrative questions ranged from preschool to 12th grade and spanned three different school districts. Several themes emerged from the data collected on the surveys. Teacher responses reflected a sense of value for cultural diversity in the classroom (Bonner et al., 2018). Teachers also stated that the diverse student population enhanced the learning for all students, making the classroom atmosphere more exciting and engaging. Many of the teachers reported that it was their responsibility to create a culturally rich environment, inclusive of all races and ethnicities within the classroom. The teaching staff shared that all students from diverse backgrounds deserve the best quality of education available. Like Fifolt et al. (2018), the teachers saw merit in including the families in the classroom. Much like the Jones Valley Teaching Farm study, parents participated in the program, presenting their talents and cultural history to the class (Bonner et al., 2018).

The perception that all people have the potential for bias and stereotypes was another theme consistent within the data. The participants in the study understood the need to self-reflect and make sure that no student is overlooked because of preconceived

ideas or cultural bias due to their schematic lens. Some of the teacher's responses showed a strong self-efficacy for teaching diverse students. The staff who did not feel as equipped committed to learning new techniques and getting educated to implement a more culturally diverse classroom environment (Bonner et al., 2018). Some of the narratives included concerns in addressing the needs of multiple cultures in the classroom. Teachers become overwhelmed with constraints related to the amount of time they had to prepare adequate instruction, along with high-stakes testing and curriculum that has an underlying bias (Bonner et al., 2018).

Recommendations for future studies included reaching other students and teachers in rural and suburban areas, gaining their perspective on teaching students of color (Bonner et al., 2018). Another recommendation was to match the teachers' culture and ethnicity to their responses to understand possible influences on their perceptions regarding a culturally responsive pedagogy. Lastly, the study recommended conducting follow-up interviews to see what types of professional development took place and what practices were currently in place because of the study (Bonner et al., 2018).

Biag (2016) stated that it is essential to gain perspective from different angles when reviewing the difficulties of ethnically diverse middle school students in communities with low income. The inability to connect to school, education, and maintain positive peer relationships can hurt students' health and nutrition, weakening their education quality (Biag, 2016). Middle school students face other issues when it comes to transitioning from elementary school to middle school and then from middle to high school (Biag, 2016). The school dropout rate is disproportionately high for students of color in low income neighborhoods (Biag, 2016; Tomek et al., 2016). In the Upward

Bound Program, students perceived their relationships with parents and school staff profoundly affected their motivation toward education (Tomek et al., 2016). To get a different look into school relationships, Biag (2016) researched the perceptions of school personnel, not just the teaching staff, regarding their thoughts on school connectedness for students of color in underserved communities.

Biag (2016) found minimal research that gathered information from the perspectives of other adults working within the school. The focus of Biag's (2016) study was to obtain information about student connectedness with school staff regarding adult support, school safety, and high academic standards from the perspective of adults working in a middle school with the majority population as students of color. Three main questions guided the study: What kinds of supports do school adults extend to their students? How do school personnel address safety concerns? And, in what ways are students held to high academic standards?

School staff volunteered to participate in the study in a large urban school in California. The sample consisted of 17 personnel, including the teachers, the principal, the vice-principal, the guidance counselor, and the school nurse. Biag (2016) retrieved data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and observed the participants during their interaction with students. Biag (2016) used Schein's (1992) organizational framework to highlight the values and underlying assumptions of school connectedness throughout the study. One of the threaded values throughout the narratives was the need for students to feel cared for and comfortable at school. School staff reported because of the mental health needs being an area of concern, they were sensitive to the emotional needs of the students (Biag, 2016).

One of the underlying assumptions was that school staff felt they needed to be more than just educators. Some of the staff stated they had to teach the students manners, fundamental skills and care for themselves properly. School staff assumed the parents were neglecting their children (Biag, 2016). This view differs from other studies such as Bonner et al. (2018) and their research on teacher perceptions. The teaching staff stated it was their duty to embrace the students' families, bring the individual cultures into the classroom, and get to know the families personally (Bonner et al., 2018). Biag's (2016) study revealed that staff had attended to their students' emotional, physical, and academic needs. However, some cultural bias was evident in their responses.

The study indicated that the school staff supporting students in food, clothing, and school supplies only reinforced their students' negative views about their students' families (Biag, 2016). They verbalized statements such as, "I feel like there is not somebody that cares . . . it bothers me how I see how some of these kids are treated" (Biag, 2016, p. 51). Negative teacher perceptions regarding parents of ethnically diverse students from low income neighborhoods lead to "unfounded views about the capacity of students' families" (Biag, 2016, p. 51). These assumptions can draw a wedge between families and educators, in turn, between the students as well (Biag, 2016). Gay's (2002) theory of culturally responsive teaching can help educators understand and address students on a cultural level helping to eliminate bias.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching addresses the need for social-emotional connections and positive teacher/student relationships, and the awareness of students' impact in a racialized society (Hammond, 2015). Gay (2000) defined CRT as a lens that

teaches ethnically diverse students through their cultures and way of life. Hammond (2015) added that CRT is a relational pedagogy that incorporates a social-emotional connection with students of color. Using a framework that secures this connection may give students of color in underserved communities the leverage needed to succeed academically (Hammond, 2015). These learning competencies are vital for educators to teach students of color effectively (Hammond, 2015).

Culturally responsive teaching is critical instruction that is derivative of the work of Paulo Freire, a principal researcher in the field of pedagogy for the oppressed (Kirylo, 2012). The work of Freire explored themes related to social, political, and educational systems that marginalize certain groups of people (Kirylo, 2012). Freire's call to action challenged oppressive structures in the mid-1900s and suggested ways that the oppressed can change their status to a democratic way of thinking (Kirylo, 2012). The early work of Freire gives recognition of the needed structural change, challenging educators with the responsibility of knowing whom they are educating, not discounting the significance of life experience among students (Kirylo, 2012). Culturally responsive teaching expounds on the work of Freire, helping incorporate ethnically diverse students' life experiences, upbringing, and social competencies into the curriculum (Gay, 2002).

Evidence of CRT

Willis (2003) examined elementary school staff and students within the California public schools. Students of color outperformed similar populations on standardized tests. After examining these schools, Willis (2003) concluded that positive reinforcement, the expectation of students, the care and consideration of each student, and secure family connections contributed to this success. Ladson-Billings (2010) stated that studies show

the success of schools that teach from a CRT lens have similar approaches to Gay's (2010, 2018) elements of CRT. Adding to Willis's examination, Ladson-Billings (2010) compiled evidence from CRT researchers that attribute this success to teachers that possess the ability to engage the culture and history of the students. These schematic connections give students the insight to learn based on life experience in a school climate that is family-oriented (Ladson-Billings, 2010).

CRT Through Literacy

Tatum (2014) stated that literacy affects all areas of academia and expounds on how students of color disengage from literature in typical public school classrooms. Research shows how self-identification and connecting one's schema to literacy has a profound effect on the literacy development of students (Moya & Hamedani, 2017). Data were collected on African American male students over 5 years in 25 different schools. Tatum (2014) discovered the literature relevant to the students' culture engaged the students, and some students as young as 12, stated that they could relate to the text. However, students had a difficult time with text that was not relevant to their culture.

Quinlan (2012) described schema as how our world view is shaped through experience, memories, and cultural norms. Using cultural norms, Gibson (2016) introduced urban fiction to students of color for a literacy assignment to see if they would connect to the literature. The cultural relevance and connection brought an understanding of the content in a new way. Students were sourcing their critical thinking skills and dissecting the characters' choices while relating them to their own lives. Integrating new media and literacy that is culturally responsive may ignite creativity in students enriching

the way youth make sense of experiences and communicate with the world (Chaebong, 2013).

CRT Through the Arts

Lifschitz-Grant, (2020), an art educator, incorporated the family into the learning experience with a pre kindergarten class, including 18 four- and five-year-old students. Thirteen were African American, three were Hispanic/Latinx, one was White, and one was Japanese. The class and at least one family member of each student visited a folk art museum and were intrigued by the quilt exhibit. Capitalizing on this interest, Lifschitz-Grant (2020) and the classroom teacher partnered for a semester-long project involving quilt making with the students and the involved family members.

The project started with a video of African American women in Alabama who made beautiful quilts. These women were descendants of slaves. The film inspired three families to bring in quilts from their homes for display in the classroom (Lifschitz-Grant, 2020). Continuing this project, the entire class created family quilts at home with their families, then brought them in to share. In the last part of the project, the class and their families created a class quilt. Storytelling became part of the quilt-making process (Lifschitz-Grant, 2020). During this project, Lifschitz-Grant (2020) observed students, family members, and school staff not just learn new information but have a better understanding of each other's culture. CRT translates into artmaking experiences where students can explore materials and topics in personal and meaningful ways, allowing an inclusive learning atmosphere (Lifschitz-Grant, 2020).

Criticisms of CRT

Hollie (2019) called into question the validity of the many theories seen in current research regarding diverse teaching methods. Some of the most common terminologies associated with diverse teaching methods include culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural and linguistic teaching, culturally sustaining pedagogy and CRT. Hollie (2019) surveyed 25 different California schools that promoted the use of culturally responsive teaching. Out of the 25 schools, only 13 had language describing their program structure that would be considered culturally responsive. Out of the 13, six schools had a culturally responsive language plan (Hollie, 2019).

Hollie (2019) affirmed that many districts are complacent in teaching students in culturally responsive ways. The theoretical framework of culturally responsive teaching is becoming a selling item or popular phrase more than practice in several districts. Hollie argued there is no current baseline for what constitutes practice or pedagogy considered culturally responsive (Hollie, 2019). Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019) suggested ways to help educators implement CRT through social-emotional learning strategies, including professional development workshops and conferences, CRT videos, articles, and lesson plan templates. Gay (2018) promoted culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogy that can connect students of color to the curriculum, engaging students from diverse backgrounds while embracing their family dynamic and history in the classroom.

Gay (2010, 2018) laid out a baseline of five elements of culturally responsive teaching, forming the five elements that promote CRT in the classroom. First, educators must have knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity. This goes beyond just head knowledge; instead, it involves the teacher understanding where students are coming

from. Second, Gay stated that selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture may reach students who are not connecting to traditional methods of instruction. Next, Gay (2002) emphasized the need for teachers to develop a multicultural curriculum, providing inclusive instruction using language and life situations that connect to the students' schematic lens. The fourth element of CRT consists of instituting supportive learning communities. Lastly, the fifth element includes the family and sharing of the students' culture in and out of the classroom by using appropriate communication as the key to developing trusting relationships. The theory of CRT is responsive in its methodology, as students and families communicate in different ways.

Chapter Summary

Prior research on student connectedness through the lens of students, parents, and teachers within the last 10 years is limited. Current research trends give evidence that supports the necessity of middle school student connectedness to school, and the weight it carries regarding student academic accomplishments, motivation toward school, and self-efficacy (Anyon et al., 2016; Ashley et al., 2012; Bahena et al., 2016; Biag, 2016; Bonner et al., 2018; Fifolt et al., 2018; Foster et al., 2017; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Monahan et al., 2010; Niehaus et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2010; Tomek et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2015). However, the articles revealed several limitations and suggestions for future research, including longitudinal studies, gender, ethnic differentiation, case studies, and parent perceptions of student connectedness.

Bahena et al. (2016) suggested obtaining longitudinal information on parent perceptions regarding middle school student connectedness on school fit. Similarly,

Foster et al. (2017) stated future research should examine to what extent connectedness translates to student outcomes long-term. Perry et al. (2010) argued that research among parent voices has been primarily conducted among White families, and data needs to be obtained from parents from diverse communities. Breaking it down even further, Gonida and Cortina (2014) contested that minimal research is available regarding the difference between father or mother perceptions and how involvement affects student connections to school and academic achievement. About teacher perceptions, Bonner et al. (2018) concluded that data collected through surveys or interviews should connect the teachers' ethnicity to get a closer look at their perceptions and how they may have a bias or internal influence.

Examining data that compares the perceptions of the parent and the educator on students being taught through a CRT lens is hard to find in current research. A qualitative study gaining the perspective of both parents and teachers may give insight into what interventions or methods of instruction positively affects middle school students of color in communities with low income. Although the African quilt project was not a study, Lifschitz-Grant (2020) used the five elements of CRT organically, and it worked. Gaining the perception of families and educators through interviews on the instruction in the classroom may give a clear lens into what methods or forms of communication help connect students of color to their teachers, school, and education. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the chosen study, including data collection, study location, participant demographics, research design, and data analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The quality of education is lacking for middle school students of color in communities with low income (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Instruction through the lens of culturally responsive teaching may help reach marginalized students who fit this description. Due to the increase in cultural and economic diversity in the public school system, Bonner et al. (2018) stated that there is a need for instruction to reflect the students they serve. There is little research on educators' and parent perceptions concerning the connectedness of students of color in low income communities regarding culturally responsive teaching (Bonner et al., 2018).

Puchner and Markowitz (2015) found that educators who are not familiar with the culture of their students may lack proper training and display biased opinions. Adding to this perception, Bonner et al. (2018) argued that some educators do not have the necessary skills to embrace a culturally diverse lens. This lack of training could influence educators' ability to teach students of color effectively. Bonner et al. (2018) discovered that when teachers committed to embracing students' culture, they became engaged in their home life, helping build relationships with their families. Ferrara (2011) found the benefits of shifting educators' mentality to be culturally responsive by including the family in the classroom may help underperforming students connect to their education. Including the students, family, and culture in the classroom may give students the support needed to succeed academically.

One of the most under-researched areas is the relationship between the family, the student, and the school regarding student connectedness (Bahena et al., 2016). Through their research, Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) suggested that school counselors can bridge parents and families with the school to better the students' education. Culturally responsive teaching enables the educator to connect to ethnically diverse populations by understanding each student's family culture and ways of life. Gonida and Cortina (2014) found that strong family engagement in the classroom resulted in academic success among students of color. Evidence indicates that parent and family involvement impacts students' development, securing connections to school and academic mastery (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010).

Gay (2002) stated five elements that promote CRT in the classroom that promote cultural diversity knowledge and understanding. The criteria include having knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity, selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture may reach students who are not connecting to traditional methods of instruction, developing a multicultural curriculum, instituting supportive learning communities, engaging families of the students' culture in and out of the classroom, and using appropriate communication as the key to developing trusting relationships with students and the families they serve. The research questions were developed to examine the perceptions of parents and educators related to their student's instruction regarding culturally responsive teaching:

1. From the perspective of urban middle school educators, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?

2. From the perspective of urban middle school parents and family members, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?
3. From the perspectives of urban middle school educators, parents, and family members, what classroom activities and initiatives most engage urban middle school students and connect them to school?

Phenomenological research, gathering data through lived experience, was the best approach for this qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study consisted of interviews with teachers, families, and administrative staff on their lived experience with the curriculum taught in an urban charter school. Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were constructed using the five elements of culturally responsive teaching defined by Gay (2000) that engage students of color. Biag (2016) researched non-certified staff, teachers, and administrators' perceptions of school connectedness for students of color in underserved communities. Using multiple perspectives through open-ended interviews, Biag (2016) was able to gain different viewpoints on how students of color engaged in the school environment.

Research Context

The study occurred in a charter middle school in an economically challenged neighborhood within a large city in Upstate, NY. With over 200,000 residents, the city is the third-largest metropolitan center in NY and the 79th largest in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The city is surrounded by universities, higher education, and companies well-known throughout the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The city is one of the most impoverished in the state, with one of

the lowest graduation rates comparable to its size. People of color make up 60% of the poverty rate. The city school district serves over 25,000 students, and 93% of the total student population are students of color (NYS Department of Education, 2019). Based on parent/guardian self-reporting of income, 99% of students qualify for free or reduced-fee lunch, a standard measure for schools' economic needs.

The participating charter middle school is within the boundaries of the city school district. The charter school is comparable to the city school district's demographics as students of color make up 95% of the enrollment, and 99% of all students qualify for free lunch. The total student population in the middle school Grades 6-8 consists of 192 students (NYS Department of Education, 2019). The charter school was selected, in part, because of its statement of beliefs that includes the creed that families are an integral part of the academic success of the students. The school's set of beliefs also includes embracing diversity, emphasizing educators' need to continue professional development to properly reach each student.

The researcher is a youth department director for a community action agency that promotes self-sufficiency within a major city in Upstate, NY. Early experience included working with children of different races and nationalities as a center director in a child development center within the city where the study took place. Early in the child development center, the skills learned were formative and transferrable as a department director, leading other managers and direct reports in expanding services and new program initiatives within urban schools in Upstate, NY.

Research Participants

The study participants consisted of current teachers, administrators, and families affiliated with the charter school in Upstate, NY. The sample of the three groups was gathered across sixth through eighth grade. Purposive sampling is used when a specific population characteristic is needed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling is the best approach to select families and educators based on what grade the students are in and what grade the teachers instruct. The sample size was taken from 15 educators, approximately 150 families, and four administrators. The semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with five educators, five family members, and two administrators (Flick, 2018). The selection size was based on the suggested sample size from Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Biag's (2016) qualitative research on school connectedness. Each group was asked questions regarding culturally responsive teaching according to their interactions with the students and the school. Biag (2016) conducted research on 17 different educators, administrators, and staff, using random sampling, separating each to avoid hierarchal differentiation. This allowed Biag (2016) to collect data that reflected different leadership levels' perspectives, avoiding partial data through triangulation of multiple resources.

Ethical considerations included the relationship between the principal and the researcher. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that the researcher is responsible for showing how all data will be collected to demonstrate that it will not be compromised. The researcher manages agency coordinators who provide after-school programming within the school. The researcher interacts with the middle school principal in maintaining a signed memorandum of understanding between the school and the agency,

including obtaining the demographics of students from the administrative staff. However, the researcher does not have a relationship or direct contact with any of the school's parents/guardians or teaching staff. The content of the questions had no implications related to after-school learning. All questions pertained to the curriculum taught during the school day and were conducted with participants not affiliated with the after-school program to avoid any possible conflict of interest.

Recruitment

Participants in the study were volunteers recruited from current teachers, administrators, and families from sixth-eighth grades who were part of the charter school. The sample of teachers and family members consisted of the following: teachers ($n = 5$), administrators ($n = 2$), and family members ($n = 5$). All teachers and administrators were eligible for the study as they were not directly affiliated with the after-school program. However, to be cautious, families who were part of the after-school program were not eligible for the study due to the relationship with the program staff supervised by the researcher. Purposive sampling gave each member of the population who met the criteria and deadline response time an equal chance to participate in the study. The researcher arranged this sampling with help from the administrative staff for confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) helped generate a cross-section of the parents' schematic views and world experiences to avoid selecting only those participants whose program experiences appeared to follow the narrative of the selected study.

Table 3.1 shows the demographics of the interviews conducted. The table breaks down the identified race of the participants, the grade the teachers instructed, the grade of

the student for whom the parent was interviewed, and the two administrators who oversaw the charter middle school. Representatives from Grades 6-8 participated in the study. However, for confidentiality purposes, grade level was not defined in the teacher demographic.

Table 3.1

Demographics of Teachers, Family Members, and Administrators

| Pseudonym | Grade level/Discipline | Group | Identify as |
|--------------|--|-------------------------------|--------------|
| Ernie (E1) | Social studies | Teacher | White Male |
| Eddie (E2) | Math | Teacher | White Male |
| Everett (E3) | Math | Teacher | Black Male |
| Elena (E4) | English | Teacher | Black Female |
| Emma (E5) | Science | Teacher | White Female |
| Fiona (F1) | 7 th grade | Family member: parent | Black Female |
| Fran (F2) | 8 th grade | Family member: parent | Black Female |
| Farah (F3) | 8 th grade | Family member: parent | Black Female |
| Fatimah (F4) | 7 th grade | Family member: parent | Black Female |
| Freda (F5) | 6 th grade | Family member: grandparent | Black Female |
| Angel (A1) | 6 th -8 th grade | Administrator | White |
| Ali (A2) | 6 th -8 th grade | Administrator | Black |
| <i>N</i> = | | | 12 |

A letter of explanation was drafted to include the nature of the study and was shared with participants before the study. Confidentiality was explained in the data collection process. Participants in the study received a \$25 gift card in appreciation of their time. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated, all participants must be comfortable with the interview process. Participants could opt out of the study if they were uncomfortable with any part of the process; none of them withdrew from their interview. Letters of intent were sent via email to family members through the school administrator and contained the researcher's information. The researcher emailed the teachers and administrators directly with access and permission from the school. Letters were mailed home and emailed to those with internet access, asking family members to respond if interested in the study. The charter school's administrative staff shared the names of any interested participants with the researcher. The researcher contacted potential volunteers on a first-come basis. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Instruments Used in Data Collection

For phenomenological research involving interviews, Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated semi-structured open-ended questions are useful for collecting data. The interview questions were aligned with the five elements of culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2010, 2018) laid out a baseline of five culturally responsive teaching elements, forming the five elements that promote CRT in the classroom. Gay (2002) stated that selecting instruction inclusive of students' cultures may reach students who are not connecting to traditional instruction methods. Having knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity, Gay (2002) emphasized the need for teachers to develop a multicultural curriculum, providing inclusive instruction using language and life situations that connect

to the students' schematic lens. Another element consists of creating supportive learning communities. This element includes the family and sharing of the students' culture in and out of the classroom. Lastly, CRT uses appropriate communication as the key to develop trusting relationships with students and the families they serve.

To conduct a good research study, Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested using triangulation. The researcher gathered information from multiple sources to properly triangulate, including teachers, administrators, and family members. All participants were interviewed in a semi-structured, open-ended question format. A pilot test of the questions was conducted by a teacher and parent of the middle school not participating in the study. Data from the pilot questions were analyzed, and changes to the questions were not needed to get quality feedback for the official data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interviews were conducted via Zoom. All participants had adequate technology to conduct the interview. The interviews were recorded through Zoom and a second recording device to capture all sessions. According to Adams and Lawrence (2019), recording all interviews will account for higher accuracy because the researcher can examine the recordings multiple times. All recordings were sent to a transcriptionist service that is not affiliated with the study.

Multiple sources of data collection were obtained, including the recorded interviews. Researcher notes were taken during and after each session. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated the importance of reflexive thinking during the interview process. The researcher took notes on observations made during the interviews to reflect on how personal experiences may have shaped the interpretation of the data collected. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), each interview should not exceed 90 minutes. The

interview sessions ranged between 25-50 minutes. The interview questions were tailored for each group to determine if CRT elements were found in the current instruction. The data collection process began after St. John Fisher College IRB approved the study. Twelve interviews took place with five teachers, five parents, and two administrators. Biag (2016) used a semi-structured interview process while interviewing teachers, administrators, and non-certified staff regarding student connectedness. Biag (2016) found underlying themes that differed among the groups, capturing diverse viewpoints, strengthening the study's validity. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated, qualitative validity and reliability are necessary to ensure the study is accurate on all levels between the researcher, the participants, and those reading the study.

Procedures for Data Analysis

The researcher used content analysis with an inductive process for the phenomenological study on urban middle school student connectedness (Flick, 2018). Gathering data from the perceptions of families, teachers, and administrators, Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested following a process for qualitative studies. Starting with organization, reading the data, coding, generating themes, and assigning themes to three groups: expected themes, surprising themes, and unexpected themes. Organizing the data for analysis using charts helps put everything in one spot, easily transferrable for the coding process. A transcription book was developed with all the transcribed interviews. Each group was sectioned off and tabbed for easy retrieval of data. Data were read through several times, and line numbers of quotes, a priori codes, and emerging codes were placed on the front page of each transcription. Two tables were made from this process, one with the codes and the questions aligning with the five elements of CRT,

and then axial coding with the emerging themes and subthemes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Inter-coder reliability was used for the study to ensure the researcher coded correctly (Flick, 2018). This process strengthens the quality of the analysis by using more than one viewpoint to evaluate the data (Flick, 2018). Once the data was compiled, a selected transcript was read line by line by the researcher and a fellow researcher in the doctoral program. As words or phrases populated from the data, numbering helped quantify codes (Flick, 2018). As described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), themes emerged from the data. Three cycles of coding were used. Prior to the study, a priori codes were developed using the five elements of culturally responsive teaching (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The additional coding phase included open-ended coding, applying words or phrases to the open-ended interview questions, and assigning one or more codes to each response (Flick, 2018). Lastly, axial coding was used to condense codes, placing them in categories and subcategories using the collective voices of the participant interviews (Flick, 2018).

A coder was selected based on experience and graduate education level for the study on urban student connectedness. The coder read through the data to discuss the codes and emergent themes. A master list of codes was compiled by the researcher (Flick, 2018). For example, Biag (2016) had the coders meet to discuss the codes and general categories to see where they agreed. In the last part of the coding analysis, axial coding was applied to the data and was re-examined to look for connections between them. Axial coding helped reduce the number of themes and identify categories combined (Biag,

2016). The final step outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) was to categorize themes into groups that were expected, surprising, and unexpected themes that arose.

Confidentiality

All data collected was stored in a computer database with a locked passcode for confidentiality (Flick, 2018). The secured data includes all researcher notes during and after the interviews. All recordings were saved in a file located on a laptop that has a security code. Data will be saved for 3 years following the study, then will be destroyed.

Procedures

The following procedures were used to ensure a quality study was conducted following the guidelines and provisions set by St. John Fisher College.

1. Obtained IRB approval from St. John Fisher College.
2. Documented support letter from the charter school for families, teachers, and administrators to participate in the study.
 - a. Letter drafted to teachers, administrators, and families describing the study and seeking participation. (sent in an email and regular mail) See Appendix A and Appendix B.
3. Drafted consent forms for participants. See Appendix C.
4. Piloted interview questions with volunteers from the charter school not participating in the study. See Appendices D, E, and F.
 - a. Revisions to the questions were not needed.
5. Conducted research
6. Data analysis
 - a. Transcribed interviews.

- b. Inter-coder reliability was conducted.
- c. Analyzed and coded, reviewed for themes among codes, inductive process as categories emerged from the data.

All procedures were conducted in the order expected through the IRB to meet the standards set for the Executive Leadership program located at St. John Fisher College.

Summary

The study on student connectedness in a middle school in Upstate, NY, provided an opportunity to gather the perceptions of educators and families regarding teaching methods that reflect or do not reflect culturally responsive teaching. Addressing the lack of connectedness for middle school students of color requires educators to look through each student's cultural lens and teach with diverse intent creating an inclusive environment (Gay, 2000). Semi-structured interviews captured the experiences of parents, family members, teachers, and administrators with the intent to find commonalities and differences in their perceptions of the current curriculum taught within the school (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collected and analyzed may help future educators design a responsive curriculum to the students' cultures. Findings may add to the current research in student connectedness among middle school students of color. The next chapter includes portions of the transcriptions from the interviews and the findings from the data analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

Urban middle school student connectedness continues to be a topic of concern for students of color in connecting to their education (Wiggan & Watson, 2016). Gay's (2000) five elements of culturally responsive teaching give educators a benchmark to measure curriculum, delivery of instruction, and the significant cultural responses needed to connect with students of color and their families. Bonner et al. (2018) stated a need for instruction to reflect the students they serve due to increased cultural and economic diversity in the public school system. Research is minimal on educators' and parent perceptions concerning the connectedness of students of color in low income communities regarding culturally responsive teaching (Bonner et al., 2018). Research that gains the perceptions from both educators and families may be beneficial in implementing strategies for middle school students of color to connect to their education.

This study examined the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and families regarding the curriculum delivered in a public charter school setting. The study used interviews via Zoom to gather the lived experiences of all three groups regarding the curriculum and strategies used through the lens of CRT (Creswell, 2018). The responses from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively through the five elements of culturally responsive teaching. The elements include having knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity, selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture may reach students who are not connecting to traditional methods of instruction, developing a

multicultural curriculum, instituting supportive learning communities, engaging families of the students' culture in and out of the classroom, and using appropriate communication as the key to developing trusting relationships with students and the families they serve. (Gay, 2000).

Research Questions

This study provided insight regarding the commonalities and differences teachers, administrators, and families have in identifying strategies that resemble the five elements of culturally responsive teaching among their students' education (Gay, 2000). The study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. From the perspective of urban middle school educators, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?
2. From the perspective of urban middle school parents and family members, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?
3. From the perspectives of urban middle school educators, parents, and family members, what classroom activities and initiatives most engage urban middle school students and connect them to school?

This chapter contains three sections. The first section contains the demographics of the teachers, administrators, and family members according to their respective students' grades and the interviewee's ethnicity. Having three different perspectives allowed the researcher to obtain triangulation, creating a solid research study from multiple viewpoints (Creswell, 2018). Next, themes that emerged from the interviews of the three groups were analyzed and provide understanding to the research questions and

theoretical framework. Lastly, the chapter ends with a summary of the findings, and the key results found in the study are discussed.

Data Analysis and Findings

Semi-structured open-ended individual interviews were used to collect data from teachers ($n = 5$), administrators ($n = 2$), and family members ($n = 5$). Data were collected over 4 weeks via Zoom at the interviewee's convenience. In total, 12 interviews were conducted. Teachers consisted of three males, one self-identified as Black, two as White. Two teachers were female; one identified as Black, the other as White. The teachers' disciplines varied from social studies, science, math, and English. All five of the family members identified as Black or African American. All but one identified as female, stating they were the child's mother, and one family member identified as grandma. Two family members were parents of eighth-grade students, two seventh-grade students, and one a grandmother of a sixth-grade student. The administrators consisted of one White female and one Black male.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: *From the perspective of urban middle school educators, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?* Two main themes emerged from the interviews of the teachers and administrators and were aligned with the theoretical framework of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). The themes were generated from the responses to Research Question 1. The interview protocol was designed to prompt teachers and administrators to give information regarding the curriculum taught and the methods used to teach

students from Grades 6 to 8 in the charter school. Table 4.1 shows the themes for Research Question 1.

Table 4.1

Research Question 1: Themes and Subthemes

| Themes | Subthemes |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1.1 Students relating to the text | Standard curriculum: Afrocentric/Eurocentric teaching strategies Book choice |
| 1.2 Pop culture/student culture | Knowing students Student's voice |

Theme 1.1: Students Relating to Text. All five teachers and both administrators articulated that the standard curriculum was “white-washed” or Eurocentric focused. All educators stated that most of the student population consists of students of color. Throughout the interviews, the teachers expressed either their ability or inability to access culturally appropriate learning strategies. Ernie, a social studies teacher, provided an example of Gay’s (2000) elements of culturally responsive teaching by developing a multicultural curriculum with online resources. When prompted about what resources were available that were culturally appropriate, he said, “there’s a fair amount . . . I read to stay current on these sort of things . . . finding other points to the curriculum. Black history textbooks that are [an] open resource online, that’s been super helpful” (E1, 50-

54). Everett expressed his experience as a math teacher, having to teach 98% from the book because of the nature of his discipline. When talking about the population of students he was serving, he stated, “with this school environment, I guess I’ll say that’s definitely one of the challenges is getting them engaged in what we’re teaching” (E3, 63-64).

Standard Curriculum: Afrocentric Versus Eurocentric Teaching Strategies.

Ernie, a social studies teacher, talked about how he was currently teaching the progressive era. Ernie stated how in the standard teaching materials, “there’s all these big reforms, but they are mostly focused on White people, and minorities and women are really left by the wayside.” Continuing with his explanation, Ernie talked about the biased curriculum in the text and the Eurocentric view of history. He stated,

Even talking about the way the map is drawn and how- how that it really expresses like hard Eurocentric view and like exactly looking at these things, except as the norm and like looking at me like, okay, you know, why if we look at a map on the wall, why is America bigger than Africa? Africa is literally 33% larger. Why is the northern hemisphere larger than the southern hemisphere? And how does that mess with your mind? (E1, 150-157)

Ernie discussed his strategy in helping his student population relate to the text. He said,

The narratives of African Americans and Latinos are always present in my curriculum. I have actually a little post-it note next to my computer. So, when I’m, you know, working on lessons, I remember to continually interject that. So, making sure that I arrange and keep those voices in there. That’s super important to me. (E1, 8-12)

Eddie, a math teacher, reinforced that this was not just in the standard teaching textbooks, but he also had difficulty finding culturally appropriate examples in articles. He stated, “there’s very rarely a time where I can pull an article from that certain culture” (E2, 41-42) when explaining his endeavors in bringing the relatable text to individual student cultures in his class. Everett, another math teacher, uses the Ready curriculum, a problem-solving-based teaching approach, and, like Eddie, identified his struggles with bringing student culture to relate better to math. He stated, “98% of everything I do is coming straight from that book” (E3, 34). Everett explained that he could get creative for the other 2%, for instance, changing names and places to match the students in his classroom. When discussing teaching strategies for subjects such as math and science, Angel, an administrator in the charter school, pointed out that “math I think is the hardest to look at it with a culturally responsive [lens], because the really kind of boilerplate way to do it is just like change the names” (A1, 36-37). Like Everett, several of the other teachers expressed how they change the names in the text to better represent the students culturally to align with whom they are teaching in the classroom.

Emma, a science teacher, expressed her strategy of engaging students in the lessons through a STEM project. She stated, “so we’re doing, for example, this week we’re doing, I hate saying Black history month because it’s a week, but we are going to be focusing on Black innovators in the STEM fields” (E5, 16-18). Emma expressed that it is difficult to find a curriculum that pulls from the culture of the students with whom she works. Angel, one of the administrators, explained that “one example is that in science, science eight, they are coming up on the genetics unit. And in the past, I’ve seen that unit kind of fall flat from a cultural, culturally responsive standpoint” (A1, 23-25).

To confirm this viewpoint, Emma spoke on how it is much easier to get creative in other subjects such as English. In her former experience in a Hispanic charter school with students who had just arrived from Puerto Rico, she stated that,

We catered our lessons culturally to what they were familiar with. And even out of our class, out of 21 students, 20 were from the Dominican Republic. I mean, I, first of all, this was just for modifications I made that were in line with best practices for ESL (English as a Second Language), but students were allowed to do all their assignments in English or Spanish. (E5, 26-30)

The teaching staff had to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. Fran, an eighth-grade parent, had a similar response when asked about culture in the classroom regarding math and science to reinforce the teachers' perspective. She talked about the projects and activities that included her child's culture in English and social studies. However, her response for math and science was different; she stated, "her other classes are just like basics. You don't really learn anything but math, science, that's it" (F2).

Elena, an English teacher, said that "everything I do includes the background and culture of my students" (E4, 8). She incorporated their individuality into the curriculum daily. Elena spoke about the different cultures and hard truths she brought into the lessons when prompted by her cultural diversity knowledge. She shared,

A lot of people don't even realize that not only where you know, the Holocaust where they had the internment camps for Jewish people, but Japanese people, Japanese American people were put into these horse-like stables, even though these people had bought houses contributed to the market right here in America, Japanese people were also treated poorly when, you know, everything went down

in World War II, they were forced to move out of their homes to take as many tags as they could carry into these horse, like stables to live in America. So-so yes, we, we try to, I try to give them an enriched variety of different ethnic groups who have suffered at the hands of America. Sad, but true (E4, 36-44).

Elena expressed the need for students to understand the suffering of other cultures, more than just their own. Another strategy Elena used was building background knowledge with her students before she started with the text. She explained,

I don't want to insult their intelligence. Then I'll start out with the article and get them to tell me what they've thought about it and making connections themselves. And I'm always amazed when I do that, because the stuff that I feel like they should know already, they don't, and the things that I feel like might be difficult and they probably don't know about it. They do. So, I still feel around a lot to make sure that all my learners are reached (E4, 69-74).

Ali, an administrator, had been working at the charter school for less than a year. They mentioned working in a different school setting where cultural references were used to help students identify with the instruction. Their viewpoint at this charter school differed as they said,

I've seen them not so much since I've been in this building [cultural references], not at all in history or science or any other lessons. I will say that the lessons I've seen since I've been in this building that have been done that were culturally relevant to the students by Black teachers. (A2, 17-20)

Ali spoke about the diversity, equity, and inclusion training that they were working on for the teaching staff to monitor and reflect on their own practices. They went on to say, "I

would say that first and foremost is the teacher that's in the classroom and how they are arranging and organizing and putting together materials for their lessons, for the students that they're teaching in front of them" (A2, 36-38).

Like Ali, Elena referenced the need to be mindful of the student whom she is teaching. She said,

Being African American is more than a hairdo . . . it's much much more than being slaves. We were somebody before slavery. If you go into research, you will know that it was the people from Africa who started mathematics, you know, built the pyramid. (E4, 98-102)

Elena went on to talk about how students of color were not taught about the outstanding achievements of their heritage. She stated, "they don't have a lot to be proud of unless someone is teaching this. And we do know that the majority of teaching should happen at home, but we also know that it doesn't happen at home" (E4, 103-105). Elena continued to share how she provided incentives for her students to incorporate other cultures into the curriculum through competition. She said,

Whichever group does the most homework wins a pizza party or can choose what I bring in. One year we had tacos. I had all the fixings, buffet-style for them, and all these nice fancy bowls, just celebrating them. I had a write-up on how, when tacos came about, whose culture this belongs to, you know . . . so they're learning even though they're eating taco salad. (E4, 359-364)

The educators shared how much of the standard teaching curriculum is not inclusive for students of color. However, using the Internet, and getting creative with the way they teach to the students, and using other curriculums was helpful. Teachers also shared how

getting ideas from colleagues and being intentional about delivering information was essential to reach the students. One administrator shared that not enough strategies were taking place for all teachers within the charter school. The educators shared another way to reach students is by selecting culturally appropriate literature.

Book Choice. According to Angel, an administrator, the teaching staff can choose books to engage learners from their serving population. They stated, “We have resources from the [school district] for textbooks and library books. We’re very careful to make sure that there are books that will appeal to every kid in our population” (A1, 62-64). Ali, another administrator, spoke about book selection that emphasized the culture of the students, such as *Mango Street* and *Water for Water* that reached their student population. Elena, an English teacher, used the book Ali referred to during a lesson on health disparities that arise from poverty. She said,

We focus on a text called *Brown Girl Dreaming* and another text called the *House on Mango Street* . . . about a Mexican family who is very, very poor in Chicago. Even though it’s fictitious and embellished to really get the reader to understand how serious poverty is and how serious segregation and racism is not only for Black people, but any nation of people of color. (E4, 33-37)

Elena continued to talk about the importance of informing the students on history that may not be covered in regular textbooks. She stated, “I teach eighth graders, everything they’ve learned up until this point has been off, you know, old White men . . . something to boost America up and I’m just interested in teaching the truth” (E4, 79-81).

The educators concluded that using culturally appropriate literature for students of color is one way to incorporate a more diverse classroom. They also shared that using

pop culture was a way to connect students to their lessons, opening a window for students and teachers to connect on a different level. Educators communicated that using pop culture references was a strategy to understand their students on a personal level.

Theme 1.2: Pop Culture/Student Culture. When the teachers were asked about the resources they had available to them, most of them had different answers on what they used. However, four out of the five mentioned using some form of pop culture to reach the students. Ernie, the social studies teacher, used online teaching materials to integrate Black history into his lesson plans. He also stated,

I listen to a lot of music, man. So, you know, like I like rap music. And so being able to have those conversations now, do I necessarily like rappers that my kids like, not necessarily, but I'm able to deconstruct why I think it's trash. So I think that's helpful. (E1, 54-57).

Knowing Students. Like Ernie, Everett, a math teacher, referenced using Spotify and Apple Music and getting creative since they went virtual. He stated, "One thing that I've started doing since we've gone virtual is like, I call it "What up Wednesday." Everett uses this to engage with the students asking them questions that relate to their lives. He said, "And it's really just for me to like, get to know them" (E3, 37). Elena used Engaged in NY when she started at the charter school 4 years ago, which she referenced,

It was very helpful and did have a lot of culturally responsive teachings in it. But as time goes on, you know, I fit different things to my character since I have to teach it, and I've found other whether it's poetry, nonfiction fiction, short stories, that I feel like it's better to get the learning across to my students. (E4, 50-53)

Like the others, Elena used music or pop culture in her teaching strategies. She shared, “In our poetry section and a lot of figurative language, I try to implement rap; they all love rap. There’s not one student that I had that didn’t love it. So, I’m able to grab their attention with that” (E4, 144-145). Like Ernie, Elena chose rap or poetry/lyrics that were encouraging, straying away from lyrics that promoted drug use and other risky behaviors. Elena allowed the students to share their music but made it a teachable moment. She said,

Listen to it with them, ask them, hey, what are you like? What kind of music do you like? And listen to it with them and learn the lyrics and then explain to them, this is why I don’t think this is best for you. (E4, 159-161)

Emma, the science teacher, taught using the state standards and used Google to get whatever information she needed. She also mentioned she liked to see what her coworkers were doing. She said,

I like to see all the other ideas that are out there and think, how am I going to relate it to my students? What do they like? And how does that play into our pacing guide, our scope, and sequence at our school? (E5, 67-68)

Emma also referred to using pop culture to relate the material to her students. She stated,

Just relating to them on that level. I think that is a great example of just knowing the pop culture references. And I make it, you know, I do listen to the Beat or WDKX just to kind of try and keep up, and, you know, I like to be in tune to pop culture references to get them in, educate myself. (E5, 56-59)

Eddie, a math teacher, referenced the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training the administrator spoke about. He said,

Yeah, I mean, we have DEI training here at my school, which helps create the culturally responsive teaching . . . so we use that information and those resources with articles and Ted Talks and stuff like that in order to create culturally responsive teaching. (E2, 20-22)

Eddie did not mention any use of pop culture in his lesson development or strategies to reach students. Angel, an administrator, talked about the importance of engaging students from an adolescent perspective. They said,

The key really is like, keep adolescents in mind, cause that's a big part of it too, you know? So there's a culture response part and also the part where teachers are knowledgeable and thoughtful about the fact that our kids are 11-14 years old. (A1, 86-90)

Elena had a similar perspective on knowing the story of the students in front of you. She spoke about how frustrating it could be when students do not show up for class. "You don't really know their full story. Like this kid may have to babysit their younger siblings while their mother or father are trying to figure out . . . we just need to make a couple of paychecks" (E4, 172-175). Elena continued to explain that students may not tell you the whole story in fear of Child Protective Services (CPS) being called, emphasizing the necessity of understanding and knowing the students in the classroom.

Student Voice. Some of the educators who used pop culture articulated that it was not enough to keep students engaged. Giving students a place to be heard and seen was vital to Ernie; he stated, "middle school is a time of discovering yourself, making sure that, you know, everyone has a chance to shine" (E1, 91, 98). Ernie included that he would stop the class to dig deeper on things that mattered to the students, even asking

about a song reference or dance to get them engaged. He stated, “I’m like talking about dance with them. So yeah, being like, giving a shit about what your kids give a shit about, I guess that’s not good language for academic study” (E1). Like Ernie, Everett expressed the need for students to be themselves and self-discover. He said,

Middle school is that awkward age, you know . . . you kind of start to figure out who you are and what you’re going to be and what not. My students here are like . . . this is what I want to do with my life. This is why I’m doing that. Like that to me just speaks absolute value of the kids that we have. (E3, 376-379)

This type of atmosphere exemplifies one of the five elements of culturally responsive teaching by instituting a supportive learning community, giving students a platform to be themselves (Gay, 2002).

Eddie, a math teacher, opened every class with a collaboration board “that allows them to voice where they see certain topics” (E2, 48-49). Eddie used real-life examples with “real-world shopping and home buying statistics . . . they can see their life through those math topics. It’s really important for them to have a grasp on that” (E2, 66-69). Emma talked about knowing the students' life experiences and giving students respect and a voice when understanding diversity. She stated,

We have to cut each other slack because we have different experiences, and we all have our own struggles. For example, I have students that are Sudanese, so they’re not going to eat during Ramadan. Their classmates were very understanding last year when they participated in Ramadan. One of my students told me they’re used to it . . . it’s fascinating to them. They want to learn from each other. They’re not trying to ostracize. (E5, 122-127)

Angel, an administrator, expounded on the necessity of knowing who was in the room, not just looking at students and grouping them together and say, “everybody’s African American,” but understanding they are from different cultures. They stated,

The kids are from island cultures . . . Caribbean descent . . . there’s you know, the Sudanese kid who came out of a refugee camp 3 years ago and doesn’t know a darn thing about African American culture. I think it’s like being humble and learning about who’s in front of you. (A1, 106-112)

Understanding culture and giving students a voice is how Emma, a science teacher, shared how she taught. Emma communicated how she pulled from her upbringing to reach students. She had an interesting dialogue that differed from how others stated math and science was hard to teach from a culturally responsive viewpoint. Emma said that she incorporated student background in her everyday teaching. She stated,

That’s how I teach. That’s a side of my personality where I think I shine. I’m able to relate to other people’s experiences. So, for example, I am in the same neighborhood that I grew up in. I just referenced today; a student was talking about pre-k, and I said, I went to that pre-k, and someone says, I go to church there now. I was able to say, oh yeah, I know exactly where you are. (E5, 45-53)

Emma also referenced her growing up in the city and the impact it has had on her teaching career when relating to the population of the students she was serving. This viewpoint reinforces the first element of culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes understanding cultural diversity. Selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture may establish a connection for students versus traditional methods of

instruction and Eurocentric curriculum content (Gay, 2002). Later on in the conversation, Emma shared a strategy she used to incorporate student voices in the classroom. She said,

I'm big on student choice. Everyone's got different strengths. The students went nuts over their body systems project . . . some hybrid students were just so excited to get their hands on a poster board, like a normal year, you know? This really connected them. They had a choice of how they wanted to present their information. One student made a video, some did slide shows. One girl found a website where she made a cartoon. (E5, 330-339)

Everett, a sixth-grade math teacher, had a similar viewpoint based on his upbringing. Everett spoke on relating to students through different artists with whom the students identified. He mentioned where his knowledge of country music came from and how he could relate to the White students. He shared,

Being Black myself, I'm able to identify with . . . even unconsciously some things within my own culture. With the White students [I tell them], I use that radio station. I like this country artist. One of the unique things about me is that I'm from a small town, a predominately White town. So, even though I don't listen to it, I grew up with friends that did . . . to acknowledge that and acknowledging that there's differences in the classroom and that's it's not a bad thing. (E3, 110-121)

Based on the interviews and the themes that emerged regarding Research Question 1, the educators agreed that the standard curriculum needs modification to reach the students they are instructing. Many use the Internet to get the teaching materials needed to engage students of color in educational resources. Getting to know the students beyond a surface level helped teachers engage students in learning. Using pop culture and

culturally appropriate literature were strategies used across the board. Allowing students to be heard and be active participants was another strategy that surfaced throughout the interviews.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked: *From the perspective of urban middle school parents and family members, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?* Research Question 2 sought to get the perspective of parents and family members regarding the curriculum taught in the classroom and if it aligned with the five elements of culturally responsive teaching. Two main themes emerged from the data, how educators relate to their children and how they communicate to students and family members is everything. Table 4.2 outlines the themes and subthemes identified from Research Question 2.

Table 4.2

Research Question 2: Themes and Subthemes

| Themes | Subthemes |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 2.1 Relate to our children | Understanding student culture |
| | Student culture in the curriculum |
| 2.2 How you communicate is everything | Multiple modes of communication |
| | Positive and negative feedback |

Theme 2.1: Relate to Our Children. Data revealed that families emphasized how educators related to their children affected the student's education. Some of the family members stated that their student and family culture was not represented in the classroom. All agreed that knowing the student and understanding the population of the students was necessary for engaging students in learning. Ali, an administrator, suggested that bringing culture into the classroom should represent the community where the students lived when prompted by the question, what is culturally diverse? Ali stated, "bring in those different cultures that you see in front of you that are involved in the community, into the lessons, into activities . . . just your everyday planning, that's what it looks like" (A2, 45-47). Although articulated differently, the consensus was similar among the students' families.

Understanding Student Culture. Having the teacher understand and know the culture of the student population was essential to the family members. Fiona, a seventh-grade parent who identified as a Black female, talked about her experiences with her daughter's struggles. She stated,

There are some classes that she didn't too much care for because she didn't understand. I do have an Associate's degree, so I'm well educated, but the way you guys do things now is totally different than how it was done when I was in school. (F1, 47-51)

Fiona also expressed that there are many different types of students. She said, "As a teacher, you'll have to clearly understand who the students are that you're teaching" (F1, 117-118). Fran, an eighth-grade parent who identified as a Black female, reinforced the importance of understanding different types of students when prompted with the

question on cultural diversity. She stated, “it’s better to know about other people and their cultures and what goes on because, at the end of the day, when you go out to the real world, you’re going to be with everybody” (F2, 57-59).

When asked if student culture was represented in classroom instruction, Farrah, an eighth-grade parent, said that the curriculum taught was not reflective of her child. However, when prompted further, her answer reflected differently. She did say that her daughter likes Spanish. She stated, “she likes her Spanish teacher, and she likes to learn more different languages and learn more of different cultures right now” (F3, 39-40). Farrah also spoke about peer learning. She said, “meeting children from different walks of life, from elementary school to now a middle school, she just learns a lot of different things from different peers that she comes across while in school” (F3, 81-83). Like Farrah, Fatimah, a seventh-grade parent, stated that the curriculum taught was not reflective of her child’s life, language, or experiences. However, when prompted further, she stated, “I know certain teachers, they incorporate the songs that the kids like, so that gets to them . . . so they’re understanding or more engaged in a classroom or the lesson at the time. I like that part” (F4, 26-28). Farrah stated that being culturally diverse meant “that people celebrate their language, the food that they may [have], the religion that they might believe in and things like that” (F4, 40-41).

Freda, a sixth-grade grandparent, spoke about the importance of diversity among staff. She stated, “she has African American teachers, she deals with Caucasians, she’s got a Spanish one there too” (F5, 61-62). However, other than Black history month, Freda did not see a curriculum that reflected the culture or life experience of her grandchild. Fiona said it goes beyond including the student culture but understanding the individual

needs of the students. She stated, “I think that there are times where some teachers . . . they have a time when you have to be patient. If you want a student to understand something, you may have to repeat it 20 times” (F1, 140-143). She talked about how one child may only need to hear the instructions once. Still, another may need it repeated 20 times, emphasizing the difference in learning strategies needed individually.

Student Culture in the Curriculum. Most parents did not see the student’s life experience and culture represented in the curriculum when asked directly. Some of the responses differed when further prompted. This sub-theme gives the viewpoint of student culture in the curriculum from the parent’s perspective. When prompted about student culture in the teaching strategies, Fiona, a seventh-grade parent, said, “if the teacher is not giving himself or herself to a student, the way the student is reactive to them, they’re not going to learn anything” (F1, 62-64). When asked about if the learning environment or if the classroom was engaging, she stated, “my thing is that I really do feel like if a teacher if it’s not in their heart to make sure that that student learns where they’re supposed to, regardless, if you have to go above and beyond” (F1, 75-77). Fiona continued to talk about how some students may have behavior issues, but it was the teacher's responsibility to investigate. She stated,

I think some teachers get frustrated because there are some kids in there who don’t listen . . . but as a teacher, you might want to find out why. Maybe there’s something going on at home on why they’re reacting the way they’re acting in the classroom. (F1, 70-72)

Fran, an eighth-grade parent, spoke about the difference between when she was in school and her daughter's experience. She said, “when we were growing up, we didn’t

really identify with other people's cultures" (F2, 35). Fran mentioned the difference with her daughter's experience. She stated, "she learns new foods, and she just learns everything now versus where we were kind of stagnant when we were in school . . . it's all in their everyday experience there" (F1, 37-41). When speaking with Fatimah, a seventh-grade parent, she mentioned how the charter school was a better learning experience versus the traditional public school system. She said,

This has been his 2nd year at this school. It's been better than our past experiences . . . like the public school. It's been a positive change with dealing with the teachers and even just the school environment as a whole. (F4, 12-14)

When speaking with Freda, a grandparent of a sixth-grade student, she mentioned the ability to observe the classroom from home due to COVID-19. She stated, "I can just sit there and hear her when she's in the classes and stuff like that" (F5, 24). Freda expressed that the classroom was very diverse in student population from what she witnessed and stated that the students were engaged. She said, "I can hear when she's talking with the teachers, interacting with the students, and hearing the stuff they have online, and stuff like that" (F5, 25-26).

Parents and family members did not witness much student culture representation in the classroom. However, they were more concerned with the exchange between the students and teachers. Some participants expressed the advantages of smaller classrooms in a charter school and reaching out to get to know the students on a deeper level. Parents and family members shared the importance of communication between students and families with the teachers and administrators.

Theme 2.2: How You Communicate is Everything. When speaking with the families, the theme of communication emerged throughout the interviews. Parents and family members believed that communicating was everything to the students, parents, and family members. Multiple modes of communication occurred between the teachers and students, and families, even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Communication that engages students and families, connecting them to school exemplifies the fifth element of Gay's (2002) framework of culturally responsive teaching. Feedback from teachers and administrators is also discussed in this theme.

Multiple Modes of Communication. All five family members mentioned multiple modes of communication were evident at the charter school. All interviewees in the parent and family group said the school conducted robocalls, email, text messaging, phone calls, flyers, mailings home, face-to-face communication (before COVID-19), and now Zoom or virtual meetings. Fiona stated that she has been contacted every week since COVID-19. She emphasized how she was texted and how the message was relayed. She stated, "she's like, hey this is [teacher's name] just checking to make sure that everything is okay with you and [student's name] if you guys need anything let me know" (F1, 168-170). Fiona went on to describe how the messaging since COVID-19 had been more emotional. She said, "I think this is now teaching a lot of people more patience, more love, more care versus before people were like, eh, I don't care . . . I think I like the virtual teachers better" (F1, 176-179). Fran, another parent, commented on how much more engaged school staff were with communication due to COVID-19. She stated,

Before COVID, you really didn't get as much feedback. Now with COVID, they are extreme, like you get emails, text messages, letters, all types of stuff to ask,

how can it be better? A few of her teachers gave personal phone numbers. (F2, 112-117)

Like Fran, Fiona said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, she had received personal cell phone numbers from her daughter's teachers. Ali, an administrator, affirmed parents' experiences when referencing communication. He stated, "the pandemic . . . it's opened up more avenues to communicate. Now we have like a ton of different ways to communicate with them" (A2, 158-159). However, even though there were more modes of communication, Ali stated that there were still parents who they had never spoken with, some who had never responded.

Farrah, an eighth-grade parent, spoke on how communication was handled if there was a behavior issue. She stated,

From the teachers to the principal to the vice principal, very supportive; they connect with the families daily. They keep you informed on how your child is doing, what your child is lacking. They listen to her side to see why she did what she did or why she reacted in such a manner as she did. They notify me, and they tell me what they said to her, and they give her the phone. (F3, 99-100, 119-121)

Like Farrah, Fatimah, a seventh-grade parent, reinforced this position stating, "if they're struggling with anything, they'll send the email, and they'll ask if your child needs extra help with anything" (F4, 77-78). Freda, the grandparent of the sixth-grader, had a similar experience. She said, "when we're having our meetings, or when I feel she's having a problem with the virtual, I'll reach out to them, and they'll call me back, and we'll come up with a plan with her [if she needed individual assistance]" (F5, 91-93). Freda also stated, "communication is good. I reach out, they reach back to me" (F5, 100-101). Most

of the family participants spoke about a positive experience with communication at the charter school. Some articulated the need for communication to include positive feedback, not just when students were in trouble or needed help.

Positive and Negative Feedback. A few of the parents spoke about receiving feedback from teachers. Fiona spoke about how most of the communication regarding her daughter was negative. She said when the teachers contacted her, she “basically ignored them, cause [daughter's name] isn’t perfect” (F1, 206). She continued saying, “I had to basically recollect myself. They called me more on her negativeness than her positivity . . . I wouldn’t even know that there were some classes that [daughter’s name] was actually doing better in until the report card came” (F1, 207-209).

However, a few moments later in the interview, Fiona recalled a time when she received positive feedback. She remembered,

Now there was a teacher that called me. Let me take that back. I still have her voicemail. She called me on a Saturday . . . at first, when I heard it, I was like, oh no, but she left me a message letting me know that she has done things better. (F1, 227-230)

The teacher continued to say that she was proud of her daughter for working on her grade and hoped to continue the upward path. When prompted about how this made her feel, Fiona stated, “I’m not deleting it, and with so many family members I was like, listen to this . . . it meant a lot. I’m really gonna be honest with you with it” (F1, 246-250). Fiona said that it showed how the teacher really wanted her daughter to succeed.

When asked if feedback was asked for or given, Farrah stated, “anytime the school needed me, they never hesitated. They always called, and as far as being

professional and being informative, they do that” (F3, 126-127). Angel, an administrator at the charter school, spoke on the difference between middle school families versus elementary school families in responding to or giving feedback. Angel stated, “communication for younger kids is more like all day long. They’re used to kind of checking multiple times a day; they tend to be more engaged. A lot of parents are like, he’s 14, he should take of himself” (A1, 206-213). Ali, an administrator, spoke on the communication with staff and families and how sensitive parents were depending on who they were communicating with. They stated,

I could say something that will be taken totally different as opposed to a White teacher saying that-that’s the cultural part that plays a factor in what happens in the classroom, how it is delivered, how it is accepted and received, all of that matters. (A2, 117-121)

One of the elements of culturally responsive teaching, to engage families of the students' culture in and out of the classroom, was not mentioned by families in many of the interviews. From the interviews, it is hard to say whether this was due to a lack of communication between teachers and families before COVID-19 or whether families had not witnessed family engagement in the classroom. The family members discussed their experiences communicating with the school and with their students' teachers. Many of the participants agreed that COVID-19 had affected parent communication and feedback, mainly positively. The effects of COVID-19 continued as a topic affecting instruction and student connection discussed in the analysis of Research Question 3.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked: *From the perspectives of urban middle school educators and parents, what classroom activities and initiatives most engage urban middle school students and connect them to school?* All participants from each group voiced their experiences regarding student connection to the school, teachers, and instruction. There were many different responses. However, the theme– relationships are key– was evident for every participant in some form. Another theme that emerged from the data was family engagement, and it appeared to be a critical component of connecting students to school. In fact, many participants mentioned a school-wide event that displayed cultural inclusion for their student population. Another significant concern shared by the participants was the impact COVID-19 had on student connectedness and instructional delivery. Table 4.3 provides the themes and subthemes relative to Research Question 3.

Table 4.3

Research Question 3: Themes and Subthemes

| Themes | Subthemes |
|---------------------------|---|
| 3.1 Relationships are key | Levels of connectedness Non-teaching staff COVID-19 and Remote Learning |
| 3.2 Family Engagement | Engaged in learning School-wide activities |

Theme 3. 1: Relationships are Key. When reaching students, the participants in all three groups relayed in some form that relationships were vital to engage students in learning. Within this theme, several levels of connectedness were discussed, such as student connected to the teacher, to the school, and to the instruction. For example, Ernie, a social studies teacher, gave an example of stopping instruction if a student shared something unfamiliar. He stated, “if you hear something you’re not familiar with, [I would] stop class, you know [and say] let’s dig into this real quick. That’s important to be able to micro-content for a second” (E1, 98-101). Ernie later shared how this strategy showed students that he really cared about who they were as individuals. COVID-19 was mentioned during every interview. Fiona, a seventh-grade parent, expressed that “before COVID-19, I noticed that [my daughter’s] learning [was more successful] being in class than where she is now [virtual]” (F1, 11-12). Participants expressed that COVID-19 had an impact on each level of connectedness for students. Parents, teachers, and administrators felt the effects the pandemic had on the education of their students.

Levels of Connectedness. When prompted, the teacher participants had similar answers on how students connected to school and their education. Ernie, a social studies teacher, said about students,

They don’t necessarily have to like you, they don’t have to agree with everything you say, but you can tell that they trust you, like they may not like it, but they understand that you are coming from a place of love. It makes them more connected to the school. (E1, 266-271)

Eddie, a math teacher, believed that connection to school had a lot to do with how you framed communication with students. He was referring to students logging into the

virtual classroom. He stated, “you know it’s never a holy cow, you’re finally here, it’s always, thank you very much for logging in. It’s so good to see you, that language is really important for students to buy into school” (E2, 159-161).

Everett spoke on the importance of creating a fun class community as a strategy to engage students. He said, “I think it starts with an individual teacher and goes as high as the building as a whole . . . what identity are you creating and projecting onto the students. I’m very transparent like we’re gonna be comfortable, we’re gonna have fun” (E3, 308-315). Everett also mentioned teacher collaboration in creating this space for students. He said,

We call it a restorative day. You go to [teacher's name], he’s playing Home Alone in his room. You go to [teachers name] he’s playing Kahoot with you guys, or Ms. [teachers name] she’s got chips and hot chocolate and all this other stuff . . . like you guys are going to be great, everybody’s been working hard. We can tell that they’re getting tired, and they need a break . . . we hear you, but just start fresh on Monday. (E3, 337-344)

Everett also commented on building relationships. He stated,

It’s easier once you have those relationships built with them . . . like getting them to trust you and getting them to see, you’re not just a label, not just the teacher. You’re somebody who’s actually going to take care and ask them questions about their likes and their dislikes. (E3, 73-77)

Eddie, a math teacher, said students must understand and contact all their teachers. He said,

Unfortunately, you know, with COVID, you need to know their emails, you don't just follow the crowd up to their rooms and see their face every day . . . so connectedness means knowing how to communicate and how to contact each of your teachers. (E2, 129-131)

When interviewing Emma, a science teacher, she shared the strategies she used to connect with students. She stated, "relationships, that's my answer for everything . . . you don't have relationships you don't have anything . . . they're not going to do the work. You're not helping them socially and emotionally" (E5, 358-362). Emma continued to explain her process. She said,

Relationships are the basis because it helps me get to know the students. I will edit lessons at the last minute even if it's scheduled for tomorrow and I find out something they like, I will change it. We were supposed to do a Black history month field trip and watch dance at SOTA (School of the Arts) . . . we couldn't go, so we did our own dance at school. We found the evolution trail, Black trailblazers in dance, like Alvin Ailey, Gregory Hines, and their favorite, Michael Jackson. We created that during lunch for the end of the day. I'll do whatever tirelessly . . . brain's always moving to try to change things, to engage students. (E5, 368-378)

Farrah, an eighth-grade parent, spoke about her daughter's bond with the staff at the charter school. She said,

The bond that she has with the staff there, from going from sixth grade to seventh to eighth, has blossomed amazingly. I keep telling her this is her last year . . . she

was like, no, I want to stay there cause she's still connected. The staff at [the charter school] is awesome. (F3, 149-152)

Freda, a sixth-grade grandparent, gave an example of her granddaughter when she needs help. She stated when her granddaughter needs help, "she's able to tell them, I'm having problems. They'll sit down and show her, go through it with her and help her . . . and get her work done" (F5, 115-117).

Angel, an administrator, spoke about the different activities they do to connect students to school. Angel said, "we've done a lot around building traditions, you know, so we have like four dances a year . . . or like the moving up ceremony, that's a big part of it, and athletics" (A1, 245-254). Angel said that the dances were the most significant connection, and they connected with the same teachers at these events. Angel stated,

The dances are like, those are like the biggest connection. It's a chance for them to really be kids. They're playing video games. They bring their [Nintendo] Switch and play it, or they run around and play tag. I wish more teachers would go, but it's the same teachers who always go. (A1, 262-270)

When prompted, Angel talked about the importance of relationships by stating, "teachers, adults, I think it's the personal connection, it's the relationships that matter" (A1, 275-276).

Ali, an administrator, spoke on the importance of students feeling safely connected to the school and the importance of relationships. Ali stated, "Connectedness to school means that students have a place where they feel safe . . . someone in this location they feel comfortable talking to. They connect to the school community, not the

building” (A2, 177-182). In line with this thought process, many family members mentioned the connection they and their children had with all staff in the school.

Non-teaching Staff. When talking with the family members about the strategies used to connect students to school, some of the participants in this group mentioned the connection they and their child have with the receptionist, the principal, and the vice-principal. Fiona, a seventh-grade parent, stated,

There are several things; there could be a connection with a teacher, with a student, with the principal. I’m going to speak for our [daughter’s name]. She has a very good connection with Ms. [receptionist]. One thing I love about Ms. [receptionist], even though she’s the receptionist, she still wants to make sure [my daughter] succeeds. She’s not a teacher, but she’s the one from the school that has actually showed me that she cares from the 3 years she has been there. I was jobless, homeless. Ms. [receptionist] made sure [my daughter] ate. She made sure [daughter’s name] had clothes . . . that lady right there, she deserves everything because from the time [my daughter’s] been there up until now, she makes sure that [my daughter] is all set. (F1, 322-330)

Fran, another parent at the charter school, discussed her perception of connecting children to school. She stated,

You had those who are just super straight by the book. You hate going to their class. You got the other types of teachers that they’re still strict, but they try to adapt to you and figure out who you are and your learning skills. I also think like the staff outside of the teachers, because it’s everyone you come in contact with, so it’s the secretaries or the coaches, or the principal. (F2, 170-175)

Like Fiona, Fran spoke of the connection with the receptionist and the principal. She said, “she loves her school, she loves her principal, she loves [receptionist]. So to me, the connectedness is like, she just wants to be there” (F2, 149-150). Farrah added,

The only thing I can say about the staff and the school there from the teachers to the principal, to the vice principal, very supportive . . . they connect with the families daily, you know, even my child, other people’s children, it’s just like a family when she leaves home, she’s going to her other home. (F3, 99-104)

Fatimah, a seventh-grade parent, said that she believes connectedness means “them being able to feel like that’s their second home, like being able to be comfortable in the school environment themselves, with their peers, with their teachers. They’d be able to focus better” (F4, 114-117). With relationships and family-like connections at school being a focal point for connectedness for all the participants, many believed that instruction, connection, and student success had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 and Remote Learning. The world of education changed dramatically in 2020 with the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students and teachers alike had to swiftly shift their learning and teaching strategies to asynchronous learning. The majority of the interviewees mentioned the effects of the pandemic on the students and some, on their failure to thrive. When describing the difference between synchronous and asynchronous learning, Eddie, a math teacher, said, “even if it’s the world’s best asynchronous level lesson, it can only be half as good as a mediocre synchronous lesson” (E2, 180-181). Ernie, a social studies teacher, explained how COVID-19 had impacted the student and family connection. He stated,

I try to make phone calls . . . I could make 10-15 of them and then put the phone down and cry in the corner. I'm in a negative place with family engagement right now because every time I call, it's my kid not doing the work. (E1, 192-195)

Everett, a math teacher, described an activity he used before the pandemic to encourage his students. He reached out to the families asking them to write a note of encouragement to their children before a state test or during a stressful time. This year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he did not ask families for those notes. When speaking with Elena, an English teacher, she was disheartened at the lack of response from some of her students and parents. Elena mentioned the difference in response from the city charter school versus the suburban school her children attended, saying, "their kids are doing great" (E4, 121). She stated,

I have kids here, you know, working in the city that I have not ever seen before. They have never done one assignment for one teacher. And, if you call the parents, they are like, well, I can't do anything about this. I have to work. I got to put food on the table. They're in eighth grade; they can figure it out themselves. (E4, 122-127)

Emma, a science teacher, discussed how the school started a Saturday school day for students to be in-person for a 3rd day. The students were in hybrid, two in-person classes, two remote, and some were entirely remote. When discussing online learning, she stated, "Some students just struggle. They struggle on their remote days, and they do literally nothing" (E5, 212-213). Emma continued talking about the issues due to COVID-19. She gave an example of a student who had a high grade at the beginning of the year and went from a 95% to a 45%. She stated,

I keep emailing mom. I tell him [the student] I am happy to work with you. This is an extraordinarily bright student. I don't know what's going on. He is getting a zero. Maybe there's something deeper that we need to talk about. We have our grade level meeting Wednesday mornings. We talk about students in need, we might schedule a parent-teacher conference with the whole team. (E5, 236-241)

Like Emma, Fiona, a seventh-grade parent, discussed her daughter's learning issues due to remote learning. She said,

She pays attention better when she's in the actual classroom, actually doing the work. Even though I know sometimes she gives teachers a hard time, she really seems like she showed more in the classroom setting than she did in virtual. (F1, 16-18)

Like Fiona and Emma, Farrah talked about her daughter's connection to an in-person class. She stated, "she goes Monday and Tuesday, she goes to school. She'll be starting Saturday school on the 27th, and she's excited about that. She just wants to go to school more than just 2 weekdays and the 1 weekend" (F3, 25-27). Fatimah, a seventh-grade parent, added to the importance of in-person classes. She stated,

He definitely missed that aspect of going to school. We didn't start in the beginning when they had the chance. I wanted to give it time to see how they did everything just to make sure it was safe, but he was like, I miss school. I miss just going and getting out. I felt so bad . . . you can totally tell the difference between him just being at home all day . . . during the first marking period, him going 2 days out of the week . . . like that improvement it did make it [grades] better. He has that interaction, and he's not just here with us. (F4, 128-135)

Fatimah continued to discuss the difference it made for her son being at the school. She said,

He's able to get that help that he needs when he's there. So, he's able to really talk to the teachers and everything like that . . . [there was] something over the computer he didn't understand the first time, at least in-person . . . it's better to explain, so I like it better. It's a better connection. (F4, 140-144).

Another parent, Fran, an eighth-grade parent, discussed the need for consistency in the teaching staff for students to connect to school. She said,

Because of COVID-19, she's had like five different Spanish teachers this year, and it makes it harder because you have one Spanish teacher this week and your learning this, and then next week she'll be learning something off a module because they don't have a teacher. Then she'll have a new teacher, and now you have to adapt to that teacher. (F2, 182-185)

Angel, an administrator, had a different view on the effects of COVID-19. Angel spoke about the digital divide that became widely visible due to the pandemic. Angel discussed the adverse effects some digital learning had on writing and the assumption that kids were "digital natives" by stating,

The generation before the kids who are in front of us now, they were producers of things that happen on the computer. The iPhone changed everything; kids are just consumers. They don't produce, you know, they don't build apps, your average kid. They just kinda take it all in. They don't really need to write. Sometimes the words show up for you, you don't even have to finish the word. (A1, 133-142)

Like Angel, Ali had a different view from the teachers and family members. Ali talked about what students were experiencing at home during the pandemic. Ali stated, "It's a lot of home time, a lot of downtime, a lot of taking care of this person...those dynamics that are happening at home are actually coming into the school building in a negative way. We find a lot of students with sleeping conditions . . . depression issues . . . emotional, social issues. And I think that has a lot to do with their home dynamics. And then it's being brought into to school where we are...we are teaching, but not addressing." (A2, 76-81)

Ali's concern with the students' home life coincided with the necessity of family engagement in the classroom (Epstein & Voorhis, 2010).

Theme 3.2: Family Engagement. Family engagement was an a priori code taken from the five elements of culturally responsive teaching that populated throughout the interviews. Family engagement in the classroom helps students connect to the school and their instruction (Gay, 2000). Several interviewees, the teachers, administrators, and parents spoke about the same school-wide event that was very impactful for them and their children. Many parents communicated their children engaged in activities outside of the classroom to show their parents their work.

Engaged in Learning. When talking with Ernie, a social studies teacher, he mentioned the need for families to be involved in after-school activities. However, virtual learning and limited time in person made it difficult. He said, "I wish we could do something like that right now. I mean, right now it's tough" (E1, 191). When talking about families engaged in curriculum, Ernie stated, "as far as bringing curriculum-wise into the classroom have not done that too much outside of Black history month. That is

probably an area of growth” (E1, 200-201). Eddie, a math teacher, spoke about the different strategies he used to engage families in the curriculum. He stated, “we can talk about heritage, we can talk about different food, recipes, and different cultures. You can do it, just requires me to think a little bit” (E2, 73-76).

Elena, an English teacher, talked about a postcard challenge to get her parents involved. She said, “we write something positive about every single student to the parents. For any trips we take – pre-COVID-19 – we would ask for chaperones or volunteers during career day. We reach out to our parents first” (E4, 233-240).

School-wide Events. The teachers, administrators, and families discussed how families were engaged during the events held at the school during out-of-school time. Some of the interviewees in each group mentioned open houses, dances, and several talked in detail about a Black history month celebration that took place pre-COVID-19. These activities were discussed when asked what activities most engaged families with the school. Ernie, the social studies teacher, brought up the celebration and how the format was interdisciplinary. He said, “We made posters, and then we had a potluck here, and all the families came. We had music. We played jeopardy. That was awesome, and I wish we could do something like that right now” (E1, 189-191).

In another part of the interview, Ernie brought up the Black history event again. He explained how this event was the last big thing they did before COVID-19 “really connected the kids” (E1, 294). He said, “They [the students] were really proud. Parents came, we all ate a bunch of food. This was a community event, you know, like a big barbecue. It was a family reunion” (E1, 294-296). Ernie mentioned that teachers and administrators visited the students at the end of the year. He stated, “We gave out yard

signs, and we had a hard time getting kids to come outside and take a picture. I don't really have a post-COVID-19 option for you" (E1, 298-301).

Like Ernie, Everett, a math teacher, mentioned the Black history event last year. He said, "last year during Black history month the kids did a project . . . a couple of classes collaborated. The parents were able to come to it, and there was just stuff all over the place on Black history" (E3, 175-177). Everett also talked about an open house and a science fair that was attended by families. When asked about activities that engaged families, Fran, an eighth-grade parent, talked in detail about the Black history event. She stated,

They actually had to bring the pictures, and when it was all done, they had it posted up on the wall of each student and their family. They had a family night, and they had to learn about different places in Africa and what they did, even with the different skin tones. It was like a family night . . . it was really nice. You would go to each different kid, and your kid would take you around and they would present to you what their whole thing was. They had a lot of it [engagement] when school was in person (F2, 67-76)

Fatimah, a seventh-grade parent, spoke about how her son was so proud to show off his work at an open house and its impact on him. She said,

Oh, the open house they did. It wasn't this year, of course, but last school year. It was something they did in art class and then a piece he wrote. And then he got chosen for both of those. He was so excited to show those off. So that was definitely a good experience for him. We usually always try to go to the open houses. He was most excited about that one because he had something to show

off, like, hey, that's mine! I did that! It's up there so everybody could see. So that was good. I love that. (F4, 104-109)

Angel, an administrator, spoke about the Black history event as a family night. Angela also communicated that they mostly used traditional forms of activities to engage families. Angel expressed they needed growth in that area,

I will say the one time that we did it, like really right, was last year at our Black history family night. I think that was a real celebration of family, family culture. We invited everyone in for a meal. We had music, games, vendors from Black-owned businesses—it kind of represented culture in a really good way. But I think for the most part we kind of screw it up because we do things like parent-teacher conferences or like open house . . . sort of like, so traditional . . . it doesn't engage families in their heart space, you know, so we've got a ways to go on that. (A1, 177-184)

All three groups had participants that mentioned the impact of the school-wide event they held during Black history month. They shared a standard view on the culture represented in a family-centered atmosphere that allowed learning to happen in a fun and inclusive way. The administration recognized this event was significant and felt that they “did it right.” However, the traditional events such as open houses and science fairs still engaged the families significantly enough for participants to mention them.

Summary of Results

This study examined and analyzed the perceptions of 12 participants, interviewing teachers, administrators, and family members, regarding their experiences with the curriculum and how it was delivered in an urban charter middle school. The research

questions were designed to capture the strategies educators used to connect students of color to their education and how they aligned with the five elements of culturally responsive teaching. For Research Question 1, educators were asked their lived experience with delivering curriculum and the strategies used to reach urban middle school students of color. Two themes emerged from the data. The first theme included the students relating to the text and the importance of inclusive instruction. Subthemes included the Eurocentric point of view from which most standard curriculum is still designed. Educators shared that Afrocentric-based learning strategies were needed to reach students of color. This included choosing literature that is relatable to the students in front of them. The second theme was pop culture. Many educators referenced the importance of connecting with students using student terminology, music, and daily living. This resulted in really knowing the students and giving students a voice in their education. These were identified subthemes to pop culture.

Research Question 2 concentrated on the parent's perception of strategies used in the classroom that engaged their children in learning and their education. Data analyzed produced two themes. The first one was, relate to our children. Family members communicated the importance of educators really understanding the culture of their children and who they were teaching. Many of the participants shared they did not see their child or family culture in the instruction. The next theme that emerged was how you communicate is everything. Parents emphasized the relationship with the teachers was contingent on how they relayed information to the students. Having passion and understanding of the population they served needed to be evident in how they communicated. Family members shared the need for positive feedback, not just

contacting parents when there was a problem. All participants in the family group said the school and teaching staff used multiple modes of communication, and they had no problem reaching them when needed.

Research Question 3 concluded the study and captured all participant voices on which strategies were used to connect students to school. Two themes emerged from the data including, relationships are key and family engagement. Almost all of the participants in part of their interviews articulated in some form that relationships were the key in connecting students to their education. Levels of connectedness was a subtheme formed to contain the different ways students connect. In this theme, educators and families shared their experiences in student connection to instruction, the school environment, teachers, administrators, and the non-teaching staff.

Many participants voiced the impact COVID-19 had on the students' education, their struggle with keeping them connected, and how it had affected communication. One positive result that had come to the surface from COVID-19 was the increased communication between families and the teaching and non-teaching staff. Family engagement was the last theme found in the data. Findings concluded minimal strategies were in place that engaged families in the classroom. However, school-wide events engaged families connecting them to the school, showcasing work accomplished by their children. One event was mentioned by all three groups, a Black history month celebration that was well attended and positively impacted the families and the students.

Participants identified strategies that aligned with the five elements of culturally responsive teaching. Some strategies reflected elements such as students connecting to their education through pop culture and students' voices. All participant groups

recognized the necessity of connecting to students through teacher-student relationships and non-teaching staff. Family engagement opportunities were evident in the school culture, with educators recognizing the need to increase strategies in these areas to connect more with families. There were similarities in some of the experiences between the families and educators. However, differing points of view give room for improvement to impactfully teach from a culturally responsive lens. Findings will be further discussed in Chapter 5, examining the study's limitations, recommendations for further research, and the study's conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Studies have been conducted on urban student connectedness and the inequities between students in urban districts compared to students in suburban districts (Sparks & Klein, 2018; Williams et al., 2017). According to Sparks and Klein (2018), students in urban settings have a higher rate of detentions, suspensions, and high school dropouts than students attending suburban schools. Research shows that culturally responsive teaching can help counteract the disparities urban middle school students face within the traditional education system (Gay, 2000). However, there is limited research on how culturally responsive teaching has been used effectively in the classroom. More specifically, little research documents the perspectives of teachers, administrators, and families related to curriculum delivery. This study gathered the perceptions of families and educators regarding the same curriculum used among urban middle school students and analyzed how it aligns with the five elements of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000). The chapter discusses the study's key findings, an overview of the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and suggestions for implementing positive educational practice changes. Aligned with Gay's (2002) five elements of culturally responsive teaching, the following research questions were used to gather data from the study participants:

1. From the perspective of urban middle school educators, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?

2. From the perspective of urban middle school parents and family members, what strategies are in place in the classroom that reflect culturally responsive teaching?
3. From the perspectives of urban middle school educators, parents, and family members, what classroom activities and initiatives most engage urban middle school students and connect them to school?

The research provided a structure for creating protocol questions for participants. Several themes emerged from the data, and four key findings surfaced from the data to guide the study's implications.

Implications of Findings

Four key findings emerged from this study. First, infusing student voice and pop culture can introduce cultural inclusivity to an otherwise Eurocentric-based curriculum. Second, teachers can create a culturally responsive environment based on knowledge and interest in students' lived experiences. Third, all school relationships drive student connectedness. Lastly, well-planned, intentional family and school initiatives create a living curriculum that can make a lasting difference. The findings are further discussed and aligned with existing research regarding student connectedness and academic success among urban middle school students. Finally, connections are made using Gay's (2002) five elements of culturally responsive teaching.

Finding 1: Student Voice and Pop Culture

Infusing student voice and pop culture can introduce cultural inclusivity to an otherwise Eurocentric-based curriculum. Participants in this study were asked to respond to their lived experiences with the curriculum delivered at an urban middle charter

school. Family members, administrators, and teachers referenced the need for students to be heard and known in order to connect to their instruction. Many of the educators and some family members referenced using pop culture to reach students. Family members such as Fatimah, a seventh-grade parent, said, “I know certain teachers, they incorporate the songs that the kids like, so that gets to them . . . so they’re understanding or more engaged in a classroom or the lesson at the time. I like that part” (F4, 26-28). Angel, an administrator, referenced that teachers need to know who they are teaching to reach the students. Everett, a sixth-grade math teacher, uses “What up Wednesday.” He created this to engage with the students asking them questions that relate to their lives. He said, “and it’s really just for me to like, get to know them” (E3, 37). Everett also uses music to connect with his students. Ernie, Emma, and Elena also use rap or songs to teach the students. Ernie and Emma break down the lyrics, allowing their students to find meaning and identify with the artists they admire.

Educators who are creative, understanding, and know their students can reach them on a personal level. By achieving personal connections, educators can engage and incorporate the culture of the students into the curriculum. To reinforce this finding, prior research such as Bonner et al. (2018) concluded that to help students connect to their education, the needs of minority students on a cultural level must be addressed. By embracing the students’ culture and getting to know them personally, students felt a sense of class ownership.

The educator participants in the Bonner et al. (2018) study understood the necessity of self-reflection and how to ensure that no student is overlooked because of preconceived ideas or cultural bias due to their schematic lens. Students of color in low

income urban communities disconnect from education when instruction is not relevant to their culture (Gay, 2000; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Using pop culture is a way for teachers to connect to their students while infusing student culture into the learning strategy. By using this strategy, teachers showcase two of Gay's (2002) elements of CRT: selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture to reach students who are not connecting to traditional methods of instruction and providing inclusive instruction using language and life situations that connect to the students' schematic lens. Using pop culture shows students that educators are interested in their lives. This strategy reaches all cultures, ethnicities, and unique abilities students possess. However, using strategies other than pop culture such as family history, family culture, and other texts and media can infuse inclusivity. Leading us into the subsequent finding, genuine interest in knowing the students establishes school connectedness regardless of what staff looks like.

Finding 2: Act on Knowledge and Interest

Teachers can create a culturally responsive environment by acting on the knowledge and interest of their students. However, educators and families had some differing thoughts when it came to cultural representation in the classroom. Some believed the environment was inclusive of their children and family culture; others did not. For example, one administrator believed that only Black teachers in the school incorporated culturally responsive teaching methods. In contrast, some parents and teachers shared that their experience included the culture of the students in the classroom. Bonner et al. (2018) spoke about some of the narratives in their study of teacher perceptions on CRT among urban middle school students. Study participants included 430 teachers across 83 schools. Concerns included how to address the needs of multiple

cultures in the classroom. In addition, teachers became overwhelmed with constraints related to the amount of time they have to prepare adequate instruction, along with high-stakes testing and curriculum that has an underlying bias. The following data collected during the urban charter school study may bring some answers to these concerns.

Two charter school study teachers shared that their experiences outside of the classroom influenced how they taught and helped create an environment that represented everyone in the room. Everett, a math teacher, shared his experience growing up in a rural community as a Black individual. He shared that he could identify with his White students because of his experience growing up in a rural school district. He can draw from his upbringing and relate to the students through music and other interests that are part of their culture. Emma had a similar experience. Emma was raised in the city and can relate to students when they mention streets and locations within the community because she lived there. Being a White educator, Emma shared the impact it has had on her teaching career when relating to the students she is serving. Emma's strategy reinforces the first element of culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes understanding cultural diversity.

Creating instruction that is inclusive of students' culture may enable students to connect to their education, creating a culturally inclusive environment (Gay, 2002). This portion of the data shows that reaching students has to do with genuine interest, lived experiences, and creativity and not solely with the teacher's race. Several elements of Gay's theory of culturally responsive teaching were evident among Emma's teaching strategies. Other science and math teachers and administrators shared that science and math are hard to teach in a culturally responsive manner. However, through the example

of Everett and Emma, being middle school math and science teachers, they have reached their students through thoughtful instruction, drawing on students' culture and interests.

Finding 3: School Relationships Drive Student Connectedness

All school relationships drive student connectedness. The participants of the study shared their thoughts and experiences with students regarding school connectedness.

Although they gave different interpretations, all agreed that relationships are the driving force connecting students to school. For example, one of the family members said,

The only thing I can say about the staff and the school there from the teachers to the principal, to the vice principal, very supportive . . . they connect with the families daily. You know, even my child, other people's children, it's just like a family when she leaves home, she's going to her other home. (F3, 99-104)

Family members spoke about the care and consideration the receptionist displayed and mentioned how she went above and beyond. Caring relationships between students and all school staff can shape the way students feel about school. For example, one parent shared how the receptionist wanted to make sure that her daughter had what she needed to succeed. She said, "she's not a teacher, but she's the one from the school that has actually shown me that she cares from the 3 years she has been there" (F1, 322-323). The parent was thankful for the relationship with the receptionist. Revealing at one point that she was jobless and homeless, the receptionist made sure her daughter ate every day. Going above and beyond, she shared, "she made sure [daughter's name] had clothes, that lady right there, she deserves everything because from the time [my daughter's] been there up until now, she makes sure that [my daughter] is all set" (F1, 324-330). These examples showcase Gay's (2002) fifth element of CRT, using appropriate

communication as the key to develop trusting relationships with students and the families school staff serve. All families have individual needs and communicate in different ways.

Families shared their experiences with communication pre and post-COVID-19. Students in the charter school were able to attend school 2 days a week in person for most of the year while attending through a virtual platform the opposite days. An unexpected finding was the connection families shared that they and their children felt during the pandemic. Some parents voiced that instruction in person is better for student connectedness. Students have a better chance for academic success when they are present in the school face-to-face. For example, Fatimah discussed the difference it made for her son being at school. She said,

He's able to get that help that he needs when he's there. So, he's able to really talk to the teachers and everything like that. [There was] something over the computer he didn't understand the first time, at least in-person, it's better to explain, so I like it better. It's a better connection. (F4, 140-144)

Eddie, a math teacher, reinforced Fatimah's experience when describing the difference between synchronous and asynchronous learning. He said, "even if it's the world's best asynchronous level lesson, it can only be half as good as a mediocre synchronous lesson" (E2, 180-181).

Although they believe in-person learning was much more effective for their student's academic success, families thought the communication connection with teachers at the school was much stronger during the pandemic. Multiple modes of communication were evident throughout all the interviews. Educators reached family members and students through texting, email, robocalls, phone calls, face-to-face meetings through

online platforms, letters home, and even giving families their personal cell phone numbers. For example, one of the family members shared her experience with communication. She said, “I think this is now teaching a lot of people more patience, more love, more care versus before people were like, eh, I don’t care. I think I like the virtual teachers better” (F1, 176-179). Families shared that the staff reached them as individuals with the best mode of communication for the families and students.

From the educators' perspectives, they used all forms of communication possible to reach students and families because of the pandemic. Some educators mentioned they had not seen students show up to class virtually, and they were concerned about their students' failing grades. Considering both perspectives, individualized communication is essential in constructing and maintaining relationships with students and family members. Families and students feel heard and valued when educators and non-teaching staff take time to get to know them individually.

The connection from student to teachers and non-teaching staff is crucial in the learning process. Many teachers found ways to connect to the students personally to engage them in the classroom, and non-teaching staff connected with students on other personal levels. One of the parents shared her thoughts on her daughter's connections throughout her time in middle school. She stated,

The bond that she has with the staff there, from going from sixth grade to seventh to eighth, has blossomed amazingly. I keep telling her this is her last year . . . she was like, no, I want to stay there . . . cause she’s still connected. The staff at [the charter school] is awesome. (F3, 149-152)

One of the teachers spoke about the significance of how you welcome students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when reaching students has been challenging. He said, “you know it’s never a holy cow, you’re finally here, it’s always, thank you very much for logging in. It’s so good to see you, that language is really important for students to buy into school” (E2, 159-161). Data reveal that student connection is related to how the teachers and staff communicate and know the students as individuals. It is all about the relationship.

Supporting this finding, Bonner et al. (2018) gathered information from the perspective of the school staff, revealing the teaching staff perceived it was their duty to embrace the students' families, bring the individual cultures into the classroom, and get to know the families personally. The charter school study expounded on the findings in the Bonner et al. study. The current study gathered information from the family members' and educators' perspectives. Family members felt the connection they and their children had with all school staff was significant in their children's success. Educators shared ways they connect with the students individually, getting to know who they are on a cultural and personal basis. The pandemic shed light on areas for improvement regarding communication between the school staff and the families. Paying attention to the way families communicated allowed relationships between the school staff and families to grow. The data suggest that all relationships in the school are essential for students to be connected.

Finding 4: Family and School Initiatives

Well-planned intentional family and school initiatives that create a living curriculum make a lasting difference. The COVID-19 pandemic restrained in-person

activities, leaving a gap in family and student events at the school for the past year and a half. Families and educators were asked about family engagement opportunities offered before COVID-19 and if these events included all cultures represented at the school. Almost every participant mentioned a school-wide event held at the school during Black history month just before the COVID-19 pandemic began. Some of the cultures represented at this event included Sudanese, Jamaican, African, and Latino, all of which match the student population. Participants spoke about the different foods offered, students' artwork displayed, and music played throughout the school. Families were guided to different stations where students and teachers shared information about the artwork, projects, and the culture they represented. All said that it was well attended. This event positively impacted all participants, worthy of 11 out of the 12 interviewees mentioning it.

The educators shared the event was interdisciplinary and intentionally designed to embrace the culture of their student population. Ernie, a teacher, commented that the event “really connected the kids” (E1, 294). He said, “They [the students] were really proud. Parents came, we all ate a bunch of food. This was a community event, you know, like a big barbecue. It was a family reunion” (E1, 294-296).

The impact this event had on all groups shows the significance of inclusivity in an educational setting. Including student and family culture in the classroom can help students connect to their learning. Involving students and families' individual cultures in a school-wide event connects students to the school, non-teaching staff, and the school community. To support this finding, Lifschitz-Grant's (2020) African quilt family project incorporated story-telling between families, sharing food from their cultures, creating a

family and student learning event that had a significant impact on the class and family connection. Embracing families' culture exemplifies Gay's (2002) fourth element of culturally responsive teaching. Engaging families of the students' culture in and out of the classroom is essential for students to connect to the school, which was evident among the quilt project and the charter school event. However, all the elements of CRT were found in both initiatives. The planning of the events required educators to know and understand cultural diversity, representing the first element. The events were inter-disciplinary and encompassed the students' individual cultures in the lessons, incorporating the second element of CRT. The teachers developed a multicultural curriculum and created a supportive learning community that engaged the students' families, connecting them to the school and building those coveted relationships. In turn, representing the third and fourth element of CRT. Well-planned inclusive school events can add value to the school climate, enriching the cultural fabric of the school.

Limitations

This study was limited to 12 interviews in a small middle school in an urban district. Thus, findings may differ among a larger student population. A cross-sectional, longitudinal, or mixed methods study that includes the students,' educators,' and family members' perspectives may gain further insight into the effects of culturally responsive teaching methods. Although the pandemic of COVID-19 shed light on the effects of asynchronous versus synchronous learning, it also limited current engagement experiences to virtual events or participants' memories of engagement pre-COVID-19.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study used qualitative research methods to analyze educator and family perspectives on the connectedness of urban students looking through the lens of culturally responsive teaching. The nature of the study was to gather participants' lived experiences with the curriculum taught and instructional strategies employed in an urban charter school serving students in sixth to eighth grades. Culturally responsive teaching contains five elements that sit as benchmarks to guide educators' teaching methods and communication to reach all students' cultures and ethnicities. Future research can build upon this study, educating school staff on implementation strategies that will reach students of color or marginalized student populations.

The first recommendation is to use a quantitative approach to allow the researcher to collect a larger sample of data. A quantitative study that spans multiple schools might provide a broader perspective that may confirm shared experiences or reveal new strategies to reach middle school students of color. It is helpful to look through multiple lenses to fully understand what strategies students are responding to that could close the education gap.

Second, using mixed-methods research will give the researcher complex data and the narrative portion that tells the story. Implementing a culturally responsive activity with students before gathering data and looking at their responses, grades, and level of student and family engagement may be beneficial for educators moving forward. Using quantitative methods will capture the validity of an intervention, while qualitative will allow the participants to share their experiences.

Lastly, getting perspective from the students, school staff, and parents regarding the same curriculum will allow the researcher to hear from all parties. Getting the perspective of family members, administrators, and teachers in this study highlighted areas of agreement and where they differed. Looking through the lens of the students would bring additional voices to the table, allowing the researcher to hear from all angles in order to shed light on new teaching strategies.

Recommendations for Practice

This study found that infusing pop culture and student voice in the curriculum allows students to connect to their learning on a cultural and personal level. The second element of CRT, selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture, was evident in the teaching strategies among the teacher participants (Gay, 2002). The teachers' experiences with their effective use of pop culture, including popular music and artists the students listened to, exemplifies CRT's connection on a cultural and personal level (Gay, 2002). Getting to know the students' personal interests outside the classroom allows educators to know the students as individuals. For example, Ernie, a social studies teacher, would stop the class and dig deeper on topics that mattered to the students, such as asking about a song reference or dance to get them engaged. Emma also used pop culture in her teaching strategies, along with students' voices. She stated, "I'm big on student choice. Everyone's got different strengths" (E5, 330).

Get to Know Your Students

The first recommendation is for educators to get to know their students before teaching the curriculum. This may take a little time. This means not just using ice breakers but really getting to know the individual students in the room, their culture, their

likes, their interests, and their best way of learning. When teachers engage students through students' interests and life experiences, they become participants in their culture. As Ernie expressed, showing students that you are genuinely interested in what they like affects the students. One of the family members shared her perspective on teacher and student relations. She explained how important it is for teachers to be flexible and reactive to how they learn. Stopping class to expound on something the students are passionate about shows students they are important, they are partnering with their education, and their voices are being heard.

As Ernie and Emma shared, paying attention to the students' interests was regularly practiced in their planning. Ernie spoke about using post-it notes to remind himself of things he could research or add to the lesson to connect his students to the lesson. Emma and Everett both used their personal upbringing to relate to the students. Emma, a White teacher, was able to relate to her students personally because she grew up in her students' neighborhoods and went to city schools. Everett, a Black teacher, reached his White students through music because of his early years living in a rural town. These teachers revealed they could connect to their students, creating a space that included the students' culture and likes regardless of race and ethnicity.

Students need to see their culture represented in the teaching staff. However, this finding suggests that teachers who understand student life in and outside of the classroom can connect with their students. Not every teacher has the personal experience to draw from, as did Emma and Everett. Training, exemplar lesson plans, and family and student assessments can help less experienced teachers learn how to teach all students in the classroom.

The educator participants in the Bonner et al. (2018) study felt overwhelmed with the responsibility of teaching to many different cultures in the classroom. To effectively reach all students, a paradigm shift of thought needs to happen regarding teaching to the individual cultures in the classroom. Educators who are not familiar with the culture of their students may lack proper training and display biased opinions (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). Ali, an administrator, and some family members expressed that family culture was not present in the curriculum, leaving room for improvement for the fourth element of culturally responsive teaching. Incorporating regular family engagement opportunities in the individual classrooms and with school-wide events may help build family relationships and help address some of the unseen issues. These events and opportunities may include in-person and virtual events. Virtual events may include arts-based opportunities such as dance, music, and art representing the culture of the students and families represented in the classroom. Instead of looking at the barriers in the classroom, educators need to look at the wealth of information they can draw from their students that add to the diversity of thought from which the class can learn.

Puchner & Markowitz (2015) revealed that educators may need training on being culturally responsive teachers. Ali, an administrator from the current study, spoke about the DEI training that was being developed for the teaching staff at the charter school. Ali revealed that many teachers were not teaching at the culturally responsive level that was needed. Including culturally responsive teaching methods in DEI training would be beneficial for all educators, especially for teachers that are new to teaching diverse students. The Bonner et al. (2018) study indicated the need for educators to be trained on culturally responsive methods to help eliminate any potential bias they may have

regarding different cultures. In addition, educating every staff member in the building on CRT methods can help build authentic relationships between school staff and the students, connecting all students to the school.

Educators in diverse communities have a responsibility to educate themselves on the culture of the students whom they are teaching. Workshops for non-teaching staff on how to relate to diverse students may help staff make the necessary connections. More in-depth training for teachers, including practical teaching strategies, may spark creativity and dialogue on successful inclusive CRT methods. In addition to training, drawing from personal experiences between teacher and student allows genuine relationships, which builds trust. Student feedback in casual conversations or surveys may be a way to organize this approach to lesson planning. Intentional use of student interests will create an atmosphere where students feel accepted and connected, creating the needed inclusive space for students going through the awkward middle school years. A school culture that claims to be culturally inclusive needs to have training, benchmarks, and assessments that help teachers reach the goals of a CRT educator.

Create Inclusive Spaces

A second recommendation is to create inclusive spaces for all students. Students are figuring out who they are during the middle school years while learning how to be independent. Allowing middle school students to share their personal experiences and incorporate them into the lesson gives students a voice and shared power in their education. Students who feel heard and valued will more likely connect to their education, succeed academically, and complete high school. The school classroom, hallways, lunchroom, and administrative offices should be spaces where students feel

safe and included. To support this implication, Tomek et al. (2016) suggested that dropping out of high school is not a snap decision but, more accurately, could result from their lack of connectedness and other social factors and behaviors during the middle school years. Tomek et al. (2016) surveyed 524 urban students on their middle school connectedness in a longitudinal study that spanned students as young as 10 years old through high school age. The study's findings revealed that students who felt connected in middle school had the highest enrollment in their junior and senior years. Thus, maintaining connection through the middle school years is crucial to students' drive to continue their education.

For middle school students of color, connectedness is critical in closing the education gap. However, middle school students of color in low income neighborhoods may have barriers to overcome before they reach the school's doors. For example, poverty, access to healthy food, health care, or adequate sleep can affect their academic success. In this study, Ali shared that they have students with poor sleeping conditions, depression, and social and emotional issues. He said, "I think that has a lot to do with their home dynamics. And then it's being brought into to school where we are . . . we are teaching, but not addressing" (A2, 76-81).

Moreover, the additional obstacles associated with low income communities can add more stress to urban students of color (Niehaus et al., 2012; Vega et al., 2015). However, these obstacles do not determine school success if students are connected to the school. For example, Niehaus et al. (2012) revealed through a study of 330 students if the students felt connected to the school, they performed well academically; socioeconomic status did not determine their academic success. The Niehaus et al. study revealed a

powerful message about the necessity of student connectedness. If students are connected, they have a better chance of academic success regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Caring about the well-being of the students is another way to connect students to the school and all school staff. For example, Fiona, a family member, revealed in this study how the school receptionist made sure students didn't go hungry, had adequate clothing, and were ready to learn for the day. She said, "even though she's the receptionist, she still wants to make sure [my daughter] succeeds...I was jobless, homeless...Ms. [receptionist] made sure [my daughter] ate. She made sure [daughter's name] had clothes...that lady right there, she deserves everything" (F1, 322-330). The receptionist created a space that was a safe haven for the students – a place they knew they would receive help and care when needed.

Student and teacher connection is essential for the student's success, but it does not end there. All school staff should be trained and educated on the importance of student connections. Implementing strategies to meet the students' individual needs should be in the fabric of the school. Instituting supportive learning communities is the fourth element of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002). This takes knowing the population of the students whom you are serving. Educators and school staff who understand the population can anticipate the students' needs and plan accordingly. Thus, paying attention to the students' well-being is part of creating a supportive school climate where students want to be.

Build Authentic Relationships

The third recommendation is for educators to build authentic relationships with students and family members. One of the findings discussed previously was the premise that relationships are key. All participants in the study recognized the importance of relationships for students to connect to school and their learning. As Emma stated, “relationships, that’s my answer for everything . . . you don’t have relationships you don’t have anything” (E5, 358). Having knowledge of culturally responsive teaching and how to teach to a diverse class is essential. However, if teachers cannot bond with the students, students will still have trouble connecting to their education. To foster authentic relationships, teachers, educators, and school staff need to be their authentic selves. This means taking a minute to dig deeper, as Ernie said he did with his students. However, it is not enough to get to know the students. Educators should feel comfortable sharing their personal stories when appropriate, as well. There is power in storytelling. Like any relationship, there is give and take on both sides. It is an investment. Students know when they are being heard, valued, and cared for.

Kennedy-Lewis (2013) examined urban middle school students in a low income district and their perceptions of why they had behavioral issues. Students reported their negative behavior was due to poor teacher-student relationships, boring instruction, and referrals. In the Kennedy-Lewis (2013) study, the students reported their teachers displayed a lack of understanding of who they were, explaining why they had difficulty in class. Behavioral issues resulted in many students being sent out of class, subsequently missing much-needed instruction. Kennedy-Lewis (2013) revealed how the teacher

relationship can negatively or positively affect the students' behavior and attitude toward their education.

Educators need to understand the significant role they have in a student's life. In the Kennedy-Lewis (2013) study, the lack of personal connection was evident, and the students suffered academically and emotionally from that experience. Unfortunately, connecting on a personal level also leaves room to hurt on a personal level.

Maintaining healthy connections is essential for an inclusive classroom; this includes communication. The fifth element of CRT states that using appropriate communication is the key to developing trusting relationships with students and the families they serve (Gay, 2002). How teachers communicate with their students is crucial to develop a trusting relationship. As revealed in the findings of this study, communication before COVID-19 was substandard. However, during the pandemic, teachers and administrators communicated using whichever method best fit the student and the family. The switch to asynchronous learning made communication challenging initially as they could no longer be taught in person. However, the teachers and school staff became creative with their communication using many forms, catering to the needs of the students and families. All family members recognized this new connection with the school, as all they had were virtual or phone communications.

Teachers, administrators, and school staff can learn from this experience. As stated by one of the parents, they felt more connected to the teachers during the pandemic. Using multiple modes of communication and communicating regularly will connect the students and the families closer to the school staff and the school.

Another way to build relationships is by creating inclusive events for the families represented in the school. As found in this study, 11 out of the 12 participants shared a Black History event that happened pre-COVID-19 that connected them to the school. In addition, all cultures in the school were represented at the event, including food, music, and student artwork that represented their individual cultures. During the interviews, educators and family members spoke enthusiastically about this event that happened over a year and a half ago. For future practice, establishing a creative schedule of culturally inclusive events that foster family and student relationships will have a lasting effect on the event participants. Authentic relationships, investing time in student culture, and creating inclusive spaces can impact students who have difficulty connecting through the middle school years.

Conclusion

This study gathered educators' and family members' perceptions on urban middle school student connectedness relating to culturally responsive teaching. Prior research concluded that students who feel connected to their school do better academically, stay in school in their junior and senior years, and move on to higher education. Additionally, family connectedness to the school is essential for student efficacy. The achievement gap continues to grow among middle school students in urban communities, resulting in students falling behind academically compared to their White counterparts. This achievement gap increases disparities among urban middle school students of color, such as lack of school connectedness, behavioral issues, and higher dropout rates.

One of the main reasons students of color disengage from their education is a lack of cultural competency among educators, administration, and all school staff. The

majority of teaching staff in urban communities are White. Some teachers are not appropriately trained to reach students of color, therefore not bonding with the students on a level needed to instruct correctly. Gay's (2002) five elements of culturally responsive teaching provide a benchmark to reach students of diverse backgrounds. The elements include having knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity, selecting instruction that is inclusive of students' culture may reach students who are not connecting to traditional methods of instruction, developing a multicultural curriculum, instituting supportive learning communities, engaging families of the students' culture in and out of the classroom, and using appropriate communication as the key to developing trusting relationships with students and the families they serve. However, not all schools use CRT or provide the necessary training to meet the needs of all cultures represented in urban communities. Gay (2002) placed the responsibility on the teacher to make the necessary connections with students. In addition to the teacher, some of the responsibility should be on the administration and those in charge of the teaching staff, ensuring they have the proper training and materials needed to embrace all cultures in the classroom.

The examination of literature revealed that middle school students disconnect between elementary and middle school. Kennedy-Lewis (2013) found middle school students' connectedness to school significantly declines after leaving elementary school. Several factors may play a big part in this decline, including transitioning from one classroom in elementary school to multiple teachers and classes in middle school. Going from one teacher to several could be a significant factor in the disconnection created by the transition from elementary to middle school. The lack of school connections continues throughout high school (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Niehaus, 2012). The

disconnection spans even farther for middle school students of color when culturally appropriate teaching methods are not in place. Another barrier for students in the middle school years is the pullback from parents. Parents perceive that students need less support during this phase and are less likely to help with homework or engage in school activities.

Research on the perceptions of parents regarding students of color during the middle school years was minimal. Parental or family voice is one of the most under-researched populations regarding student connection and how it impacts the development of relationships and secure connections to school and student academics (Bahena et al., 2016; Gonida & Cortina, 2014; Perry et al., 2010). Although the research was minimal on this topic, one study found the importance of family connection. Foster et al. (2017) studied youth who had recently visited urgent care in a low income community. The study revealed that youth who felt connected to their family and school may not suffer from other risk factors such as bullying, depression, self-injury, or suicidal thoughts that adversely affect their education. The findings suggest that family connection is vital for students' health and wellness and academic success.

Fifolt et al. (2018) conducted a study using a teaching intervention called the Jones Valley Teaching Farm. The study included urban students partnering with parents and educators in a hands-on curriculum project. The students learned how to farm, become leaders, and work as a team. Parents shared that their children learned transferable skills while learning how to eat healthy foods and became more responsible at home. Students expressed a positive connection with the staff and the parents who took part in the project, and they wanted to continue the project at home. The data shows how

great an impact parental support can have on the overall success of students. The literature also highlighted the importance of the teacher and student relationship.

Many classrooms look different today in the United States due to increased cultural and economic diversity in the public school system. However, not all educators or school staff have attended or are offered the needed training to reach students with diverse backgrounds (Bonner et al., 2018). In addition, little research can be found on teachers' perceptions regarding the connectedness of students of color in low income communities (Biag, 2016; Bonner et al., 2018). Bonner et al. (2018) surveyed teachers who taught in urban districts across 83 middle schools. Teacher responses reflected a sense of value for cultural diversity in the classroom, making the environment engaging for all students. The teachers reported they believed it was their responsibility to create a culturally inclusive environment for all ethnicities within the classroom. Studies such as the Jones Family Teaching Farm (Fifolt et al., 2018) and projects like the African quilt project (Lifschitz-Grant, 2020) showcase the power of partnerships. When educators partner with families and students, these effective and healthy relationships create an inclusive classroom environment.

Qualitative research methodology was used to gather the perceptions of educators and family members of the curriculum used in the charter school. The study consisted of 12 semi-structured open-ended interviews of teachers, administrators, and family members in their lived experience with the curriculum delivered across sixth-eighth grades. The teacher participants represented the four main disciplines: math, science, English, and social studies. Family member participants represented students across sixth through eighth grades, and two administrators participated in the study.

Analyzing through coding revealed multiple themes for each of the three research questions. Research Question 1 sought to find what strategies educators used to engage students of all cultures. Two main themes emerged from the data and analysis from the interviews. The themes included (a) students relating to the text and (b) pop culture/student culture. Research Question 2 revealed family member perception on strategies used to engage students from all cultures. Two main themes emerged, (a) relate to our children and (b) how you communicate is everything. Research Question 3 examined educators' and family members' perceptions of what classroom activities and initiatives most engaged urban middle school students and connect them to school. The data revealed two main themes (a) relationships are key and (b) family engagement. The themes emerged from the transcribed interviews, and subthemes supported the main themes revealed from each research question.

Four key findings emerged from the analysis of the themes from each research question. First, infusing student voice and pop culture can introduce cultural inclusivity to an otherwise Eurocentric-based curriculum. The curriculum in public education has been critiqued as narrow-focused or “white washed” and not inclusive of different cultures, specifically for educating students of color. Including student voice and life experiences in classroom activities makes students active participants and partners in their education. Therefore, teachers can transform traditional methods of instruction into elements of culturally responsive teaching. Educators who paid attention to the details and culture of the individual students perceived a stronger connection to their students. To conclude the first finding, family participants added that teachers who give of themselves build trust, and students respond positively to that bond.

Second, teachers can create a culturally responsive environment by acting on knowledge and interest in student experiences, displaying the second element of culturally responsive teaching. Educators who drew from a personal experience shared their creative strategies based on knowing the students they were teaching. Teachers bonded with their students on a different level when they referenced shared community spaces they experienced. Understanding student culture and learning from the students helped teachers create an atmosphere responsive to the students' individual needs.

Third, all school relationships drive student connectedness. Relationships between teachers, parents, and family members are essential for student connectedness. However, all school staff members are responsible for providing an inclusive atmosphere. As many family member participants shared, the receptionist at the school provided an inclusive space for students. One family member said, “she deserves everything” (F1, 329) when referencing her gratitude for the school receptionist. This example shows how teaching and non-teaching staff can have an impact on the students. The summation of the data reveals that all school relationships are responsible for creating an inclusive environment for student success.

Lastly, well-planned, intentional family and school initiatives create a living curriculum that can make a lasting difference. The family member and educator participants spoke enthusiastically about the Black history month celebration organized by the charter school staff. It was an interdisciplinary event that focused on the students' unique interests and cultures in the school. The event positively impacted the students and families. These well-planned and creative events exemplify how to bring family and

student culture in and out of the classroom as commissioned by Gay's (2002) elements of CRT.

The five elements of CRT could be found among many of the strategies used in curriculum development, communication, family engagement before COVID, and student connections to teaching and non-teaching staff. However, according to the family members' responses, the second element of CRT was lacking. According to the family members, selecting instruction that includes the student's culture was not found in the curriculum taught. Using pop culture in the curriculum was a strategy used to connect students to the learning among the teaching staff. Still, it could be strengthened by infusing the individual family culture represented among the students in creating a multi-focused teaching lens that caters to the individual students learning needs.

Recommendations for future research included using quantitative methods to allow the researcher to collect a larger quantity of data. In addition, quantitative research can span across multiple districts giving a broader perspective to the research. Second, using mixed-methods research gives the researcher complex data and the narrative portion that tells the story. The use of mixed methods allows for a larger sample while still hearing the voice of the participants. Third, getting the students' perspective, school staff, and parents regarding the same curriculum allows the researcher to hear from all parties. Finally, hearing from the students, educators, and family members gives voice to the students, fulfilling the fourth element of CRT.

Future practice recommendations included educators and school staff knowing the students' culture and life experience, creating inclusive spaces, and building authentic relationships. This recommendation incorporates the second and third elements of CRT,

including student culture in learning strategies and creating a supportive learning environment. First, educators need to get to know their students before they can really teach. This involves teachers getting to know the individual students in the room, their culture, their interests, and how they learn. When teachers engage students through their interests and life experiences, they participate in the students' culture. Middle school students are already disadvantaged, going through the awkward phase and transitioning from elementary to middle school. When there is a disconnect in student learning based on a lack of attention to culture and ethnicity, the education gap grows.

This study showed the necessity of relationships between the students, families, and school staff. More importantly, how school staff relates to each student's individuality can impact their engagement in learning and their connection to the school. Many of the elements of culturally responsive teaching were exhibited in the perceptions of the participants. However, the fifth element, engaging families of the students' culture in and out of the classroom, could be strengthened during in-person instruction. Families did not believe their individual cultures were represented in the curriculum. This could be a result of a lack of communication between families and educators regarding the curriculum. Administrators in the study stated they did not get regular feedback from families on the curriculum used.

The impact of COVID-19 changed the way the school staff communicated with families. Participants stated they felt more connected to the school during the pandemic because of the level of communication efforts among the educators and school staff. These efforts display the fifth element of CRT, engaging families of the students' culture

in and out of the classroom by using appropriate communication as the key to develop trusting relationships with students and their families.

Providing an atmosphere where all students and families feel valued and accepted should be at the forefront of every learning institution. It should be embedded in the values and mission of their framework. School culture has a tangible feel. When students enter their school, it should be a place where they feel safe, invited, valued, and ready to learn. School staff, including the teachers, administrators, maintenance, lunch crew, and reception, need training and accountability in weaving an inclusive cultural fabric. Students should feel welcomed and loved walking down the halls, into the rooms, in the offices, and in shared spaces.

Building authentic relationships takes time and energy. Educators are responsible for educating themselves on the students' culture and life experience of the students they are teaching. Relationships are a give-and-take. Sharing life experiences takes vulnerability. Students in safe spaces will be more likely to open and share from a personal perspective and take academic risks. Creating these safe, inclusive spaces will help foster authentic relationships between educators and students. One of the themes that emerged from the data was *how you communicate is everything*. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, communication efforts intensified between students, teachers, and family members. The pandemic shed light on how persistent educators need to be to reach students and family members. The way educators respond and react to students, and family members impacts the developing relationships. Educators and non-teaching staff follow the lead of executive leaders. The position of an executive leader comes with

responsibility. The relationship between executive leaders and school staff should be a model for the desired relationships between the school staff, families, and the students.

Executive leaders in education need to have expertise in strategies that connect all students to their education, ensuring educational institutions are provided with the proper training to connect students and families to the school. Therefore, educational leaders should be responsive to the population served and have recruitment strategies to employ diverse teaching and non-teaching staff. Training on youth development, culturally responsive teaching, how to build relationships, and inclusive spaces should be included in the diversity, equity, and inclusion plan in urban districts. It is the responsibility of the teachers and administration to invest in their practice through introspection and education. The voice of this generation is calling for lasting change. It is not enough to hear the voice of just the educator, family member, or the voice of the students. All voices need to be heard.

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Appendix A

Letter to Interested Parents and Families

Dear Parents and Family Members,

Thank you for your possible interest in participating in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine current teaching methods that may help future educators connect with students of all backgrounds. This study is designed to gather the perceptions of parents/families, teachers, and administrators on including the students' culture in the curriculum. As a participant, you will be interviewed and will have the opportunity to share your experiences regarding the curriculum and classroom activities.

Participants who meet the criteria will be selected according to grade level for equal representation of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. If there is more interest than participant need, participant names will be selected at random. This means that all interested individuals who meet the criteria by the deadline response time will have the same opportunity to participate. Interviews will be set up at the interviewee's convenience. The date and time will be determined at the time of contact. The interviews will be approximately 30-60 minutes long. The interviews will take place via Zoom. If you need technology, please contact the receptionist, and we will set up space socially distanced at the school. If you do participate, you will receive a \$25 gift card for your time. I have attached an "Informed Consent" document. To participate in the interview, you will need to read and sign this document. If you are selected, you can send the form back via email. Please contact the phone number below if you do not have access to email or the internet, and I will make accommodations to retrieve the consent form. Please understand that I cannot conduct the interview without the consent form. If you are uncomfortable at any time during the interview, you can withdraw your interview. However, you will still receive a gift card.

If you are interested in participating in this study and/or have questions, please feel free to contact me via cell phone or email. Thank you for your time and careful consideration. I look forward to partnering with you in this research study.

Sincerely,

Diane Bardeen

Educational Doctoral Candidate, Executive Leadership

St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY



Appendix B

Letter to Interested Administrators and Teachers

Dear Administrators and Teachers,

Thank you for your possible interest in participating in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine current teaching methods that may help future educators connect with students of all backgrounds. This study is designed to gather the perceptions of parents/families, teachers, and administrators on including the students' culture in the curriculum. As a participant, you will be interviewed and will have the opportunity to share your experiences regarding the curriculum and classroom activities.

Participants who meet the criteria will be selected according to grade level for equal representation of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. If there is more interest than participant need, participant names will be selected at random. This means that all interested individuals who meet the criteria by the deadline response time will have the same opportunity to participate. Interviews will be set up at the interviewee's convenience. The date and time will be determined at the time of contact. The interviews will be approximately 30-60 minutes long. The interviews will take place via Zoom. If you do participate, you will receive a \$25 gift card for your time. If you are uncomfortable and any time during the interview, you can withdraw your interview. However, you will still receive a gift card.

I have attached an "Informed Consent" document. To participate in the interview, you will need to read and sign this document. If you are selected, you can send the consent form to the email address below. Please understand that I cannot conduct the interview without the consent form.

If you are interested in participating in this study and/or have questions, please feel free to contact me via cell phone or email. I Thank you for your time and careful consideration. I look forward to partnering with you in this research study.

Sincerely,

Diane Bardeen

Educational Doctoral Candidate, Executive Leadership

St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY



Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

Perceptions of Educators and Families of Urban Middle School Students' Connectedness Related to Culturally Responsive Teaching

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in the classroom. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of how teachers, administrators, and families agree or disagree in regard to classroom instruction on the elements of culturally responsive teaching.
- Approximately 12 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of the researcher's dissertation.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for one individual interview, lasting between 30-60 minutes
- If you decided to participate, you will be asked to share a 30-60 minute long individual interview via Zoom. If you do not have access to a computer or internet and participate, we can make arrangements at the charter school for computer and internet use.
- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk. Minimal risks or inconveniences include sitting for up to an hour to participate in an interview.
- You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may help contribute to developing and implementing professional development for districts, schools, and educators.

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):

You are being asked to be in a research study of the influence of culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. This study is being conducted via Zoom. This study is being conducted by: Diane Bardeen, in the Executive Leadership Doctoral Program at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you fit the criteria for the study as a parent, family member, school administrator, or teacher at the charter school.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to share for one individual interview. You will be asked questions regarding your perceptions of culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. The interview will take place via Zoom at your convenience. The interview will last 30-60 minutes. The researcher may follow up with you if there is a need for clarification of your responses. The interview will be audio-recorded. Agreement to be audio recorded is required for participation in this study.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will receive compensation/incentive. Gift cards in the increment of \$25 will be given to the administration at the charter school in a sealed envelope for you to pick up at your convenience after the interview has taken place. If you cannot travel for pick up, the gift card will be mailed to your home address from the school.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private, and your confidentiality will be protected. Although the researcher(s) might publish in any sort of report, no identifying information will be included.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data will be kept on a password-protected laptop or in a locked filing cabinet in a private office by the investigator. All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after three years.

Audio recordings will be accessed by the researcher and a transcription service.

Pseudonyms will be used during interviews. Recordings will be erased after three years.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John Fisher College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS, AND QUESTIONS:

The researcher conducting this study: Diane Bardeen. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact Diane Bardeen at St. John Fisher College.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the [REDACTED]

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Retain this section only if applicable:

I agree to be audio recorded/ transcribed *Yes* *No* *If no, there is not an alternative for participation.*

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.

Appendix D

Teacher Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about your experiences with culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. I have prepared questions that I will pose to stimulate discussion. I may ask follow-up questions as needed. Overall, the interview should last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. As a reminder of the information in the Informed Consent form that you signed, I wanted to remind you that the responses shared today will remain confidential. I will not use your name and avoid reporting information that could be linked back to you personally. This interview will be audio-recorded. The recording and notes related to this interview will be stored securely and then destroyed 3 years after this study has been completed. If you are uncomfortable at any time, you may withdraw your interview. Are there any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

Regarding instruction in the classroom,

1. Let's talk about the student curriculum.
 - a. Can you give any examples of lessons or activities that might include the culture and backgrounds of your students?
 - b. What resources are used to help guide you?
2. Tell me about the different cultures in your classroom/school.
 - a. What makes the classroom engaging for all cultures?
 - b. What does being culturally diverse mean to you?
3. Let's talk about curriculum delivery.
 - a. How are the individual cultures and backgrounds of students considered during instruction?
 - b. How are students' life experiences included in classroom instruction?
4. Tell me about parent and family engagement.
 - a. What types of activities do you feel represent the culture of your students' families?
 - b. What kind of feedback do you ask for from parents and families?
5. Tell me about communication with your students' families.

- a. How are student cultures represented in communication?
 - b. What different modes of communication are used?
6. Can you share any knowledge you have about students' connection to the school?
 - a. What does student connectedness to school mean to you?
 - b. In the last year, what activity or lesson most connected the students to school?
 - c. What are some things that you believe connect students to school?
 - d. Is there anything else you would like to add about student connection to the school?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix E

Parent and Family Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about your experiences with your individual cultures and family life represented in your children's classroom. I have prepared questions that I will pose to stimulate discussion. I may ask follow-up questions as needed. Overall, the interview should last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. As a reminder of the information in the Informed Consent form that you signed, I wanted to remind you that the responses shared today will remain confidential. I will not use your name and avoid reporting information that could be linked back to you personally. This interview will be audio-recorded. The recording and notes related to this interview will be stored securely and then destroyed 3 years after this study has been completed. If you are uncomfortable at any time, you may withdraw your interview. Are there any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

Regarding instruction in the classroom,

1. Let's talk about your child/children's classroom and learning experience.
 - a. What activities or lessons have you observed related to your child's/children learning experience?
 - b. What types of learning activities reflect your child/children's family life? Language? Experiences?
2. Tell me about the different cultures in your child/children's learning environment.
 - a. What makes the classroom engaging for all cultures?
 - b. What does being culturally diverse mean to you?
3. Let's talk about curriculum delivery.
 - a. How are the individual culture/cultures of your child/children considered during instruction?
 - b. How are students' life experiences included in your child/children's learning?
4. Tell me about parent and family engagement.

- a. What types of activities or strategies do you feel represent your family's culture?
 - b. What kind of feedback are you asked for by your school or teacher?
5. Tell me about communication with your child/children's teachers and administrators.
 - a. How is communication delivered to your child/children and your family?
 - b. What different modes of communication are used?
6. Can you share any knowledge you have about students' connection to the school?
 - a. What does student connectedness to school mean to you?
 - b. In the last year, what activity or lesson most connected your child/children to school?
 - c. What are some things that you believe connect students to school?
 - d. Is there anything else you would like to add about student connection to the school?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix F

Administrator Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today. The purpose of this interview is to learn more about your experiences with culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. I have prepared questions that I will pose to stimulate discussion. I may ask follow-up questions as needed. Overall, the interview should last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. As a reminder of the information in the Informed Consent form that you signed, I wanted to remind you that the responses shared today will remain confidential. I will not use your name and avoid reporting information that could be linked back to you personally. This interview will be audio-recorded. The recording and notes related to this interview will be stored securely and then destroyed 3 years after this study has been completed. If you are uncomfortable at any time, you may withdraw your interview. Are there any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. Let's talk about the student curriculum.
 - a. Can you give any examples of lessons or activities that might include the culture and backgrounds of your students?
 - b. What resources are available to help guide the teaching staff?
2. Tell me about the different cultures in your classroom/school.
 - a. What makes the classroom engaging for all cultures?
 - b. What does being culturally diverse mean to you?
3. Let's talk about curriculum delivery.
 - a. How are the individual cultures and backgrounds of students considered during instruction?
 - b. How are students' life experiences included in classroom instruction?
4. Tell me about parent and family engagement.
 - a. What types of activities do you feel represent the culture of your students' families?
 - b. What kind of feedback do you ask for or receive from parents and families?
5. Tell me about communication with your students' families.
 - a. How are student cultures represented in communication?
 - b. What different modes of communication are used?
6. Can you share any knowledge you have about students' connection to the school?
 - a. What does student connectedness to school mean to you?

- b. In the last year, what activity or lesson most connected the students to school?
 - c. What are some things that you believe connect students to school?
 - d. Is there anything else you would like to add about student connection to the school?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?