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BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SCHOOLS THROUGH TEACHER CAPACITY

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the Department of Leadership and Counselor Education  
The University of Mississippi

by

LaTonya Robinson

May, 2022

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the dynamics of how teaching culturally responsive strategies to teachers can help eliminate the opportunity gap between students of color and their White counterparts. The action research method involved first collecting quantitative data through several surveys and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data through interviews and professional learning communities. In the first phase of the study, the culturally responsive and teacher efficacy scale data was collected from the participants within the study and the district at large. While the district survey was not mandated, it was strongly encouraged. All the teachers selected for the study took the district survey, in addition to the other surveys, which were specific to the participants. The next step was the first interview. The second, qualitative phase was conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative results to help explain why we are where we are in this area. In this follow-up, I explored with the participating teachers how culturally responsive teaching through professional learning communities can help teachers gain invaluable insight into student achievement. We hope to scale up this training to the whole district as we do the work, creating and modifying our instructional strategies along the way.

## DEDICATION

To Marvin, my amazing husband, who has supported me through all my educational endeavors and from whom strength flows in the moments I feel I have no more to give. To my loving daughters and their patience with me through all of my busy days. You continually allow me grace and shower me with your very obvious pride in my work. Makaili, Makenzie, and Peri, this is also for you.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Psychological Association
ARTIC	Attitudes Related to Trauma-Informed Care
CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
CITI	Collaborative Instructional Training Initiative
CRP	Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
CRT	Critical Race Theory
MDE	Mississippi Department of Education
MTSS	Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
NCCRESt	National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
OSD	Oxford School District
PD	Professional Development
PLC	Professional Learning Community
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
WCCT	Whole Child Champion Team

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS.....	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	13
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS.....	33
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	53
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	73
REFERENCES.....	92
APPENDICES.....	102
VITA.....	116

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The problem of practice examined in this applied research study is the achievement gap between White and Black students in the Oxford School District. James Baldwin (1963) posited that when we become conscious, we begin to examine every aspect of our existence, including our education. Amaetea (2012) reveals the complexities of family-school dynamics and the significant power imbalances between the expectations of caregivers and teachers who differ by class and race. According to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE, 2018) current state level data, a plurality of public-school students in our state are Black at 48%, while White students trail right behind at 44%. However, The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) indicates that the majority of Mississippi classrooms—like those in the rest of the country—are being taught by White teachers.

Darling-Hammond (2015) reported that teachers are predominantly White, middle-class women who have little experience with diverse populations. Many teachers are products of school systems with little diversity. According to Darling-Hammond, many White teachers have limited life experiences with people of color before they get their degrees, and the effects of their lack of exposure to diversity become even more pronounced as they attempt to guide the minds of students who not only do not look like them, but live vastly different lives than they do.



## **Description of the Problem**

The Oxford School District (OSD) has been haunted for years by the large achievement gap between White and Black students (MDE, 2017). This has been a persistent concern with little progress made toward addressing the issue. Countless professional developments, seminars, and well-intentioned strategic plans have failed to explain why this problem continues unabated. The issues relating to race and education are immensely complex and exceedingly difficult to diagnose and solve (Banks, 1995). Gay (2018) found students of color had been taught and were thought to be performing at their academic peak for years with little challenge. Despite a Black president and more people of color doing amazing feats many times over, teachers are still teaching with expectations for children of color far below those held for White students. The problem of practice addressed in this applied research study was the sustained large achievement gap in the Oxford School District. Tillman (2008) concluded, when teachers, leaders, parents, and communities decide children of color will receive an education that emphasizes academic and social excellence, teaching and learning changes in fundamental ways. In a paradigm that promotes academic and social excellence, educational goals are pursued and achieved by teachers and leaders who demonstrate their capability to grow kids holistically.

One of the ways the Oxford School District has attempted to mitigate the achievement gap has been through an emphasis on social-emotional learning. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development, through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitude to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make caring, responsible decisions. Social-emotional

learning, when implemented correctly, could help address inequities and empower schools seeking to reach all students. Part of my professional leadership is bridging the gap between SEL and cultural responsiveness.

Cultural responsiveness is the ability to understand the within-group differences that make each student unique, while celebrating the between-group variations that make our world a tapestry. Culturally responsive leaders need to continuously support marginalized students by examining assumptions about race and culture (Khalifah, et. al 2016).

Social-emotional learning is how educators help children process their environment and become better students and humans. However, it is crucial to note, social-emotional learning cannot take place without a culturally relevant start. It is important that we seek to understand students culturally before helping them learn new social skills and behaviors. These opportunity gaps are considered both curricular and cultural (Ogbu, 2003). Curricular and cultural gaps intersect when curriculum is developed with a singular focus devoid of diversity (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Among children who are negatively impacted by anxiety, low self-esteem, and inability to communicate, Black children in particular experience these issues further compounded with racial trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (Franklin et al., 2006). Black children are directly and indirectly impacted by racial discrimination and violence. Lee (2002) emphasized that “from a cultural perspective, we know that the meaning and emphasis of particular emotions are influenced by different traditions of socialization” (p. 803). Black children have been socialized to cope with racism. King (2005) illustrated, through an analysis of research literature, that Black education under Jim Crow segregation encouraged Black children not to “internalize

negative stereotypes and to learn emotional self-control in response to experiences of micro-aggression” (p. 804).

A focus on the whole child expands beyond a limiting approach focused on accountability alone. The whole-child infrastructure within the district is important. Beginning these initiatives, getting them assigned to schools, and forming committees had not been a big priority before Covid-19. Now, as we rise from the ashes of a raging pandemic, an invisible traumatic virus plaguing our most vulnerable learners and communities of color, we are left to pick up the pieces of this stalled initiative and push forward. With the death and destruction of major racial unrest added to this, we recognize now is the time for intentionality toward the achievement gap.

### **Personal Background**

As a Black woman and educator, I understand and live in a culture where I am marginalized, underestimated, overlooked, stereotyped, and sometimes even criminalized in the media. Growing up in the Mississippi Delta, one of the poorest areas in our state, I learned early on that education was the only equalizer a Black child had. I was raised by a strong Black grandmother. Having only a sixth-grade education herself and working days in a White household as a cleaner and babysitter, she taught me nothing was impossible if I stayed committed to my education. She instilled in me that my life was not meant to be like her life, and she compelled me to want more. Several amazing teachers, college professors, and benefactors later, I am now happily married to a phenomenal man and raising very beautiful, bright, Black children of my own. My fight to make things right for all kids is now all the more pressing. Although I experienced a culturally competent teacher in my formative years who validated who I was and facilitated an inclusive curriculum, not every child has this experience. My

community, largely Black, consisted of many scholarly teachers of color in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, this trend has not continued, and we now face difficulty finding culturally competent practitioners.

I now work in a district where this is a concern. I work in a predominantly White world daily and have recently been appointed as equity director in my district. When I stepped into this position, I felt it was necessary to look at all facets of what the district had already done, investigating the underlying systems and seeing for myself if we had the tools in place to make a significant difference in the achievement gap. My first year as equity director, I triaged the ailing multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) and worked to build the new system we are currently utilizing. While this innovation is still in the early stages, it allows me to look deeply at the inequities within our district with respect to social-emotional learning, cultural responsiveness, and trauma-informed practices. In year two of my time as equity director, we built capacity by revamping requirements for and staffing the Whole Child Champion Team (WCCT). This team led the efforts throughout this study and provided the infrastructure to our overall MTSS overhaul. With Covid-19, these plans have become especially critical. However, the pandemic has allowed us to uncover more of the gaps within the system.

### **Description of the Context of the Research**

The district is located in the city of Oxford, Mississippi, which has a population of 25,884 (U.S. Census, 2020). Oxford is currently growing at a rate of 2.69% annually, and its population has increased by 36.84% since the most recent census, which recorded a population of 18,916 in 2010 (U.S. Census, 2020). With this population boom, the Oxford School District has seen a significant rise in attendance over the last few years, further diversifying the student population.

The average household income in Oxford is \$63,651 with a poverty rate of 33.38% (U.S. Census, 2020). This number is important because it shows a large disparity between the have and the have-nots. This phenomenon has begun to trickle into the schools, causing much disproportionality in student achievement. The median rental cost in recent years is \$938 per month, and the median house value is \$258,600. Fifty-seven percent of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. In the city of Oxford, the racial breakdown is 70% White and 24% Black (U.S. Census, 2020). Comparatively, 32% of Mississippians are college-educated, while the median income is \$23,121, well below the median income of Oxford. The state has a poverty level of 19% overall which makes the poverty rate within Oxford at 33% a bit high. Ensuring the teachers and administrators understand this dynamic was also a priority, as it tells a story.

The Oxford School District has a long-standing tradition of academic success coupled with innovative, experiential learning opportunities designed to maximize learning for each student. Property taxes play a significant part in the funding of this school district, and for this reason, these schools are among the best funded in the state. Students are each assigned their own iPad for learning K-12. Our district also has an impressive online platform so students can get whatever they need in school or out, with little interruption.

The OSD is made up of six schools. The current demographics are 34% Black students, 52% White, and 14% others. This means the OSD is about 52% White and 48% minority. The faculty makeup district wide is 88% White, 12% minority; administrative staff makeup is 73% White and 27% minority. All the principals are White; 80% of the school counselors are White. Over 60% of the teaching staff has an advanced degree beyond a bachelor's, and the majority, 70%, have six or more years of experience.

Other significant data reveal a sharp disparity in how Black and White students experience school in the OSD. This includes a gifted population of 75% White and 8% Black. State assessments (MDE, 2018) show White students scoring proficient at nearly double the rate of students of color. In advanced level courses, White students are in the majority by a whopping 79% of participants, and Black students make up 8%. Meanwhile, the special needs population is 49% Black and 39% White. Last year, 88% of dropouts were students of color. The discipline data shows that Black students are over three times more likely than White students to receive a discipline referral. In the Response to Intervention (RTI) process, over 78% of students tiered are students of color.

In 2018, the district went through the Cognia accreditation process. Cognia, formerly known as AdvanceED, is one of the oldest and largest educational accrediting agencies in the world. Through this process, we discovered there were priorities needing to be addressed. While the school district could boast of several powerful practices, one of their priority issues was to identify and implement specific, research-based instructional strategies to enhance academic rigor and provide robust differentiated instruction to improve the achievement of all students. Most evaluators noted the lack of cultural responsiveness in the classes they chose to visit. During the exit presentation, the superintendent provided the review team a wide range of student performance data. The data indicated that students in the system generally score at or above state and national averages in all content areas and at all grade levels. However, achievement gaps existed for African American students, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and limited English proficiency students across the board. In addition to student performance data, the observation data collected by the review team indicated that

differentiated learning opportunities for students with varying academic needs were inconsistently provided in all classrooms (Cognia, 2018).

In addition to implementation of various programs and the planned expansion of pre-kindergarten, the district decided it needed to be rebranded. For many years, the district touted being “First in Class the Oxford Way.” A committee decided this phrase lacked cultural awareness and a need existed for a more global, inclusive statement. This rebranding signaled the beginning of a new mission to bring equitable outcomes for all. Birthed from this journey were a new mission, vision, and strategic plan, as well as the newest addition to Oxford’s repertoire, “The Portrait of a Graduate,” a comprehensive checklist of researched-based attributes needed for global citizenship.

Also emerging from this accreditation process was the district’s decision to hire an equity director. I was hired the next year and given the marching orders to create an MTSS infrastructure and other goals of equity, such as addressing the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program and Advanced Placement classes. MTSS is the framework that many schools use to provide targeted support to struggling students. It screens all students with the aim to address behavioral as well as academic issues. The goal of MTSS is to intervene early so students can catch up with their peers. MTSS is just one facet in the Oxford School District’s war against the achievement gap. The adoption of the Portrait of a Graduate created the urgency for this dissertation in practice. In order for the school system to address its goals, our staff must become versed in these critical skills we believe each child must attain and learn how to cultivate them in students. In addition, new systems will need to be built, and the people to collaboratively oversee this work trained. The Equity Task Force and the WCCT were created to meet these needs.

## **Justification of the Problem**

The United States educational system faces a stark mismatch of teacher and student demographics: 79% of teachers are White, compared to only 50% of students. Twenty-five percent of students are Hispanic, 15.6% are Black and 4.8% are Asian (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). If a student is not White, there is a high probability that their teacher will not share the same cultural and ethnic background.

The underrepresentation of teachers of color provides an additional barrier for students of color when they don't see teachers who look like them or share similar experiences (Darling-Hammond, 1995). This level of familiarity validates a student and reinforces self-worth. As an educator of color with varied successful personal and professional experiences, even I am empowered when I see successful people of color who share similar experiences and situations. Therefore, a student who is still developing cognitively and establishing their identity could be positively (or negatively) impacted forever by the presence or absence of an effective teacher of color. Sleeter (2001) explained that the situation of increasingly diverse student populations being taught by persistently non-diverse teaching forces significantly exacerbates the problem of disparities in achievement.

## **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this applied research with program evaluation study was to close the achievement gap between White and Black students in the Oxford School District. To accomplish this purpose, a team was created to analyze district data and existing research and collaboratively develop an action plan to address the problem. The team examined school data and found cultural responsiveness in classrooms is essential to provide a more inclusive



environment. In response, the team created an action plan for a professional development program (LEAP) to be offered over the course of two years.

Year one began in August 2020 with an effort to increase awareness of the need for culturally responsive teaching by sharing and discussing survey results and observational data during MTSS meetings. In addition, the program began that year with the WCCT. The district champion team used the 2020-2021 school year to become immersed in research around trauma, SEL, and cultural responsiveness. The champion team developed lead teams within each school to disseminate information. The Attitudes Related to Trauma-Informed Care (ARTIC) survey (ARTIC; Baker et al., 2016) was given to all teachers in fall 2020, and teams are used behavioral data to chart progress. This data informed how we would proceed with students in the traditional and virtual settings.

Beginning in year two, in August 2021, the LEAP professional learning module commenced with a team of six teachers. These teachers implemented strategies acquired from the LEAP modules in their classrooms. The participants were selected based on several factors, including length of time in district, professional experience, and input from school-based principals. The modules consisted of book studies to inform a Plan-Study-Do-Act approach to implement the changes identified as needed in practice.

At the end of the second year, the team conducted a program evaluation. The program evaluation resulted in the data collection and analyses for this research. The program evaluation determined how the program was able to impact the problem of practice. In addition, the program evaluation will also be used to improve the overall cultural competence program within the district.

## **Research Questions**

The study attempted to answer the following central question: To what level did the professional development program support closing the achievement gap between White and Black students in the Oxford School District? To answer this question and the following sub-questions, a program evaluation was conducted in the spring of the 2021-22 school year:

1. Did the participants demonstrate an understanding that knowledge of the students’ “story” makes a difference in the students’ success?
2. To what extent did the teachers participate in the bi-weekly professional learning community (PLC)?
3. What areas of success were evident through the implementation of the program?
4. What problems hindered successful implementation of the program?
5. Did the program improve the capacity of the teachers even when engaging in their other professional learning communities?
6. Did the teachers become better practitioners after going through this program?

## **Summary**

Meeting all of the varied educational needs of the Black and White students in the OSD is an arduous task that must be strictly monitored, adapted, and accommodated. In light of the increased push for educational equity around the country, this has now become one of the biggest social justice issues of the day. Continuous improvement is not just a mantra but a way of doing business in the Oxford School District. As such, it is a natural progression to look at every angle by which to defeat the looming achievement gap that still dogs our heels, which makes it incumbent upon us to look at teacher capacity and see if its improvement will help improve the overall picture, especially given the racial makeup of our teaching force. In Chapter Two, I

explore the research related to cultural responsiveness as a means of informing the development of an action plan intended to build the collective self-efficacy of the faculty within the district. The six research questions served as the basis from which I evaluated the action plan outlined in Chapter Three. The purpose of the program evaluation was to determine the degree to which the professional development assisted in our larger purpose of improving the cultural responsiveness of our faculty. A variety of qualitative and quantitative data was used and collected through surveys, interviews, archival data analysis, and observations to provide evidence of the level of impact the professional development implementation had on the selected participants collective efficacy.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Culturally responsive teaching explores using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them, teaching to and through the strengths of these students (Gay, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching is specifically committed to collective, and not merely individual, empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As our society increases in diversity, teachers and other school personnel have a corresponding need to increase in their understanding of the integral relationship between culture and social behavior and the need to view students' behaviors within a cultural context.

Lisa Delpit (1995) summarized the relationship between culture and behavior best when she made this statement:

We all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness, making it seem that our own view is simply “the way it is.” Learning to interpret across cultures demands reflecting on our own experiences, analyzing our own culture, examining and comparing varying perspectives. We must consciously and voluntarily make our cultural lenses apparent. Engaging in the hard work of seeing the world as others see it must be a fundamental goal for any move to reform the education of teachers and their assessment. (p. 151)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the nonprofit organization that developed the SEL framework and remains dedicated to its implementation in public schools, has five different competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2019). The CASEL dimensions, while rooted firmly in psychology, do not explicitly address the broader lens of sociology, paying scant attention to sociopolitical context and culture (Larson et al., 2018). Although the literature acknowledges a tacit understanding at best of the role culture plays in creating and sustaining respectful interpersonal relationships, it does little to acknowledge the cultural nature of identifying and working with emotions and reflects a colorblind approach, privileging White, middle-class, American values of what constitutes social-emotional learning (Hoffman, 2009). There has never been a time in history more appropriate for educators to positively impact the social and emotional development of the whole child as they address the academic standards of their curriculum and student age groups.

The purpose of this literature review is to present research on closing the achievement gap through improving cultural competence in teacher capacity. It begins with the historical context of race and education in the United States. Next, it presents a cursory discussion of critical race theory in education. Finally, the chapter ends with a comprehensive review of the research on cultural competence and multicultural education. From this analysis of the literature, we will further explore supports teachers need in order to effectively implement cultural responsiveness in the classroom.

### **Historical Context of Race and Education in America**

Race relations and education have a longstanding history in the United States. In 1896, almost thirty years after the end of the Civil War-during the Reconstruction period, the case of

*Plessy v. Ferguson* ushered in the ideal that public education for minorities and Whites would be “separate but equal.” This case, which began in 1891, started as a civil complaint made by Homer Plessy on the grounds that if a person was segregated by their race, then one could assume that other genetic features, such as hair color, could also support the segregation claim. Plessy, who was 7/8 White and 1/8 Black was infuriated by the fact that he was segregated when riding on trains. Plessy further urged the courts to realize that segregation automatically implied hierarchies and a superiority of Whites. However, the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy and established the “separate but equal” policy, which became the cornerstone for segregation within education (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896).

From this decision, and subsequently extending into multiple arenas within public life, harsh laws and punishments systemically denied Black people legal rights and equal opportunities. These systemic inequities allowed for public education to establish invisible (and oftentimes visible) barriers that limited access and success for all students. Black students were provided substandard curricular materials and teaching staff along with limited monetary resources, all of which further enabled and enlarged academic and opportunity gaps (Gorski, 2013).

### ***Historical Background to Educational Equity***

The problems of education inequality are deeply rooted throughout American history. In the South, segregation was upheld in the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which mandated that schools be segregated into Black and White. Although in the North there were no segregation laws, school officials deliberately drew up district lines with the intent of segregation. The Fourteenth Amendment granted full citizenship to all persons regardless of color and promoted equal protections (“14th Amendment Simplified Summary and Impact,”

2009). Segregation caused inferior education for Black children because the districts in which they were schooled had fewer resources, which often resulted in poor facilities and lesser quality teachers. In the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, the tide began to change for Black students. In this case, the court unanimously ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, thus reversing the position of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954). However, legalized segregation in schools would take much longer to eradicate completely.

In the 1960s, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a group of social scientists to write a report on educational equality in the United States. Sociologist James Coleman led the group, and the report was one of the largest studies in history, surveying more than 150,000 students. In 1966, the finished report—over 700 pages in length—was published. The report, titled "Equality of Educational Opportunity," came to be known as "The Coleman Report." At the time, it launched widespread debate on school effects, or the ways in which school-level characteristics influence student achievement. It also helped define debates over desegregation, busing, and cultural bias in standardized tests. The Coleman Report was commonly presented as evidence that school funding has little effect on student achievement. In fact, the report did not deny that funding or other school effects matter, but it did argue that other factors are more important. Specifically, the report found that student background and socioeconomic status are much more important in determining educational outcomes than are measured differences in school resources. However, it also affirmed that differences in schools—and particularly teachers—have a very significant impact on student outcomes. Thus, the report supplied evidence that different conditions in different schools could lead to different outcomes for different groups of students (Coleman, 1966). By lending official credence to the notion that

"schools did not make a difference" in predicting student achievement, the Coleman Report stimulated a vigorous reaction, instigating many of the studies that would later come to define the research base for the effective schools movement.

### ***Effective Schools Movement***

The educational researchers who conducted these studies developed a body of research supporting the premise that all children can learn and that the school controls the factors necessary to assure student mastery of the core curriculum. The first task of the effective schools researchers was to identify existing effective schools – schools that were successful in educating all students regardless of their socioeconomic status or family background. Examples of these especially effective schools were found repeatedly, in varying locations and in both large and small communities. After identifying these schools, the task remained to identify the common characteristics among these effective schools. In other words, what philosophies, policies, and practices did these schools have in common? Upon closer inspection, the researchers found some commonalities among all of these especially effective schools. They all had strong instructional leadership and a strong sense of mission. They also demonstrated effective instructional behaviors, held high expectations for all students, practiced frequent monitoring of student achievement, and operated in a safe and orderly manner. These six attributes eventually became known as the Correlates of Effective Schools (Lezotte, 1979).

### ***A Nation at Risk***

On April 26, 1983, President Ronald Reagan stood before the press in the State Dining Room at the White House and held up a report titled *A Nation at Risk*. Eighteen months in the making and written by the blue-ribbon members of the National Commission on Excellence in Education at the behest of Secretary of Education Terrell Bell, the report examined the quality of



education in the United States—and the findings were anything but stellar. “Our nation is at risk,” the report boldly declared in its first sentence. Over its next 36 pages, it lambasted the state of America’s schools and called for a host of much-needed reforms to right the alarming direction that public education was seen to be headed. The commission found few signs of encouragement about the American education system. Test scores were rapidly declining, low teaching salaries and poor teacher training programs were leading to a high turnover rate among educators, and other industrialized countries were threatening to outpace America’s technological superiority. The report provided mounds of statistical evidence: 23 million American adults were functionally illiterate, the average achievement for high school students on standardized tests was lower than before the launch of Sputnik in 1957, and only one-fifth of 17-year-old students had the ability to write a persuasive essay. Almost immediately, this report garnered massive media attention. It found an outdated form of classroom learning led to an increasing number of students who were subjected to a curriculum that diluted the course material and allowed them to advance through their schooling with minimal effort (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

### ***No Child Left Behind***

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law by George W. Bush in 2001 with major bipartisan support. Many elected officials felt we were on our way to making a big difference, and that making the federal government the hall monitor was necessary in order for schools to have the needed incentive to close the achievement gap and propel all students forward (United States Department of Education, 2001). NCLB effectively scaled up the federal role in holding schools accountable for student outcomes. It was the product of a collaboration between civil rights and business groups, as well as both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol

Hill and the Bush administration, which sought to advance American competitiveness and close the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more advantaged peers. Since 2002, it has had an outsized impact on teaching, learning, and school improvement and become increasingly controversial with educators and the general public. The law meant to help bridge the achievement gap is mostly noted now as only helping to widen it.

Noticeably absent from any of these reforms and policies was an emphasis on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed pedagogy, or cultural competence. However, despite the initial fervor around *A Nation at Risk* and NCLB, neither led to many far-reaching changes. Many of the problems identified in 1983 remain unaddressed, and stagnant student achievement continues to challenge educators and administrators everywhere. Collopy, Bowman and Taylor (2012) viewed the educational achievement gap as a critical social injustice. The authors' point of view came from the argument of the Catholic teaching on social justice, and they argued the achievement gap constitutes social injustice. In the study, Catholic and Marianist conceptions of social justice in particular call people to work with others in their spheres of life to transform institutions in order to further human rights while promoting the common good. The widening achievement gap is a blatant antithesis to social justice. Kornhaber, Griffith, and Tyler (2014) go further by viewing the achievement gap from a failed view of equity. Their study went on to argue that, in order to achieve equity among racial groups, educational policies and resources would have to be aligned to account for the inequitable circumstances students come from and inform the actions and resources that shape children's possibilities.

### **Critical Race Theory and Embedded Racism**

Critical race theory, which presupposes that racism is embedded within society and institutions (Sleeter, 2012), is not propaganda or anti-American; it is a toolkit for examining and

addressing racism and other forms of marginalization. Rather than rejecting this theory, departments of education should ensure principals and teachers learn how it can be applied to address long-standing educational inequities. If we recognize how race and racism shape our institutions, principals and teachers can find innovative ways to value the lived experiences of their students of color, prioritize the recruitment and retention of faculty and staff of color, elevate the voices and experiential knowledge of Black and brown students, and adopt culturally responsive teaching practices (Sleeter, 2012). Without this guidance, principals and teachers may be committed to racial justice but be unable to translate their commitments into action. Most principals recognize that individual teachers can be biased, but few understand how racism operates in their schools and in their own decision-making processes. Consequently, these principals suspend Black students at higher rates than their White peers, partly because they rely solely on the teachers' accounts to inform their disciplinary decisions. Some also rigidly adhere to discipline policies without considering context and circumstances, while others admit to making quick disciplinary decisions to get back to more pressing issues.

Principals who acknowledge that racism exists, and that a mindset of racial neutrality is not the same as pursuing equity, may be less likely to thoughtlessly take the teacher's word and instead ensure cultural misunderstandings between teachers and students are not an underlying cause of disciplinary referrals. Principals who reject the idea of racial neutrality and acknowledge how several categories (including race, poverty, immigration status, and LGBTQ identity) can create additional layers of marginalization might be able to question their own practices. They might then avoid disciplining students sleeping in class who are experiencing homelessness, just lost loved ones to deportation, or are working after school to support their household, for instance. Principals in underfunded schools may work more closely with

communities and amplify the needs of historically marginalized families to ensure their schools receive adequate resources (Sleeter, 2012). “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (King, 1967).

In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, Geneva Gay (2018) called for a stop to the disempowerment of students of color, which results in disproportionate levels of low achievement. Though many factors—such as funding, policy making, poverty, and trauma—contribute to inequity in schools, purposeful changes in how students from varying backgrounds are taught have been shown to help close the achievement gap and increase achievement. Teachers must begin to seek answers about their students before they render judgement. Often students of color are not given the same opportunities to make mistakes as their White counterparts because no one ever addressed the trauma around the behavioral problem, and the teacher is not competent enough in social-emotional learning or cultural responsiveness to see an issue. Over sixty years after the Supreme Court ordered integration of the country’s public schools, students of color are still disproportionately underachieving when compared to their White counterparts.

### **Multicultural Education and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Decades of research have revealed that culturally responsive teaching presents a potential solution to this problem. The literature consistently shows that students of color achieve more academic success when their cultures are respected, valued, and incorporated into the classroom. However, despite the evidence supporting it, this type of inclusive classroom environment has yet to become a reality for countless students of color. While cultural diversity among American student populations rises, the teaching population remains homogenous—European American

(Banks, 1994). Allodi (2010) explains that heterogenous student populations reflect various learning styles and abilities as well as social and cultural differences. Allodi advocates the need for teachers to develop strategies to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to learn and understand.

Moreover, Cheesman and De Pry (2010) determined that in general, most teachers, regardless of race or ethnicity, have a negative perception of both African American and Hispanic American students. These views compound when these students are also economically disadvantaged. Teacher perceptions and interactions with their students dictate the quality of the learning environment. Cheesman and DePry (2010) included studies revealing a direct correlation between teacher self-efficacy and the students' self-perception, behavior, racial tension, and motivation to learn. However, Delpit (2012) acknowledged that classroom teachers with culturally diverse populations categorized as English Language Learners face many challenges. These challenges include students' immigration status, socioeconomic depression, behavioral problems, and/or low performance. The daily challenge of developing strategies for creating culturally responsive classrooms that are equitable and that meet the needs of culturally diverse student populations can be overwhelming.

In 2012, the American Psychological Association (APA) convened a Presidential Task Force on Educational Disparities. The task force found that the racial and ethnic disparity between students and teachers has created cultural barriers that impede learning and academic attainment among students. Instead of relegating African American and other culturally diverse students to special needs and behavior modification programs, America needs to invest in methods that enhance and stimulate learning that is efficacious and promotes creative and innovative thinking among all student populations. The APA Presidential Task Force (2012)

identified several avenues for enhancing the academic environment: cooperative learning, interracial relationships, intergroup attitudes, access to educational resources, and professional and social networks. The work of the task force expanded upon the ideology James Banks had introduced two decades earlier when he coined the term “multicultural education.”

Multicultural education focused on the introduction of ethnic studies into the curriculum through five dimensions, which Banks (1995) described in an interview. The first dimension is content integration, which includes the cultural perspectives of diverse people. The second dimension is knowledge construction, which encourages students to understand how cognition developed within one’s cultural paradigm. Knowledge is fluid and determined from one’s perspective and requires investigation into ways of knowing, assumptions based on frames of reference, and values. Knowledge often dismissed as religious or mythological should be further analyzed and could enhance the discourse among students about the ancient understanding of different cultures on a topic of study.

Equity pedagogy, the third dimension of multicultural education, requires teachers to practice flexibility and modification in their practice to ensure success regardless of race, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status. The fourth dimension is prejudice reduction, wherein teachers implement methods for creating positive interactions among their culturally diverse student populations. Finally, Banks (1995) states that an “empowering school culture and social structure” is essential within the classroom to create an equitable environment that encourages participation from all students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

When these dimensions are combined with culturally relevant pedagogy, students should not feel that their culture, language, or ability to learn is problematic. MTSS integrated with cultural responsiveness encourages the teacher to seek out different ways to approach and teach a

skill to the students through their way of knowing. Teacher understanding of the importance of self-efficacy and self-identity can dictate effectiveness in teaching.

Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) described three increasingly effective frameworks for multicultural education that are utilized in schools and teacher education programs. The conservative approach reflects an assimilationist view, whereby students are encouraged to achieve success by adopting the values of the dominant culture. The liberal approach is characterized by a superficial focus on celebrating diversity. In the critical approach, which is presented as the ideal to strive for, the students' cultures, voices, and ways of knowing are authentically incorporated into the curriculum. "The critical approach seeks justice by focusing on the relationships between equity and excellence, on one hand, and race, ethnic, and class configurations, on the other hand" (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001, p. 93).

While not identified by Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) as a model of critical multicultural education, I believe that culturally responsive teaching is yet another iteration of critical multicultural education. Banks (1994) asserts that the broad goal of multicultural education is to "increase the educational equality for both gender groups, for students from diverse ethnic and cultural groups, and for exceptional students" (p.45). With this goal in mind, culturally responsive teaching provides teachers with a framework for accomplishing this task.

Gay (2002) defines the framework of culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. Additionally, she outlines five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching. These elements include developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring

and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in delivery of instruction (Gay, 2002).

In addition to these elements, Gay asserts there are five dimensions that further define culturally responsive teaching. She describes culturally responsive teaching as: multidimensional, validating, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. These qualities and dimensions of culturally responsive teaching reflect the dominant goal of multicultural education, which is to transform learning environments for the benefit of all students (Nieto, 2003). Culturally responsive teaching that is validating acknowledges the prior knowledge, cultural experiences, and learning styles of students. Additionally, connections are made between home and school or between the real world and the world of school. The curriculum validates the students' existence by reflecting the cultural and ethnic background of the students. This validation is seen through all aspects and content areas of the curriculum (Gay, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching that is comprehensive focuses on the whole child. By focusing on the whole child, the teacher also focuses on the child as a member of a larger community. In this sense, the teacher responds to the student's need to belong and honors their human dignity by allowing the student to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity and heritage (Gay, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching that is multidimensional is inclusive of many aspects of the teaching-learning process. These aspects include the curriculum, the student-teacher relationship, the classroom climate, the instructional strategies, and the assessment of learning. It may also include collaboration among teachers of different curricular disciplines on a singular topic. For example, teachers may focus on the concept of "oppression." This idea would be explored through the arts, literature, mathematics, science, etc. (Gay, 2018).



Culturally responsive teaching that is empowering not only instills students with a belief that they can succeed, but also provides support systems to ensure students' success. One example of an empowering school culture would be a school that enacts changes so that all students (and families) have equal opportunity for success, perhaps by recognizing and allowing the use of home languages, when possible, in communication with students and families. Additionally, this would mean holding high expectations for students, regardless of the student's gender and racial, cultural, socio-economic, or linguistic background. Maintaining this belief of high academic achievement for all students also means that school personnel would look critically at the practice of academic tracking and how students are identified for gifted and special education programs. Culturally responsive teaching that is transformative incorporates the students' linguistic and work styles into the learning process. This may include more interactive communication styles, such as call and response, as well as more opportunities to work collaboratively (Gay 2018).

Additionally, students are taught the skills to critique and engage the world around them in order to speak back to the world and enact change. Culturally responsive teaching that is emancipatory challenges the notion that there is only one truth. Culturally responsive teaching promotes the idea that there are multiple lived realities and, therefore, multiple ways of knowing about the world. This idea counters the mainstream narrative often promoted within schools and allows students, particularly minority students, to see themselves reflected within the curriculum. Many may consider the pedagogy of critical multiculturalism generally speaking, and culturally responsive teaching in particular, to be just good teaching, but it is more as well.

### ***Multicultural Education in Teacher Education***

The inadequate preparation of teachers can create a cultural gap between teachers and students and can limit educators' abilities to choose effective instructional practices or materials because, much too often, teachers and instructional contexts are developed to benefit students from White middle and high socioeconomic backgrounds, voiding the cultural characteristics of diverse learners (Orosco & Aceves, 2009). Reflecting back on my own preparation to teach, I encountered a lack of focus on how to address the unique needs of the potentially diverse students that would enter my classroom. Instead, there was an emphasis on celebrating diversity, reflective of the liberal multicultural education approach Jenks et al. (2001) discussed. This idea, that most multicultural teacher education is indicative of the conservative or liberal, rather than the critical, approach supports Sleeter and Grant's (2003, p.89) assertion that, "multicultural education is an educational concept that most educators must profess to understand, even if they know little or nothing about it, because its inclusion of multicultural content is a requirement in their courses." Therefore, its meaning often becomes superficial, reflecting a glazed over approach. Additionally, Gomez (2008) claims a "single course or field experience in a teacher education program only rarely if ever has the power to interrupt or change values formed over a lifetime" (p. 57). Therefore, if most teachers experience this type of enactment of multicultural education within their preparatory period, little multicultural education is really learned at all.

When teacher candidates do receive training in cultural responsiveness, the result can be a powerful impact on their future classrooms. Castro, Field, Bauml, and Moroski (2012) conducted a study that examined how preservice teachers approached social studies after immersion in multiculturalism and cultural diversity training. This study revealed that training in cultural diversity influences teacher attitudes. The teachers in urban districts tended to be more

willing to embrace transformative pedagogy that broadened social commentary, accepted a culturally diverse curriculum, and embrace diversified instruction. Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning (2011) also conducted a preservice case study and found that, once teachers acknowledged their roles of power within the classroom and embraced the cultural knowledge of their students, critical pedagogy was easily assimilated into science, mathematics, literature, and other curriculum, reframing the classroom setting as a challenging and dynamic learning environment.

Ukpokodu (2007) states that teachers must develop a social justice orientation because most teachers are inadequately prepared to teach culturally diverse students. Quinn and Cooc (2015) indicated that the margins in the achievement gap in math, literacy, and science are at epidemic levels and inferred the problem is due to inequitable and inefficient education practices. These educational deficits among specific student populations impede the nation's ability to meet the demands of living, developing, and participating in innovative high-tech and global economies.

### ***Culturally Responsive Instruction***

Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally responsive instruction as pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitude. Rajagopal (2011) further explains this model of education as one in which teachers infuse the standards or core curriculum with culturally responsive lessons and teaching materials that enable students to learn effectively. The instruction reflects the cultural paradigm and knowledge of the students' ethnic heritage. Culturally responsive classrooms require teachers to advance constructivist views of learning, commit themselves as agents of change, and embrace culturally responsive teaching strategies.

Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (1995) define establishing inclusion as creating an academic environment that creates a genuine sense of community, promotes justice, and infuses equitable learning among all learners. Teachers who create strong classroom communities foster a flow of respect and connectedness among students. Students have opportunities to practice collaboration, respect different perspectives, engage in positive interactions, and demonstrate empathy towards one another. Intrinsic motivation elevates as students respond cognitively according to Gardner (2015).

The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST, 2010) was a federally funded project, which ran from 2002-2010 and advocated the integration of culturally relevant instruction with intervention to ensure that students are receiving culturally responsive instruction as part of the interventions used to broaden understanding and enhance learning. There have been concerns that cultural relevancy impedes academic challenge and undermines Western culture. For this reason, many teachers do not believe that culturally responsive instruction is necessary. Fortunately, the NCCREST affirmed that culturally responsive instruction has a positive impact on learning for all students. NCCREST studies indicated that there are no adverse correlations between the academic performance of White students and their Black and brown counterparts when implementing culturally responsive instruction (Klingner et al., 2005). Therefore, all students can only benefit from responsiveness.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

This chapter presents a summary of the literature related to improving cultural competence among teachers. While the benefits of cultural responsiveness are well documented, there are gaps in the literature, which my study sought to help fill. These include a focus on the opportunity gap instead of the achievement gap, the impact of targeted professional development

on the cultural responsiveness and efficacy of teachers, and the intersection of SEL and cultural responsiveness in a diverse, affluent school setting.

### ***The Opportunity Gap***

While achievement gap discourse in education usually focuses on students' scores on standardized tests, it also concerns student graduation rates, patterns in gifted and advanced placement, and other measurable outcomes that allow for comparisons between groups of students. I argue that standardization of policies and practices is at the heart of many reform efforts aimed to decrease and eventually eliminate achievement gaps. However, in my analyses, standardization, in many ways, is antithetical to diversity because it suggests that all students live and operate in homogeneous environments with equality and equity of opportunity afforded to them (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Milner & Williams, 2008; Tate, 2008). Standardization reform efforts advance a sameness agenda when the playing field for many students of color and other marginalized groups is anything but level (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

On the one hand, it is necessary to hold educators accountable for providing optimal learning opportunities for all students, and evidence is needed to gauge such learning; on the other hand, instructional practices and related educational experiences need to be constructed in ways that address and are responsive to students' varying needs because of the range of differences that students bring into the classroom and because of the social context in which students live and learn (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2010).

Moreover, I argue that results based on outcomes such as standardized tests provide information about a particular, socially constructed way of thinking about what students know and need to know. However, these results report only one dimension of a much more complex and nuanced reality. Educational researchers and theorists need to refocus attention away from

achievement gap analyses and discourses, which inherently have a standardization emphasis. I argue that the emphasis should be expanded toward gaps in opportunity. The language itself is thought to have a deficit lens.

### ***Professional Development***

Given the documented inadequacy of teacher education programs to prepare future educators for diverse classrooms and the ongoing lack of diversity within the profession, it becomes imperative that school systems develop effective trainings to improve the cultural responsiveness of their current teachers. There is a lack of literature focused on this specific area of the problem. My study explored how implementing a well-researched process of targeted professional development for teachers, challenging their biases and previous understandings around cultural responsiveness and social-emotional learning can result in better outcomes for all students with special emphasis on students of color.

### ***Cultural Responsiveness in an Affluent School Setting***

Oftentimes the perception is that the concepts of social-emotional learning and culturally responsive teaching are ideas that must be tended to by urban, low-income, or underachieving schools. Clarity is needed about how SEL relates to diverse student populations. There also must be a way for us to examine the level of commitment to SEL and culturally responsive teaching in an affluent, high-performing school district. The Oxford School District provided an ideal setting for such an examination.

### **Summary**

Like children, adults learn best when they are engaged in active learning, when learning relates to current situations, when enough time is provided to assimilate learning, and when they are allowed to engage in collegial conversations (Ozuah, 2005). It is beneficial for practitioners to

reflect on their pedagogical practices to become equity oriented and to reverse inequality in education (Farrell, 2012). Teacher reflection can improve instruction, which results in increased student learning. Purposeful reflection and deep critical reflection can help educators build awareness of the diverse needs of students. Purposeful reflection on thoughts, feelings, and experiences is critical to building teachers' capacity to practice culturally responsive teaching. Deep critical reflection is thinking, problem solving, and responding to an issue by involving active and deliberative cognitive processes.

This review summarizes the literature on the historical background during which most of our educational practices were developed and how current practices of teacher preparation and professional development were born. Further, it explores the existing body of research surrounding culturally responsive pedagogy and effective teaching practices for underrepresented students. Finally, it summarizes the benefits of teacher self-reflection as a practice to support and sustain critical changes to pedagogical practices. This attempts to address the need for educators to engage in self-awareness and increased knowledge through professional development to examine how their perceptions affect students in their care. By guiding educators toward an understanding of fairness and open-mindedness, one can ultimately help practitioners find new ways to teach to students' strengths and capabilities instead of focusing only on their differences or deficits. Chapter three presents the methods that were used in this applied research with program evaluation design. It begins with an overview of the development of the action plan, then provides a description of the action plan, and concludes with an overview of the program evaluation design used in this research.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this applied research with program evaluation study was to close the achievement gap between White and Black students in the Oxford School District (OSD). This chapter presents an overview of how a problem of practice was identified and addressed, and how the improvement effort was evaluated. An action plan was designed to improve the teacher training needed to build cultural responsiveness in support of closing the aforementioned gap. Gay (2018) suggested educators need a true understanding of their own cultural identity and conjectures. In order for the needed growth to take place, educators must be aware of where they are before developing a culturally responsive teaching environment. Because of this need, the Whole Child Champion Team (WCCT) designed a professional development program to support cultural responsiveness and help teachers develop a deeper, more meaningful understanding of their own cultural identity as it relates to the identities of those entrusted in our care. The program was implemented in the OSD in the fall of 2021.

The study is designed to answer the following central question: To what level did the professional development program support closing the achievement gap between White and Black students in the Oxford School District? To answer this question and the following sub-questions, a program evaluation was conducted in the spring of the 2021-22 school year:



- 1.
2. To what extent did the teachers participate in the bi-weekly professional learning community (PLC)?
3. What areas of success were evident through the implementation of the program?
4. What problems hindered successful implementation of the program?
5. Did the program improve the capacity of the teachers even when engaging in their other professional learning communities?
6. Did the teachers become better practitioners after going through this program?

The details of this research design are presented in this chapter in three parts. First, the creation of the WCCT is explained as a planning group to lead the schools in this new effort. This section includes collaboration with stakeholders, a review and timeline of the design process, and how implementation plans achieved increased cultural competence within the OSD. This section also includes preliminary data supporting the need for this infrastructure and the ensuing WCCT. The second part presents the full action plan and an explanation of each element. The final section of Chapter 3 presents the program evaluation design for the action plan with the results for each element. This section also responds to the central focus on how well we met the goal of cultural responsiveness in our engagement with students. The data supporting each element is analyzed, and each research question answered.

### **Development of the Action Plan**

In the spring of 2018, the district leadership team gathered to review the district's mission and vision statements around equity. There had been a Cognia (school accreditation formerly known as AdvancED) audit, and the findings were specific. There was a gap in the learning of some students over others. Minority students were being disciplined at a higher rate and

participating in Advanced Placement or gifted classes at a much lower rate. The superintendent wanted to create more equitable outcomes for our district and decided to act. He assembled a team of community members, district administration, and teachers to determine what our new mission and vision should be for the district, as well as how best to articulate what each graduate of Oxford should be. Born from this committee, our district developed new mission, vision, and priority statements with equity at their core. Portrait of a Graduate (POG), which is a list of attributes we fully expect each student to embody and each teacher to facilitate growth of, became our beacon for change (see Fig 1). A new position was also created and implemented as a result of this committee.

**Figure 1**

*Portrait of a Graduate*



In the fall of 2018, I was hired as the new equity director with marching orders established around our perceived district inequities. As a result of this new position and the need for more data to support the instructional components surrounding POG, the district launched an internal audit. The results of this audit concluded that we were lacking in cultural awareness, resilience, and overall student engagement. In light of this data, coupled with an alarming achievement gap, we further realized students could not fully embody the ideals of POG because teachers had no real understanding of what those ideals were or how to teach them. The district engaged a consultant in this work, and it was determined we would pursue a stronger attempt at the Whole Child initiative. This initiative had initially begun in the fall of 2017, but was not embraced or supported in the schools due to larger district initiatives that took precedence. Revamping its stance on Whole Child and its alignment to POG led the district to begin discussing trauma and social-emotional learning, along with cultural responsiveness and how it impacts student achievement. Armed with this new information and implementation, we needed to figure out how to compile these processes into one system that would govern our multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). By combining these processes through MTSS, we could then ensure they would be embedded and implemented at each level of schooling with fidelity. The Equity and Intervention department and the WCCT were given the mission to begin the large task of uniting the systems we had in place and the people and processes needed to create the foundation needed for POG, social-emotional learning, and cultural competence to flourish.

Our first order of business was to ensure the MTSS systems were accurate and that students who were struggling were identified, academically or behaviorally, early enough to offer support. This work allowed us to begin, for the first time, to document students who were in trouble early enough to help them. We established systems for identification and created

intervention plans for all students meeting specific criteria. Other students who were not fully academically sound were monitored by both the MTSS apparatus and my offices. This system was fine-tuned, with progress monitoring for each student as required by our state. While Black students were overidentified in this process, we soon learned teachers were not able to prevent these students from struggling in the academic setting. In spite of our coming together to create this system, we still ended in the spring of 2019 wondering what we were missing. The data from the 2018-19 school year still showed that, on average, Black students in grades 3-8 were still lagging behind, with more than half across the board scoring below the Level 3 pass rate in most grades. As of the 2019-20 school year, 76% of our teachers were still White, with 14% Black. Discipline still placed Black students at 67% of the infractions, compared to 21% of their White peers—discipline that also being meted out by administrators who were 90% White and only 10% Black. In order to bridge the gap, we knew we needed to build collective capacity.

Then, in the fall of 2019, after reviewing data from across the district, the superintendent's cabinet met to review the school systems and functionality. The superintendent wanted to incorporate a more collaborative approach, as opposed to the many schools operating in silos. Another, more prominent concern was the identification of two of our district schools in school improvement, due to the lack of growth in our special-needs population. The district leadership included the superintendent, principals, federal programs director, special education director and the assistant superintendent/director of curriculum. It was tasked to me as equity director to continue my work with shoring up MTSS, which is a direct pipeline to special services. The entirety of 2019, until the pandemic, was spent pouring over interventions and intervention data (both behavioral and academic), observing interventionists as they carried out

their tasks, and observing the behavior coaches and counselors as they attempted to bridge the behavioral gaps in each building.

In the spring of 2019, we were suddenly hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, and schools went dark everywhere. Students were expected to do more with less, and teachers in their own panic-filled states were expected to administer learning to students remotely. People everywhere were getting sick and being hospitalized in record numbers, others dying as the world was ravished by this virus. Meanwhile, we were still trying to figure out how to teach what was left of the grade-level content and ultimately close out school with some degree of fidelity. Even in the best of times, it can be difficult for equity initiatives to gain traction, but with the ensuing pandemic, equity became the topic of the hour. In this frantic, chaotic time, districts all over, including our own, were striving to ensure our student's social-emotional, physical, and academic needs were met, while battling large-scale inequities across the board with technological access, student engagement, and trauma.

The pandemic in the spring of 2020 unearthed blaring inequities, which caused priorities to be shifted immediately. We still wanted to attain POG, but we knew it could not be accomplished without ensuring teachers had the capacity to handle the myriad of cultural implications and social-emotional needs of their students. Within a short period of time, we saw teachers having to manage instructional content, teaching in a digital platform, and social-emotional and trauma needs on an entirely different level from anything they had seen before. The entire spring of 2020, while working remotely, was spent recruiting the team that would become the WCCT. Meetings were held with the superintendents and the Palmer Home, a private trauma-informed consultant group, to determine the direction for the district's trauma-informed response. The WCCT was born out of a need to gather more essential voices from the

ground floor to the effort. We needed a team that could overarchingly observe the district in many capacities from within and inform the Superintendent's cabinet of needed supports and district training. The WCCT, which was still in its infancy and had yet to meet, was tasked with helping satisfy the many needs of our district in regard to Whole Child. It felt like we were expected to land a plane, out of gas, and without an engine. The deployment of the WCCT—comprised of counselors, behavior coaches, and administrators—gave us a dedicated force to attack some of the more monstrous social-emotional and culturally responsive tasks.

The first assignment was a meeting of the minds to survey and determine what teachers, students, and the district needed to do in order to ensure safety and emotional wellbeing. We were challenged as a team to find a proactive solution involving all stakeholders to help the district improve cultural competence. The areas identified for professional development by the WCCT formed the beginning of the creation and implementation of the LEAP cultural responsiveness model for teacher professional learning outlined in my action plan.

### **Description of The Action Plan**

Creswell (2008) asserts that a qualitative study encourages participants to share their understanding of a phenomenon in their voice. The purpose of this applied research study with program evaluation design allowed teachers to explain their process for bridging cultural competence and social-emotional learning. Teachers explained their understanding of how their identity impacts the learning and how they practice self-efficacy and also qualify the impact on student performance and engagement. The results of this applied research study will inform professional development to address issues of equity through documentation of how our K-12 teachers describe, learn, and implement best practices for cultural responsiveness.

Understanding how teachers integrate responsiveness through their individual and collective experiences is paramount. This applied program evaluation design provided opportunities for teachers to learn new paradigms, then develop processes and strategies that work to support each student they teach. The research study included interviews with structured and open-ended questions, an examination of the district through parent, teacher, and student surveys, and classroom observation data. This action plan has two main elements: formation of the WCCT and capacity building professional development. The elements used in this action plan are summarized, along with the goals we set out to achieve and the evaluation used. The elements are listed with the details of the evaluation plan in Table 1.

**Table 1***Logic Model/Evaluation Plan*

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Who</b>	<b>Evaluation Data</b>
Champion Team Professional Development	The element is needed to foster collaboration, awareness and buy-in among the lead teams and administrative teams throughout the district on the importance of being responsive during this time.	July 2020 through March 2021	The Champion Lead Team is the carefully selected combination of behavior coaches and counselors.	ARTIC (Trauma Informed) and Reopening of Schools Surveys Equity Dashboard Cultural Awareness Survey MTSS and at-risk meetings monthly SEL lessons in each class bi weekly Creation of the Interview protocol for study Creation of the interview questions for use with participants
Professional Learning	This element is increase awareness and cultural competency in teachers and support staff during and after pandemic.	August 2021 through the spring 2022.	Selected participants from schools within the district. No more than 2 from each school 5-12 total.	BOY Cultural Bias and competency survey EOY CB and Competency Survey SEL surveys of the teachers will also be given in the beginning and at the final stage.



Beginning in fall 2020, the WCCT was deemed operational. A monthly meeting schedule was planned and each month's focus discussion topics created. In our first meetings, we outlined our priorities and established norms. We decided our priorities would be to ensure that the model components of the Whole Child initiative, POG, and cultural responsiveness were being implemented with fidelity.

***Element I: Whole Child Champion Team***

Culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment (Gay, 2002). Even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these in turn affect how we teach and learn (Gay, 2002). The members of the WCCT were selected based on their job description, as it relates to social-emotional learning and behavior. Behavior coaches, counselors, administrators, and nurses made up this team. This element was needed to foster collaboration, awareness, and buy-in among the practitioners throughout the district on the importance of being intentional. Teaching is an act of social interaction, and the resultant classroom climate is related directly to the interpersonal relationship between student and teacher (Irvine & York, 1995). The district administered the ARTIC (understanding trauma) survey to all certified and classified staff in the spring of 2018. This data showed a definitive misunderstanding of what trauma is and how it impacts our students. Overall, our district scored a 3.7 out of a possible 7.

This survey established a baseline for the district around trauma and the teachers understanding of trauma for students and themselves. Soon thereafter, a cultural awareness survey was also given. It further showed how little cultural responsiveness was actually embedded in the instructional practices of teachers. These results established a baseline for our

professional development around cultural competence, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed practice. The WCCT began meeting to share information around the surveys to determine problems of practice. Observations of faculty and staff while discussing students in MTSS processes were established and held monthly, as were behavioral collaborations with support staff in in-school intervention (at-risk committees). The WCCT determined to what degree teachers and support staff were utilizing SEL and cultural responsiveness strategies by behavioral incidents in the regular classroom setting.

Teachers who began the school year building relationships were tracked by the WCCT to see if those practices had any effect. Changed teacher behavior, which emerges in part through the implementation of SEL programs, is the key to creating positive social and emotional contexts for learning (Greenberg, et al., 2003). SEL curricula that complement academic curricula and are implemented in ways that do not diminish teacher authority, self-efficacy, and professionalism represent a promising avenue in maximizing students' learning and achievement (Liew & McTigue, 2010). Behavioral progress monitoring was tracked with fidelity and SEL teachable moments established at school sites across the district. Each school established their own SEL protocols, and some purchased curriculum to help further facilitate teacher learning.

The WCCT met each month to discuss progress, lessons learned, and practices not working. After each meeting, the team left armed with more ideas to convey to their sites in support. The MTSS process benefited from the insight gained into social-emotional tiering, and students who were experiencing traumatic events and not adjusting well began to be placed on SEL tier. This allowed the student to see either a behavior coach or counselor weekly, with check-ins throughout the week. Our SEL tier numbers rose as more students were identified and placed in the rotation. Changing perspectives around cultural competence and teacher efficacy,

with relationships at their focus and intentionality toward each student as a daily push, saw behavioral referrals ebb at each level during the first semester as teachers began to embed this into their practice. As we continue, it is our hope to learn if students are becoming more comfortable in their surroundings and relationships with teachers and support staff and if there are notable differences from previous years.

Several other ideas we will discuss further were born from this beginning collaboration of the WCCT. The Equity Task Force was established as a district level push to ensure policies and practices were equitable for all students. Educational and public policies need to provide supports that enable these changes to occur. Building a shared commitment and vision among all of these stakeholders and structures will require finding common ground among competing values, priorities, and politics (Aber et al., 2011). Addressing these barriers and realizing a vision of integrated approaches to SEL cannot happen at the school level alone (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). The in-school intervention (formally in-school suspension) teams were trained along with the WCCT during the first semester in restorative and responsive techniques, and we were able to gain a commitment from several to partake in a weekly panel discussion on cultural responsiveness techniques during the pandemic. This group of teachers met with me and members of the WCCT to discuss more active ways to become involved with their students to understand their background, fully grasping their stories.

### ***Element 2: Professional development***

Improving teacher diversity helps all students in several ways (Carothers, et al., 2019). Research (Harry & Klingner, 2006) supports that a student's race, ethnicity, and cultural background matter and can significantly influence the student's achievement. Addressing the unique needs of culturally diverse students is one of the major challenges facing public education

today because many teachers are inadequately prepared with relevant content knowledge, experience and training to address these students' learning needs (Orosco & Aceves, 2009). When teacher diversity does not match that of the students, cultural responsiveness and SEL can powerfully address this disparity. The professional development element was essential to increase awareness and understanding of cultural responsiveness in teachers throughout the district. Teachers communicated their prior understanding of responsiveness, cultural bias, and trauma-informed ideas as they related to students and POG.

The LEAP training sessions were offered to teachers wanting to build their culturally responsive instructional practice and take on leadership roles within the WCCT, school-based teams, or the Equity Task Force. The teachers selected served as the practitioners of our action plan. All foundational coursework for the LEAP model was grounded in Oxford School District's Portrait of a Graduate through the lens of cultural competence, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed practice. Each of the eight components of POG formed the basis of a monthly session over the entire first semester through January of 2022. Throughout the sessions, learning was grounded in these beliefs to support teachers in building a culturally responsive classroom. Teachers were given an opportunity to plan and adjust lessons according to the PD sessions, and after each component an observation took place.

This study was designed to include five sequential sessions over approximately five months. Each participant was chosen intentionally across the district with this element and the study in mind. The participants were then asked to discuss the session's focus within their monthly mandated schoolwide PLCs. This was meant to help build collective capacity as we work in this small group. Teacher capacity has the single greatest effect size (1.57) in impacting

student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Empowering teachers increases their instructional impact and self-efficacy, which Hattie also notes as having a high effect size.

### **Program Evaluation**

Program evaluation refers to the systematic, scientific, and rigorous investigation of a program's effectiveness. In education research, for example, such evaluations examine the goal attainment and outcomes of programs designed to promote student, teacher, and/or school performance. Through the evaluation of educational programs, the credibility and accountability of related education entities and educational systems can be assessed and improved (Yarbrough et al., 2011). As equity director, I am in charge of leading the collaborative effort to develop research-based training and strategies relating to cultural competency. The program evaluation in my dissertation in practice assessed the impact of the LEAP modules on collective teacher capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes.

This program evaluation data was collected in line with the program evaluation standards as developed by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2011). Attention was given to the five key elements of utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability to ensure all data collection was done in an ethical manner. Transparency in communication, reporting, and validity of collection of results was also paramount.

Below, I outline the data that was collected and analyzed to accurately evaluate the implementation of each element within the program and explore the degree of organizational improvement. This information will be used to make further recommendations for a more global implementation across all schools in the district in an effort to continuously improve. All interview protocols and questions are included in the appendix. The data collected directly corresponded to the research questions posed in this study.

### ***Whole Child Champion Team Professional Development***

The first action plan element evaluated was the WCCT initial implementation and training. The goal of this training was to provide support for the implementation of the LEAP professional learning program. Prior to the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the reboot of this group was given to my department. Due to the nature of my study and what our district was trying to accomplish, I carefully selected a combination of behavior coaches and counselors to ensure we had a voice for the social-emotional and trauma-informed components of our plan. The reopening of school survey served as an additional layer to understanding what both our students and teachers felt we needed in order to be prepared to reopen post Covid-19 shutdown. This data provided insight as we began to piece together processes. After school began, in fall of 2020, we gave the cultural awareness and trauma-informed surveys. The information from these surveys was used as a baseline of prior knowledge of cultural responsiveness, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed practices. The professional development of the WCCT, which began in July 2020, included a survey about the benefits of the training to determine if the goal of building cultural responsiveness was attainable and to gauge where we were as a district. This team also created the interview protocol and survey questions for the professional learning element. A classroom observation instrument was also developed by this team and utilized for fall of 2021. This observation instrument served as a data point for participants, which can be seen in Chapter 4.

Year one of the action plan ran through March of 2022. The WCCT completed monthly meetings and helped to build the professional learning series for the next year. They aided in its implementation as well. The LEAP modules were offered to teachers wanting to build their culturally responsive instructional practice and take on leadership roles within the

champion/school-based lead teams. These teachers served as the practitioners of our action plan. All foundational coursework for this model was grounded in Oxford School District's Portrait of a Graduate, which details the district's commitment to educational equity. The training included five modules covering the foundational beliefs of excellence, equity, service, support, and relationships as follows:

1. Teaching is intellectually complex, difficult, and demanding work. The development of skillful teaching requires deep collaboration and non-defensive self-examination of practice in relation to student results (*effective communicator, culturally aware, personally responsible*).
2. By collaborating with families in authentic partnerships, we create a path to reach students (*active citizens, effective communicators*).
3. Intelligence is not a fixed, inborn trait. All children come to school with cultural capital, intelligence, and all the raw material to learn rigorous academic material at high standards (*critical thinkers, creative thinkers*).
4. By recognizing and cultivating the gifts and strengths of every student, we can get each student to believe in themselves and deconstruct any of their own internalized stereotypes (*resilience, personally responsible*).
5. Bias in our society exerts a downward force on the experiences and achievement of students of color that must be met with active countermeasures (*ethical*).

Throughout the professional learning sessions, learning was grounded in these beliefs to support teachers in building a more culturally responsive classroom in the hopes of eventually closing our district's achievement gap.

The Oxford School District WCCT provided mentoring and coaching across the year and within the schools. The team provided an environment where educators could openly explore their successes and struggles, authentically articulate their thinking, and bravely take risks to improve their teaching practice. The monthly at-risk meetings served as a formative assessment for this element. In the fall of 2021, the LEAP module included teachers who were able to dive deeper into the foundational beliefs with their peers, to lay out a vision of what effective, culturally responsive instruction means and looks like in the Oxford School District. This professional development served as a summative assessment for the WCCT and our first year of implementation.

### ***Professional Development***

The second element of the action plan to be evaluated was the teacher professional development (LEAP), beginning in the fall of 2021. The goal for this learning was for teachers to develop a higher level of cultural responsiveness and feel more supported with an increased level of collaboration between themselves, students, and the school support staff. All selected teachers participated in monthly meetings. The first evaluation data tool used in element two was the initial beginning-of-the-year (BOY) interview questions. Additionally, during the PLCs, we pushed teachers to be both self-reflective and introspective of their practices. I also inquired to see if the teachers felt more supported with increased collaboration. This information was used as our formative assessment each meeting. The end-of-the-year (EOY) final interview at the end of our training served as the summative assessment for the monthly PLCs. The teachers also began their training with both a culturally responsive survey and an SEL survey. This served as our baseline to help guide each session. I conducted a final exit interview of the teachers in February of 2022.



The post-implementation interview was the second evaluation data tool used with element two. This information was used to better understand the implementation of the LEAP model, so we can make any needed changes as we offer the training more broadly, and build teacher efficacy in supporting all students responsively. The information was also helpful in the final assessment of all research questions. All participating teachers participated in the post-implementation interview. The topics covered in the interview were professional development, teacher efficacy, the PLC model implementation, and next steps for the district. The post-implementation interview results were compared to the pre-implementation interview results. We also looked for emerging trends in teacher implementation and ways to improve the implementation of the model for the next school year as we push for continuous improvement.

The third evaluation tool used for element two was the teacher surveys. The BOY and EOY surveys provided information, which helped us understand the effectiveness of the PLCs in the implementation of the LEAP modules and how strategies learned were implemented. I employed a structured-interview protocol before and after the conclusion of the modules. A total of two interviews were conducted for each practitioner participant. I designed these interviews with the participating teachers in hopes they would provide insight for future continuous improvement.

To further assess the impact of the professional learning module, I developed a cultural responsiveness and social-emotional learning survey aimed at gathering participants' perceptions of the program. I collected and analyzed survey results to assess collective efficacy of the program and action plan. Table 2 outlines the research questions, data collection tools, and a corresponding rationale of how each tool was utilized to answer the research questions in this study.

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected during the action plan. A continual review of data was used for formative assessment in order to improve the action plan. Now that the inaugural year of implementation is complete, the next year can be planned with improvements to the action plan, based on feedback from all stakeholders and ideas revealed by reviewing the data. The WCCT and participating teachers will also be very instrumental in building the district-wide implementation for year three.

### **Summary**

The goal of this applied research with program evaluation was to help teachers become more culturally competent with all students, in hopes of ultimately eliminating our achievement gap within the district. Collaborative effort from teachers, behavior coaches, counselors, and administrators in year one gave us insightful understanding. These measures, if implemented with fidelity, could possibly affect Black student outcomes. Through the WCCT in year one and professional learning in year two, feedback from all stakeholders will play a vital role in the further implementation of the action plan. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the research and illuminates the methods the district will use moving forward as it integrates this professional learning module into its normal professional practice and operating procedures. A logic model of the research questions, methods, and rationale can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2***Summary of Methodology*

Research Questions	Method	Rationale
In pre- and post- interviews of teachers who received the LEAP training, was there a difference in the usage of responsive strategies by teachers?	Teacher Observations/PLC EOY Practitioner Interviews	To identify additional supports required in order to properly implement culturally responsive/SEL strategies. To identify weaknesses early on and potential strengths as we continue. This could also show us the approaches used by practitioners and if they are sound.
Based on stakeholder interviews and surveys, what steps can be taken to improve this implementation or to implement district wide?	BOY/EOY Surveys	To identify additional supports required to implement district wide. To also bring forth a new crop of people (those participating now) able to help engage participants in the future in a train-the-trainers approach.
What is the relationship between teacher efficacy, culturally responsive instructional strategies and management?	Teacher Efficacy and Culturally Responsive Surveys	To determine the influence of the implementation of LEAP on the practitioners' capacity. To also improve upon each step as we attempt a district-wide approach.

*Note.* Research questions and methods of measurement.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The analysis of the data from this applied research study yielded results focused on the purpose of the plan, the action plan's evaluation, and answers to the research questions. This chapter provides specific examples of the data collected and how it was analyzed. Further, the data will be summarized to better understand the results of the evaluation of the action plan. Extensive data will be summarized, and the outcomes will be thoroughly discussed.

The chapter is organized beginning with the purposes and processes of this applied research design. The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research questions. First, the purpose statement and research questions are reviewed. Then, the pre-implementation survey data on cultural awareness within the district is presented to provide context. The next section includes a discussion of program evaluation goals and measures, along with an introduction of the data collected, followed by a detailed discussion of the data collection and analysis to answer research questions. Finally, a general summary is provided for reference and as a synopsis of data collection and analysis.

#### **Purpose of Applied Action Research Plan**

Implementing the LEAP professional development program at University Elementary School was primarily an attempt to address the persistent achievement gap between Black and White students through a responsive lens. Further, the action plan was implemented to support collective capacity building among teachers. These common purposes were addressed through

one central question and six sub-questions. The central research question of the study asks: To what extent did the professional development program (LEAP) support closing the achievement gap between White and Black students in the Oxford School District? To address this question, I developed the following sub-questions:

1. Did the participants demonstrate an understanding that knowledge of the students' "story" makes a difference in the students' success?
2. To what extent did the teachers participate in the bi-weekly PLC?
3. What areas of success were evident through the program's implementation process?
4. What problems hindered the successful implementation of the program?
5. Did the program help improve the teachers' capacity even when engaging in their other professional learning communities?
6. Did the teacher candidates become better practitioners after this program?

For each of these questions, relevant data sets are provided, and each piece of data collected reveals either direct quantitative information or provides a contextual narrative through a qualitative lens. Data from district surveys, interviews, and a focus group of administrators were all analyzed. This chapter will reveal the data collected with further analysis of how this data answers the research questions.

### **Pre-Implementation of the LEAP Professional Development**

In order to understand the impact of the professional development implemented within the action plan, it is incumbent upon me to reiterate the reasons which created the need. During the fall of 2020-21, we launched an initiative within the Oxford School District to reach the whole child and to become more trauma-informed. Professional consultants came to assist district-level leaders with this initiative, and administrators and leadership teams throughout the

district were subsequently trained. Each school then had a separate training with the consultant around the components of trauma and responsiveness in a day-long session. After this session, the district took over and formed a committee, the Whole Child Champion Team, that would meet each month. This committee was made up of counselors, behavior coaches, teachers, etc. Each school sent a representative to participate in a study around trauma scenarios and received specific toolkits for teachers and students. The school staff initiated the work. Schools purchased a social-emotional learning curriculum and tentatively waded into the waters of responsiveness. Each school also added time in their master schedule to document SEL. This was a forward step and had never been done before.

A district survey went out shortly after the initial professional development (see Appendix). The survey was administered through Panorama for all certified employees, but only 78 responded. The survey was not mandatory because we wanted the data to feel more organic and less coerced. The breakdown of the certified staff who completed the survey was 70 teachers, 4 counselors, and 4 administrators. *Figure 2* examines the survey responses. The overall confidence score of the equity survey was at 46%, which placed the district in the 20<sup>th</sup>-39<sup>th</sup> percentile nationally. This means, according to the national administration of this same survey, district staff fell below the national average overall. The breakdown shows the general feelings of the 78 respondents before beginning this professional development. The survey is intended to shed light on why the PD was needed in the first place.

The following 2021 survey data provides an overview of where the district was in terms of cultural awareness before implementing the LEAP program. The presentation of this data allows readers to understand more fully why such programming was needed and the level of

understanding of the district as a whole. This data gave us the baseline and rationale for the action research.

**Figure 2**  
*District Survey on Cultural Awareness Among Certified Staff*



As one can see in the responses to the question that asks, "How confident are you that adults can have honest conversations around race within your school?" only 25% responded favorably. Within the comments for this survey, many expressed "not feeling the need to have these discussions," or "as a school, we should be colorblind," both of which were among the most pronounced reactions. Even for the question, "How well does your school help staff speak out against racism?" only 31% of those surveyed responded that this was something they felt comfortable doing. This survey was a major precursor to the PD. Despite the seemingly negative results, the comments recorded showed a surprising number of respondents who felt they needed more information and training. "If we are to help close our achievement gaps, we must

understand the gap itself.” “Since race and culture of the most affected subgroups are an issue, we need to build our pedagogical toolkits to help them achieve more.” These were just a few of the comments from the district survey that highlighted the need for PD around cultural responsiveness.

### **The LEAP Cohort Description**

The LEAP cohort was composed of six classroom teachers differing in age, race, background, and professional experiences. *Table 3* shows the group's demographics and highlights critical findings that emerged during the pre-interview. The question that read, "What were your K-12 educational experiences like growing up?" provided clear pathways to understanding the teachers' current instructional styles. One of the participants remarked, "I did not have diverse students around me consistently until I went away to college." Another remarked that she was homeschooled through sixth grade and around only students who looked like her thereafter. Most respondents had predominantly White teachers; even the one Black participant noted that her school, while predominantly Black, had only one Black teacher.



**Table 3***Demographics of Participants Pre-Interview*

	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>K-12 Educational Experiences</b>
Teacher T	0	White	Homeschooled K-6 very little diversity after that; sheltered environment; no diverse friends.
Teacher K	4	White	Private K-6; predominantly White through high school; primarily White teachers; no diverse friends
Teacher G	22	White	Predominantly White K-12 one Black child remembered as adopted; all White teachers; very few diverse friends before college
Teacher D	14	Black	Predominantly Black school district K-12; mostly White teachers; very few diverse friends
Teacher H	13	White	Predominantly White school K-12; White teachers; excluded diverse friends purposefully.
Teacher S	7	White	Oxford graduate; predominantly White teachers; some diverse student

**Research Question One**

Research question one asks, “Did the participants demonstrate an understanding that knowledge of the students’ ‘story’ makes a difference in the students’ success?” According to the

data recorded, the answer to this question is *yes*, to some degree. I used several data sets to answer this question with fidelity. The primary data came from the pre- and post-interviews of each of the candidates. Each participant discussed the need to know the "story" as a pivotal point in helping them learn how better to reach their students. Several others went on to say they have made complete changes both instructionally and physically within the classrooms due to the things they have learned. Two of the respondents felt they had, as one put it, "missed an opportunity to learn my students, due to the increased pressures of teaching and assessing." Overall, all of the six participants knew the importance of learning the students' story in theory, but only a few actually carried it out in their classrooms.

At the beginning of our professional development, each of the teachers felt they needed to get the year started and learn what they needed from their students. The three teachers who had taught over 10 years said they established community first and foremost. They each mentioned taking the first couple of weeks to establish norms and routines. The teacher with the least experience was one of the outliers. Although she felt prepared to enter the profession, she admitted at the post-interview to being severely overwhelmed. She felt there were crucial things she missed and did not understand. She attributed her lack of understanding to thinking "all of them were starting at the same place" and believing she "could teach them all the same." At the conclusion, all teachers acknowledged the need to be more intentional with students. In responsive pedagogy, learning the story of each child is imperative. The idea of this not being consistently implemented as best practice could give us some insight into why the students are not responding well to instruction and not reaching academic targets.

## Research Question Two

Research question two asks, "To what extent did the participants participate in district PLCs?" The results are presented for each element associated with this question. To answer this question, I examined several data sets. The primary data consisted of attendance records (Table 4) and submission of assignments after each session. A focus group of the administrative team, along with post-interview questions, was also analyzed. The following data shows that the participants participated in district PLCs to a high degree.

**Table 4**

*Participants Attendance Log*

PLC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Teacher T	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Teacher G	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Teacher H	X	X	X				X	X
Teacher K	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Teacher D	X			X	X	X		X
Teacher S	X		X	X	X		X	X

I measured participation in the PLCs in multiple ways. First, the actual attendance rate of participants was recorded. Then, I examined responses from interview questions, along with data from an administrative focus group. Four of eight meetings during the 2021-2022 school year, had perfect attendance. The other four meetings had only one or two teachers absent because of school responsibilities, personal emergencies, or quarantines. I created virtual lessons to fill in the gap if someone had to miss one of our sessions. Several candidates remarked about "the need for more adult conversation after dealing with students all day." Another felt she could "discuss

things she was concerned about with our group" over time as we continued to meet. No administration participated, and the teachers felt a sense of relief. They felt they could be more of themselves and learn from their mistakes without the feeling of being evaluated. All remarked that, over time, the sessions did not feel evaluative at all. They felt their knowledge base grew with each lesson. Some limitations noted included the feeling the professional development was being done in a vacuum. All of the teachers remarked they felt this PD should have been offered to all teachers throughout the six months of implementation.

Until this time, only grade-specific PLCs collaborated, and the school did not have a structure for teachers across grade levels to talk and collaborate. As we wrapped the meeting, during one of the sessions, a question was asked: "How will you share what you have learned with the greater school community?" Nearly every participant felt the PD should have been afforded to all teachers and not just a select cohort. One teacher commented, "I wanted to be able to share what I learned in this group with my PLC, but felt they were not on the same page after we learned so much."

Post-interviews were also conducted, (see Appendix) and participants discussed what they retained from their time in the PLCs. All respondents indicated that their time in the PLCs had been well spent, and they also all expressed that the PLC meetings had positively affected them instructionally. Finally, all teachers reported they implemented changes in their classrooms based on information from the PLC session, such as learning each child's story, utilizing the information learned to develop instructional strategies for each student, avoiding victimization, and pushing high expectations.

In a focus group for the administrative team following the PD (see Appendix), the assistant principal, behavior coach, counselor, and intervention coordinator spoke to the degree

to which they noticed changes in those who participated. They were asked what they learned from observing their colleagues over the last six months. The assistant principal noted "a decrease in student occurrences within the teachers' classrooms," especially from our novice teacher who participated. Before the PD, Ms. T was one of the most active classrooms for the administration, counselor, and behavior coach. The intervention coordinator noted, "All of the teachers began to dig deeper into their data and increase their remediation." Before this, most teachers waited until students were placed on the academic tier for support. She went on to say, "Several of our teacher participants were simply doing more than they had any other year." This was something she could speak to, given she had been in the position of intervention coordinator for the last eight years in the building. In answering the research question asking to what extent did the teachers participate in the PLCs, the findings show a high level of attendance and participation.

### **Research Question Three**

Research question three asks, "What areas of success were evident through the implementation process of the program?" To answer this question, I examined several data sets. The results are presented for each element associated with the question. Pre- and post-interviews, a focus group of administrative support staff, and classroom observations were used to determine success. High teacher participation in PLCs, individual teacher growth, and school visits revealing teacher understanding indicated areas of success in the program.

The participation of the teachers was established early in this program. The teachers were less talkative in the first session and mostly listened to me. While they consented to attend, they did not fully participate in those first discussions. As they grew more comfortable with each other, discussions became more organic. The younger teachers began to participate and ask

questions, and the veteran teachers began to unravel their practices with introspection. As a bond formed among the cohort, they began to discuss ideas outside of the PLC. I considered this a success, primarily since these PLCs were held after school hours. The onus to attend and participate was all on the teachers who participated. Their willingness to do this without complaint for over five months, even amid all the challenges of the pandemic, showed how dedicated they were to their students' success.

In the teacher post-interview (see Appendix), teachers were asked if they felt they were better teachers after going through the program. One responder said, "When I thought of responsive classroom, I did not get any of this. This PD opened my mind to new ideas I felt I had to try with my kids." Another replied, "Though I do not feel there have been significant changes in my teaching, I have made a concerted effort to become more empathetic to my students." A seasoned veteran teacher replied, "I do not think I learned much I did not know, but it felt good to be validated in my approaches to students; I felt like what I was doing made more sense and contributed to the overall purpose of equity." One of the younger teachers remarked, "This program has the enormous possibility, and I felt I was pushed to grow. This is why it should be more than just us taking part." These responses reveal that teachers saw success, both personally and instructional.

A focus group comprised of the school administrators and support staff who worked with the teachers (see Appendix) was asked how they noted change within the school during the last six months. One replied, "The culture at our school and even district is such where we need more training on responsive strategies for our students in most need. The fact this program allowed teachers to immerse themselves in this way is a tremendous plus." The behavior coach in the group noted, "These teachers seem to be collaborating more on things related to behavior. I see

them utilizing the resources more and able to discuss progress monitoring of behavioral data."

The counselor noted, "At the beginning of the year, students were hesitant to go to classes due to their relationships with teachers." She went on to say, "Many of the kids I saw for concerns were due to personality conflicts and lack of understanding on the part of both the teacher and student." The training helped push teachers to reach deeper and try harder to understand students and where they were coming from. These observations of positive changes in classroom management are evidence of the program's success.

I conducted one observation of each teacher candidate (see Appendix), using an observation form to rate various types of participant activity. The overall theme of the findings was that most teachers were actively engaged with their students each visit. A sense of community was evident for most, and in some classes, I noted that students were assured of a sense of belonging. Teachers came to sessions prepared with student data to discuss and ready to decipher ways to become more intentional. Based on the observations, the teachers' knowledge of building stronger relationships with students increased. Teachers even began to discuss incidents with administration and support staff, in order to help others who work with their students understand them.

Research question three asks for the specific areas of success through the implementation process. High teacher participation in PLCs carried over into additional efforts among these teachers to affect change across the spectrum within the building. Individual teacher growth regarding understanding students and better supporting students was another success. Finally, the on-campus visits revealed real connections between students and teachers within the classrooms.

## Research Question Four

Research question four asks, "What problems prevented successful implementation of the program?" I answered this question through examining the post-interview and finding common themes among the participants. Some of those themes were lack of a district-led approach to responsive pedagogy, varying degrees of teacher preparation and experience, existing weaknesses of the building leadership, overall culture within the building, and pandemic outbreaks and quarantines. This section presents the results for each element associated with the question. While some areas of success were evident, the areas identified prevented an entirely successful implementation.

One problem was the lack of a district-led approach to responsive pedagogy. The participants were present at the PLCs but did not interact much at first due to the lack of fully understanding "responsive pedagogy" and its meaning. All of the participants felt, based on their pre-interview, that they had no formal knowledge of responsiveness, and did not feel as if the district had a real focus on building their capacity. One teacher stated she "felt I had so many other, more important mandates to learn." Another teacher remarked she "didn't feel comfortable with dealing with students' parents and families." All participants started the professional development with little understanding of responsive pedagogy, but with a high sense of cultural awareness. When asked about their perceived level of competence, the average response on a Likert scale was 3.

Another problem that prevented the successful implementation of providing support to participants was varying degrees of preparation and experience among the cohort. Due to this being a voluntary study and not a district mandate, some participants felt it was not significant. In the post-survey, several teachers noted feeling isolated in the study, especially with so much



going on around the school with discipline and behavior. One participant stated, "My entire grade-level PLC should have been in attendance due to the things learned." She added, "All of the teachers needed this information and not just a specialized group." Others felt that the silence of the veteran participants caused them to hesitate in honest discourse. This was especially true for the novice participants, who felt they could be targeted if they were too honest in their assessment.

Existing weaknesses of the building administration also played a role in preventing the successful implementation of providing support to the participants. The difference in experience levels among participants, coupled with various challenges they faced at their school, impacted their overall growth. In the post-interview (see Appendix), they shared their frustrations as the building became more chaotic as a result of the pandemic. The administration would often fail to communicate before additional students were placed in their rooms due to the multitude of quarantines. One participant noted, "Communication is probably my building administrators' weakest link, I often feel as if I am not adequately prepared for what happens next." Another stated, "I do not often see administration coming by to check in or provide support." In the focus group, the administrators were honest about doing better. The assistant principal remarked on "building better channels of communication and feedback."

The culture of the building overall was also problematic. The district gave a survey to all teachers on their perception of their building leader and their leadership skills. When asked if the principal has promoted a culture of being a lifelong learner and provided needed feedback, most of the teachers in the building replied dismally. One of the participants in the program added that she "did not always know what was expected and felt things changed a lot at the teachers' expense." Another participant replied, "The principal allowed too many distractions from the

central office and failed to listen when we felt something was not developmentally appropriate for our students." The comments suggest that neither the teachers overall nor the participants perceived their building principal as an instructional leader. Another teacher remarked, "Implementing standard-based grading and ensuring the fidelity of this district mandate, often took precedence to all others." One final participant remarked, "Sometimes, I feel I have no more brain power to give anything else."

Finally, the pandemic and multiple quarantines also hindered successful implementation. When a teacher was quarantined, it was challenging for them to participate fully. Many were often sick themselves or were providing full-time online support. In these instances, we did not have total attendance. Some teachers also had to sub in for others, which caused a ripple effect through the PLC.

### **Research Question Five**

Research question five asks, "Did the program help improve the capacity of the teachers, even when engaging in their other professional learning communities?" The results are presented with each element associated with the question. To answer this question, I analyzed the post-interview for recurring themes. Most teachers felt the lack of school-wide support for the PD stymied their abilities to engage meaningfully outside of their classrooms.

The support given to teachers during the entire program was designed to improve each teachers' instructional reach while also improving organizational learning. In their post-interview (see Appendix), the participants were asked if they felt they could share what they learned in the cohort with their other grade-level professional learning communities. One teacher replied, "I would say that as a group, we learned some amazing things, but I did not feel comfortable sharing within the larger PLC for various reasons." Another participant replied that she "did not

feel comfortable discussing what we learned with teachers who had been in the profession longer." The most veteran participant replied, "I will always advocate for children and discuss new ideas with my group." She felt it was "my duty to learn more and offer as many opportunities for growth for others as I can." This participant led her grade-level PLC in an activity conducted by the cohort. This was another reason in the post-interview all participants echoed the sentiment, "This PD should be for all teachers."

### **Research Question Six**

Research question six asks, "Did the participants become better practitioners after going through this program?" To answer this question, I examined several data sets. Overall, the participants did experience growth as a result of the professional development. After completing the program, all participants remarked on the need to evolve their practice and contribute to the school's culture and climate. All of the participants celebrated the professional development and discussed ways they would continue what they had learned.

The cohort of teachers was provided with a robust, bi-monthly professional development program focused on the tenets of Oxford School District's Portrait of a Graduate. We used the book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond (2014) as our guide. The discussion over the eight weeks focused on the following topics: "Defining the Achievement Gap and Analyzing the One We Have Within Our District"; "What Does Culture Have to do With It?"; "The Brain and Culture"; "Preparing to be a Culturally Responsive Practitioner"; "Building a Foundation of Learning Partnerships Within the Classroom"; "Establishing Alliance Within Your Classroom Community"; "Shifting Academic Mindsets"; and "Information Processing to Build Intellectual Capacity."

Each teacher began the sessions with a high level of confidence; they were going to learn a few things to add to their toolkits. They each took a teacher self-efficacy survey (see Appendix) centered around their beliefs, difficulties, and understanding of the profession. A Likert scale was used, which ranged from 1-10. Ten was considered the highest attainment. The first question read, “How much do you try to get through to the most difficult students?” This question had highly positive responses, with all six teachers at an average score of 8. Even the novice teacher felt she went above and beyond for students who struggled. However, as we delved further into the subject matter, they felt the need to review their responses, and make corrections.

**Figure 3**

*Summative Scores of a Gap Analysis of Each Candidates’ Classroom*

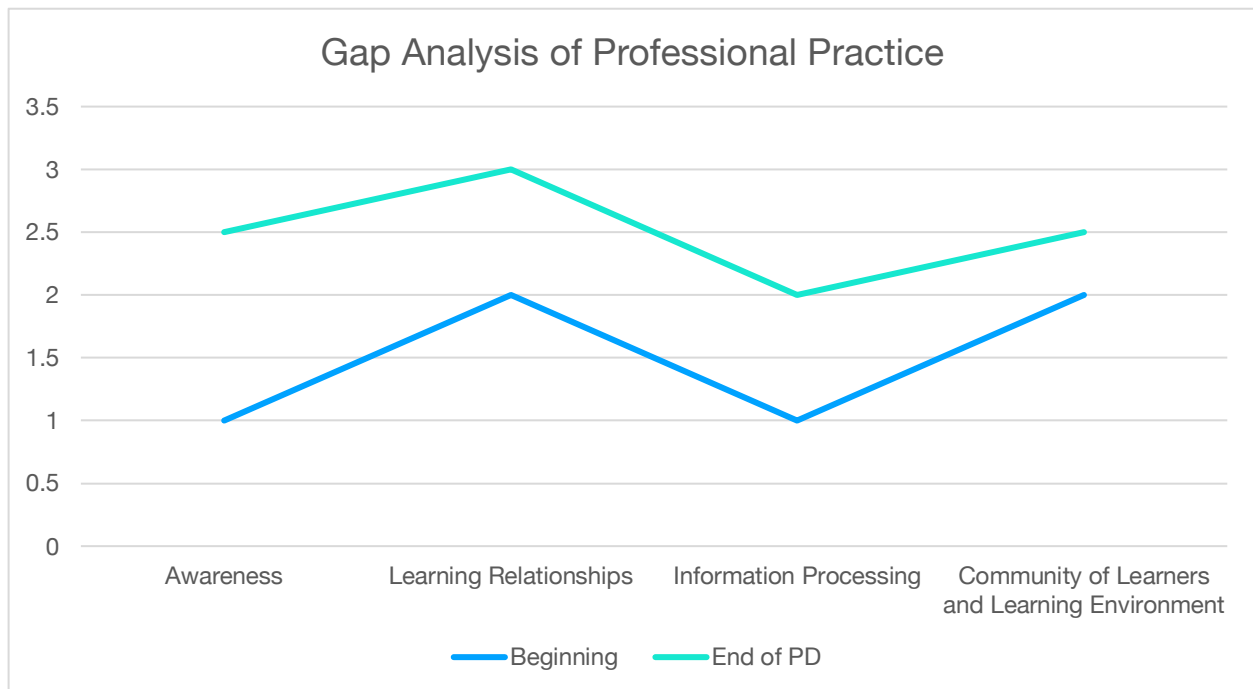


Figure 3 was completed as an assignment to see how the participants scored themselves after reviewing the first lessons and building culture within the classroom. After careful discussion of each definition, each candidate had to rate themselves where they felt they were in their practice. The summative results are graphed below. While most of them initially felt they were "aware" and had awareness, most agreed after discussion they had things to learn. The scores around information processing and learning communities resulted in changes needed and more learning for all participants. One remarked, "I feel like I need the year to start again," due to the weight of what she did not know. While the assignment above proved difficult, each session we met created a sense of urgency over the five months. All of the practitioners displayed a genuine concern for their efficacy. Each teacher felt they had made headway in establishing community within their classroom since school began.

As we wrapped the professional development, each teacher was interviewed again; their post-interview questions further cemented the evidence of their successful attainment. In the interview, I posed the question of whether they felt they had grown. Each candidate felt wholeheartedly they had, with most openly admitting they did not know as much as they felt they did in the onset. Several discussed being more open to understanding their own biases and other cultures beyond their own. One teacher stated, "Using the student's story allows me to pinpoint specific areas for growth; I use what I know about my students to gain buy-in from them." Nevertheless, another teacher stated, "A student with some emotional issues, who was quick to anger before processing things, stumped me at first, but now I realize I have more to learn in order to help him."

A focus group was conducted with the administrative team at the school where my teachers are located (see Appendix). This data also cemented whether the participants were better

off having participated in this study. The focus group all commented on the changes in candidates in the cohort, especially the novice teacher. The administrative team felt she had made a complete turnaround from the beginning of the year. "Teacher T has come a long way since August; her parents love her and give her grace to figure things out with their children. She goes above and beyond already searching for ways to be better." The behavior coach noted, "Teacher T now gives grace to students and allows them time to regulate themselves." Another question posed to the focus group was, "On a scale of 1 to 5, where would the school as a whole fall in being culturally competent?" "I kind of think if we are basing this on a one to five as you put in the survey, I would say that we are probably holding it a consistent three, just because we have some that have gone through the professional development that you have done, and they are doing an excellent job with some of the things they are taking from your group."

Before we started, the candidates were asked to rate their own overall cultural competence, with the average being about 3.5. They were pretty confident. When asked again what they would rate themselves at the post-interview, they quickly recanted their initial rating, going much lower. All of the participants celebrated the professional development and discussed ways they would continue what they had learned. One remarked, "I will continue to grow as a practitioner, and now I will also continue to dig deeper for more answers."

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this applied research study have been presented. In determining if the program was a success, a few of the problems which hindered successful implementation were noted. The data indicated full buy-in from the participants due to very sensitive subject matter, and more inclusivity of their colleagues within the PLC as areas of improvement. These will be a focus going forward. However, overall, the results indicate the program was a success and could

be a catalyst in the capacity building of cultural competency in teachers. Noted success stories include participants beginning to gain more insight into their students beyond academics, and working on strategies to build community within the classroom. Beginning with professional development at the start of 2020-21 district wide, followed by implementation of our LEAP PD, regular PLC meetings, and on-site campus visits contributed to the success of the program. Most promising, data revealed how levels of collaboration might further increase within the district. The desire of the participants wanting to add more cultural competency to the conversation of practice and program development is strong evidence of a positive impact. Chapter Five will discuss the meaning of the findings and implications for further study and continual improvement.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this applied research study was to implement an action plan to improve academic outcomes for Black students so they would be equal with their White counterparts. The need for teachers to increase their responsive capacity became evident when the state accountability data (MDE, 2018) outlined a continuous pattern in the State of Mississippi and the school district in student achievement among Black students over several years. When comparing Black students to their White peers, the ever-widening gap and resulting increased pressure on teachers and students underscored the need for professional development to equip teachers to handle the many demands of the diverse classroom.

The intent was to implement a professional development system to reduce the achievement gap between White and Black students through collaboratively building teacher capacity in cultural competency. The data demonstrated reasons to be optimistic, as evidence analyzed to respond to the final research question indicated positive growth in the organizational capacity for change. The participants showed growth in a number of areas, which if continued, will likely lead to improvements in the area of academic achievement. This chapter will discuss the impact of the implementation of the action plan, the overall gains, and recommendations for continued implementation.



As mentioned in Chapter Two, it is imperative that students and teachers know each other beyond the subjective cultural experiences that each may bring to the classroom, and that educators possess an understanding of diverse cultures but not stereotype people into a one-size-fits-all cultural mold (Gay, 2000). To create a classroom community, teachers must learn and be sensitive to the diversity of their students and their cultural backgrounds.

I worked weekly with a cohort of elementary teachers to ascertain if utilizing direct, capacity-building professional development in the area of cultural competency could begin to close the achievement gap between our Black and White students. The study sought to address the gap through a culturally responsive lens to guide the program development. The program sought to cultivate and expand the professional growth of the teachers involved using three elements: cohort-based professional development, study-guided participant PLCs, and implementing an MTSS system focused on the whole child.

The short-term goal of the program (action plan) implemented in the study was for participants to develop a higher level of expectations in their classrooms by becoming more responsive to all students' needs. The long-term goal was for participants to develop a deeper understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and how it could positively affect student achievement. Both of these goals were within reach, but only one was actually achieved. The professional development program assumed culturally competent teachers would be more effective than their peers and allow for increased learning opportunities. The PD's design and implementation included the following characteristics: (a) duration, PD spread over six months; (b) collective participation, expected of the teachers; (c) active learning, opportunities provided; (d) coherence, activities provided to address needs; and (e) content focus.

I found these components alone did not ensure an extensive understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy by the participants. The findings indicated:

1. The PD allowed teachers to develop knowledge of strategies, but not theory for teaching responsively.
2. Active learning and collective participation were supported by constructivist activities but were focused on pedagogical knowledge of implementing classroom strategies.
3. The connections the teachers made between the PD and their students were limited to academic needs, with minimal inclusion of culturally responsive pedagogy and relationships in PD discussions.
4. External factors impacted the duration and the content focus of the PD.

Each finding is discussed below.

### **The LEAP PD Allowed Teachers to Develop Knowledge of Strategies, but not Theory**

The cohort-based PD allowed for teachers to develop knowledge of strategies for best teaching students responsively, but did not provide an in-depth understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy. In order to be effective, PD should result in teacher outcomes and classroom change (Darling-Hammond, 2008). The culturally responsive pedagogy focused on content that addressed being both culturally responsive and pushing students' achievement. The reading course content focused on practical foundations for all students without specifically targeting culturally responsive needs. While the PD aligned with elements of CRP, the results showed a minimal understanding of teaching, limited to using strategies to promote responsive classrooms, rather than a deeper understanding of the cultural needs of all students. Implementation of strategies kept teachers learning at an active level of understanding without necessarily including conceptual knowledge.

Collective participation and active learning were evident in the LEAP PD sessions. The sessions also aligned with constructivism, in that they supported teachers building relationships among their peers. The opportunity to understand how the strategies would look within their own classroom empowered teachers to implement strategies for instructional change, an element which is known to support effective PD (Darling-Hammond, 2008). This hands-on approach provided teachers opportunities to construct their own understandings of the strategies through the lens being emphasized in the PD session each week. While the LEAP course did not develop conceptual knowledge of culturally responsive teaching, the evidence of instructional knowledge through strategies was apparent. Teachers not only provided clear examples of implementing the strategies from the course, but also continued to change their practices to include the PD strategies after we were finished.

Contrastingly, teachers' comments, questions, and post-interview responses showed some discrepancies in their understandings and valuing of the reading course in regard to making connections between the PD content and classroom content areas. These discrepancies were particularly true for some of the veteran teachers, who did not find the PD content relevant to their classrooms. The LEAP PD allowed teachers to develop knowledge of strategies, but not necessarily a strong theoretical understanding for teaching responsively. The PD provided opportunities for teachers to learn classroom strategies and activities to implement in their classroom practices. The active learning opportunities and collective participation opportunities provided by the instructors allowed for teachers to construct understanding of the PD content. Planning and implementing effective PD must not only include the characteristics described in the literature, but the content focus must provide the necessary conceptual knowledge teachers need to know in order to support academic learning and language development for their students

(Lucas et al., 2008; Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Promoting professional development heavily focused on classroom practices diminishes the importance of teachers fully understanding the impact these classroom practices have on the students.

### **Active Learning and Collective Participation were Supported by Constructivist Activities**

The integration of constructivist activities, such as active learning and collective participation, helped teachers transfer pedagogical knowledge from the PD to classroom practice. The PD offered opportunities for collaboration and participation, encouraged teachers to learn from each other, and focused on improving academic learning for an underrepresented population of students. Participants were able to collaborate with peers, reflect on their learning with peers, and use modeling and practicing within each PD session to learn new knowledge. The new knowledge, which focused on pedagogical strategies rather than conceptual knowledge, led to teachers being able to immediately implement the strategies in their classrooms.

My philosophy guided the PD as I structured their sessions to include active learning and collective participation. The inclusion of peer discussions increased the learning of the content as the participants extended their discussions about implementation ideas for strategies throughout the course, creating a pedagogical plan of action. The PD design also included opportunities for the teachers to construct pedagogical knowledge through teacher reflection. The reflection opportunities, however, did not push for teachers to construct new conceptual knowledge about their students from the LEAP content. The PD design also helped form relationships to create professional learning communities for peer learning.

Modeling and practicing in the sessions gave teachers opportunities to try the strategies first themselves and construct knowledge on how the strategies could work in their own classrooms as they learned to use them from the student perspective. The CRP methods course

attempted to foster an active learning community among the participants. The PLC could have been even more effective if the teachers had used their peers for feedback on lesson ideas for implementing the PD coursework. Participants did learn new knowledge from their peers and believed that understanding the content and learning from each other was important.

Peer learning on the surface appeared valued in the LEAP sessions. The teachers formed deeper connections with their peers as they listened intently to discussions. Teachers reflected on their learning of strategies during peer discussions. While teacher reflections demonstrated learning, the reflection questions and discussions often concentrated on why the strategies were useful for students in regard to their academic needs rather than relating to the students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and stories. This limitation sustained knowledge at the action level of consciousness rather than conceptualization, which is described in the work of Piaget (Genovese, 2003). In conclusion, it appeared the participants were more invested in learning quick strategies, than developing a deeper, more conceptual understanding of the material.

### **Teacher Connections were Limited to Academic Needs**

I also found that, while teachers were able to change their instruction (pedagogical knowledge) by learning strategies that support best practices, the lack of focus on CRP theory impeded the opportunity for teachers to change their beliefs (conceptual knowledge) about students responsively. Additionally, the underdeveloped role of culturally responsive teaching left teachers without a deep understanding of the role of culture in teaching and learning. Teachers related to the PD content they constructed and were able to implement various strategies in their own instructional practices but were not able to demonstrate an increase in cultural awareness or a deeper cultural understanding due to the activities only focusing on academic needs.

The participants did not improve their conceptual understandings of responsiveness on their post-interview responses, but rather built their pedagogical knowledge on how to include building more background activities in their classroom practices. The implementation of standards mastery overpowered the development of culturally responsive teaching in the PD coursework. While LEAP demonstrated success in the participants' learning strategies, it did not necessarily alter their core beliefs of culture, nor their understandings of CRP. Furthermore, because the content focused on strategies, when concerns about cultural issues or moments of cultural awareness occurred, the discussions often returned back to the whole group learning.

As discussed earlier, the PD's focus on pedagogy resulted in effective instructional changes but lacked evidence of deeper cultural understanding. While participants gained surface-level knowledge about responsiveness, the inclusion of CRP research was isolated to when I actively presented. When the teachers were left to work alone, they reverted back to form. There was no evidence of deep understandings or changes in actual beliefs for the participants in this study.

Deeper discussions of the complexities of culture were not present, and opportunities for teachers to analyze their own cultural beliefs and the role their beliefs have in their teaching and learning were not included. Explicit instruction on cultural awareness was needed in order for teachers to connect their own culture to the PD content. Without including activities that allowed for teachers to critically reflect on their own cultural beliefs (Nieto, 2013, Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014), the concept of culturally responsive teaching was not fully implemented, resulting in an unclear and inconsistent understanding of culture from teachers on their surveys and in their assumptions of grouping students' cultures together as homogenous.

Researchers in the field of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Gay, 2002) would agree that the consequences of not including cultural discussions can hinder teachers in understanding their marginalized students. However, infusing culturally responsive teaching in PD affirms the importance of understanding culturally and linguistically diverse students (Nieto, 2009).

### **External Factors Impacted the Effectiveness of the PD.**

As previously discussed, the simple inclusion of the elements of effective PD may not guarantee sustained improvement in learning opportunities for students, with teacher learning resuming at a superficial level. In this study, I found that some characteristics of effective PD were compromised due to the external factors. External factors impacted the effectiveness of the PD due to meeting the needs of the multiple stakeholders (i.e. the district, university, and the state). When working with multiple stakeholders to implement PD, one must examine how the needs and requirements of the stakeholders can impact the effective characteristics of the PD implementation. External factors impacted the effectiveness of the PD opportunity in regard to the duration being shortened during the first few months due to the pandemic and extensive quarantining of both students and teachers. Managing the needs of all the stakeholders also compromised some of the characteristics of effective PD for the study. I was responsible for all of the observations and instruction.

Another issue I encountered was the school not being able to compromise on having PD during the school day. Due to the state's mandate of instructional minutes, we had to have each of our sessions right after bus dismissal. The external factors impacted the evaluation process of the PD, the collective participation of the participants, and the teacher selection process, which determined which teachers volunteered for the coursework. These issues caused frustrations for

me early on, and I am certain it may have contributed to some teachers feeling overwhelmed with the course reading and assignments. Even with a well-developed model of PD, external factors can influence the effectiveness of the PD and impact the best practices unintentionally.

Because I designed the coursework and also worked for the district, I got to determine what content to include and what activities to use to teach the content, as well as structure the assignments to meet criteria I felt essential. The presentations were consistent in keeping the content lively and structured. I also attempted to support the participants' beliefs about teacher learning. The PD included activities for teachers to learn the PD content; however, these activities were limited to learning strategies. Without a strong understanding of responsiveness and culturally responsive pedagogy, even the most well-designed PD has the potential risk of not meeting expected learning outcomes. In other words, students will not improve academically if their teachers are unable to implement instruction and assessment that is informed by their knowledge of both content and cultural awareness needs.

### **Program Evaluation Standards**

The five program evaluation standards—utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and accountability—were used to evaluate the implementation of the program. According to Yarbrough et al. (2011), the five program standards provide a logical way to examine the caliber of a program to build capacity in response to the needs of the stakeholders, which ultimately leads to improvement of the program and contributes to the organization's value.

Utility, according to Yarbrough et al. (2011), seeks to examine the extent to which the evaluation processes and products are valuable in meeting the stakeholder's needs. The program implemented in this study allowed for all stakeholders to gain from the increased instructional capacity of teachers. Teachers learned new teaching strategies and developed their content



knowledge, which improved their instruction. As a result of improved instruction, students gained a stronger conceptual foundation in CRP. The administrative support team participated in the focus groups, which allowed them to provide input in the process. These leaders also gained valuable insight into how to assess and develop a plan of action to increase the capacity of the organization. Within each of their respective areas, they learned what to expect and how to dig deeper to uncover more detail.

The next program standard utilized to evaluate the program was the standard of feasibility. Yarbrough et al. (2011) describes feasibility as “the extent to which resources and other factors allow an evaluation to be conducted in a satisfactory manner” (p.288). With regards to the program implemented, several resources are required to successfully replicate the study. These resources include time, a content consultant in the area of culturally responsive pedagogy, administrative support, willingness of participants to engage in the program, and the ability to track progress comprehensively through a program or assessment.

The third program standard, propriety, speaks to the fairness, legality, and ethics of the program (Yarbrough et al., 2011). To ensure the program was enacted using all the attributes of propriety, I received Collaborative Instructional Training Initiative (CITI) training before the development of the program. The training included several modules focused on protecting the rights of students and participants, federal regulations, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, as well as ethical principles. In addition to the CITI training, the program description along with the various data collection tools were submitted to the University of Mississippi’s Institutional Review Board for approval. The approval also required the consent of my dissertation chair. To maintain compliance, all surveys were completed anonymously. All participants were informed of their rights with regards to the study, as well as the right to

withdraw from the study at any time. All qualitative data obtained from teachers and/or advisors during interviews or coaching sessions were kept confidential.

Accuracy, the fourth program standard, addresses the element of integrity with regards to conclusions and the findings. According to Yarbrough et al. (2011), accuracy attends to approximately eight standards which include reliability, validity, reduction of error and bias, data collection, data analysis, logic, conclusions and communication. Several types of data were collected during the study. These data types include interviews, focus groups, surveys, and observations. Data collected for this research study can be validated through district records and/or voice recordings obtained with the permission of participants.

According to Yarbrough et al. (2011), the fifth and final program standard, accountability, examines the methodology of the study. The focus of this standard is to ensure sufficient documentation is obtained throughout the study. Documentation of each element presented in Chapter Three was obtained throughout the evaluation process. For example, the teachers were involved in both pre- and post-interviews, discussed the focus group held with their administrative supports, and attended all of the PLCs. The extensive transcribing and coding detailing these sessions serve as documentation. I maintained all data and/or documentation of the evaluative process throughout the study and analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data according to the methods outlined in Chapter Three. All findings reported are supported through documents and data collected throughout the evaluation process.

### **Goal Achievement**

Many positive gains were seen throughout the program of developing teachers. Most notable were their contributions and collaborations during the PLCs and their willingness to go beyond the scope of the program. At the beginning of the program, the participants contributed

very little. One of the biggest successes early on occurred when one of the participants requested to share insights on improving student buy-in based on previous ideologies she developed earlier in the year. She noted her original ideas were not successful, and it caused her to rethink her approach. When this happened, the moment of impact where participants could become vulnerable enough with each other to share mistakes, I knew we were headed in the right direction.

Collaboration among the participants also increased as evidenced in their work as reported by support personnel. All participants increased their knowledge of student data, learned experiences and behavior. Administrative staff noted the difference in their output during MTSS meetings and other observations. As time progressed, so did their desire to add input. Many were saddened when the time came to an end, lamenting on the need for more of this kind of professional development districtwide.

### **Limitations**

One limitation to the study may be my role related to the participants. As a central office administrator, the participants did not seem to feel as though they could be completely honest in their feelings about the professional development at first. The nature of my job responsibilities as a member of the superintendents' cabinet could be a limitation. When asked specifically if they thought the PLCs were beneficial, all said yes, but few shared with their colleagues' deeper discussions from our time together. I felt the longer we met they began to trust me, but felt their peers would not see me in the same light if they were to mention something they learned from our sessions.

Another limitation to this study would be the lack of instruments to adequately measure cultural competence and the nature of the research in lower elementary grades. In measuring

cultural competence, it is impossible to measure all of the things necessary for a teacher to be deemed competent. Student achievement is difficult to use as this measure because of all of the variables involved with working with such a young age group. In general, these are not the students who are tested each year by the state test. These students are in the developmental stages of learning to read, and as such, may or may not be reading ready. This data alone could not accurately be used as a factor of success. While we were able to see growth among the students, it could be attributed to other areas than the PD alone. The other caveat to this is the instrument used to measure would have to be developed around the grade level of students and perhaps teacher expertise, which would mean they would need to be improved. As a novice researcher, I made decisions in the beginning of the study that I would not have made as the study progressed and my understanding of research emerged.

The time factor also posed a problem in the study. Building cultural competence is a paradigm shift and thus generally a slow process. While the study covered a year and half, the consistency of the participants was questionable. I feel strongly if I had this to do over, I would have made better utilization of my time with the participants. The research also indicated the need for more time. We now understand improvement efforts take years of continuous improvement.

Mental health concerns and pandemic fatigue among both teachers and students were also major challenges during this study. At the beginning of our program, we were at still at the height of the variants spreading quickly and students either at home or virtual. However, regardless of their own concerns for family and the virus, teachers and students were still expected to push through. As the quarantines rose, and participants had to be quarantined for ten days, their participation was not always guaranteed. Most of the time they were only a close

contact quarantine, but in some cases the teachers themselves got sick and needed to be taken care of. Student discipline and behavioral issues spiked, and despite our discussion of building relationships and being more intentional with students, teachers didn't feel they could do it all. Many days, even during our sessions, I had to give a "vent" break where they could just be humans and tell me things they couldn't possibly tell anyone else or say out loud. Some were still hesitant, in my current position, but sometimes the need outweighs that fear.

Finally, the most disturbing limitation came from our looming discussions around Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT has hit our state hard, and over the last year there has been a heated debate among legislators about how much of it is taught in schools. The mention of cultural anything triggers thoughts of CRT in some—even the mention of social-emotional learning, which is also closely linked to being culturally competent. This limitation proved daunting and continues to be so as the governor has made it evident he will follow other states, signing a prohibition of CRT into law. The disturbing part of this comes as we attempt to expand this professional development for all of our stakeholders. Will we be able to without recourse? Will some of our more political parents and teachers feel the need to rebel? These are the questions that plague me moving forward.

### **Implications**

This study was designed to find ways to build teachers' capacity around cultural competence, thus aiding in closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. One implication of this research is it showed cultural competence to be an area where more work is needed in the school district. The results indicate we do not know what cultural responsiveness means collectively to educators in the district. This study began the process of supporting and equipping teachers with understanding the whole child and then extending this into their

instructional prowess. While every aspect of the study was not as successful as anticipated, each element was important, and the focus needs to remain on continuing them. Providing support to administrators so they can build collaborative cultures within their buildings is also paramount.

Some of the steps of this research were more important than others. The initial whole child champion team breaking down barriers and laying the foundation for the work was an important element which provided change in the school district. The LEAP PD provided the most important element. This was the crux of the study and should be continued in the future. The idea of relationship over rigor and the understanding of each child that evolved from the PLCs laid the foundation for sessions and gave the participants something to actually work towards. The organizational learning that developed from the PLCs was also important.

### **Recommendations**

Future research on this subject could be strengthened by a larger and more inclusive sample size. The sample size in this research study consisted of only six teachers. A larger sample size to include all the teachers from the school and inclusive of all grade levels, would strengthen the study significantly. Even if the first year is only one school site, doing this work within the confines of an entire building would be an amazing step forward. Another recommendation would be teacher preparation courses added at the university or the creation of a program tailored specifically for pre-service teachers who are doing their student teaching within the district. This way they would be immersed in the research and work, also making them more attractive as potential teacher candidates.

### **Further Research**

In this study, it was my hope to share what I have found so valuable in culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as “using the cultural

knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Griner and Stewart, 2013, p. 589). Culturally responsive practices in classrooms have been shown to be an effective means of addressing the achievement gap as well as the disproportionate representation of racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students (Cholewa, 2014). Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences, and uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles. CRP should empower students to feel proud about their culture and encourage them to want to share it with others. The classroom is a place of diversity and all students should be celebrated to create the best possible learning environment.

This study was dedicated to teaching educators about culturally responsive teaching through professional development. While the presentation was appropriate for teachers in any grade or teachers in training, it could have been more developmentally appropriate for the age group of students chosen to study. The information did present benefits for all school-age students, as well as the teaching practices and mindset of the educators involved. However, if I had to do it all over again, I would have made it more intentional to non-readers or developing readers, simply because there is a different mindset of teachers who teach primary children. My hope is that this study has brought up and addressed the questions of why culturally responsive education is important, and if fostering a positive, culturally appropriate, classroom environment can affect student achievement. I found in CRP that you can actually recreate the classroom environment in a way that would meet the needs of each student and celebrate their cultural

differences and talents. Becoming a culturally responsive teacher is a never-ending goal of celebrating and empowering students' culture to benefit their learning.

The study could take many directions forward, depending on how much the district, individual teachers, grade collaboration groups, or schools, wanted to invest in culturally responsive teacher training. It would also depend on whether the building administrators felt this shift was a necessary factor to foster student success. The momentum, if allowed, could provide endless data on how best to reach children where they are and to grow them as needed. Observations of teachers and their classrooms could be made before, during, and after this training, as well as long-term check-ins throughout the year on how CRP was working in classrooms. This could be incorporated into the evaluation of the teachers and also outlined in their unit planning. The professional development could also be expanded into multi-day sessions that could meet once, every few months, throughout the year. I also thought about the possibility of the creation of a website, blog, or podcast, where educators could share ideas with each other monthly.



**Figure 5**

*An Example of How to Build a Cultural Competence Culture*



## **Conclusion**

The opportunities for change and impact from this study could be widespread and long lasting. However, the work put into making a teacher’s classroom culturally responsive can be extensive and takes time. The idea of success for all students is not a novel thought, but requires teachers to have high expectations of all students and the understanding of how to make those expectations turn into successful outcomes for students. Culturally responsive education can also be a catalyst in cultural understanding and instilling tolerance, acceptance, and celebration of the beauty of diversity. Program evaluation and continuous improvement allows us to hold ourselves accountable in ensuring this happens.

For the seed of cultural competence to grow, it is imperative that the following elements be present: (a) a unified common language spoken within the district, (b) students who are emotionally regulated by teachers who understand trauma and mental health, (c) an integration of community resources and parents, (d) social-emotional learning embedded within the culture, and (e) restorative practices utilized in place of punitive. Then we will see how universal screeners and data can bring about changes in all students across subgroups. This is the toolkit for beginning the work.

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## List of Appendices

## APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are being invited to participate in a mixed-methods program evaluation research study.

**Statement of Consent** – Selected Participants across the district (and possibly new teachers to the district).

My name is LaTonya Robinson, and I am a doctoral student at The University of Mississippi. I am conducting a mixed-methods program evaluation research study to address building cultural competence through teacher capacity within our school district.

My research will focus on improving teacher cultural responsiveness. I am particularly interested in these main areas: (1) Development and implementation of a professional development program around cultural responsiveness, social-emotional learning, and trauma (2) Continuing growth of our WCCT; and (3) Evaluation of this program for effectiveness and future districtwide implementation.

Research gathered from this study will add to the body of literature regarding the development and implementation of a professional development module around cultural responsiveness. Additionally, this research may offer additional assistance to new teachers, administrators, and other key stakeholders on the effect developing this program can have on both teacher capacity and ultimately student outcomes.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and there are no anticipated risks or discomforts related to this research study. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer, and if you choose to discontinue involvement in the research study, you may do so at any time.

Steps will be taken to protect your identity and ensure confidentiality. To ensure accuracy of your responses, I will record conversations and take notes in the interview. You may request to see or hear any information collected.

Findings from this study will be utilized to further examine processes and outcomes of a new cultural competency program and add to the literature as a program evaluation design. Additionally, this study will be utilized as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education at The University of Mississippi.

Thank you for your willingness to participate. Your time and involvement are appreciated.

If you require any information about this study or would like to speak to the researcher, please email LaTonya Robison at: [lrrobin3@go.olemiss.edu](mailto:lrrobin3@go.olemiss.edu).

If you have additional questions and concerns, you may address those with my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Douglas Davis, by email or by phone at The University of Mississippi: [drdavis@olemiss.edu](mailto:drdavis@olemiss.edu) (662) 915-1459 (office)

## APPENDIX B: PLC PROTOCOL

**Overall Research Topic:** *Building cultural competence in schools through teacher capacity*

**Research Questions:**

- Did the program help improve the capacity of the teachers even when engaging in their other professional learning communities?
- Did the teacher candidates become better practitioners after going through this program?

**Conceptual Framework:** *collective efficacy, collaboration, teacher self-efficacy*

**Statement of Consent:**

*This focus group is part of an applied research study to fulfill partial requirements for a Doctor of Education degree for LaTonya Robinson from The University of Mississippi. The purpose of this study is close the achievement gap between Black and White students through building teacher capacity.*

*Any questions pertaining to this study and/or its findings can be emailed to:*

*lrrobin3@go.olemiss.edu.*

*Any questions or concerns can also be directed to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Douglas Davis, by email or by phone at The University of Mississippi:*

*drdavis@olemiss.edu (662) 915-1459 (office)*

*Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences as an educator and member of this Professional Learning Community. The information you provide today will help me understand best ways to provide supports to not only those in your group but to all teachers. Protecting your rights is of utmost importance to me, and any identifiable information will be removed from the responses you provide. I want you to relax and feel comfortable answering any and all questions fully and honestly. With that said, are you willing to proceed with the focus group?*

## APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Overall Research Topic:** *Building cultural competence in schools through teacher capacity*

**Specific Research Question:**

- Based on stakeholder interviews and surveys, what steps can be taken to improve this implementation or to implement district wide?
- What areas of success were evident through the implementation process of the program?
- What problems hindered successful implementation of the program?
- Did the teacher candidates become better practitioners after going through this program?

**Conceptual Framework:** *mentoring, support, collaboration, self-efficacy*

**Statement of Consent:**

This interview is part of an applied research study to fulfill partial requirements for a Doctor of Education degree for LaTonya Robinson from The University of Mississippi. The purpose of this study is to close the achievement gap between Black and White students through building teacher capacity.

Any questions pertaining to this study and/or its findings can be emailed to:  
lrrobin3@go.olemiss.edu

Any questions or concerns can also be directed to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Douglas Davis, by email or by phone at The University of Mississippi:

drdavis@olemiss.edu (662) 915-1459 (office)

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences as an educator. The information you provide today will help me understand best ways to provide supports to teachers throughout the district. Protecting your rights is of utmost importance to me, and any identifiable information will be removed from the responses you provide. I want you to relax and feel comfortable answering any and all questions fully and honestly. With that said, are you willing to proceed with this interview?

**Practitioner Interviews**

*Each participant will be given this interview before and after participating.*

**Icebreaker/Background Questions:**

1. Where are you from?
2. How long have you served as teacher in the OSD? In education?
3. Why did you become an educator? Why choose the OSD?



### **WCCT/Admin/Support:**

1. Are there systems in place that may impede a marginalized student from taking advanced level classes? Or being recognized for advanced level?
2. Should there be monetary factors associated with AP when you have disproportional students who may not be able to afford?
3. What has the district-level research shown in respect to teaching marginalized learners?
4. What could the district do as a whole to provide support for new teachers, veteran teachers, and the general district as a whole to promote advocacy of marginalized groups?
5. Do we have an equity policy, and do we actually look at said policy to ensure fidelity in organizing programs for teachers?
6. Are all of our programs actually doing what they are intended to do and impacting those they are intended to impact?

### **Teacher Perception:**

1. What has been your experience teaching Black students?
2. What was your K-12 experience like?
3. Do you believe students' achievement rest solely in their own motivation?
4. How will you build a bridge to a student who struggles and is marginalized?
5. Are you providing any advocacy for students who may not have other student groups who look like them within the school community?
6. Do you feel it is a benefit as a teacher to be an advocate for students?
7. Is the climate in your classroom associated with success for ALL kids?
8. Do you know the story of the students you teach? Have you ascertained family attitude toward schooling?

### **Additional Questions to consider that could be adapted to either perspective:**

What self-reflection strategies do you use in order to service students of color or different perspectives?

1. What strategies do you use to build relationships with students who have different perspectives than your own?
2. What culturally relevant teaching strategies/skills/activities do you use or would like to be trained on?
3. What do you believe are strategies and/or activities that will help you become a culturally competent educator?
4. What activities do you use when creating a safe and equitable learning environment?
5. Can you assess your own cultural competence?

### **Concluding Questions:**

21. Can you assess your own cultural competence?

***Thank you very much for participating!***

## APPENDIX D: CULTURAL AWARENESS SURVEY (Panorama Equity Survey)

**Overall Research Topic:** *Building cultural competence in schools through teacher capacity*

**Specific Research Question:** *(With respect to cultural competency)*

- Did the participants demonstrate an understanding that knowledge of the students' story makes a difference in the students' success?

**Conceptual Framework:** *self-efficacy, management, cultural responsiveness*

### **Statement of Consent:**

This survey is part of an applied research study to fulfill partial requirements for a Doctor of Education degree for LaTonya Robinson from The University of Mississippi. The purpose of this study is to close the achievement gap between Black and White students through building teacher capacity.

Any questions pertaining to this study and/or its findings can be emailed to:  
lrrobin3@go.olemiss.edu

Any questions or concerns can also be directed to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Douglas Davis, by email or by phone at The University of Mississippi:

drdavis@olemiss.edu (662) 915-1459 (office)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey about your experiences as an educator. The information you provide today will help me understand best ways to provide supports to new teachers. Protecting your rights is of utmost importance to me, and any identifiable information will be removed from the responses you provide. I want you to relax and feel comfortable answering any and all questions fully and honestly. With that said, please respond to each item in the survey.

### **Cultural Awareness Survey**

#### **Belonging**

*How much faculty and staff feel that they are valued members of the school community.*

1. How well do your colleagues at school understand you as a person?
2. How connected do you feel to other adults at your school?
3. How much respect do colleagues in your school show you?

4. How much do you matter to others at this school?

5. Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?

**Cultural Awareness and Action (Adult Focus)**

*How well a school supports faculty and staff in learning about, discussing, and confronting issues of race, ethnicity, and culture.*

6. How often do school leaders encourage you to teach about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?

7. How often do you think about what colleagues of different races, ethnicities, or cultures experience?

8. How confident are you that adults at your school can have honest conversations with each other about race?

9. At your school, how often are you encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topics?

10. How comfortable are you discussing race-related topics with your colleagues?

11. How often do adults at your school have important conversations about race, even when they might be uncomfortable?

12. When there are major news events related to race, how often do adults at your school talk about them with each other?

13. How well does your school help staff speak out against racism?

**Cultural Awareness and Action (Student Focus)**

*How well a school supports students in learning about, discussing, and confronting issues of race, ethnicity, and culture.*

14. How often are students given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?
15. How often do you think about what students of different races, ethnicities, or cultures experience?
16. How confident are you that adults at your school can have honest conversations with students about race?
17. At your school, how often are students encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topics?
18. How comfortable are you discussing race-related topics with your students?
19. How often do students at your school have important conversations about race, even when they might be uncomfortable?
20. When there are major news events related to race, how often do adults at your school talk about them with students?
21. How well does your school help students speak out against racism?

### **Educating All Students**

*Faculty perceptions of their readiness to address issues of diversity.*

22. How easy do you find interacting with students at your school who are from a different cultural background than your own?
23. How comfortable would you be incorporating new material about people from different backgrounds into your curriculum?
24. How knowledgeable are you regarding where to find resources for working with students who have unique learning needs?

25. If students from different backgrounds struggled to get along in your class, how comfortable would you be intervening?
26. How easy would it be for you to teach a class with groups of students from very different religions from each other?
27. In response to events that might be occurring in the world, how comfortable would you be having conversations about race with your students?
28. How easily do you think you could make a particularly overweight student feel like a part of class?
29. How comfortable would you be having a student who could not communicate well with anyone in class because their home language was unique?
30. When a sensitive issue of diversity arises in class, how easily can you think of strategies to address the situation?

**Professional Learning About Equity**

*Perceptions of the quantity and quality of equity-focused professional learning opportunities available to faculty and staff.*

31. At your school, how valuable are the equity-focused professional development opportunities?
32. When it comes to promoting culturally responsive practices, how helpful are your colleagues' ideas for improving your practice?
33. How often do professional development opportunities help you explore new ways to promote equity in your practice?
34. Overall, how effective has your school administration been in helping you advance student equity?

## APPENDIX E: TEACHER EFFICACY SURVEY

**Overall Research Topic:** *Building cultural competence in schools through teacher capacity*

**Specific Research Question:** *(With respect teacher self-efficacy and capacity)*

- Did the teacher candidates become better practitioners after going through this program?

**Conceptual Framework:** *self-efficacy, classroom management, relationship building,*

This survey is part of an applied research study to fulfill partial requirements for a Doctor of Education degree for LaTonya Robinson from The University of Mississippi. The purpose of this study is to close the achievement gap between Black and White students through building teacher capacity.

Any questions pertaining to this study and/or its findings can be emailed to:  
lrrobin3@go.olemiss.edu

Any questions or concerns can also be directed to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Douglas Davis, by email or by phone at The University of Mississippi:

drdavis@olemiss.edu (662) 915-1459 (office)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey about your experiences as an educator. The information you provide today will help me understand best ways to provide supports to new teachers. Protecting your rights is of utmost importance to me, and any identifiable information will be removed from the responses you provide. I want you to relax and feel comfortable answering any and all questions fully and honestly. With that being said, please respond to each item in the survey.

### ***TEACHER EFFICACY SCALE INSTRUCTIONS:***

Please indicate your personal opinion about each statement by circling the appropriate response at the right of each statement.

When a student does better than usually, many times it is because I exert a little extra effort.

The hours in my class have little influence on students compared to the influence of their home environment.

The amount a student can learn is primarily related to family background.

If students aren't disciplined at home, they aren't likely to accept any discipline.

I have enough training to deal with almost any learning problem.

When a student is having difficulty with an assignment, I am usually able to adjust it his/her level.

When a student gets a better grade than he/she usually gets, it is usually because I found better ways of teaching that student.

When I really try, I can get through to most difficult students.

A teacher is very limited in what he/she can achieve because a student's home environment influences on his/her achievement are large.

Teachers are not a very powerful influence on student achievement when all factors are considered.

When the grades of my students improve, it is usually because I found more effective approaches.

If a student masters a new concept quickly, this might be because I knew the necessary steps in teaching that concept.

If parents would do more for their children, I could do more.

If a student did not remember information I gave in a previous lesson, I would know how to increase his/her retention in the next lesson.

The influences of a student's home experiences can be overcome by good teaching.

If a student in my class becomes disruptive and noisy, I feel assured that I know some techniques to redirect him/her quickly.

Even a teacher with good teaching abilities may not reach many students.

If one of my students couldn't do a class assignment, I would be able to accurately assess whether the assignment was at the correct level of difficulty.

If I really try hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students.

When it comes right down to it, a teacher really can't do much because most of a student's motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment.

Some students need to be placed in slower groups so they are not subjected to unrealistic expectations.

My teacher training program and/or experience has given me the necessary skills to be an effective teacher

**KEY: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Moderately Agree, 3=Agree slightly, more than disagree, 4=Disagree slightly more than agree, 5=Moderately Disagree, 6=Strongly Disagree**



## APPENDIX F: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION GUIDE

**Overall Research Topic:** *Building cultural competence in schools through teacher capacity*

**Conceptual Framework:** *teacher self-efficacy, culturally responsive pedagogy, social-emotional learning*

This survey is part of an applied research study to fulfill partial requirements for a Doctor of Education degree for LaTonya Robinson from The University of Mississippi. The purpose of this study is to close the achievement gap between Black and White students through building teacher capacity.

Any questions pertaining to this study and/or its findings can be emailed to:  
lrrobin3@go.olemiss.edu

Any questions or concerns can also be directed to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Douglas Davis, by email or by phone at The University of Mississippi:




drdavis@olemiss.edu (662) 915-1459 (office)

Thank you for allowing me to visit your classroom today and learn more about your experiences as an educator. The information you provide today will help me understand best ways to provide supports to new teachers. Protecting your rights is of utmost importance to me, and any identifiable information will be removed from the responses you provide. I want you to relax and feel comfortable answering any and all questions fully and honestly. With that being said, please respond to each item in the survey.

Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes cultural ways of learning and cognition. Affirmation of students' cultural roots comes through incorporating deep cultural values and cultural ways of learning using the memory systems of the brain, organizing around social interaction (collectivism), and combining oratory skills with academic talk (Hammond, 2018).

**Classroom Observation Guide**

...and use of more than one learning time component

		
<p><b>What do you see as you walk through?</b></p>	<p><b>What do you hear as part of the environment?</b></p>	<p><b>What conversations are happening?</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there <b>rituals and routines</b> that students know and participate that support transitions between blocks or that help open and close learning blocks?</li> <li>• Are students <b>working in authentically communal ways</b> to get started in a lesson or do thinking together?</li> <li>• Does there seem to be a <b>spirit of inquiry</b> in the classroom? Students are doing research and talking through how new information fits with what they already know. There's project-based learning.</li> <li>• Are there "<b>anchor charts</b>" to help students <b>remember</b> processes and inspirational messages about <b>grit and perseverance</b> visible?</li> <li>• Are there <b>positive messages about making mistakes and turning errors into information</b>?</li> <li>• Does the environment seem to be "<b>intellectually safe</b>"? All students are making contributions, not just the same ones. Students can think out loud.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you hear a <b>humming of student voices</b> as they work or is it too quiet?</li> <li>• What is the ratio of teacher talk and authentic student talk (not just "getting into groups")?</li> <li>• Is there ample <b>student discussion</b> around the lesson?</li> <li>• Do you hear <b>students smoothly code switching</b> between home language and academic language?</li> <li>• Is <b>music incorporated</b> into the environment? Maybe to signal a transition or as background during thinking time?</li> <li>• When you ask, can <b>students talk about what they are working on</b>, why it's important and how it connects to what they already know?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there "<b>cultural modeling</b>" to <b>help scaffold</b> students' understanding of the content (i.e., using metaphors, character experiences from culturally oriented music lyrics, TV shows)?</li> <li>• Is there <b>trust building language</b> and interactions (i.e., building a rapport and personal connection)?</li> <li>• Are there <b>one-on-one instructional conversations</b> (during conferencing around writing or other projects)?</li> <li>• Are there <b>regular opportunities to get and talk about authentic feedback</b> (timely, corrective, actionable, affirming)?</li> </ul>

## VITA

“I believe change in education must be systemic, sustainable, and equitable for all students. I believe students learn best from teachers who takes the time to learn their student’s ‘story.’ There is POWER in that story!”

### **Professional Experience**

***Batesville Middle School***, Batesville, MS South Panola School District  
*Fifth Grade teacher, 1998-1999*

***Green Elementary School***, Jackson, MS, Jackson Public School District  
*Third Grade Teacher (self-contained), 1999-2000*

***Bolton Edwards Elementary School***, Bolton, MS,  
Hinds County School District  
*4th Grade Teacher (self-contained high ability), May 2000-December 2000*

***Batesville Middle School***, Batesville, MS  
South Panola School District  
*Self Contained In School Suspension Teacher, January 2001-May 2001*

***Myrtle Hall IV Elementary School***, Clarksdale, MS, Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District  
*Fourth Grade Teacher (self-contained), 2001-2002*

### ***Administrative Roles***

***Morgantown Middle School***, Natchez, MS, Natchez Adams School District  
*Assistant Principal, 2009-2011*

- Assisted with first developed formative assessment system
- Assisted with transforming the building into a data-driven school helping teachers understand the data and what it meant for their instruction

- Assisted in creating and facilitating a more comprehensive system of support for remediation

***Oxford Elementary School***, Oxford, MS Oxford School District  
Principal, 2011-2014

- Pushed for the use of consistent assessment system to evaluate student and teacher success
- Created professional learning communities of teachers to begin collaborative working and planning
- Helped OE reach its first A-rated level on MCT2 after two years
- Created a system of collegiality and peer observation
- Worked to dismantle districts' system of ability grouping
- Was voted Administrator of the Year by my peers and fellow administrators

***Della Davidson Elementary School***, Oxford, MS Oxford School District  
Principal, 2014-2017

- Working to perfect the professional learning community and its tie to student success
- Created first master schedule to include a consistent plan of intervention daily
- Strengthened the systems of collegiality among 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers
- Strengthened knowledge of data and formative assessments
- Working to strengthen writing
- 96% pass rate on initial test for 2015-16 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading Gate, after an initial 140 students entered 3<sup>rd</sup> grade below reading level
- Received distinction of having 2<sup>nd</sup> highest ranked elementary/middle school in state after the 2015-2016 accountability results

***Green Hill Elementary School***, Sardis, MS North Panola School District  
Principal, 2017-2019

- Work to develop a viable curriculum

- Implemented first intervention/MTSS system where students were identified based on data

- Worked to build capacity of teachers who were not traditionally trained

- Moved school from a D to a B within one year

- Help to transition schools from neighborhood to grade spans

***Oxford School District Central Office, Oxford, MS MTSS/Equity/Deputy Sped Director***  
2019-2021

- Working to reconfigure current MTSS system to offer more individualized supports for struggling students

- Updated district Section 504 policies and procedures

***Oxford School District Central Office, Oxford, MS Chief of Student Services***  
2021-Present

Implementing SEL and Whole Child

Implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Implemented a Districtwide Behavioral Screener and Maintains Emergency Management System (SEL, Attendance, Discipline, Academics)

Established Equity Task Force

## **EDUCATION**

Coahoma Community College

*Associates Degree in Elementary Education, May 1996, honors graduate*

The University of Mississippi

*Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education May 1998, honors graduate*

The University of Mississippi

*Master's of Elementary Education May 1999, honors graduate*

Delta State University

*Specialist in Educational Leadership, December 2009 graduate*

The University of Mississippi

*Ed.D Hybrid Program in Educational Leadership, expected graduation date May 5, 2022*