

HUMANIZING THE WORK WITH EQUITY FACILITATORS TO UNDERSTAND
CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: A SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR'S
PRACTITIONER INQUIRY

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To my beloved grandparents, James and Hulda Moore, Mary Elizabeth Jones, and Oliver Wilson, I dedicate this work to you. Your entire lives, you endured the effects of systemic oppression without anyone acknowledging the hardships it created. May my work recognize the wounds you experienced. Thank you for your legacy of resilience, wisdom, dedication, and love.

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To educate students from diverse backgrounds, educators are often encouraged to be aware of their student's cultural backgrounds and to use the knowledge to inform their instruction to be culturally relevant. While this approach to teaching is widely promoted, educators are often unaware of how to accomplish this. This is especially true for White educators whose backgrounds are starkly different from their students. Although there is an abundance of literature explaining the theories underpinning pedagogies that build on students' backgrounds, like culturally relevant pedagogy, there is not a lot of literature examining the journey White educators take as they try to implement asset-based pedagogies --in particular, the journeys of White educators trained as facilitators of equity. Using whiteness and culturally sustaining pedagogy as a lens, this dissertation explores what happens when I facilitated conversations with two White educators as they attempted to divest from dominant ideologies and implement asset-based pedagogies in their elementary classrooms. In this practitioner inquiry, data included interviews, observations, field notes, and classroom observations. Using thematic analysis, the findings of this study include the tensions that arose due to the educators feeling confined to the dominant systems and how they contended with these pressures. The implications of this practitioner inquiry study extend to equity-minded leaders, suggesting the need to comprehend white supremacy culture, the developmental journey toward critical consciousness, and the significance of text selection. Furthermore, the study holds implications for my own professional development, advancing my understanding of white supremacy in

relation to trauma and reinforcing my commitment to resisting dominant systems to further this work.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Statement of Problem of Practice

Educating culturally and linguistically diverse students continues to be a significant problem in this country and is evident by the racial achievement gap. This achievement gap demonstrates that in the United States, we do not collectively know how to educate a diverse population well (Sleeter, 2005, p.5). Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1996a), Paris and Alim (2014), Gay (2002), and Lee (2007), and others, challenge the status quo and encourage educators to shift their pedagogy from deficit-based to asset-based. Instead of studying students through the lens of contempt and pity (Paris & Alim, 2014), these scholars shift the focus to the system that has created what Ladson-Billings calls educational debt (2006). The shift from deficit-based to asset-based requires teachers to develop critical self-awareness regarding themselves and the context in which they teach. With this, they can begin to question their taken-for-granted knowledge and assumptions (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). In doing so, educators begin to develop critical racial and cultural consciousness, which is imperative to improving the educational opportunities for students who have been historically marginalized.

Over the past eighteen years, my professional journey in education has provided me with a rich and diverse range of experiences. As an educator in various settings, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges school systems face in effectively educating students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Motivated to address these challenges, I embarked on a journey to deepen my understanding of theories and practices that illuminate the complexities of teaching diverse student populations and offer potential solutions. In my role as a classroom teacher, I earnestly sought to implement the practices and theories I had learned. Despite encountering moments of perceived failure, I persisted in infusing my teaching with these

insights. Over time, I began to witness small yet meaningful transformations in my classroom. I observed moments where students who often felt disconnected from the curriculum and instructional methods became actively engaged, transitioning from objects to subjects of their own learning (Ladson-Billings).

Transitioning to an administrative role within a school district, my focus shifted to supporting and guiding other educators in incorporating similar practices in their classrooms. Collaborating with teachers committed to fostering equity and implementing asset-based strategies, many of whom are White, I have embraced the role of facilitating change and promoting culturally sustaining practices (CSP) within the educational landscape. This study explores the dynamics of collaboration between two designated equity facilitators (EFs) and me, focusing on enhancing our understanding of CSP. This research provides a nuanced perspective on integrating asset-based pedagogies within educational contexts by employing the theoretical frameworks of whiteness and culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Background

The cultural mismatch between students and teachers is recognized and often studied (Sleeter, 2001; Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). This research has demonstrated the need for universities and colleges to implement courses that address racial and cultural incongruence. Accordingly, research illustrates the impact of those courses on pre-service teachers (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Reece & Nodine, 2014; Smith, 2000). There is also literature illustrating the impact of professional development related to asset-based pedagogies on in-service teachers (Washington, 1981; Sleeter, 2012). What is understudied in literature is the complexities that come when White teachers struggle to divest from whiteness (Utt & Tochluk, 2020) while learning to implement asset-based pedagogies.

One reason for this difficulty is due to the educational structures informed by standardization and accountability. Royal and Gibson (2017) argue that hyperstandardization and hyperaccountability in schools make it difficult for educators to commit to pedagogies that honor and build upon the cultures of students. When school systems emphasize accountability, the result is an emphasis on standardization. Consequently, educators and students become standardized and homogenized (Royal & Gibson, 2017). The goal becomes high test scores above anything else.

Additionally, the focus on accountability and standardization limits the ability to find substantial data that demonstrates the success of anti-racist pedagogies on students' academics. This lack of evidence can also compel educators to focus on standardization instead of asset-based pedagogies. This is especially true if one's colleagues appear to be more successful based on standardized tests (Royal & Gibson, 2017; Milner, 2017). Standardization leads to a one-size-fits-all curriculum that teachers are mandated to use with fidelity (Royal & Gibson, 2017). Educators who implement asset-based pedagogies despite standardization discover it is a challenging feat. This is evidenced in the following quote: "Educators who embrace CRP [culturally relevant pedagogy] must be highly skilled masters of their craft, strategic and subversive, approaching teaching and learning aligned with CRP while adhering to mandated programs stressing hyperstandardization and hyperaccountability" (2017, p. 18).

Significance of the Study

As stated previously, the journey White in-service teachers take while learning to implement asset-based pedagogies is understudied. While White educators are encouraged to embark on this journey, the educational structures and systems do not support this. This study is significant because it examines the journey of White teachers, who are facilitators of equity-

centered conversations in their schools, as they deepen their understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). The impact of these conversations adds to the existing scholarship that explores the challenges and possibilities related to White teachers developing critical consciousness. Additionally, the study assists equity-minded leaders in comprehending the complexities inherent in facilitating discussions with individuals committed to implementing asset-based pedagogies within the confines of mandates that contradict those practices.

Research Questions

This study examines what occurred when I worked with two teachers committed to critical reflection as they attempted to understand and enact culturally sustaining pedagogy. The research questions are as follows:

- What happens when I, as an Assistant Principal, work closely with two Equity Facilitators in an effort to help us all enrich our understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy?
 - What tensions, if any, do we encounter and navigate as we attempt to understand CSP?
 - How does whiteness inform those tensions?
 - How do I respond to these findings in order to increase our understanding of CSP?

Theoretical Framework

To help explore what happens when I work with the two facilitators to understand asset-based pedagogies, I integrate two complementary theoretical frameworks: whiteness and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Whiteness reflects the intensely ingrained, invisible structures essential to this country's success (Lipsitz, 2018; Brown & Jackson, 2013). CSP is an asset-based

pedagogical approach that seeks to sustain the cultural ways of being of historically marginalized communities as a means to combat whiteness (Paris & Alim, 2017). The foundation of these two frameworks is to critique and dismantle dominant ideologies. Accordingly, both frameworks illustrate how these ideologies influence educators who are trying to divest from them. In the subsequent sections, I will delineate the key principles of the whiteness lens that informs this study, followed by an exposition on culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Whiteness

Whiteness is a social construction that operates as a mechanism to uphold existing societal structures by legitimizing and perpetuating them, all while presenting itself as neutral, fair, and empathetic (Castagno, 2014). In doing so, it provides advantages for White people while making those advantages invisible to them (Green, Sonn, & Mastebula, 2007). The impact of whiteness extends beyond White people. It is an overarching system that constructs and coordinates various domains of power and dominance (Castagno, 2014, p.8). Instead of being perceived as an advantage, whiteness is viewed as the quality of being normal. This norm is the standard to which others are defined, compared, and examined (Chambers, 1996).

Historically, scholars have studied how whiteness has been maintained by conquest, colonialism, slavery, and segregation (Lipsitz, 2006). Similarly, scholars have examined how the maintenance of whiteness created opportunities for White people to have property that people of color could not acquire (Harris, 1993). This property is not limited to physical ownership but also rights constructed by society. Furthermore, scholars have studied how whiteness in education perpetuates inequalities and preserves the status quo in educational settings. For example, how whiteness impacts the identities of White students (Perry, 2001) and adults (DiAngelo, 2011) has been examined. Others have investigated how whiteness functions through

niceness, resulting in well-meaning diversity approaches perpetuating racial inequities (Castagno, 2014). This study seeks to advance these existing understandings by examining how the perpetuation of whiteness through White supremacy culture engenders tensions for educators who are attempting to understand and implement culturally sustaining pedagogy.

The inception of whiteness gave rise to the establishment of White supremacy (Aguilar, 2020; Okun, 2010). While the term "White supremacy" is commonly associated with groups like the Ku Klux Klan and advocates of segregation, its more profound implications are often overlooked. Rarely is it recognized as a complex set of mechanisms that underlie and sustain systems of dominance and privilege (Leonardo, 2009). These mechanisms constitute a racialized system that reinforces the perceived superiority of individuals identified as White (Leonardo, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Furthermore, this racialized system is deliberately crafted to foster disconnection among individuals, from themselves, and from the environment (Okun).

Moreover, White supremacy intertwines with other forms of subjugation, forming an interdependent relationship that strengthens and perpetuates each other (Okun). This highlights that White supremacy's influence extends far beyond individual behaviors and ideologies. It represents a pervasive force that colonizes various aspects of existence, including "our minds, our bodies, our psyches, our spirits, our emotions as well as the land and the water and the sky and the air we breathe" (Okun). This pervasive nature of White supremacy manifests in both overt and covert forms of privilege and domination, with the latter often maintained through the culture fostered by White supremacy.

According to Okun (2010), culture encompasses the values, beliefs, norms, and standards held by a group to ensure its functionality. The culture engendered by White supremacy is so deeply ingrained and omnipresent that it remains invisible to those within it, shaping their

perceptions and behaviors as if it were natural rather than constructed. This culture serves to indoctrinate individuals into a particular understanding of societal expectations, with White supremacy culture explicitly conveying the message "that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value" (Okun).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Throughout history, the primary objective of schooling has been to assimilate students and families from marginalized communities into the dominant cultural paradigm of Whiteness. Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to disrupt the colonial legacy embedded within the educational system. CSP advocates for schools to be reconceptualized as environments that nurture and uphold historically marginalized communities' cultural identities and practices rather than seeking to eradicate them (Django & Paris, 2017). This paradigm shift necessitates a rejection of the prevalent notion that educational achievement should be measured against White, middle-class norms of knowledge and behavior. CSP requires a de-centering of whiteness, envisioning an educational landscape where students are encouraged and empowered to explore, honor, extend, and occasionally challenge their cultural traditions and practices (Django & Paris, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, CSP calls for a critical examination of whiteness itself. By critiquing whiteness, educators can shift the focus of critique away from students and redirect it toward the oppressive systems perpetuated by the dominance of whiteness (Django & Paris, 2017).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a foundational framework underpinning this study, guiding the pedagogical approach to cultivating asset-based instructional practices among participants. I sought to instill an understanding and develop an embodiment of CSP principles, emphasizing the importance of sustaining cultural ways of being, de-centering whiteness, and critiquing the educational system. These principles were interwoven into the texts used to deepen

our comprehension of CSP, shaping the discussions and responses throughout the project. Approaching discussions through the lens of CSP allowed for a nuanced exploration of how participants resisted the systemic influences of whiteness. In reviewing the data, it became evident that CSP provided a lens for understanding and served as a tool in identifying the resistance against the constraints imposed by whiteness.

Whiteness and culturally sustaining pedagogy serve as complementary lenses that provide valuable insight into what happened as the facilitators, and I developed our understanding of CSP. As you will see in chapters four and five, whiteness allowed me to identify and understand the tensions that surfaced during our discussions. CSP provided a lens into how the participants resist systemic influences within the educational structures. These lenses contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in understanding and applying culturally sustaining practices in academic settings.

Furthermore, using whiteness and culturally sustaining pedagogy assisted me in understanding the ways the participants and myself are confined to this dominant system and how we respond to it. It facilitated a deeper comprehension of the tensions that surfaced as we grappled with understanding and implementing CSP. By grasping how White supremacy culture functions to maintain whiteness and the potential for resistance with CSP, I gained insight into the importance of humanizing this work. This recognition helped me to learn that humanizing is a form of resistance against a system intent on preserving the existing order.

Local Context

This study takes place within a school district, referred to as The Promise School District (TPSD), located in a metropolitan city in the Midwest. TPSD comprises thirteen schools: nine elementary, three middle, and one high school, collectively catering to a student population

exceeding 10,000. The student body of TPSD is a diverse school district, with over sixty percent identifying as Black, twenty-four percent as Latinx, approximately seven percent as White, five percent multiracial, and one present Asian. One of the schools within TPSD, Garden Grove Elementary School (GGS), serves students from kindergarten through fifth grade. For the purpose of this study, pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality. The participants in this study are two White elementary educators from GGS: Ashley, who teaches fifth grade, and Michael, who teaches fourth-grade high ability.

Both participants recently took on the role of equity facilitators (EFs) at GGS. EFs are educators who volunteer to lead discussions and facilitate professional development sessions to foster equitable practices within their school community. At the time of the study, TPSD had recently created an equity-oriented strategic plan, aiming to have seventy-five percent of its teachers implement culturally sustaining pedagogy by 2024. To support this goal, I was tasked with providing professional development to enhance teachers' capacity in this area. During the 2020-21 school year, I conducted training sessions for EFs, who then began facilitating conversations and professional development activities within their school community starting in the 2021-22 school year. At the beginning of this study, Ashley and Michael had facilitated professional development for half a year. Given their roles as educators working with diverse student populations and as facilitators of equity-focused initiatives, it is crucial for Ashley and Michael to understand the specific needs of historically marginalized students. This understanding will directly inform their instructional practices and their ability to effectively support other teachers dedicated to challenging and dismantling inequitable structures within the educational system.

My Location as a Researcher

As a Black woman, my lived experiences, both personally and professionally, have provided me with firsthand insights into the pervasive impact of whiteness in perpetuating inequities within educational contexts. Reflecting on my own educational journey, I was raised in a disinvested community predominantly composed of Black residents. However, as part of desegregation, I was bussed to a predominantly White school district. I learned indirectly and directly that I was not a part of the norm and would need to conform to fit in. Navigating the educational system as a parent further underscored these systemic challenges. I witnessed my Black son facing disproportionate disciplinary actions, compelling me to grapple with how to support him within a system that was inherently biased against him. Similarly, as an aunt to three Black boys, I confronted the harsh reality of their struggles to assimilate into an educational environment that did not value their cultural identities. Transitioning into my role as a classroom teacher, I actively resisted the prevailing narrative that marginalized students and their families were to blame for their difficulties in conforming to the dominant educational paradigm. Recognizing the complexity of their experiences, I refused to engage in practices that perpetuated their marginalization. My awareness of how dominant systems construct oppression and privilege fueled my commitment to becoming a more effective educator for all my students, but especially those who have been historically marginalized. I engaged in ongoing reflection to deepen my practice, cultivating a commitment to continuous learning. This reflective stance allowed me to critically examine my beliefs and practices.

Engaging in a reflective examination of my teaching practice became integral to my professional identity as an educator. My initial exposure to culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) during my undergraduate studies resonated deeply with my personal convictions and aligned

closely with my values. While my personal beliefs aligned closely with CRP principles, translating these ideals into effective classroom practices posed significant challenges. Despite extensive reading and attempts to implement strategies from literature, I found it difficult and often felt like I needed to improve. Through perseverance and a shift in approach towards creating unique, personal experiences rather than mimicking existing models, I began to observe meaningful progress. This shift enabled me to appreciate small victories, such as my students initiating a campaign to end uniform policies in our school or using terms like "activist" and "bystander" in informal contexts outside of classroom instruction.

My challenges in implementing CRP led me to recognize the tensions inherent in implementing asset-based pedagogies. This realization sparked a desire to better understand these tensions for my growth and to support other educators in their implementation efforts. By delving into the journeys of my participants, I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges associated with implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy in systems that do not inherently support such pedagogical approaches. This understanding informs my practice, enabling me to anticipate and address the support and needs of teachers striving to implement asset-based pedagogies.

In my role as an assistant principal and training facilitator at the study site, I occupy a position of authority in relation to the participants, who are educators within my school. Conscious of this power dynamic, I approached the participants to invite their participation in the study with clarity regarding their autonomy in deciding whether to join, emphasizing there was not any pressure. Throughout the study, I made concerted efforts to establish a safe and inclusive environment, encouraging participants to express their perspectives openly while underscoring that my primary focus was self-examination and our ongoing sense making. I was not in an

evaluative role for this study. I aimed to facilitate discussions and prioritize active listening over directing conversations. Despite these efforts to cultivate a sense of safety, I acknowledge the presence of tensions that may have arisen due to my administrative role within the district.

For instance, I recognized instances during the study where I unintentionally dominated discussions, potentially leading the participants to feel as though they had to pretend like they understood what I was saying. Although they did not explicitly voice this, there were moments when I would talk and pause and both of them would be silent. I am not certain if that was due to the power differential, but it could have played a role. I also believe the power differential played a role in their decision to allow me to do a classroom observation. Observations often create tensions for any educator. While I was not their evaluator, I was an administrator in the district coming to watch something they were just learning about. I understand how the power differential plays a role in their ability to teach during that time and the hesitancy they may have felt about me coming into their classroom.

In conjunction with the classroom observations, I sought permission from both participants to conduct pre- and post-observation discussions regarding the observed lessons. While Ashley agreed to engage in these discussions, Michael did not provide a time for us to meet. I chose not to follow up because I did not want to create any pressure, and because this was intended as a secondary data source. While Michael did not offer a specific reason for his unavailability, I acknowledge that discussing an observation may evoke feelings akin to an evaluative process, which could potentially have influenced his decision and created a sense of tension.

Continuing to navigate my role within these interactions, I remained mindful of when to delve deeper into specific statements made by the participants and when to refrain, aiming to

avoid inadvertently implying any wrongdoing on their part. This delicate balance was crucial, as I sought to maintain a supportive rather than evaluative stance. Reflecting on my position, I observed moments when Michael appeared defensive in response to certain comments or queries. While the underlying reasons for his reactions remain uncertain, I acknowledge that my inquiries or remarks, coming from a position of authority, could have been perceived as critiques, prompting him to feel compelled to defend his perspectives or actions.

Definition of Key Terms

- Anti-racist: “Any idea that suggests that racial groups are equal in all their apparent differences-there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group” (Kendi, 2019, p.20)
- Anti-racist pedagogy: pedagogical practices characterized by proactive measures aimed at combating racism and interconnected systems of oppression (Sleeter & Delgado, 2004); the investigation of “structural racism, power relations, and social justice” as part of pedagogical applications” (Kishimoto, 2018, p.541)
- Asset-based pedagogy: pedagogical practices that see students’ funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001) as assets to learn from. The knowledge obtained guides instructional and curricular decisions (Milner, 2017)
- Critical consciousness: reflections that challenge one to see how their positionality influences their students (Howard, 2003); an examination of the cultural norms, values, customs, and institutions that perpetuate inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995); becoming aware of oppressive systems, leading to liberation; the act of becoming aware of oppressive systems, leading to liberation (Freire,1970)

- Culture: the values one holds dear; the way one looks at and interacts with the world
(Nieto, 2008)
- Humanizing: to make humane; make kind, merciful, considerate; civilize; refine
(Collinsdictionary.com)

Organization of Study

I present the foundational information underpinning this study's rationale in this opening chapter. I outline the significance of this research, the research questions driving the inquiry, and I define the theoretical frameworks that will serve as the lenses through which I interpret the data. Furthermore, I offer insights into my background and motivations, illustrating why this study is relevant and important to me. Chapter two delves into the relevant literature, offering a cohesive summary of existing knowledge pertinent to my research. This chapter focuses on four interrelated areas: culturally sensitive pedagogies, resource pedagogies, developing critical consciousness, and navigating whiteness. Chapter three outlines the methodological approach adopted for this study, detailing the data collection and analysis procedures.

In Chapters four and five, I present the findings derived from the data analysis. Chapter four focuses on the themes from the data related to Alex, and chapter five focuses on Michael. Across these two chapters, I detail the confinement the participants felt and how they contend with the systemic influences. Chapter six provides an analysis of these findings through the theoretical lens of whiteness. This chapter details how whiteness informs the confinement and hinders the resistance articulated in chapters four and five. Subsequently, Chapter seven examines the findings in relation to my own experiences. In this chapter, I detail how humanizing the work became important to this study. This chapter culminates with the implications of the research and the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Four interrelated areas of literature contextualize this study: 1) history of culturally sensitive pedagogies, 2) resource pedagogies, 3) developing critical consciousness, and 4) navigating the dominant structures. In the following paragraph, I explain how each of these areas of literature relates to my dissertation study.

Examining the literature on past pedagogies that addressed the cultural incongruence between students and teachers is essential. This examination illustrates how pedagogies have evolved and the critiques that shaped their evolution. Additionally, the literature provides an understanding of the implications of certain pedagogical practices in today's educational system. Next, I review the literature on the latest evolution, resource pedagogies, and explicitly focus on culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy. This body of literature helps to understand the challenges associated with how culturally relevant pedagogy is used and why the complimentary pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, might be more effective. The next area of literature explored is the importance of teachers developing critical consciousness. This literature is important because it provides the groundwork for what needs to be accomplished for a White person to address inequities caused by whiteness. Finally, I incorporated the literature on some specific challenges entailed when navigating the implementation of culturally sustaining practices. This body of literature illustrates the tensions White teachers may encounter internally and externally as they attempt to enact anti-racist pedagogies.

Exploring Culturally Sensitive Pedagogies

It is important to examine the evolutionary trajectory and the factors that have precipitated such changes in order to comprehensively grasp the historical development of

culturally sensitive pedagogical paradigms. The forthcoming section will detail the initial understanding of cultural differences and the methodologies that emerged from these nascent understandings. Additionally, it will critique these early interpretations and provide a perspective on the evolution of culturally sensitive pedagogies.

Historical Perspectives

Since the formation of this country, systemic inequities have existed, leading to educational inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As a result, several theories were developed to describe the basis of these inequalities. For a period, many of those theories were deficit-based and shaped the field of education, resulting in maintained inequalities (Lee, 2007). These deficit-based theories view the cultural ways of being of students who have been historically marginalized as deficiencies that need to be overcome. For example, Jensen (1969) argues that the gap in achievement can be attributed to deficits in intelligence and home culture. As such, disadvantaged students needed to attend compensatory schools to make up for what they lacked. The primary goal of these schools was to “remedy the education lag of disadvantaged children and thereby narrow the achievement gap between majority and minority pupils” (Jensen, 1969, p.5). Because the dominant, acceptable way of being is directly connected with White, middle-class norms, the goal of instruction was to eliminate the marginalized group's language, literacies, and culture and replace them with white, middle-class standards that are viewed as superior (Paris, 2012).

Several scholars have refuted the deficit approach mentioned above. For example, Woodson (1933) focused on the role the structure of schools played in the achievement disparities. Woodson argued that Black children were miseducated in schools. Additionally, he stated the lack of education provided to Black children handicapped them "by teaching him that

his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless" (Woodson, 1933, p. 3). Woodson likened this to lynching, stating it "kills one's aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime" (Woodson, 1933, p. 3). The education provided to Black students excluded the perspectives and history of Black people and instead focused on European views and history. He contended that instructional practices, curriculum content, and teacher mindset all work together to produce inferiority in Black students, leading to disparities.

Similarly, Freire (1993) criticized schools for the disparities in education, arguing that schools positioned students as containers to be filled. As a result, education becomes a bank where the students are seen as depositories, and the teacher is seen as the depositor (Freire, 1970). Knowledge is then regarded as a gift given to those considered uneducated (students) and provided by those deemed most knowledgeable (teachers). This approach masks the effort to turn students into "automatons - the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human" (Freire, 1970, p.73). Consequently, the more students work to learn the information teachers give them, the less they can develop critical consciousness. Instead, they adapt to the world and accept the reality presented to them (Freire, 1970).

Difference Approaches

In the 1970s and '80s, different approaches emerged. This belief system was based on students' language, literacies, and cultural practices that were different but equal to the dominant ways of being (Paris, 2012). The premise was that schools would be successful if they acknowledged those differences by using non-standard approaches to instruction. For example, culturally appropriate methods were based on the belief that the context of instruction could be inappropriate for certain students if it were disconnected from their cultural norms (Au, 1980). For example, in a study conducted by Au and Jordan, the authors found that when teachers used

a particular speech event, talk story, with Native Hawaiian students over some time, their reading achievement increased (Au, 1980).

Erickson (1984) defined the teachers' instruction as culturally congruent and found similar instances of success with Native Alaskan children. Teachers of Native descent educated students using instruction that was congruent with the "patterns of social relationship found in home and community life" (Erickson, 1984 p. 541.) Cultural congruence is the belief that more learning takes place in schools if the classroom is compatible with the cultural context of the students (Singer, 1988). Another difference approach, which is culturally compatible, is similar to the previous two. According to Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp (1987), students are more successful when instruction is culturally compatible. That compatibility is specific to particular cultural groups and cannot be generalized.

While these approaches were not based on deficit beliefs, they can produce similar outcomes. For example, difference models do not address systemic barriers that have caused inequities in schools. This lack of acknowledgment accounts for how cultural mismatches affect certain groups differently. According to Ogbu (1982), every student experiences cultural discontinuities. However, groups who share "secondary discontinuities "are impacted differently (Ogbu, 1982, p. 298). Secondary discontinuities develop due to stratified domination and involve the involuntary incorporation of "castelike minorities" (Ogbu, 1982, p. 299). This stratified domination caused structural discontinuities among subordinate and dominant groups creating the educational problems that exist. Consequently, according to Ogbu,

a prerequisite for solving the educational problems resulting from these discontinuities is to recognize their structural basis; another is to apply a structural remedy along with other remedies by improving the opportunity structure of the minorities. Under this

circumstance, "programs emphasizing cultural, cognitive, linguistic or communicative, and interactional remedies are likely to prove more successful (Ogbu, 1982, p. 305).

If culturally sensitive remedies that ignore the political aspects of schooling are implemented, they can give off the illusion of progress and mask societal inequities (Villegas, 1988).

Another goal of difference approaches was for students from culturally and linguistically marginalized communities to learn the dominant way of being successful in schools, with little attention given to maintaining their native practices (Paris, 2012). Conversely, resource pedagogies emerged during the 1980s. Counter to the pedagogies before them, resource pedagogies "repositioned the linguistic, cultural, and literate practices of poor communities—particularly poor communities of color—as resources to honor, explore, and extend in accessing Dominant American English (DAE) language and literacy skills and other White, middle-class dominant cultural norms of acting and being that are demanded in schools" (Paris, 2012 p.94). Thus, resource pedagogies seek to join students' cultural ways of being with the dominant way and not devalue either in the process. While there are several variations of resource pedagogies in the field of education (Sleeter, 2012), culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustainable pedagogy will be the focus of this study. In the subsequent section, I review the literature associated with these two approaches.

Resource Pedagogies

The following section will review the scholarly literature on the historical development of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). It will also elucidate the various tensions that have hindered the full implementation of CRP within educational contexts. Lastly, the section will explicate the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and establish its interconnectedness with CRP, thereby offering a holistic understanding of these pedagogical frameworks.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is a resource pedagogy that originated from scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings. Like other resource pedagogues, Ladson-Billings realized that much of the research on successfully teaching Black students relied on deficit-based ideologies (2014). In 1988, she conducted a two-year study on successful teachers of African American students. Through recommendations, eight teachers were recruited to participate in the study. At the conclusion of the study, Ladson-Billings found that while the teachers possessed various approaches to pedagogy, they had similar beliefs and ideologies that served as theoretical foundations of CRP: beliefs about themselves and others, ideas about the structure of social relations, and thoughts about knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Ladson-Billings hoped that these characteristics would provide a range or continuum of behaviors, making this practice more accessible. Along with the identified underpinnings, there are three tenets one must include when approaching CRP: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). All three principles must be present to be considered culturally relevant.

Over the years, knowledge of CRP has become popular. However, the implementation of it can be complicated. Scholars have noted this difficulty is often due to a misunderstanding of the tenets of CRP (Sleeter, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). For example, cultural competence requires students to maintain their cultural integrity while at the same time achieving academically, but this can be difficult to accomplish (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). The difficulty in achieving cultural competence is due to essentialized or static views of culture (Nieto, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2010). Essentialized ideas can lead teachers to believe that certain racial or

ethnic groups share the same culture because they share the same race or ethnicity. This can result in stereotypical ways of incorporating culture (Nieto, 2008).

For instance, Brown et al. (2018) found a new teachers' attempt to enact CRP during STEM lessons showed a lack of understanding of the depth of culture. Because of her limited knowledge, the teacher incorporated a simple integration by using name-brand shoes in a STEM lesson to connect with their students. The teacher thought because the children were of color, they would relate to purchasing name-brand shoes (Brown et al., 2018). Similarly, Young (2010) found that participants mostly equate cultural competence to knowing their students. They did not view cultural competence as a way of helping students honor their cultural ways of being while accessing the dominant culture. Instead, they believed it to be a practice used for community meetings and not something infused into the instructional practices throughout the day (Young, 2010).

Teachers' lack of cultural knowledge makes it challenging to implement CRP; students' understanding of culture can also influence its implementation. For example, in a critical ethnographic study conducted by Dutro et al., the authors examined a teacher, Ruth, enacting an activity she believed to be culturally relevant (2008). The study ended a two-year, more extensive study where the authors visited the classroom during the week, collecting various forms of data. To get students to understand their cultural background, Ruth created a classroom project where students researched and shared information about their cultural experiences. Unfortunately, the initial directions and discussions about the assignment unintentionally caused students to conflate culture with country and implicitly conflate it with race (Dutro et al., 2008). As a result, students who did not have clear connections to countries outside the United States

struggled to identify and legitimize their cultural identity. Thus, teachers must be provided with more training related to understanding culture.

Sociopolitical consciousness is also misunderstood and sometimes left out altogether (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Educators may find it easier to focus on the cultural aspects of CRP (though often trivialized) and shy away from critical elements. According to Sleeter (2012), "substituting cultural for political analysis involves maintaining silence about the conditions of racism and other forms of oppression that underlie achievement gaps and alienation from school, assuming that attending to culture alone will bring about equity" (p. 571). This silence was also illustrated in Young's research (2010). The author found participants focused more on cultural competence than sociopolitical consciousness. Out of the five teachers, only two had occurrences of critical consciousness in their lesson, with the teacher with the highest being Black.

Similarly, Morrison et al. (2008) found a lack of critical consciousness when they synthesized 45 research articles that centered on the enactment of CRP in classroom settings. The analysis aimed to provide empirical descriptions of teachers enacting CRP. To analyze the articles, the authors coded the research articles using the three tenets of CRP and then created subcategories that demonstrated concrete examples of the principles found in the papers (Morrison et al., 2008). They found various examples of how teachers enacted the three tenets of CRP. While there were examples of each principle, the authors found examples of critical consciousness lacking the most. Twenty-six of the forty-five articles had examples of critical consciousness (Morrison et al., 2008). However, one of the four subcategories related to critical consciousness, sharing power in the classroom, was not as critical as the others. One can share power with students and not address inequities. Therefore, nineteen of the articles included sociopolitical consciousness as required by CRP.

The previous studies illustrate how much of the work under the guise of CRP has fallen short of the goals initially outlined by Ladson-Billings (Paris & Alim, 2014). Indeed, according to Ladson-Billings, "culturally relevant pedagogy has taken on a life of its own, and what I see in the literature and sometimes in practice is totally unrecognizable to me" (2014, p.). This distorted approach is the impetus to scholars such as Django Paris and H. Sammy Alim critiquing and extending the work of culturally relevant pedagogy and advocating for its evolution, naming it culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) attempts to marry past and present research and practice in the resource pedagogy field (Paris, 2012). According to Ladson-Billings (2014), it is a "fresher version of culturally relevant pedagogy that meets the needs of this century's students" (2014, p.76). With CSP, students of color are not compared to White middle-class norms, with the sole purpose of instruction being to help them achieve those norms. Instead, CSP focuses on the "heritages and contemporary practices of students and communities of color," sustaining them and helping them to acquire the dominant culture (Paris & Alim, 2014, p.85). Ultimately, "CSP seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 88).

Paris and Alim use CRP as the basis of CSP and have the same foundational ideas of students as subjects in the instructional process rather than objects (Ladson-Billings, 2014). While the principles are the same, culturally sustaining theorists critique how asset pedagogies of the past have been implemented in the educational system. Paris and Alim provide three "loving critiques" (2014, p.85). The first critique addresses previous conceptualizations of asset

pedagogies focusing specifically on CRP. As stated, the goals outlined by Ladson-Billings are not being taken up in the field of education. Paris and Alim see two reasons for this. One is that the use of the terms “relevant” and “responsive” do not thoroughly and explicitly support these goals (Paris, 2012). Another reason CRP implementation falls short is the existence of flawed beliefs regarding the relationship between Dominant American English (DAE) and power. The authors suggest that only having DAE can hinder access to power due to our increasingly diverse society. Consequently, students must learn DAE and maintain their multiple ways of speaking and being (Paris & Alim, 2014).

The second critique is that asset pedagogies too often draw on links between race and language, literacy, and cultural practices of the past and fail to consider new and evolving practices (Paris & Alim, 2014). Failure to consider new and evolving approaches results in the simplification of asset pedagogies. This simplification focuses only on traditional methods of students of color and ignores evolving cultural practices. The third critique looks inward at how asset pedagogies can support youth practices but also needs to “critically contend with problematic elements expressed in some youth cultural practices” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86). Asset pedagogies must view youth cultures from a purely positive lens and “interrogate and critique the simultaneously progressive and oppressive currents” in youth practices (2014, p. 92).

While CSP is a new concept, several researchers have used it as a viable way to investigate how teachers are addressing inequities. For example, Zoch (2017) examined four ESL teachers' enactment of CSP in an ethnographic study while teaching lessons focused on test preparation. Data was collected in various forms, including observations, interviews, and audio recordings. After reviewing the data, Zoch found examples of CSP in how three of the teachers could speak in Spanish and English during instruction, demonstrating linguistic pluralism.

Additionally, all four teachers included aspects of critical consciousness by focusing on issues of equity. Aspects of critical consciousness were incorporated despite the lesson focusing on test preparation (Zoch, 2017).

In another example, Whitney (2018) conducted a case study of a 7th-grade Black female student named Raquel. This study also provided examples of CSP in the secondary education field. Raquel had been labeled as having a learning disability and deemed a subpar writer. The study aimed to demonstrate how CSP helped Raquel use poetry to "establish her identity, share her thoughts and ideas, and advocate for change in the world" (Whitney, 2018, p.644). Data was collected over a year in various forms. In the study, Whitney draws from the Black Girls' Literacies Framework to enact CSP. Whitney states this framework uses reading and writing to promote community and social change (Whitney, 2018). Whitney found that when she enacted CSP using the Black Girl's Literacies Framework, Raquel used poetry to address social and political issues in her life in a way she had not been able to do before. Additionally, her writing demonstrated that she was a capable and competent writer instead of what was thought of her previously (Whitney, 2018).

In a similar study, Machado et al. (2017) examined teacher Mr. Coppola's enactment of CSP in a poetry unit. In his 7th-grade English class, Mr. Coppola welcomed the use of non-dominant forms of poetry and valued it similarly to canonical texts (Machado et al., 2017). For example, Mr. Coppola used the documentary *Louder than a Bomb* and the poetry featured in it as anchor texts as well as using other canonical texts. The authors specifically sought to see how the students expressed the fluid and hybrid natures of their cultural affiliations through the poetry unit. Machado et al. focused on the poetry of three students who participated in the unit: Isaac, Jess, and Alex (2017). They found that the students demonstrated fluid and hybrid natures of

culture through their use of linguistic play. For example, Isaac included language from his Jewish ethnicity and religious culture in his poetry. Jess reflected the fluid nature of her cultural affiliations by invoking an insider perspective of Chicago culture in her poetry, allowing her to critique the local culture. Lastly, Alex, a new student in the class, used poetry to hybridize her cultural affiliations with youth literature culture and the classroom culture (Machado et al., 2017).

As stated previously, culturally sustaining pedagogy is an evolution of culturally relevant pedagogy. One is not better than the other; instead, they complement each other (Ladson-Billings, 2014). While the research listed above provides examples of practical applications of CSP resulting in success, the articles do not demonstrate the journey the participants took to commit to CSP. According to Howard (2003), educators cannot achieve without critical reflection, which helps to develop their critical consciousness. It is difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish without it (Howard, 2003; Morrison et al., 2008). The subsequent section will review the literature related to teachers' journey to develop their critical consciousness.

Developing Critical Consciousness

As previously noted, cultivating critical consciousness is fundamental for the effective implementation of asset-based approaches. The ensuing section will provide a comprehensive definition of critical consciousness, interchangeably utilizing terms such as sociopolitical consciousness, critical reflection, and critical awareness. Additionally, this section will delve into the intricate challenges associated with challenging deeply ingrained beliefs to foster critical consciousness development.

What is Critical Consciousness?

White teachers often live and receive their education in predominantly White communities (Lawrence & Tatum, 2004). This homogeneity can lead to limited firsthand knowledge of communities of color, with their understanding often distorted by secondhand information. This distorted perspective is shaped by whiteness, a pervasive and normalized lens through which societal structures are viewed as typical and the status quo (Castagno, 2014; Howard, 2006; Green, Sonn, & Mastebula, 2007; Perry, 2001). A prevailing belief influenced by this perspective is the notion of meritocracy. In the United States, there is a strong emphasis on self-reliance (Hammond, 2015), leading many educators to believe in a meritocratic system where it is assumed that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed (Castagno, 2014). This form of dysconsciousness, described as an "uncritical habit of the mind that justifies inequity" (King, 1991), often prevents White teachers from recognizing how their racial identity shapes their teaching practices. While White teachers may engage in discussions about racism or diversity, few understand the extent to which their racial identity influences their pedagogy (Ut & Tochlak). Therefore, expecting White teachers to be culturally sensitive or to implement anti-racist pedagogies (Howard, 2006) without first examining their ingrained beliefs and assumptions is unrealistic.

To interrupt the existing conditions, White educators must adopt a commitment to pedagogies that require them to think, feel, and act in ways that combat systemic inequalities (Howard, 2003). This commitment necessitates the development of critical consciousness. When developing critical consciousness, White educators acknowledge and comprehend the impact of whiteness on their personal identity, initiating the process of White reconstruction (Helms, 1990; Howard, 2006; Leonardo, 2009). While mastering effective instructional techniques is crucial, it

is equally vital for educators to understand their individual identities and the contexts in which they teach. Educators should also interrogate conventional knowledge and assumptions (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Critical reflection examines an individual's behavior and experiences, aiding them in making informed decisions moving forward (Howard, 2003). This reflective practice encourages educators to assess key elements of teaching related to equity, access, and social justice (Howard, 2003; King, 1991), prompting them to consider how their positions influence their students' academic success (Howard, 2003). Consequently, teachers who engage in this process can evolve into disruptive educators as whiteness is not a “hopeless disease and may be rehabilitated” (Leonardo, 2009, p.98).

The journey of critical consciousness can be an arduous task. Delving into the construction of one's identity and confronting difficult questions can be a daunting endeavor (Howard, 2003). Gay and Kirkland (2003), in their work with teachers, have identified several obstacles that can impede the progress of critical reflection. These obstacles include a lack of understanding about the nature of self-reflection, as well as a scarcity of high-quality opportunities for guided practice in this area. Additionally, Gay and Kirkland found that the perception of teaching as an objectifiable craft can hinder critical reflection. Other impediments to this process include educators redirecting attention away from cultural and racial consciousness discussions or refusing to engage in such discussions altogether.

Moreover, educators may sometimes assert that they are more advanced in developing their consciousness than they actually are without deeply contemplating changing their personal and professional behaviors (Kirkland & Gay, 2003). This sentiment was also evident in a collaborative self-study completed by Tondreau et al. (2022). In this study, teacher educators from various universities examined their collective understanding of critical literacy and its

implementation in their classrooms. They discovered that the foundation of their ability to facilitate conversations on critical literacy lay in their knowledge of themselves. Prioritizing the internal work of interrogating their own whiteness over focusing solely on instructional practices was crucial (Tondreau et al., 2022). This recognition allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities that come with implementing instructional practices that challenge whiteness. Consequently, they became more deliberate in their approaches.

The challenges discussed in this section are intricately tied to the process of learning. Every action we undertake is rooted in a belief system. Therefore, the cultivation of critical consciousness necessitates identifying and transforming underlying beliefs (Aguilar, 2020). The following section will elaborate on the difficulties associated with challenging deeply ingrained beliefs and acquiring new ones.

Disrupting Beliefs

We are inundated with messages constantly. To manage this influx of stimuli, our brains engage in a process of categorization, allowing for the organization of information and facilitating rapid decision-making based on perceived patterns (Eberhardt, 2019, 2020). While this process is innate to our brain, it can limit our ability to understand people we feel are different. This hindrance can be attributed to our unique cultural backgrounds, which shape the categories we form in our minds, the contents we assign to these categories, and the labels we apply to them (Eberhardt, 2020). As such, categorization, while human, can lead to bias. Our beliefs and attitudes can become deeply intertwined with the categories we construct about social groups, leading to the automatic acceptance of these associations as truths that influence our behavior and decision-making processes. Bias can occur rapidly within milliseconds and manifest regardless of our consciously held values or desired self-image (Eberhardt, 2020). It is a

“distorting lens that’s a product of both the architecture of our brain and the disparities we see in our society” (Eberhardt, 2020, p.6).

Moreover, when we have established beliefs about others, our brain will seek out and focus on information confirming that belief. This information is found to be trustworthy, and consequently, we are less critical of it even when presented with other information that suggests something different (Eberhardt, 2020 & Aguilar, 2020). Known as confirmation bias, it allows inaccurate beliefs to spread and persist (Eberhardt, 2020). While bias presents challenges for disrupting beliefs, one can dismantle ingrained beliefs and acquire new information (Aguilar, 2020).

Scholars such as Helms have elucidated the process of disrupting ingrained beliefs and cultivating a positive White identity. In her seminal work "Black and White Racial Identity" (1990), Helms identified two key processes that White individuals must undergo: the abandonment of racism and the development of a non-racist White identity (p. 49). The White racial identity development model created by Helms proposes a process of attitudinal development. A White person moves through a series of stages involving acknowledging racism and the consciousness of whiteness to differing extents (1990). The ultimate goal is that a White person reaches the highest stage where they take personal responsibility for racism, constantly recognize their whiteness, and abandon racism by defining a non-racist White identity. Helms theorizes that the process of White identity development transpires over the following six stages: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independent, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy (1990).

In the first stage of White identity development, contact, one comes into contact with people of color but is oblivious to systemic issues and, therefore, takes being White for granted.

With Disintegration, the second stage, a White person has a conscious yet conflicted acknowledgment of whiteness (Helms, 1990). Along with the tension of acknowledging whiteness, the person begins to question the racial realities they have been taught to believe, possibly causing emotional discomfort and cognitive dissonance. A White person could engage in the discomfort and use it to take action or develop new beliefs related to White superiority and black inferiority (Helms, 1990). The development of new views can begin the Reintegration stage. This occurs when "the person consciously acknowledges a White identity," however it is not positive (Helms, 1990, p.60). One stays in the Reintegration stage until one begins to question the presence of whiteness and racism.

In the Pseudo-Independent stage, a White person understands racism as a systemic issue (Tatum, 1997). While an understanding of racism as a system of advantage may be present, the individual may not know what to do with that information. However, a White person may feel a sense of uncertainty. At the same time, in the Pseudo-Independence stage, they will continue to develop a positive White identity if their sense of rewards offsets their uncertainty (Helm, 1990). Redefining a positive White Identity begins the Immersion/Emersion stage. An individual may start to focus on ways to address racism and oppression (Helms, 1990). The last stage, Autonomy, is the culmination of the White racial development process (Tatum, 1997). A White person is committed to their new definition of whiteness, nurtures it, and applies it. In doing so, they confront racism and oppression in daily life. Although this is categorized as the highest level of White racial identity, a White person continues to develop their identity even after reaching this stage, as development is an ongoing process (Helms, 1990).

The descriptions of the stages listed above are approximations of experience. There is no absolute way to identify a person's stage (Helms, 1990). According to Howard, some people

have shared accounts of never experiencing the earlier stages due to being raised to have a multicultural identity (2006). As such, teachers enacting culturally sustaining pedagogies could be at any stage in their development, which can influence their ability to enact such pedagogies. Understanding the connection between developing a positive racial identity and implementing anti-racist pedagogy with in-service teachers is understudied (Lawrence & Tatum, 2006). Consequently, few White teachers understand how developing their racial identity affects their teaching practices.

Lawrence and Tatum (2006) attempted to illustrate this connection by studying the effects of an anti-racist professional development course on White teachers. The authors were specifically interested in whether the teachers' understanding of their racial identity impacted their thoughts and classroom practice (Lawrence & Tatum, 2006). Participants included 20 White educators. Data was collected using interviews, essays, and reflection papers written for the course and was coded using Helm's White Racial Identity Development theoretical framework (Lawrence & Tatum, 2006). After reviewing the data, Lawrence and Tatum found that participants began to understand racism as a system of advantage and began to recognize the racial privilege and power that accompanied them or how they may have been complicit in racist practices (2006). This new awareness was an impetus in the teacher's thinking about becoming allies instead of wallowing in guilt. As a result, 85% of the participants reported at least one way they combated racism professionally or personally.

Lawrence & Tatum reported that while the participants saw areas of growth, tension arose when the course focused on the dynamic between the participants and people of color who also participated in the course (2006). When students of color expressed feelings of distrust for White people, it revealed how the participants were not prepared to “acknowledge the legacy of

racism that followed them into the room” (Lawrence & Tatum, 2006, p.370). Instead, they felt they should be viewed as individuals, a characteristic of whiteness (Lawrence & Tatum, 2006; Chambers, 1996). The authors found this was an ongoing source of tension and never resolved.

In a similar study, Utt and Tochluk (2016) analyze the experiences of White teachers as they navigate the “third space” as theorized by Leonardo (2009). According to the authors, existing in the third space can be difficult as it is an in-between space of racial identity development. For this reason, teachers should see themselves as “complicated, flawed, and essential to racial justice” instead of the binary: problem or ally (Utt & Tochluk, 2006, p.130). In their research, the authors provide an empirical analysis of White teachers' experiences and offer six personal and professional development areas to help White teachers construct anti-racist pedagogical practices.

The six areas are a part of two overarching concepts: "Understanding Oneself and Accountable Action in Community" (Utt & Tolchuck, 2016, p.131). With Understanding Oneself, the authors recommend that White teachers analyze privilege and microaggressive behavior. This analysis involves an individual regularly reflecting on how privilege is manifested to interrupt "subconscious enactments of microaggressions" (Utt & Tolchuck, 2016, p. 134). The authors also recommend White teachers explore ethnic and cultural identities by understanding how whiteness was developed and maintained and recognizing their connection to whiteness and White culture. Furthermore, it is suggested that White teachers learn the history of White anti-racists and multiracial struggles for justice as part of developing a healthy White racial identity. Acquiring this knowledge aids White teachers in not falling into a sense of guilt and shame.

Additionally, developing intersectional identity assists White educators in understanding themselves. When White teachers develop and understand intersectional identity, they can begin

to acknowledge and discern that people have various identities that influence how they interact with society. The overarching concept of accountable action in community means building White anti-racist communities with other White individuals and demonstrating accountability across race by continuing to have conversations and relationships with people of color.

The previous literature illustrates that White teachers must develop an anti-racist White racial identity to enact CSP. While this evolution is essential, it does not come without obstacles. The subsequent section will review the literature related to the tension that arises as White educators attempt to enact pedagogies that contradict the dominant structure of schools, whiteness.

Navigating Whiteness

As stated previously, whiteness is characterized by its normative quality within societal contexts. Consequently, educators may not consistently recognize the pervasive influence of whiteness on their pedagogical practices, including their interactions with students, the prioritization of curriculum and resources, and the cultural ways of being they value. Upon embarking on a journey toward critical consciousness, educators may encounter various challenges in grappling with the implications of whiteness. This section examines two key areas of challenge: dominant ways of being permeating schools and the constraints imposed by existing educational structures.

Dominant Approaches

In his book *Ratchedemic: Reimagining Academic Success*, Dr. Christopher Emdin (2021) uses sociologist Jonathan Turner's ideas about core, social, group, and role identities to explain how these identities are related to dominant ways of being. Emdin illustrates how role identities

are pivotal for individual survival, representing the performance of expected behaviors in various contexts. For educators, assuming a role means embodying a perception of what it means to be a teacher, often shaped by observations of past educators, peer interactions, and instructional guidelines received through training (Emdin, 2021). This process essentially involves internalizing and adopting socially sanctioned norms of behavior, encompassing understandings, attitudes, values, and emotions as defined by the educational institution (Emdin, 2021). Because of the pervasive influence of whiteness, what it means to be a teacher is deeply informed by dominant cultural norms and values.

Consequently, while teachers may try to diverge from whiteness, sometimes engaging in dominant ideologies can be in one's best interest (Castagno, 2014). Castagno found that well-intended, polite school practices can "solidify inequity and reinscribe whiteness" (2014, p.2). According to Castagno, there is a social etiquette defined by dominant ideologies. This etiquette determines what is appropriate and what is not when it comes to race and racism. Because of this, educators are more likely to be silent on issues dealing with inequities under the guise of being polite (Castagno, 2014). Not only are these polite norms hard to resist, but educators are also expected to educate children on them (Castagno, 2014). Teachers who are developing their racial identity while attempting to enact anti-racist pedagogies may experience tension due to this. They may encounter individuals who deem their developing critical discourse impolite, creating conflict (Howard, 2006). Navigating who to talk to and when to talk about specific issues related to inequalities may be challenging, as illustrated in the following quote:

Part of being educated in whiteness entails knowing when, where, how, and with whom to engage certain issues. These rules of engagement constitute what it means to be polite.

Nice teachers and students engage politely so as not to make others uncomfortable, nervous, or otherwise upset (Castagno, 2014, p. 85).

Resultingly, educators committed to enacting CSP must learn how to navigate the constraints of niceness enforced by whiteness.

Additionally, educators developing their critical consciousness will encounter challenges in navigating dominant ideologies that permeate educational discourse, one of which is deficit ideology. As delineated by Gorski (2023), this pervasive belief system attributes educational disparities to inherent deficiencies within historically marginalized communities. This belief system blames marginalized groups for lacking educational achievement, suggesting “moral, intellectual, dispositional, or even spiritual” shortcomings (Gorski, 2023, p. 147). This perspective not only obscures the underlying inequities but also shifts the focus towards "fixing" marginalized students. Consequently, pedagogical approaches that affirm students' cultural ways of knowing, known as asset-based pedagogies, are often dismissed in favor of Eurocentric methods (Power-Carter, 2008).

Due to the pervasive influence of whiteness in defining norms, ingrained beliefs are often resistant to disruption. These deeply rooted beliefs are present in educators upon entering the field of education. For example, Enumah (2021) conducted a study involving sixteen justice-oriented teacher educators (TEs) from diverse public and private universities. The study aimed to explore the tensions that arose when the TEs instructed teacher candidates (TCs) about White supremacy and how they managed these tensions. Enumah identified significant tensions related to the TEs' efforts to challenge deficit ideologies held by the TCs, proving to be a difficult task. The TEs attempted to develop a variety of assignments to address these beliefs, often needing to modify them as they navigated the complexities of addressing the TCs' deficit beliefs.

Furthermore, the TEs had to devise coping mechanisms to effectively respond to these entrenched beliefs. These tensions underscore how White supremacy is sustained through "pervasive, structured, and deeply rooted social and cultural mechanisms" (Enumah, 2021, p. 3), highlighting the intricate challenges of navigating dominant norms in education.

Dominant paradigms in education, characterized by concepts such as niceness and deficit ideologies, serve to perpetuate and uphold single stories (Adichie, 2009) deeply rooted in whiteness. Educators engaged in developing their critical awareness are confronted with the task of navigating these implicit norms and prevailing beliefs, which not only detrimentally impact their students but also have adverse effects on the educators themselves. Emdin (2021) underscores this dilemma, highlighting that teachers are compelled "to reconcile their allegiance to a structure that harms their core selves and causes them to harm youth at their core selves" (p.80). This is not an easy task as deficit thinking, as Aguilar (2020) states, is like an oil spill. It is pervasive and obscures beauty, causing harm to the environment and making it tedious to clean up (Aguilar, 2020, p. 91). This arduous task is exacerbated by the educational structures and systems that perpetuate and reinforce these detrimental ideologies.

Educational Structures

Adhering to the dominant structures of the educational system may also be in an educator's best interest. Teachers are required to teach the curriculum mandated by their school districts. This curriculum is often based on the belief that standardization remedies inequities. (Sleeter, 2012). In other words, achievement gaps will diminish if every student receives the same educational content. A homogenized curriculum will often reflect ethnocentric ideas and diminish the history of the United States' role in creating inequities (Sleeter, 2006). Resisting these structures can be difficult for teachers trying to develop their racial identity and enact

culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. Sleeter (2012) provides three reasons for this difficulty. First, the dominant perspective is more prevalent in mainstream ideology, causing educators not to question it. Second, there are few illustrations of successful anti-racist pedagogies. Third, challenging systemic barriers through pedagogy conflicts with institutionalized structures teachers are expected to observe.

Because the curriculum is the focus of educational activity, everything centers on its content. This “includes the formal, overt knowledge that is central to the activities of teaching, as well as more tacit, subliminal messages” (Beyer & Liston as cited in Sleeter p,10). The tacit, subliminal messages create a hidden curriculum, the knowledge students learn unconsciously (Sleeter, 2005). Consequently, teachers committed to culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies must determine how to navigate this hidden curriculum in an educational structure that requires its implementation. As suggested by Ladson-Billing (2010), culturally relevant teachers "must be able to deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct the curriculum" (p. 36). The teacher understands that the curriculum is not ideologically neutral but instead is a cultural artifact that must be critically examined (Ladson-Billings, 2010).

This examination is difficult to accomplish. Educators may lack the resources and understanding to create the curriculum needed (Sleeter, 2012). Much of the theoretical work surrounding anti-racist pedagogies is conceptually dense and provides few classroom practice examples. Additionally, many teachers may lack time to research and develop curricula due to the mandates that come with standardized testing (Sleeter, 2012). Furthermore, examining the curriculum is not all that is needed. Teachers may also need to reconstruct the way they approach instruction. Rebuilding instruction could also prove difficult as some of the more uncomplicated pedagogical strategies used previously may be the kind of instructional strategies to avoid

(Ladson-Billings, 2010). Because of the tension that arises when restructuring curriculum and instruction, educators may find it in their best interest to adhere to the dominant structures.

Despite the difficulties, some teachers may still commit to the restructuring; however, they must consider their motives, as they may be self-serving. An example of this can be found in Hollingworth's (2009) case study of a White teacher, Patrice, and her attempts to enact a multicultural curriculum. The authors found that although the teacher intended to teach students about racial stereotypes through classroom conversation, the conversations normalized whiteness and hindered students' exploration of various inequities. Hollingworth attributed this breakdown to the teacher's commitment to color-blind ideology. Additionally, it could be due to the impetus for initiating lessons: a student calling Patrice racist. This realization caused the author to wonder if the purpose of incorporating multicultural education was to benefit the students or herself. This line of thinking is connected to the interest convergence tenet of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As stated, gains made for people of color rarely happen out of altruism alone. In this case, one of Patrice's motivating factors was to prove to her students that she was not racist and inevitably gained their trust. Ultimately, this study illustrates the need for developing anti-racist educators to examine their motives. If an individual's reason for enacting CSRP is based on interest convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), their commitment will oscillate. At times, it may benefit them more to adhere to dominant ideologies, and at times, it may help them more to adhere to anti-racist ideologies.

In summary, culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies are the antithesis of school's dominant ideologies, as the dominant ideology prepares students for the status quo and reinscribes whiteness (Castagno, 2014; Gilborn, 2013). The tension caused by enacting asset-

based pedagogies may be too difficult, and teachers may find it easier to conform to the dominant structure instead.

Conclusion

Each of the previous sections of literature helps to situate the current study. The first section provides a foundation for the evolution of past pedagogies and their ideological basis. This information helps to understand why certain instructional practices are still present and the ideologies that underpin them. These pedagogies have influenced educators in some way. This influence has resulted in teachers knowingly or unknowingly incorporating them into their pedagogical practices. Evolving from these approaches may create tension for White teachers. The second area of literature on resource pedagogies provided an understanding of the challenges associated with culturally relevant pedagogy and how culturally sustaining pedagogy was created to complement and extend CRP.

Additionally, the literature supported the need to develop critical consciousness for educators to enact CSP. The third area of literature helped make visible the progression White educators must go through as they develop a positive White racial identity. The fourth area of literature on navigating the dominant culture is relevant because while White teachers are developing their racial identity, tensions will arise due to whiteness. Thus, the literature illustrates the internal conflict White teachers may have to encounter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter aims to outline the methodological framework underpinning this study. It describes the qualitative research methods employed, including the data sources and analytical approaches. Furthermore, this chapter describes the research site, the participants, the procedures for obtaining access, and my social location as a researcher.

Practitioner Inquiry Study

This study employs practitioner inquiry methods. Practitioner inquiry is “the systematic examination of problems in education” where the practitioner is the researcher and focus of the study (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). In the educational field, this type of research implies “insider” research conducted by a practitioner in a specific community they are a part of (Anderson, Herr, Noble, 2007). It is a reflective process based on the idea that those who work in particular settings have significant knowledge about what occurs (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). The investigation is focused on problems that emerge in professional practice. With practitioner inquiry, the knowledge generated is “intended primarily for application and use within the local context in which it was generated” (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 508). Consequently, the results from the data are unique to the specific research site and are not transferable.

Self-study is practitioner inquiry that draws on biographical, autobiographical, and narrative data collection and analysis forms. It operates from the belief that one cannot separate themselves from either the research process or from their practices in the educational field (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). Self-study is focused on how personal experience provides understanding and solutions for public dilemmas. In like manner, it also focuses on how public

theory provides insight and solutions for private experiences (Bullough & Pinnegarm 2001). Although self-study recognizes the role of the self in research, this form of inquiry does not focus solely on the self. Instead, it focuses on the “space between self and the practices engaged,” as this dissonance is essential to action (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Loughran & Northfield, 1998). Similarly, self-study “focuses on spaces in our understandings such as the space between what we know or think we know” (LaBoskey & Richert, 2015, p.167).

Action research, also called practitioner research, is a systematic inquiry into practice conducted by practitioners interested in their educational setting (Mertler, 2014). Action research is intended to produce a change in those settings. This change can include modifying curriculum, challenging school practices, and working for social transformation (Efrat Efron & Ravid, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). Action researchers study their social setting by acting in it and analyzing the impact of their actions. Action researchers are viewed as generators of knowledge rather than receivers and enactors of expertise produced by outside experts (Anderson, Herr, Nihlen, 2007; Efrat Efron & Ravid, 2013). This view is due to ongoing problem-solving (Anderson, Herr, Nihlen, 2007). In addition, action research is situational in that the researcher desires to understand the context of the study and the participants involved. Therefore, the results of this inquiry should only be understood within the characteristics of the particular setting in which the study is conducted (Efrat Efron & Ravid, 2013).

As an assistant principal of the research site, I find this approach to inquiry helpful as it is connected to the goal of this study: to explore what happens when two equity-minded teachers and I explore culturally sustaining pedagogy. Not only are these methodological approaches related to the objective of the study, but they are also directly related to who I am as a person. I have spent a significant amount of time exploring text related to helping teachers become

culturally sustaining. Practitioner inquiry assists me in furthering my understanding of how to accomplish this task. I ask critical questions about my practice and create knowledge about those practices (Anderson, Herr, Noble, 2007). This process leads me to “strip away the unexamined theoretical baggage that has accumulated around almost everything we do in schools” by making the familiar strange (Anderson, Herr, Noble, 2007). The very purpose of whiteness is to make the familiar strange to disrupt what is viewed as normal and natural to address inequities. As a Critical Race Scholar, this is my goal as well.

Description of the Site

The school where the study took place is located in a large Midwestern city and is a part of a larger school district. The pseudonym Garden Grove Elementary School (GGES) is used when discussing the school setting. Likewise, The Promise School District (TPSD) is used as a pseudonym for the school district. The school serves kindergarten through fifth grade students with approximately 491 students. Of those students, over 68.6% are African American, 6.5% multiracial, 11.8% White, 12% Latino, and 1% Asian. Other demographics outlined on the State Department of Education website identified 57% percent of students as economically disadvantaged, 16.1% as English learners, and 10.2% as students with disabilities. Garden Grove has thirty-six teachers. Of those teachers, 2.8% are Black, 94.4% are White, and 2.8% are Latino. The school was established in 1985. For a significant amount of time, the school followed a balanced calendar, operating on a different calendar than other schools in the district. A balanced calendar means students attended school for nine weeks and then had three-week breaks. Parents had to complete an application to attend Garden Grove, which is still needed today. The purpose of a balanced calendar was to remedy summer learning loss. However, most of the students who attended were students whose parents could find childcare for their children

during the three-week breaks. As a result, most of the students who attended were from middle to upper-class families.

Garden Grove is among three balanced calendar schools in the district, and all three schools historically have had the highest number of White students in attendance. In addition to differing demographics, Garden Grove is one of three schools that houses the high-ability program. Over time, the demographics began to change with increased students from disinvested communities and the flight of White students. Coupled with this, the amount of applications has decreased throughout the years. With this decrease, the district sends students to Garden Grove as other schools reach capacity.

Research Journey

I have been an educator for the past eighteen years, working in various settings and grade levels. I have observed inequities between White students and students of color in every location. Some of the disparities I noticed were related to disproportionality in discipline practices, curriculum resources irrelevant to students, and instructional approaches focused on test preparation rather than helping students develop their thinking. Because of this, I have always wanted to learn more about ways to combat disparities. While my experiences fueled my desire to know as a teacher, the desire did not start there.

As a black girl growing up in disinvested communities, my father ensured I understood dominant ideologies and instilled a passion for becoming an activist working to disrupt inequities. My father continually tried to help me resist the dominant, unflattering images he knew I'd see in society with positive images of people of color. He wanted me to embrace my culture and heritage. He tried to make that happen in ways that included reading stories of black "freedom fighters," attending Kwanzaa celebrations, and making me wear dashikis to school

programs. I had to be careful of my language when my father was around. There was a time when I made the mistake of calling a biracial girl an “Oreo” (Black on the outside but White on the inside). I believed she was “acting white.” When I said as much to my father, he became upset. He gave me a long lecture about what it means to be an educated black person. Then he made me watch the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary.

The conversations I had with my father impacted me greatly. When I became an educator, I made it my mission to address inequities. My passion led me to begin reading the works of various scholars to learn ways to combat oppression. As a result of my exploration, I now identify as a critical race theorist. Critical race theory (CRT) is the lens I use to view the world. It influences how I interpret and understand my interactions with others.

As I learned more about how dominant ideologies operate in schools, I understood the importance of developing teachers' awareness and wanted to know more. I was introduced to the book *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* by Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton (2006). In this text, Singleton and Linton contend traditional school professional development focuses on the inclusion of diversity and culture; however, these initiatives “fail to consider the impact of race and racism on student achievement disparities” (Singleton & Linton, p.17). Without this understanding, educators lack the passion and persistence to implement any multicultural education endeavors. Because of this, scholars such as Howard (2003) argue that educators must participate in critical reflection, which, as mentioned previously, encourages educators to evaluate critical aspects of teaching about issues of equity, access, and social justice.

I worked at GGES for seven years. During my second year at the school, I asked my administrators to create a space for a small group of teachers to come together and reflect

critically. I was permitted to organize a group focused on courageous conversations about race. My principal found the discussions to be impactful. The teachers were very open and honest during meetings. They were vulnerable and shared how their past experiences influenced their interactions with people different from them. After seeing the impact of the talks, my principal decided to make it a part of our school-wide professional development plan, making the conversations mandatory for all teachers to attend.

For the past eight years, I have facilitated discussions with teachers in our district in various capacities. The content of these conversations encouraged my colleagues to reflect critically on their beliefs and assumptions about students and student learning. Similar to the small group, I facilitated discussions about the importance of understanding how their past experiences influence interactions with students, enactment of the curriculum, and instruction. My goal was for teachers to become aware of the importance of examining themselves to see their students clearly (Palmer, 1998).

Because of my efforts, I was promoted to Instructional Coach (IC) for a year and then promoted to Assistant Principal. Additionally, I am a member of our district's Equity Council and worked closely with our district leaders to create a goal-oriented strategic plan focused on equity. One of the goals of this plan is explicitly focused on teachers of the district implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy. To assist with making this possible, our district has identified people who are willing to facilitate conversations in their respective buildings. Those individuals were given the title of Equity Facilitators (EFs). I have been in charge of providing professional development to them. In this role, I have facilitated conversations regarding inequities in the educational system and society in which they are a part. These conversations have been

conducted in safe spaces where facilitators are encouraged to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings.

To complete this study, I received permission from the school administrator and district administrators. I sent a summary of my proposal to the assistant superintendent and superintendent of the school district. Once I received their permission, I confirmed with the two teachers that they would still participate in the study. Participants were chosen based on their participation as Equity Facilitators. These educators expressed a commitment to antiracism and accepted a role as Equity Facilitators for GGES. A copy of my proposal was also provided to them. Additionally, I explained that I would not share their identity or the identity of their students.

Participants

As stated previously, the participants are two Equity Facilitators at GGES and are a central part of this inquiry to explore culturally sustaining pedagogy. At the time of this study, they had engaged in professional development provided by me for a year that focused on developing their understanding of CSP. At the start of the study, they began facilitating conversations with their staff based on their learning from the prior year's training. Both participants identify as white. For this study, I give them pseudonyms. In her late thirties, Ashley is a fifth-grade teacher at Garden Grove. She is recently married and does not have any children. At the time of the study, she had taught for ten years, three of those years at Garden Grove. Ashley has taught first grade, third grade, and fifth grade. Michael is in his late forties and teaches the fourth-grade high-ability program. At the time of the study, he had taught for twenty-six years, with twelve of those years at Garden Grove. Michael taught kindergarten through fifth grade. Michael has four children who attend school in TPSD and is married to a White woman.

Data Collection

As mentioned previously, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- *What happens when I, as an Assistant Principal, work closely with two Equity Facilitators to help us enrich our understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy?*
 - *What tensions, if any, do we encounter and navigate as we attempt to understand CSP?*
 - *How does whiteness inform those tensions?*
 - *How do I respond to these findings to increase our understanding of CSP?*

Primary data was collected during biweekly meetings between the participants and myself. These sessions occurred ten times during the 2022 spring semester. The meetings lasted approximately an hour and a half and took place on Zoom. Each session was recorded and transcribed. During each meeting, the participants and I read texts that assisted the understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and culturally sustaining pedagogy. To accomplish this, we started with a review of Gloria Ladson-Billing's seminal articles, "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" (1995a) and "Yes, But How Do We Do It? Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" (2012). These articles provided a foundational understanding of CRP's theories and tenets, which is essential for cultivating culturally relevant teaching practices. Our first four sessions focused on CRP, with each session digging deeper into each of the tenets: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.

After delving into the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), our sessions transitioned to exploring culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). To facilitate this exploration, we began by examining an excerpt from the seminal article "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice" by scholars Django Paris and H. Sammy Alim (2012). Additionally, I identified a book that offered a structured framework for CSP,

which I shared with the participants. I selected this text with the intention of providing them with practical and tangible strategies they could implement with their students. My primary objective was to assist them in developing lesson plans during our collaborative sessions, and I believed this resource would serve as a tool in achieving that goal.

The text, *Textured Teaching: A Framework for Culturally Sustaining Practices*, authored by Lorena Escoto Germán (2021), served as a focal point for our meetings. In our fifth session, we engaged with the introduction of Germán's text alongside the excerpt from Paris and Alim's work. Following a thoughtful discussion and reflection on the introductory material, I made the decision to structure our subsequent sessions around the chapters of *Textured Teaching*. In the sixth session, we delved into the introductory chapter of the text, where Germán elucidates key concepts in equity work, such as social justice and bias, while outlining the foundational principles of her Textured Teaching framework. This framework is described as a dynamic approach with strategies designed to cultivate social justice among all learners (Germán, 2021, p. 5). It comprises four key strategies: student-driven and community-centered, interdisciplinary, experiential, and flexible. The seventh, ninth, and tenth sessions focused on these strategies. The eighth session consisted of a meeting with Ashley and me to plan a lesson.

Secondary data for this study was gathered through a combination of journal entries and classroom observations. Following each session, the participants and I engaged in reflective journaling, documenting insights and reflections on the conversations. These electronic journal entries provided valuable supplementary data for the study. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to further enrich the data collection process. Each participant chose a literacy lesson they wanted me to observe. Due to a incorrect setting on Ashley's Zoom account, the initial observation of Ashley's lesson was unsuccessful, necessitating an additional

session. During the lessons, field notes were taken. These observations offered an in-depth look into the participants' teaching practices and provided valuable context for understanding their perspectives and approaches to culturally sustaining pedagogy. In addition to the observations, I conducted and pre and post observation discussion with Ashley. Michael was not able to meet with me to discuss his lesson.

Table 1
Co-inquiry Meeting Timeline and Content

Date	Meeting Content
1-24-22	<p style="text-align: center;">Review of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy</p> <p>The content of this initial meeting focused on reviewing culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). The participants and I read Ladson-Billing's text, "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" (1995a). We spent time sharing reflections and making connections to the content.</p>
2-7-22	<p style="text-align: center;">Academic Achievement</p> <p>This session aimed to deepen our understanding of CRP by focusing on Ladson-Billing's explanation of academic achievement. To do this, we read excerpts from the previous text on this topic and from "Yes, But How Do We Do It?" Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2012), which focused explicitly on Academic Achievement.</p>
2-22-22	<p style="text-align: center;">Cultural Competence</p> <p>This meeting focused on deepening our understanding of cultural competence. We read excerpts from both texts used previously by Ladson-Billings that defined cultural competence.</p>
3-7-22	<p style="text-align: center;">Sociopolitical Consciousness</p> <p>This meeting focused on growing our understanding of sociopolitical consciousness through the previously used texts. Like the other sessions, we focused on the specific parts that provided detailed knowledge of sociopolitical consciousness.</p>
3-21-22	<p style="text-align: center;">Introduction to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy</p> <p>In this session, we shifted from CRP to culturally sustaining pedagogy, reading excerpts from Alim and Paris' article Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice. We also read the introduction to <i>Textured Teaching</i> by Lorena Escoto Germán.</p>
4-10-22	<p style="text-align: center;">Chapter One of <i>Textured Teaching</i>: Naming it All</p> <p>The focus of this session was to discuss the first chapter in <i>Textured</i></p>

	<i>Teaching</i> . We read the chapter prior to meeting and discussed the contents during this time.
4-25-22	Chapter Two of <i>Textured Teaching: Textured Teaching is Student-Driven and Community-Centered</i> The participants and I discussed the second chapter of <i>Textured Teaching</i> in this session.
5-9-22	Planning Session with Ashley Ashley and I met during this session to plan for an upcoming lesson she was planning to teach.
5-23-22	Chapter Three of <i>Textured Teaching: Textured Teaching is Experiential</i> This session focused on the third chapter of <i>Textured Teaching</i> . Both participants and I shared our understanding of this chapter.
6/9/22	Chapters Four and Five of <i>Textured Teaching</i> This was our final session. The participants and I discussed the fourth and fifth chapters of the text. Additionally, we discussed plans for the upcoming school year and how the text could support their ideas.

Data Analysis

My approach to analyzing the data was guided by my theoretical frameworks and my research questions. As stated previously, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis, described as a method for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was chosen for its efficacy in uncovering patterns and meanings embedded in this study. Following the sessions with participants, the data was transcribed using a professional transcription service, Rev. Subsequently, the data was coded, starting with the initial session and progressing through each subsequent session. While coding, detailed analytical memos were crafted, as there is “a reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon” (Saldana, 2021, p. 58). The memos were instrumental in discovering emerging themes and forming a comprehensive understanding of the data set.

The analytical process was iterative and ongoing. I used inductive coding to begin the process. Inductive coding, as Saldaña explains (2021) explains, is an adaptive and responsive analysis method. This approach to coding fits with the exploratory nature of my research question and allows for a flexible and dynamic examination of the data. While I approached the data coding inductively, the codes created were guided by the theoretical frameworks of this study and the ways they answered the research question. To code the data, I read the transcripts and went line by line and reviewed the participants journal entries using a combination of coding techniques. For example, I used in vivo coding, codes taken directly from what the participants say (Saldaña, 2021), as I found these codes to be impactful in learning from the participants and honoring their voices. For example, Michael initially shared feelings of not being as effective as he used to be. He made the following statement when expressing these sentiments, “But I guess what strikes me is, and I know...I feel like I’m stuck in a rut here.” This phrase was coded as "stuck in a rut," preserving his voice and perspective within the analysis. His response assisted me in gaining a deeper understanding of the tensions he experienced, and further analysis revealed how these tensions were influenced by whiteness.

Values coding also was employed to discern and interpret the participants' underlying values, attitudes, and beliefs. This coding technique, as described by Saldaña (2021), acknowledges the intricate interplay between thoughts, feelings, and values, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the data. When applying this approach, I coded the data based on any of these constructs, recognizing their interconnectedness. For instance, Ashley conveyed her beliefs regarding the impact of administrators on teachers, stating, "I will say that it kind of depends on what your administration is like, if I could justify it." This statement was coded as a belief about administration, specifically labeled as "administration determines freedom,"

reflecting her perspective on the matter. Additionally, descriptive coding was utilized to summarize basic concepts from passages of the data. For example, when Michael recounted his interactions with parents, highlighting the importance of conferences and his efforts to cultivate a sense of community, his statements were coded as "meeting with parents is important" and "social events are important," encapsulating the core ideas conveyed in his narratives.

Initially, the analysis process involved manual coding of the sessions. Upon discovering an electronic system for data analysis, Delve, I shifted to uses analyzing the data electronically. After the completion of the initial coding phase, I reviewed the data sets again to refine existing codes and introduce new ones as necessary. After the initial round of analysis, I thought it was important to separate the data related to each participant. While the data illustrated similarities between the two, it also demonstrated differences. I wanted to highlight the differences, viewing the participants as on separate but similar journeys. To do so, I had to differentiate between the participants' data as the codes were not categorized by participants. The Delve system combined all codes without distinguishing between the two. To remedy this, at the end of each code, I added the participants' initials when it was unique to them. Codes shared by both participants were denoted by including the word "both" behind the label.

Following the completion of the second round of coding, patterns began to emerge across the dataset. This iterative process was instrumental in identifying recurring themes that addressed my research questions (Saldana, 2021). To refine these themes, I engaged in an interactive process of evaluation and revision, aiming to deepen my understanding of the data. My analytical memos were helpful in this process as I had been noting emerging themes. In identifying themes, I employed a method of combining codes that I deemed to be conceptually similar within the electronic platform. Once commonalities were discerned, I labeled these

emergent themes. Subsequently, using the Delve system, I transferred these themes to a Word document, enabling a manual separation of themes to distinguish between the two participants' datasets. After segregating the data, I was able to ascertain themes that were unique to each participant. Guided by my primary research question and supporting inquiries, I continued to refine these themes, seeking to extract insights from the participants' narratives regarding their comprehension of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Additionally, I explored the tensions that impeded their understanding and examined how the concept of whiteness informed these dynamics.

The iterative nature of this process necessitated considerable time, as themes initially identified were often found to overlap or could be effectively combined with others. Beginning with a total of twenty-nine themes, I meticulously separated them based on the participants, ultimately identifying seven distinct themes for Ashley and ten for Michael. Following the completion of this phase, I turned to classroom observations, and the pre and post observation discussion with Ashley to ascertain its alignment with or divergence from the identified themes. This secondary dataset was integrated into my analytical memos. Through a comprehensive review of these memos alongside the established themes, I gained valuable insights into how the supplemental data informed and enriched the identified themes, enhancing the depth and breadth of the analysis.

The classroom observations proved instrumental in enriching the existing thematic analysis. For instance, one notable theme that emerged from the data concerning Ashley's teaching practice was the emphasis on students establishing connections to broader systemic influences. This theme was substantiated during the classroom observation, where I witnessed Ashley's deliberate efforts to foster such connections through a variety of instructional activities.

Similarly, a key theme evident in Michael's approach was the promotion of student voice, which was prominently displayed in the lesson I observed.

To address the research question regarding my response to the findings, I conducted a thorough review of the data from our sessions and my journal entries, focusing on my interactions with the participants. This analysis began with a review of the transcripts, specifically examining the shifts in conversation that occurred. Employing a top-down approach, I systematically analyzed all transcripts and recordings, taking detailed notes on recurring themes related to these shifts (Erickson, 2004). The top-down approach facilitated an exhaustive analysis of the data, enabling me to identify common themes in the shifts I made during the conversations. For instance, I labeled shifts such as "shifting back to the text" and "affirming what they said" after analyzing the first transcript. Subsequently, I continued this process throughout the remaining sessions, identifying both previously identified shifts and new ones. Upon reviewing my responses, I identified several shifts made during the interactions. Initially, I categorized them into three common themes that recurred in my analysis: reframing back to the text offered, providing specific examples, and focusing on human needs.

As I identified the shifts in my responses, I also sought to evaluate their effectiveness, particularly when they were in response to language perceived as counter to culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) or influenced by whiteness. Initially, I categorized these shifts as working, not working, unsure, and complex. To assess their effectiveness, I examined the participants' responses to these shifts, looking for examples of each category within the data. I defined "working" as language that was asset-based, "not working" as language that was deficit-based, "unsure" as responses that were unclear to me, and "uncertain" as responses that seemed to both work and not work. However, as I began the writing process, I realized that this initial

categorization was not effective for analyzing the data. The distinguishing characteristics were too simplistic, as a shift that appeared to work in one part of a response could seem not to work in another part. Realizing this, I moved away from these labels.

In the process of beginning the writing phase, I underwent a shift in perspective regarding the categorization of the recurring shifts I had identified. Initially, these shifts were classified into three categories. However, as I delved into articulating my findings, I reflected on my responses to the participants and had a realization. I recognized that the majority of my responses were driven by an overarching goal to humanize the participants, their students, myself, and our experiences. This recognition prompted me to reevaluate the categorization of the shifts, realizing that they were all informed by this humanizing approach. Consequently, I came to understand that labeling the participants' responses as working, not working, etc., which I had previously employed, was constraining and not useful to the goals of this study. Instead, I found it more valuable to focus on understanding the underlying motivations driving my actions rather than engaging in a binary assessment of their effectiveness.

In examining my responses to the participants, I also revisited my journal entries, which I had maintained electronically throughout the study. These entries comprised pre-session and post-session notes for the majority of our sessions, although there were instances when I was unable to complete a pre-session entry due to time constraints. Employing a top-down approach similar to that used for the transcripts, I analyzed the entries to identify emerging themes. This analysis revealed common themes in my perceptions of how the sessions were progressing. Understanding these patterns provided valuable insights into my own thought processes and informed my responses during our sessions, as the concluding chapter highlights. The themes

identified in the journal reflections enriched my understanding of myself through this research process, offering a unique perspective on my perception of the sessions and my role within them.

Practices for Validity

In ensuring validity, I triangulated the data. As noted previously, when starting my analysis I reviewed the transcripts from the sessions. In reviewing them I began coding the data. Following the completion of coding, I proceeded to examine the journal entries provided by the participants. These entries were subjected to the same coding procedures utilized for the transcripts. After coding the data from the transcripts and journal entries, I identified emerging themes. Once the themes were identified, I completed a careful review of the observations and field notes taken. Reviewing these data sources assisted in enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of my findings by ensuring that emerging themes were supported by multiple data sources.

Another method employed to enhance the validity of this study was peer debriefing. Throughout the data analysis process, I engaged in frequent meetings with the chairperson of my committee. Prior to our sessions, I submitted my analytical memos to him, and he provided feedback, often questioning the decisions I made regarding my findings. These discussions prompted deep reflection on my process, at times leading me to reconsider the ways in which I determined themes and adjusting my approach based on our conversations. The dialogue with my committee chair served as a critical checkpoint, ensuring that my interpretations were robust and well-grounded.

Additionally, member checking was employed as an additional measure to ensure the validity of the study. Both participants were provided with a copy of the final chapters that pertained to them. They were encouraged to provide feedback, with reassurance that it was

acceptable to disagree with any part of the writing, emphasizing the importance of accurately capturing their voices. Both participants engaged in this process, with Michael sending an email response expressing his reflections on reading the section about himself. He noted the strangeness of reading about himself and commented on the changes in his thinking and emotions as a result of participating in the study. For example, he stated, “Reading through the pages also made me realize how much my thinking and emotions have changed. I no longer “clinch-up” when discussing whiteness, biases, or prejudices—and for that, I sincerely thank you.” Ashley, on the other hand, responded verbally, sharing that reading the chapter brought tears to her eyes as she felt genuinely heard, something she does not often experience.

Moreover, to bolster the study's validity, rich, thick descriptions of the findings were provided in the subsequent chapters, as advocated by Creswell (2014). These descriptions are reflective of the data, incorporating various examples that serve to reinforce the identified themes. This approach not only enhances the depth and clarity of the findings but also allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Limitations

While efforts were made to ensure the validity of the data, such as peer debriefings and member checks, the subjective nature of data analysis introduces the possibility of bias and interpretation errors. As noted previously, one potential limitation stems from the power dynamics inherent in my role as the assistant principal to the participants. This relationship could have influenced the data collection and analysis, as participants might have felt compelled to respond in ways they perceived aligned with my expectations or beliefs, potentially affecting the authenticity of their responses.

Additionally, the data collected through interviews was filtered through my perspective, potentially leading to bias in interpretation (Creswell, 2014). For example, I recognized a negative bias towards Michael's responses, initially struggling to view him in a non-critical way. This is something I spoke with my committee chair about repeatedly. Through our conversations, he aided me in shifting the critical perspective I had of Michael to a more charitable one. Additionally, understanding his responses in connection to white supremacy culture assisted me in seeing the humanity in his responses. While this bias was addressed through discussions with my advisor, it may have influenced the findings.

Furthermore, there were multiple instances where either myself or one of the participants dominated the conversation, potentially limiting the depth and variety of responses from both parties. This dominance could have biased the data towards the perspective of the more vocal participant.

A Methodological Note

For my two participants and myself when I used quotes from the transcripts, I elected to streamline the use of language. For example, I chose not to include "um" or "like." This decision was made for readability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this practitioner inquiry study employed thematic analysis to investigate the outcomes of my collaborative work with equity facilitators, aiming to deepen our comprehension of culturally sustaining pedagogy. The outlined procedures were instrumental in systematically addressing the primary research question and its associated sub-questions. The analysis of the data revealed two overarching themes that permeated our collaborative

discussions. Participants articulated feelings of confinement within existing educational structures and systems alongside strategies they employed to negotiate and challenge these constraints. The subsequent chapters will delve into the manifestations of these opposing forces within the data, beginning with an exploration of Ashley's experiences, then Michael's, followed by an examination of how whiteness informs their experiences, and concluding with an analysis of my responses to these tensions.

Chapter 4: Working Within and Against the System: The Story of Ashley

As previously noted, the data analysis highlighted Ashley's perception of being constrained by the educational systems within which she operates, as well as her efforts to navigate and resist these constraints. This chapter provides a comprehensive examination of Ashley's articulation of these tensions. It will begin with an exploration of the complexities she encountered while grappling with the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and the ways in which she perceived herself to be confined by the prevailing educational structures. Subsequently, this chapter will elucidate Ashley's strategies for resisting the system, including an examination of her current classroom practices aligned with CSP, her aspirations for further growth, and the tensions that may hinder these aspirations.

Confined to the System

As we tried to understand culturally sustaining pedagogy more deeply, the data revealed a prominent theme that hinders the implementation of CSP for Ashley. A sense of constraint inhibits Ashley's ability to implement this practice within the system. This sense of confinement manifests in different ways, including institutional pressures from policymakers and district leaders. Because of these pressures, the structures outlined for teachers do not support CSP and feel incompatible. Additionally, there are unspoken rules within these systems for adults and students that contribute to these tensions. The following sections detail the tensions that arise for Ashley due to feeling confined.

Institutional Pressure

A recurring theme from the data related to confinement is the pressure teachers feel from those in charge of creating educational policies and practices. Ashley spoke about a fundamental

issue in education. There is a gap between what educators know is best for students and the institutional practices that often counter this knowledge. This gap makes it difficult for teachers to implement culturally sustaining pedagogy, as what is required by the state is contradictory. Standardized testing, which has long been a contentious topic in education, stands as a stark example of this misalignment, as illustrated in the following statement Ashley made,

What baffles me, and it has ever since I came into education, is we know what's good for kids and what's best for them, so why do all of our expectations and rules like...that they don't match up. They're going against what we know is best for kids. We know standardized tests are not good for kids. Why do we still do them?

Ashley also spoke of the need for politicians and lawmakers to understand what it means to sustain students' cultures. During the fourth session, when discussing the importance of critical conversation, I shared a quote from Adam Grant that states, "Shielding students from uncomfortable ideas isn't education. It's groupthink. In healthy learning cultures, students are invited to take intellectual risks. They gain the courage to challenge each other's views and their own. Silencing dissent is an enemy of critical thinking" (Quote, 2021). During the discussion, Ashley remarked, "Can you share this with lawmakers? Because I feel like they need to hear it's good to be uncomfortable. That means they are developing into empathetic people like this quote." For Ashley, it is not enough that politicians are aware of asset-based pedagogies such as CSP; instead, she advocates for their comprehensive understanding of the potential of this approach and its impact on students.

Ashley also addressed the impact of recent legislative measures in other states, constraining educators' capacity to implement CSP effectively. As she articulated,

I mean Florida, Texas, all of these bills right now that are being passed by people in charge that teachers are going to be in trouble if they don't follow them, it just feels very... Like for trying to be anti-racist that feels very racist. And hard that they don't see

that, or maybe they do, and they don't care because they're empowered like...I don't know. I just feel bad for educators.

Ashley is speaking to the contradictory nature of recent legislation that underscores the challenges educators face in navigating a policy landscape that is at odds with the goals of CSP. Her current professional context has not been directly affected by such legislation. She conveyed her gratitude for the relatively supportive environment in which she currently teaches and expressed her unwavering commitment to the principles of CSP, going as far as stating that she is willing to lose her job should such legislation occur in her district. She articulated, "That would be a hill I'd be willing to die on."

While the legislation in other states does not directly impact Ashley, she did speak to the constraints in her district and how those constraints are connected to state policies. During our last session together, Ashley expressed frustration with how the district prioritizes short-term outcomes and compliance with mandates over the holistic well-being of students. In this session, Ashley and I discussed her irritation with a discussion she had with her building-level coaches and a district specialist. The coaches and specialists met with Ashley and her team to discuss their progress in math. The team was behind on the scope and sequence outlined by the district. During the conversation, she shared her and her colleagues' challenges in preparing their students for grade-level content. The challenge is primarily attributed to the disruption caused by COVID-19. She articulated,

And like, I wish our state education people were thinking that cuz they'll say it all day in a press conference, but it doesn't feel like they're really taking into account what that means, and how they can shape. I know that they're...I don't know what they're driven by. I know our school leaders are driven by...they want funding for our schools. So you have to do well on these standardized tests, which makes them put out these mandates for our schools. And then the teachers get mandates based on that. I know it's all trickle down, but I don't know who and why they're making those decisions if they know that Covid has affected us.

This statement illustrates how institutional pressures emanating from policymakers and legislators influence the decision-making process at the district level and subsequently to teachers. Consequently, teachers feel confined to the traditional approaches to education.

Moreover, Ashley's expressions of frustration are further underscored when she articulates her wish for district administrators to gain a deeper understanding of classroom dynamics. Her desire is made clear in the following statement, "I just wish that like you could come see what's...not you, the bigger you could come see what's happening like in our classrooms before like dictating some of the things that they dictate." Ashley shared how her colleague "brought receipts" to the meeting, indicating that her colleague provided detailed information demonstrating the gaps in their students' understanding of key concepts. She expressed that they needed to spend more time on specific concepts because of those gaps. Her experiences reflect the complexity of the relationships between district leaders and classroom teachers and highlight the need for alignment that leads to a more informed decision-making process.

Ashley's concerns also extend to the perceived disconnect between district administrators and the pursuit of culturally sustaining pedagogy. In the following statement, she questions the level of commitment among district leaders, "Are they, and I know that some administrators above are having these conversations, but like as a township, is this kind of where we're headed?" Her question delves into the overarching coherence of the district's approach, specifically wondering about the degree of alignment among everyone. Furthermore, Ashley highlights the disconnect between what is offered during professional development sessions facilitated by external trainers and the policies enacted by the district. This belief is encapsulated in the following statement,

Yeah. I mean you always get hopeful with the speakers that they have come to the conference and stuff. It's like, oh yeah, that's what we should be doing. But then, like the procedures and stuff and policies that we're given, I'm like, hmm, that's not <laugh>. That's not what the training says.

This statement demonstrates the inconsistencies that emerge between the district's aspirational ideals of professional development and the realities of district policies. The disconnect leads to teachers feeling restricted to the traditional system of educating students.

As the conversation persisted, Ashley continued to express doubts by highlighting the contradiction between the mandated testing and the core tenets of CSP, as illustrated in the following quote,

As far as like, I was thinking quantity versus quality. Because I'm just thinking about us having to do these module assessments. So things like that where it seems like those ideas are still being pushed upon us when we're being taught to buck the system and fight back. Like, are these conversations...because we can do as much as we can do in our classroom, but as a whole, like, I don't know, just curious.

This statement highlights her acknowledgment of her own limitations in effecting change and her recognition that alignment within the district is crucial for substantive progress.

Incompatible Structures

The absence of congruence between institutional pressures and the tenets of CSP has caused the current school structures to be incompatible with the implementation of CSP, also leading to a sense of being confined to the system. This incompatibility manifests itself through strict adherence to the predefined daily schedule, limiting Ashley's ability to reflect and plan CSP-infused lessons and hindering collaboration with colleagues. Ashley's comments during our sessions illuminate her struggle with this tension. For instance, during one of our sessions, Ashley stated,

The problem is, I think, is the time to meaningfully reflect on these units. And just time to talk through with our team and just kind of brainstorm some ways to make this relevant. I feel like when you get hooked in that go, go. There's this to do, this to do, this to do, and not time for that which is important. I feel like it's really hard to find that time.

In our last session together, Ashley conveyed her difficulty in deviating from the schedule due to concerns about potential consequences during observations. She stated,

So scheduling is something that impedes quality instruction a lot because I don't feel like we always have the freedom to have a little wiggle room in our schedule. One, because I don't wanna hold up my team from doing their guided reading groups. But also, if we come in to get observed, we are dinged for that, like being off schedule. And I don't know that if we explained why, it would always be taken as okay because we're off schedule.

In a similar fashion, Ashley spoke about the pressure tied to adhering to the predefined curriculum map. In one particular session, our conversation revolved around the challenges posed by topics or issues that students found engaging, relevant, or concerning but were not explicitly covered in the curriculum. I asked Ashley if she believed she could deviate from the curriculum to respond to the student's needs. Ashley conveyed her sense of constraint, stating,

I wouldn't feel as much freedom to do that. I would, I mean...I would find some time and a date to discuss that, but bringing it into reading if it came up. Like organically through conversations within our reading, I might tie it to that, but I do still feel some pressure to kind of stay with. Like on schedule, I guess, I don't know how to say it.

Furthermore, Ashley described the difficulty of providing time for her students to have the productive struggle needed when processing information.

We already don't have enough time to teach all the subjects we need to in a day, so like I want this activity, but student-centered takes a long time. Like those activities, it's hard, and you know your groups are supposed to be starting here in 20 minutes, but you want to give the activity the time it deserves so there's always like a constant also. Time is hard.

Ashley's remarks illuminate her sense of constraint and the hurdles these structures pose in addressing her students' interests. As evidenced by her statements, there exists a sense of

dichotomy—either adhere to the prescribed structures or cater to the needs of the students.

Balancing both is challenging.

Ashley also spoke about the impact of state testing on her instructional approaches. She expressed frustration with the state standardized test taking priority. In one of our last sessions, Ashley shared her ideas for a unit of study she was getting ready to teach. The purpose of the unit was for her students to begin to understand how systems operate in society. I asked her if she felt she could incorporate all she had planned within her current time frame. She responded, “Um, probably not, because we’re also gonna be starting (state test) during this unit. So there’s a system.” She then expressed her frustration with having to make time for the assessment, as illustrated in the following quote, “I’m struggling right now. Cause I mean, I wouldn’t say that there’s no teaching that goes on, but it’s very hard to get things accomplished during that time without stressing our kids out.” Later in the conversation, she began discussing her frustration with math instruction, stating, “But you know what, it comes down to teaching to the test.” Her remarks further exacerbate her sense of constraint.

The struggle to connect math to culturally sustaining pedagogy came up multiple times in the data. Ashley felt connecting other subjects, such as reading to CSP, was more manageable. She believed those subjects were a “comfort area” for her and expressed her ability to create a “bridge” between the content and the principles of CSP. She also felt those subject areas were more interesting, as demonstrated in the following quote, “It’s easier, I should say, for me to find those connections in language arts and social studies. That’s just where my interest is, too. I know, like, a lot about that area and how to get like their interest.” Conversely, math felt like a struggle for her. She expressed it was challenging to make the lessons relevant to students or difficulty in “finding real world connections.” During our second session, Ashley expressed that

because of that difficulty, she sometimes resorts to using instructional practices that are not as engaging, stating, “Um, just kind of trying to keep the engagement level up when I feel like there are times when I just have to just lecture to them and have them practice along with me.”

Furthermore, Ashley feels pressure to assist her students in understanding grade-level math content. As mentioned previously, during one of our last sessions, she expressed her discontent about defending her instructional decisions to colleagues. Ashley lamented about this struggle, articulating,

But for math, we're behind in our units because we got students that have not learned even fourth-grade standards. So we're taking our time with units, but we had to meet with Tom and Lindsey because we're so behind. And even though we explained like we um, can't teach division of fractions if they don't know how to divide. So he's like, ‘Well, you could just, um, introduce those skills to them,’ but that's wasting everyone's time because they're not going...like, there might be two or three in here that pick it up. But that could be a small group as a whole. We need to hit where our kids are, and we're always told to... meet our kids where they are. But that is not also the message that we're getting from higher-ups and our coaches. So that's another systems issue that is pressing and just happened last week.

Ashley’s comments illustrate her frustration with the constraints imposed on her that keep her from implementing instructional strategies that would allow her the time and space to meet her students’ needs. There is a dissonance between the expectation to expedite the progression through the math curriculum and her concern for addressing her students' individualized needs.

Ashley's constant battle with the incompatible structures persisted throughout the data. In one session, she connected the tension she feels to a symbolic battle between two opposing forces, as illustrated in the following quote,

It's like the devil and angel on your shoulder. Like yeah, ‘Hey, we should really break for community circle; this is an issue.’ And then the other ones like, ‘Yeah, but you have that math test next week that you have to get through.’ There's a constant battle, so I think that's just an ongoing teacher struggle.

She further illuminated the struggle by explaining that she must "justify the important things" for her students. Ashley spoke about the internal tension she feels. She identifies as a "rule follower" and as someone who wants to "buck the system." She tries to determine the best approach with the competing beliefs and will take risks by asking for "forgiveness instead of permission." Ashley's statements accentuate the inherent tensions between the structural demands and the flexibility needed to implement culturally sustaining pedagogy. These incompatible structures create a sense of being confined to the system.

Unspoken Rules

Ashley identified particular rules associated with an educator's tenure within the profession, which shapes their capacity to exercise pedagogical autonomy and innovation. She believes veteran teachers have more autonomy in their accumulated experience and consequently exhibit more confidence in straying away from the prescribed curriculum. They can articulate their instructional choices rationale and are not concerned as much about "getting in trouble." Instead, they will take risks. For example, when discussing a chapter from the book *Textured Teaching*, Ashley stated,

I liked this chapter. I think the longer you teach, the more, um, less rule-following <laugh> say that you become. Like, I see myself doing more and more of these things as I, I don't know, am worried less about getting in trouble <laugh> in my teaching. Yeah. So I think that that comes with just like, um, experience and knowing that you're doing right by your kids as opposed to, like, what am I gonna get in trouble for this? So it's kind of that whole asking for forgiveness, not permission. Not really asking for forgiveness, but just being able to explain yourself better. Like why you chose to do this.

Conversely, Ashley contends that novice teachers must be cautious and not make too many "waves" within the established order. Ashley says, "I know that good teachers do that when they need to. Um, but also, like, you're new in a building, and you don't wanna be seen as difficult or making too many waves, because you're still trying to feel everyone out too." While

Ashley is not classified as a new teacher, she is relatively new to her current school. Her arrival engendered a sense of feeling “trapped” during her initial year. This was attributed to the district's use of the term “fidelity” when referring to curriculum implementation.

While Ashley believes veteran teachers have more autonomy, there is a correlation between the beliefs and attitudes of school administrators and that autonomy. The degree of comfort an educator experiences when diverging from the predetermined curriculum is linked to the extent of support they feel from their administration. In Ashley’s view, an educator’s willingness to deviate from the mandated curricula hinges upon their perception that they can justify their pedagogical choices and that their explanations will be received. This belief is illustrated in the following quote,

I will say that it kind of depends on what your administration is like because I feel if I could justify... the need. If someone came into, I don't know to do an observation, or something or just to kind of check-in, and we were doing something that was completely not related to reading, I think your comfort level with administration and being able to explain, like this is important to us right now.. And I feel that freedom now, but in other years I might not have felt that way.

Ashley offered an example of when she felt empowered to challenge a dominant belief about reading instruction held by one of her past school leaders. She expressed the importance of administrators being “on board” with instruction that centered on student needs, as illustrated in the following quote,

I'm trying to instill the love of learning and reading for them. I felt like I was being crushed a bit because they have to have an exit ticket for everything that they do. And they have to read books that are only on their level. So I kind of pushed back a little bit for that, but I think that that was a good lesson for me and like. Sometimes, you have to stand up for what you know is right for your kids, even if it's not what's expected in the building.

Similarly, Ashley posits that school administrators determine the comfort of their teachers to disagree with them or question predetermined practices. During one of our sessions, I

discussed the idea of disrupting mental systems. I provided an example of how difficult it is for educators to be vulnerable with each other. Instead, teachers will suffer in silence and pretend everything is okay. Ashley agreed and stated the following,

And I agree with that totally. But I think that some of that even has been unwelcome. My last school, I went to work for a really great principal, and then he got promoted, and so then someone came in who did not understand the culture of our school, and she was not open to any kind of questioning. Like you couldn't talk to her.

The clandestine customary way of operating in school complicates efforts to stray away from the system that perpetuates the status quo. Ashley's insights exemplify administrators' profound influence on teachers' ability to deviate from the system. The environment fostered by school leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the landscape where educators feel empowered to share their thoughts and comfortably stray away from systems that perpetuate inequities.

Moreover, Ashley believes veteran teachers not only know how to navigate the unspoken expectations of administrators, but they can also navigate those of parents, as demonstrated in the following quote,

And I don't think it's only like, um, the people in charge in our buildings, but sometimes it's parents too, and like breaking down their expectations of what assessments and grades should look like. And like, why aren't they coming home with worksheets of homework every night? Well, <laugh> there's a reason for that. And the kind of explaining to people why you do the things that you do and helping the kids understand that, yeah, you're used to this, but we're gonna do it this way. And what do you think about that? And how would you want this to look?

In session seven, Ashley spoke about specific instructional approaches parents are accustomed to seeing in classrooms. She shared how straying away from those expectations is difficult because parents are used to them. Specifically, Ashley stated that parents want to see spelling words and worksheets for homework. Breaking away from that approach is difficult for parents to understand. She states, "That's just what their idea of school is. I think it's hard for people to change their view of schooling sometimes." Ashley believes that because this norm is present, it

will cause tension between teachers and administrators and between teachers and parents. Consequently, this tension can keep teachers feeling restricted by the system.

The challenges of unspoken rules are not confined to educators alone but also extend to students. The data revealed that breaking away from the norm is arduous because students themselves need to unlearn certain notions. Beginning in the first session, Ashley elucidated how implicit rules in the classroom influence power dynamics. These dynamics create a hierarchy in the classroom where certain students have influence over other students. During our fourth session, when discussing sociopolitical consciousness, Ashley described the burden students face in identifying these rules, as evidenced by her statement,

The conversations that we've had have kind of been about power in the classroom and who has that. So that's something that they see all of the time, and it's kind of an unspoken rule. Like we know who has power in our classroom. Like there are certain people that carry a little bit more power than others, and so we've been trying to pull out why. Like the idea, I mean snitching is what we what we started. But there are some people that you will snitch on right away, and there are some people that get away with so much more. So we've been trying to interrogate that a bit.

Ashley perceives the manifestation of power in her classroom as akin to its manifestation in society. She observes that the students recognize it as an issue, yet everyone is "kind of okay with it." She believes her students do not feel comfortable addressing the power dynamics, even if they disapprove of them, opting instead to allow them to persist.

For Ashley, the unspoken rules in her classroom also make it challenging for her to build a classroom community. One reason for this difficulty is how certain students are judged by their peers for particular ways of being "beyond their control." Ashley cited examples such as boys' hairlines and the potential for a few students to have a foul odor after strenuous activities. She expressed how students insult each other without thinking about "what causes those things." This

type of interaction is prevalent in her classroom. Ashley believes that technology exacerbates this trend, as illustrated by her statement,

You control that person on the internet, but when you do it in person, these are people, you know, and there are feelings involved. And I feel like they're just used to having their immediate thoughts come out. And sometimes that's not always like, we wanna hear what you think, but um, I don't know, just gearing it to where you're not hurting other people intentionally. I think that's what we are really struggling with in our classroom.

Ashley's remarks highlight how social media impacts classroom dynamics, revealing challenges in fostering empathy when students are accustomed to online belittlement, which carries over into the classroom. The implicit rules of social media influence their interactions. These unspoken rules shape student behavior, leading to misconceptions in the classroom.

Ashley also believes technology has impacted her students' ability to be intrinsically motivated. She believes that they struggle with perseverance because technology provides immediate access to almost anything. In our second session, Ashley asserted,

This is just me thinking out loud, but I don't know how much of it is the culture. Being a kid is just different now. I think about back in our day, we had to wait for things. I just think about the information the entertainment, everything is just at their fingertips, all of the time very quick moving. And so they're used to not having to work, not work very hard, but they just work differently than we did like we had to put an effort in search searching out things and I don't know how much of that plays into. Putting in effort, and I feel like kids now are very frustrated when they don't get something immediately and it causes them like they're not always having to do that push through that perseverance.

Ashley felt it was important for her students to understand that learning will not just happen for them. She believed they needed to be active participants in their learning. While that was her goal, it was not something she felt she was achieving. She expressed multiple times that it was hard to motivate her students stating, "I just wished they cared more." and "It's hard to keep the momentum going."

During our post-observation meeting, we discussed the lesson of Ashley's that I observed. During our conversation, we spoke about a student in her classroom who appeared

unmotivated during the lesson. The student continuously made distracting comments to his peers throughout the lesson. Ashley encouraged him to take a break by moving away from the group and refocusing. Despite this, he continued to distract his peers. When we discussed his actions, Ashley shared how the behaviors were not new and how she has tried to address them in the past. She stated that she has spent time explaining to him how his actions impact his peers. Ashley shared that she believed he needed attention, and to meet his needs, she would give him two minutes at the end of every day to do a comedy show. She believed this would meet his needs.

We discussed what happens when he and other students continue to distract their peers. I specifically focused on the term boundaries. I noticed a list of classroom boundaries on the wall and asked about the consequences for violating those. She stated that she does provide a consequence when the boundaries are crossed but expressed that this can sometimes cause more problems, as shown in the following quote,

And I am concerned about that and we've had that talk because actually last week, because a lot of the time in our classroom when you hold up those boundaries or the consequences for crossing boundaries, they say you're mean. So we had to have a class meeting about like why, why are we saying those things? Cuz David said the other day, like, when he was leaving, he got sent to a buddy classroom, and he said this is why people are mean to you.

Ashley stated that she ignores the statements about her being “mean” in the moment but will always talk to them at a later time. She also expressed having to “let things go” and not address every comment. While she is letting them go, the incidents build up and cause her to be emotional. Ashley shared in the past she has cried in front of her students because of the build-up of frustration.

Contending with the System

The preceding section elucidated the tensions experienced by Ashley as a result of the existing educational systems and structures. A thorough review of the data revealed that despite these tensions concerning culturally sustaining pedagogy, Ashley articulated strategies to navigate them. Three prominent themes emerged from the data: the importance of creating trust, the cultivation of sociopolitical consciousness, and the pursuit of continuous learning. The subsequent section will delve into Ashley's strategies for resisting the dominant system and the tensions that arise.

Creating Trust

In analyzing the data, a significant theme evident in Ashley's teaching approach is establishing trust within her classroom, which she considers crucial. She aims to cultivate an environment where students feel empowered to take the lead, recognizing that this requires them to be allowed and trusted to do so. Ashley believes that students do not naturally develop agency but rather require guidance to attain it. During the sixth session, Ashley expressed this sentiment: "I feel like that sometimes; a lot of times, kids need guidance towards that empowerment."

For Ashley, empowering students involves creating a safe space for them to engage in "honest conversations" and express their opinions without fear. During session six, she remarked,

Well, we do that sometimes. If I feel like I'm not getting anywhere with them, then I'll just say, we're gonna write this down. I say the most important thing is that you're honest. So if you don't feel like you can be honest and put your name on it, then just be honest. We do that a lot with conversations, but I think they're not used to people asking them or adults telling them that you can push.

Ashley reflected on how difficult it was for her students to be transparent. She attributed it to their lack of experience versus the “trust level in their classroom.” In session six, she stated,

When we have our circle time or like group meetings, um, sometimes, like I know that they have opinions on a lot of things that happen in our classroom or what's happening with them amongst their peers. But sometimes, when we get into a classroom meeting, it's really hard for them to come out and say like...cuz I always tell them if you don't like what's happening in our classroom or if you think that we could be doing something a little better, like, I'm completely fine with you pushing back and giving me ideas to make our classroom a better classroom. And it sometimes feels like sometimes they hold back. So, I'm hoping that it has more to do with that than trust.

The statements above illustrate how Ashley grapples with the system by reflecting on how she can create a sense of trust with her students. She recognizes that this is a novel concept for them and acknowledges the potential impact of this novelty on their receptiveness to her approaches.

Ashley also wanted to create more formal ways for her students to connect to each other's ideas. For example, Ashley used a brainstorming protocol called *Silent Storm* (Mattoon, 2021). The protocol's purpose is to offer a different approach to brainstorming that allows participants time to reflect on one's ideas and the ideas of others through writing. During our debrief, Ashley stated she chose the activity because she wanted to provide her students with “the opportunity to talk to lots of different people about the same things.” By doing this, she believed it would help her students have thorough responses to the questions she posed. She found value in this activity and stated that she would like to infuse this type of activity in more “meaningful ways” by including other protocols that require students to respond to their peers.

In addition to fostering trust and empowerment, Ashley places great importance on creating an environment where her students can be their authentic selves. Ashley frequently emphasized the significance of understanding and honoring her students' cultural backgrounds throughout the data. She believed this approach leads to proactive responses to students' ways of being. Ashley articulated her perspective by stating that being proactive involves establishing

"like spaces and systems where students are already coexisting and creating a new classroom culture based on whoever's in it." This statement underscores the importance of co-creating a classroom community with students and using their culture as a mechanism for shaping the classroom culture.

The data also highlights the essential role of understanding students' culture in building a classroom community. Ashley emphasizes the importance of genuine understanding, where students feel heard. She believes listening and following up with students demonstrate genuine care about their experiences. This belief is shown in the following quote,

I think that, like just listening to them and following up when they tell you something. If they're sharing something with you, it's important to them. So, sports teams and make sure I always follow up with sports teams. You guys had a big game this week. How did it go? Just their excitement and their voice. Oh, your grandma came in from Honduras? How is that going? Did you guys cook together? What were some of the activities that you did?

Ashley feels that listening to students and understanding their culture better assists teachers in understanding students' behaviors. She shares how giving her students chances to explain their behaviors helps them feel heard and builds trust. Additionally, understanding their culture provides insight into when to "push them" or "pull back," guiding her in knowing when to "be more strict" or "be more loose." Ashley compares this understanding to an iceberg, stating,

Thinking of that iceberg, but just knowing all of that about your students, it helps you interpret situations in a way, that's more true to the students, so if they're having like a moment in class where they're feeling frustrated just knowing the information about the students or maybe how to students are interacting together, I think it helps.

Ashley acknowledged that despite her efforts to familiarize herself with her students, she would not attain complete knowledge of them, expressing that such efforts provide "only a window into who they really are." Her statement signifies her recognition of the intricacies of culture. She emphasized that knowing her students solely within the confines of the school environment is

inadequate. Additionally, she articulated her comprehension of culture as "dynamic and changes in context," which informed her understanding that comprehensively knowing all aspects of a student's cultural identity would be challenging.

Ashley's emphasis on establishing trust aligns with the concept of creating learning partnerships. Zaretta Hammond, author of the text *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive relationships (2015). Teachers can create a conducive space for students to share their cognitive insights by fostering rapport and alliance. Hammond describes cognitive insights as the process of "making the invisible visible" (2015, p. 75). Ashley's approach highlights the significance of trust and understanding in facilitating meaningful learning experiences. By doing so, she can contend with the established systems.

Cultivating Sociopolitical Consciousness

Another salient theme in navigating systemic challenges is the cultivation of sociopolitical consciousness. The data underscored Ashley's emphasis on learning transferring among her students. She articulated a desire to ensure that whatever she taught her students, they could "take what they learned and transfer it." This notion recurred throughout the data, with Ashley highlighting the importance of providing students with opportunities to connect to instructional content, deeming those connections "super important." Accordingly, she also expressed a broader goal of enabling her students to grasp the "bigger picture," understanding how significant societal concepts relate to their own lives.

During the sixth session, while discussing the text *Textured Teaching*, Ashley elaborated on her understanding of social justice. In defining social justice, Germán (2021) states, "This means restructuring how we've historically done things in this country that oppressed and

marginalized many people based on various elements of their identity and favored only a narrow few. I'm talking about changing the system so that we can all be free" (p.5). Ashley responded with the following,

So getting kids to think like abstractly, like a bigger picture is sometimes a challenge. Thinking beyond what they see or who they are, to think about like, how we can see things in our community. We know that there are issues in our community that we wanna change, but thinking about a plan of action kind of takes some thought outside yourself. And just because things are fair for me doesn't mean that they're fair for you or fair for my neighbor or their neighbor, you know?

Ashley highlighted the complexities of imparting the concept of social justice to students of this age group, emphasizing the need to overcome their inherent self-centeredness to appreciate the broader implications of justice and equity in society.

Building on the theme of fostering sociopolitical consciousness, Ashley endeavors to cultivate her students' understanding of systemic issues and encourage them to question these systems critically. During the fourth meeting, we discussed the conflict between Ukraine and Russia during the fourth session. Ashley wanted her students to engage in nuanced thinking about why specific conflicts receive more media attention than others. She prompted them to consider why the Ukraine-Russia conflict garnered greater visibility despite ongoing conflicts worldwide with similar humanitarian consequences. Ashley encouraged her students to explore the dynamics of power that influence media coverage, suggesting that countries with less geopolitical influence may receive less attention. Moreover, Ashley sought to deepen her students' understanding of conflicts by challenging the idea of one side as good and the other side as inherently bad. She informed her students that there were people in Russia who were protesting the conflict.

During session ten, Ashley expanded on her belief in developing sociopolitical consciousness. During our conversation, she referenced a quote from the *Textured Teaching* text,

calling the statement “an educational philosophy.” In the text, Germán states, “When we make connections from the classroom to the outside world, we are teaching young people to be aware, socially conscious, and lifelong learners” (2021, p. 73). For Ashley, these are the ultimate “skills” students should develop regardless of the content being taught. Ashley's goal is for her students to make connections and develop a deep understanding of systems and their societal impact, particularly those perpetuating oppression and privilege. She advocates for a critical perspective that challenges students to analyze the world around them with a discerning eye, encouraging them to question established narratives and not accept information at face value. By fostering this critical lens, Ashley aims to empower her students to engage meaningfully with complex societal issues and contribute to positive change.

This quest for understanding also involves the ability to question ingrained knowledge. Ashley observed that her students often lacked the confidence to question and were not sufficiently encouraged to do so in their educational environment. Consequently, she felt it was crucial to create opportunities for students to critique or question concepts they found puzzling or disagreed with. Her statement encapsulates this sentiment: “So trying to give them or trying to think through ways to give them that confidence to question things and why is this the way this is and think about their part and, like the big picture.” Ashley's approach highlights her commitment to fostering a classroom environment where students feel empowered to challenge assumptions and explore ideas from multiple perspectives, contributing to their development as critical thinkers and active participants in their own learning process.

In addition, Ashley encourages her students to see themselves as “changemakers.” She perceives a prevalent belief among her students that effecting change is unattainable. During our

fifth meeting, Ashley expressed her desire to dispel the perception of changemakers as mere fantasy and instead present them as a reality, stating,

And kind of knowing that it's just people like them who have spoken up. There are people who are change-makers in our world, but they can all be that too. So kind of getting them to realize that you have to step up at some point and do like what you know is right and not just wait for someone else to come along that's gonna change it.

Ashley wants her students to understand that they do not have to wait for someone else to do the work but have the power to initiate change, reminding them that “someone has to be first.” She believes her students will gain confidence by realizing their agency and ability to impact their environment. This newfound confidence, in turn, will create more opportunities for them to become changemakers in their own right.

Throughout our sessions, Ashley conveyed that various incidents involving her students and other students in the grade level naturally presented opportunities for discussions that could foster critical reflection. During our fourth meeting, she mentioned that “a lot of opportunities” arose from incidents both within and outside the classroom. While these incidents provided fertile ground for critical conversations, Ashley also recognized that such discussions could not occur without proactive efforts from teachers. In session nine, she emphasized the significance of establishing student expectations before engaging in these discussions. Ashley highlighted the importance of creating norms collaboratively with students and enforcing these norms by asking disruptive students to step away from the conversations.

The data further underscored the importance of proactive measures in fostering critical conversations, particularly through vocabulary development. In session eight, Ashley emphasized the significance of her students forming personal connections with words such as “stereotype, prejudice, and segregation.” She aimed for her students to apply these terms to texts and relate them to their personal experiences. Additionally, she wanted her students to critically

examine the concept of "fairness" and its implications for how people should be treated. Moreover, during session nine, Ashley discussed her students' simplistic understanding of race, noting that they felt nervous discussing their own race or that of their classmates as if it were "a bad thing." She stressed the importance of destigmatizing vocabulary related to race and identity, suggesting that this process should begin in earlier grades. Familiarizing students with these concepts early on would make them more comfortable discussing them at the intermediate level, fostering a more open and informed dialogue around complex issues such as race.

Continuous Learning

Another significant theme in how Ashley grapples with the system is her recognition of her ongoing developmental journey and the perpetual nature of learning. During our sixth session, in a discussion centered on sociopolitical consciousness, Ashley articulated this perspective, stating,

I know that it's continuous. Like this isn't something I'm never gonna be like, oh, I'm done with that, you know? Um, so I'm getting in the habit of questioning when something comes up in our classroom or, um, just in current events or the news. Stopping to question like, why do I think that way? Like, what about my identity is causing me to feel that way? And it's kind of helped me think about things from other people's point of view, including my students in the classroom, when they see a situation differently than I have. Like stopping to think about past experiences in the classroom or why I would try not to make so many assumptions about why things are happening. So I'm still like making that, um, second nature. So I...right now, it's still really intentional, but it will be nice to get to a point at some point where those things just automatically happen if that makes sense.

The idea of automaticity also came up in her written reflections as well, writing, "I'll never be done with the work. I want to be automatic in questioning my assumptions." Ashley's statements illustrate the tension in her understanding of the never-ending nature of this work and the urgency to want to arrive.

Building on the notion of a continuous learning journey, Ashley's understanding is grounded in the realization that the process is ongoing due to the vast amount of new knowledge that continually unfolds. During our sixth meeting, she expressed this sentiment, stating,

Once you learn, like I always say, you don't know it. You don't know until you know, I feel like that's another thing with this work is that just when you think that you have something figured out, then you realize how connected it is to 10 other things that you have no idea about <laugh>."

These comments highlight Ashley's recognition of the depth and interconnectedness of knowledge, illustrating the idea that achieving equity is a journey rather than a destination (Aguilar, 2020).

Ashley further acknowledges that the journey towards equity is never-ending due to the intricate web of interconnected systems of oppression. She acknowledges, "like if you pull that string, then it goes to this one, and then it goes to this one, and there's things that you never even thought about before." This understanding reflects her awareness of the complexity and depth of the issues at hand, emphasizing that addressing one aspect of oppression often reveals countless others that require attention. Moreover, Ashley's awareness of her identity as a White person informs her understanding of the need to develop her consciousness continually. She articulated, "And for me, like I'm white, I don't have to think about that, that I haven't had to think about that before. And so when you start pulling a string, you're like, oh, oh," highlighting her realization of the layers of privilege and unconscious bias that she must actively confront and dismantle in her journey towards equity.

The data also revealed how Ashley is beginning to rethink specific assumptions and practices, illustrating a commitment to continuous growth and development. For instance, in our second meeting, Ashley recounted cases in which she had assumed a common knowledge base among her students, particularly regarding traditional nursery rhymes, only to realize the

limitations of such assumptions. Her realization that her students may not share her familiarity with these stories underscores her openness to challenging her preconceptions and embracing new ways of thinking. Additionally, she shared how she is reexamining what engagement looks like in her classroom. This reflection resulted from a conversation we had in our second meeting. This discussion delved into the nuanced distinctions between engagement and compliance when I shared a resource with Ashley and Michael that provided a different way of thinking about these two ideas. During our discussion, Ashley stated, “

I feel affirmed in some areas, but also there are some areas that now I'm going to look through that compliance versus engagement. And I feel like a lot of my work and the things that I think I'm doing to help students, I don't know if they see the benefit in them as much as I do

The concept of engagement and compliance came up again during our third meeting with Ashley, who shared how she is reconsidering her views on engagement, stating, “Some of the things that I might have thought were engagement in the past that might have been compliance.” Ashley expounded on her reflections, stating that she needed to evaluate the practices in her classroom to see “what’s working and why it’s working.” In this instance, working for Ashley was students being engaged. She believed if she could determine why her students were engaged at certain times and less engaged at others, she could learn from those times of engagement and apply those same methods when she felt more compliance-driven. For Ashley, those times were mostly during math.

Ashley's commitment to continuous learning and improvement is evident in her reflective approach to planning. She acknowledges the need to be intentional in her planning, particularly in the context of the current educational structures that do not fully support culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). In our initial session, Ashley wanted a structured framework, such as a list of questions, to guide her practices and lesson planning to ensure she was implementing CSP

effectively. The theme of planning intentionally resurfaced during the ninth and tenth sessions as well, with Ashley reflecting on how *Textured Teaching* inspired her to envision future learning experiences.

For example, during the ninth session, our discussion centered on the text's third chapter, which emphasizes the Interdisciplinary trait of the *Textured Teaching* framework. During our conversation, Ashley reflected on the current components of the district's adopted reading curriculum. In her reflection, she shared that the essential questions embedded in each reading unit had "been helpful." She described these questions as a guiding "umbrella," providing direction while remaining flexible enough to accommodate additional content. Additionally, during this session, Ashley expressed how the text affirmed some of the current approaches she and her colleagues had already taken to be interdisciplinary but also encouraged her to think of other ways to grow in this area by including special area teachers in their planning.

During the last session, Ashley further expressed how the text provided her with new concepts and pushed her to think differently. This session centered on the fourth and fifth chapters of the book, which detailed the traits of textured teaching being experiential and flexible. In our conversation, Ashley expressed a desire to incorporate the social justice standards created by Learning for Justice, as articulated in the following quote,

It gave me some ideas for pushing, kind of like what you were just saying about like, the social justice standards. While we address those in our classroom, I don't think I embed them as much and cross curricularly as I should. So I'm gonna be a little bit more intentional with the things that we're talking about with those and embedding them into everything we do. This chapter gave me some inspiration, a little push myself a little bit more, and, um, like kind of tying everything together.

Furthermore, Ashley reflected on her current flexibility practices in her assessment processes.

She expressed a desire to include students in the creation of assessments to "bring more student voice" into the process. Ashley noted the challenges in collaborating with students but identified

certain subjects, such as formative social studies assessments, as starting points that would be easier to implement this approach with. Ashley's insights into her future planning process demonstrate a proactive and thoughtful approach to incorporating the content from the text that will assist her in becoming culturally sustaining.

The preceding section delineated Ashley's perception of being constrained by the educational system. She identified the systemic and structural constraints within her school, extending her analysis to encompass challenges at the local and national levels. Ashley astutely observed how decisions made by authorities contribute to the creation of incompatible structures, thereby impeding the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Furthermore, she acknowledged the role of unspoken rules in perpetuating these difficulties. Notwithstanding these constraints, Ashley also articulated strategies to resist the system. These strategies include fostering authentic trust with her students, enhancing her own critical awareness as well as that of her students, and maintaining a steadfast commitment to continuous personal and professional growth. The subsequent chapter will shift focus to Michael's experiences of confinement and his strategies for contending with these constraints.

Chapter 5: Working Within and Against the System: The Story of Michael

An analysis of the data also elucidated the constraints experienced by Michael within the educational system, along with his strategies for resisting these systemic influences. This chapter will begin with an examination of Michael's articulation of these constraints, followed by a detailed exploration of the data illustrating his methods of resistance. In detailing his strategies for contending with the system, I also delineate the tensions that arise from such resistance.

Confined to the System

Similar to Ashely, the data revealed a salient theme of the ways Michael is confined to the system. These constraints are attributed to systemic forces of whiteness that sustain the prevailing norms and structures. While Michael acknowledged the challenges he encounters, the data indicates that he does not exclusively attribute these challenges to systemic influences. Rather, he tends to view them through both an individual and systemic lens. The following section elaborates on the specific ways in which Michael experiences constraints within the system.

Things are Not the Same

A recurring theme evident in the data is the perception of change. Michael often expressed a perceived loss of efficacy in influencing his students and their diminished capacity for hard work. This perception keeps Michael grounded in the system as his perspective is anchored in an individualized framework rather than within a system understanding of his experiences. This idea came up during our first session. For example, while discussing Ladson-Billings' (1995a & 2012) articles, Michael shared how he used to be able to “actually motivate”

his students. He articulated a sense of nostalgia for a former time when he could employ strategies mentioned in the article to increase the effort of his students, stating,

And I've been teaching for a long time, so. And I'm gonna sound like an old, you know, jaded teacher when I say this, but I've been teaching long enough that I can remember it. It just, in my mind, it seemed to me that there was a time when I could actually motivate or, or, or use some of the things that were mentioned in the article to get a student to want, you know, to try hard, go beyond what's easy.

Michael expressed how he used to be able to collaborate with students to help them achieve their goals. However, he currently cannot do this, stating, “My power’s gone,” reflecting a feeling of diminishment in his influence.

In this session, he attributed his lack of power to the recurrence of remote teaching due to Covid-19. However, this causal link was rare. On the contrary, a prevailing theme was an uncertainty of the root cause of his perceived powerlessness. For example, during the first session, he stated, “It's like all the things that I used to do, all those tricks, all those it's like...I don't know. It's like that power seemed for me...It just seems to be gone the last couple of years.” Michael expressed his uncertainty about how to address the shift in his influence by making statements such as, “I’m stuck in a rut here,” “I don’t understand how that happened when that happened, why that happened,” and “I don’t know how to get past that. I don’t know how to get around that.” Michael’s statements about his lack of influence on his students demonstrate a feeling of inefficiency and powerlessness.

Throughout our sessions, Michael shared strategies he had previously used to motivate students but no longer found effective. One such strategy involved speaking with students about the grades they received on assessments. Through those conversations, he could “make a connection” and use that connection to understand and address the student’s misunderstandings. He aimed to forge connections that facilitated targeted interventions addressing students’

misconceptions. Furthermore, Michael expounded upon an approach he had previously implemented when identifying students, he perceived as grappling with academic difficulties. In such instances, he would provide that student with “more responsibilities.” He believed by putting the students in leadership roles, the student would recognize their capabilities. This method sought to create self-realization and foster a belief in their potential. Michael articulated his underlying rationale, stating, “Hey, you're important, you're capable. You can do this, you know, give them successes so that they see, I can do this. It can be done.”

Michael shared various other strategies that worked previously and no longer seemed to have the same effect. For instance, he recounted times when he used productive struggle in the past. He orchestrated opportunities for students to grapple with challenges and, subsequently, success was an efficient method to keep students engaged. Michael stated how he has to be intentional with “planning” for success, expressing that his students “gotta see that so they understand I can, I can get this. I can keep going”. He specifically brought up this method with math instruction. However, Michael lamented that this approach no longer works, stating, “A lot of times, I’ve already lost them.”

Another strategy Michael shared using previously that did not work any longer is providing his students with choice. During session nine, he explained how he afforded students the agency to select their books for book clubs. Despite providing autonomy, students abandoned the chosen book after one week, leading to Michael's frustration. He reflected on this experience, acknowledging that sometimes a book might not resonate with students. In an effort to increase engagement, he chose a shorter text but still felt he was the primary driver of engagement, stating he was “doing all the driving” and “doing all the pushing.” Additionally, he attempted to spark engagement by creating a debate between two book club groups with opposing viewpoints,

which initially excited students. However, the sustainability of this engagement was short-lived, as students lost interest after the first debate; as Michael noted, “The novelty was gone. They were done.”

The recurring theme of Michael's strategies having short-lived effectiveness was evident throughout our discussions. Michael often made statements about getting the students' attention initially, but the engagement was not sustainable, specifically without his direct involvement. He repeatedly lamented how he can cultivate excitement and participation during the onset of a lesson. However, when he “steps away,” the students lose interest. He struggled with this dynamic, stating during the second meeting,

I keep coming back to how do I get that to translate to now I'm going to step away? I'm going to work with another group. You got to keep going. Because, yeah, it doesn't matter whether it's reading, math, social studies, or science. It doesn't matter, you know. I can get them hooked. They're excited about what they're doing until I step away.

Michael emphasized this point several times, stating that even when using real-life examples to get students “excited about what they're learning,” students' work ethic declines once he steps away. Despite his efforts to instill excitement through real-life examples and cultivate a genuine passion for learning, Michael expressed recurring frustration, grappling with the challenges of conveying to fourth-grade students the importance of sustained effort in his absence.

For Michael, students struggle with motivation more now than they have in the past. This thematic underpinning surfaced during the initial meeting, where Michael articulated concerns regarding his students' work ethic. While discussing his frustration with students during remote learning, Michael made the following statement,

I've got students in here that will spend almost twice the amount of effort to hold a piece of paper in front of them and take a pencil and wiggle it in the air. So that it's on the camera. And I know they're not writing, they're not working, they're not doing anything.

As mentioned previously, Michael attributed the lack of motivation to the impact of Covid-19. Additionally, he expressed that his students are more interested “in what their friends are thinking or talking about or looking at on Facebook or YouTube or whatever.” He perceived his students as more interested in social aspects and less interested in “doing a good job in the classroom.” Additionally, Michael shared that his students are used to things coming easily to them, stating, “Every aspect of these kids’ lives is let’s do it quick.”

The belief regarding a perceived change in student motivation extends beyond Michael’s observations. It is confirmed through his interactions with his colleagues and the parents of his students. For example, he shared a conversation with a music teacher during a piano recital he attended. During the discussion, Michael commented the students are “not as clean as they were 10-15 years ago.” He shared that the teacher validated his statement, replying, “They just don’t spend time practicing.” Moreover, Michael asserted that parents share the same sentiments, further supporting his contention. He shared how he proactively contacts parents regularly to discuss their students’ efforts. Michael contended that “ninety-nine percent” of the time, parents align with his observations, sharing a common sentiment in the decline of their student’s dedication to their work. He stated, “The most common response I get is, I’m seeing the same thing at home.” This perspective among colleagues and parents contributes to the perception of a shift in students’ attitudes toward academic commitment.

The persistent theme of changing student dynamics decreased between the second and eighth sessions and resurfaced with heightened frustration during the ninth session. During this session, Michael articulated a recurring concern about the pervasive belief that his students frequently “quit.” Repeatedly throughout the conversation, he stated, “They just quit.” I asked him what does quitting look like. In defining it, he shared the sentiments expressed in the

previously. He cited instances where students abandoned book choices in their book clubs despite his efforts to accommodate their interests. Furthermore, he underscored his students' reluctance to engage in reading homework, noting that only two-thirds of his students complete the assigned tasks. After sharing the examples, he made the following statement,

So, what does quitting look like for me? I've been doing this for twenty-seven years, using every trick I think I have in the book and effort. Just, you know. What kind of really great, you know, understandings do we have that are, you know, now part of our mental capacities, and we're going to remember this for the rest of our lives. It just, I don't know, it just doesn't feel to me now, like it did five, six, you know, seven years ago.

The statements illustrate Michael's yearning for his students to genuinely engage in his instructional techniques. The current disengagement and the past successes intensify his frustration.

The preceding data highlights a persistent tension between past successes and current challenges faced by Michael in his teaching practice. Michael perceives a diminishing effectiveness of strategies that were previously successful, leading him to attribute this decline to a decrease in student motivation. This perception is supported by the lack of sustained effort exhibited by his students and the observations of colleagues and parents. Such a belief aligns with the concept of confirmation bias. As a form of protection, our brains tend to uphold beliefs that fit certain situations in an attempt to make meaning. Consequently, the brain will seek to protect and reaffirm those beliefs (Aguilar, 2020 & Eberhardt, 2020). Michael's struggle to engage his students within this perceived limitation reflects a tension in understanding culturally sustainable pedagogy (CSP), as his longing for the same kind of success he had previously may hinder his ability to explore new, potentially more effective methods. The challenge lies in reconciling his deeply ingrained belief in the efficacy of past approaches with the recognition that alternative approaches could also enhance student engagement.

Constraints

As previously mentioned, the data illustrates Michael's perception of the challenges he encounters through both individual and systemic lenses. A prominent theme that emerged concerning systemic influences is the palpable sense of constraints within the educational framework, as perceived by Michael. These constraints manifest as challenges in meeting the diverse needs of his students and in cultivating his ideal classroom environment. The data reveals that Michael discerned several constraints, with a significant theme being the limitation of time to address his students' needs.

During the second session, Michael articulated a sense of confinement imposed by the district's assessment schedule, which mandates monthly districtwide common assessments in reading. Although these assessments are intended to ensure adherence to the prescribed curriculum scope and sequence, Michael finds them restrictive, limiting his instructional flexibility. He described this constraint as a constant pressure, stating, "It is always a drive." While Michael recognizes the importance of aligning with the district's guidelines, he also expressed frustration with the excessive focus on staying on track, noting, "I think I've been focusing too much on staying on track, staying on target, not getting behind." This persistent pressure to maintain pace and avoid falling behind weighs heavily on him, especially considering his acknowledgment of being behind in the math curriculum, a realization he described as "killing" him.

This sense of time pressure persisted into the ninth session, where Michael expressed frustration with the limitations on how much material he could cover during the school year. He reflected on the school year's conclusion, questioning, "Am I happy with the way it ended? Do I like where the kids got to? I never feel like I get enough in them. I never feel like there's enough

time." Despite his extensive teaching experience of over twenty years, Michael expressed that he has never felt he taught everything he wanted to in a school year. This sentiment was reiterated in the tenth session, where he expressed a continual need for more time, humorously stating, "You know, all the years that all the administrators have said, 'What can I do to help you?' Time, I need time <laugh>. I mean, that's always it. Um, and the thing is, it's not just time to plan. I need time with my students." These reflections highlight the ongoing tension Michael experiences between the structured demands of the educational system and his desire for more time to engage deeply with his students and cover the material he finds essential.

For Michael, the "grind" of adhering to mandated procedures and "checking off boxes" has compromised his ability to provide instruction aligned with the unique needs of his students. He identifies a risk of losing sight of what truly matters in education, emphasizing the need for his students to have ownership over their learning. Throughout the data analysis, a recurring theme emerged regarding Michael's belief in prioritizing his students' voice and agency. Across our sessions, Michael expressed how essential it is for students to have a voice and choice in their instructional approaches, naming this as the "right way" to facilitate learning. He articulated that he provides his students time to offer feedback related to lessons, stating, "I can tell you in my class whether it's a mini-lesson, whether it's individual work time, there are many times I will pause and I will say, "Do you have anything to add, ask, or say?" For Michael, this allows his students to respond to the lesson in any format they choose and fosters classroom dialogue.

I observed the pedagogical approaches Michael detailed when observing Michael's classroom. During the observation, I viewed a read-aloud in Michael's class. Michael read a text while the students listened intently, taking notes as he read. Each student had their Chromebooks opened, capturing their notes on their devices. While reading, Michael would

pause and ask students various questions related to the text. After reading the text aloud to the students, Michael posed questions to them, calling on several students and allowing them to respond, some asking questions regarding the text and some drawing conclusions from it. Michael's responses to his students' questions varied, sometimes being minimal with statements such as "interesting theory" or "possible," and other times posing a question back to the students to foster more critical thinking. At one point, Michael encouraged his students to use Google to search for the answer to one of the questions posed. The observation of Michael's classroom further illuminated his commitment to creating an interactive and student-centered environment.

Looking across all the sessions with the two participants, Michael shared other ways to foster student-centered instruction. For Michael, those times were centered on students having voice and choice in instructional practices. Michael expressed how these approaches cultivated a more inclusive learning environment, free from the constraints of "rigid." While Michael expressed this sentiment, he found it difficult to manifest these types of teaching strategies on a consistent basis. Similar to Ashley, Michael shared he could find some success in reading and social studies. Michael also referred to his implementation of Genius Hour, a time when students can research topics of interest to them, as a way for his students to be the subjects and not the objects of study (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Michael struggled with centering students during math, stating that math was the "most difficult" and an area where he was "weakest" in applying student-focused instruction.

Standardized testing further exacerbates Michael's feeling of constraint, adding to the challenges he faces in addressing the authentic needs of his students. In the sixth session, Michael expressed how mandated testing impedes his instructional pace due to the demands of preparing for the assessment. Additionally, he described how this focus increases disciplinary

issues, adding to his challenges as students struggle to maintain focus and exercise self-control. Michael believes the behavioral struggles are not the students' fault, stating, "Well, they're kids. They're not gonna have perfect self-control." Instead, he draws a correlation between student engagement and discipline challenges, stating, "If I keep things interesting and fast-paced and it's something they need, something that they want, they're awesome."

Moreover, during the same session, Michael grappled with feelings of burnout, questioning why he felt emotionally drained despite his unwavering dedication to working with his students. He shared his reflection on that question, stating the following,

Am I getting tired of working with these kids? No. No. I don't ever get tired of working with the kids. That's not it. Do I feel like working with these kids leaves me feeling emotionally ragged at the end of the day? Yeah. Because I'm, I feel for them. I love them. I care for them and I, I want them to have everything. I want them to have the world. Right. But I never get tired of working with them. Now I never really answered why do I feel so freaking burned out? I, I don't know. But it's not the, it's... it's not Gary, it's not Jordan, and it's not all my kids that drive me absolutely bonkers every day. I love working with them. You know? So that, and then that just kinda leaves me, so why am I so tired? Why am I so burned out? Why is this so hard some days? I don't know. But it's not them. It's not the kids.

When I asked him if he could pinpoint why he felt the way he did, he mentioned mandated testing, stating, "Seriously, I hate those things." Michael shared how his classroom is "humming and happiest" when he can assess students more authentically, such as one-on-one reading assessments that allow for a personalized understanding of their abilities.

Michael also shared his displeasure with mandated testing as the topic became a focus at the forefront of his student's minds. Michael shared his disapproval, reflecting on a time when one of his students associated the month of April with testing. He asked his students to prepare to write a poem by brainstorming topics that come to their minds when they think of the month of April. One of his students immediately named a mandated test they would take that month. This association highlights the clash between the institutional demands and the students' authentic

interests. This clash further underscores how standardized testing impedes Michael's capacity to attend to the individual needs of his students and deepens the complexity of Michael's ability to implement CSP, where the focus on individual needs clashes with the rigid constraints imposed by external mandates.

In addition to a lack of time and the effects of standardized tests, the data revealed that for Michael, COVID-19 created constraints. Michael lamented the impact the pandemic had on his relationship with his students' parents, which he values. For Michael, parental support is essential to his success. Michael reflected on past experiences he has had with parents and how the pandemic has hindered those types of connections. For instance, Michael shared how he previously found ways to bring parents into instructional conversations to enhance them intentionally, explicitly stating he wanted them to "share their story." Michael also shared times when he would host movie nights at local theatres. He would invite his students to come and watch a movie connected to a text he was using in class. He excitedly shared how almost sixty people would be in the movie theatre at a time as parents would decide to stay and watch as well. For Michael, the "highlight" of the night was getting to the theatre before the movie started and talking with the parents before the movie. He lamented, "I miss that."

Michael also emphasized the importance of parental involvement in his students' education, including managing student behavior. He expressed a desire for parents to visit the classroom, believing it would positively influence student behavior, stating, "I mean, you'll never have a day of better behavior out of a student that might be struggling and when their mom is sitting right in their room." However, he acknowledged that COVID-19 has limited such interactions, hindering his ability to create the desired classroom environment and build strong relationships with parents.

During the fourth session, Michael shared his belief that the pandemic was a sociopolitical issue that impinging on the lives of his students. For Michael, Covid-19 negatively impacted his students in various ways. He discussed the impact of the pandemic on his students' ability to collaborate effectively and on his efforts to build a supportive classroom environment. He noted the challenges of facilitating small group work due to students' limited experience in such activities since first grade. Michael highlighted students' need for his support during group work, citing an example of a community circle session where most of the time was spent addressing a student's behaviors, like putting their feet near their neighbor's desk. Michael expressed frustration at losing opportunities for students to practice essential skills.

The data demonstrates the intricate tension that Michael experiences, stemming from the confluence of district mandates, standardized testing requirements, the impacts of the pandemic, and his commitment to providing instruction that authentically meets his students' needs. This tension is particularly challenging within the context of CSP, where the fundamental premise is to center the dynamic practices of students (Django & Paris, 2017). The challenge for Michael lies in navigating the delicate balance between these competing pressures and the principles of student-centered pedagogy inherent in CSP. This complex interplay complicates Michael's implementation and understanding of CSP as he strives to both adhere to the district's requirements and address the genuine needs of his students. Next, I will explore the ways the data demonstrates how Michael is able to resist the systemic structures outlined in this section.

Contending with the System

In alignment with Ashley, I discerned themes concerning the ways in which Michael contends with the prevailing system. This involvement is characterized by his appreciation and respect for his students' cultural practices, his efforts to cultivate their critical consciousness, and

his acknowledgment of the system's impact on his own identity. While the data indicates these as strategies through which he confronts or opposes the system, it also reveals the complexities inherent in his engagement. The subsequent section elaborates on the diverse ways in which the data illustrates Michael's navigation of the dominant system and the accompanying complexities.

Honoring Student Culture

From the initial session onwards, Michael consistently emphasizes the significance of culture. He articulated this belief by stating, "Um, I guess for me, the thing that I always try to remember is I want every student to know that where they come from, who they are, their thoughts or beliefs, everything about them is just as important as anybody else." This statement underscores his commitment to validating his students' identities and ensuring they feel recognized and valued in the classroom, a theme he revisits throughout our discussions, notably in the third session.

In the third session, Michael addresses the need to move beyond merely acknowledging his students' cultures. He believes building genuine relationships with his students requires a deeper understanding of their backgrounds. He sees it as his responsibility to intentionally learn about their cultures, viewing this as essential for establishing authentic connections. Michael reflected on his evolving understanding of his students, attributing it to his deliberate efforts to learn and adapt to their needs. He stresses the importance of transcending temporary interests like sports and striving for more profound connections. He explains, "Like their culture is dynamic. I got to be dynamic. I've got to be moving. I've got to be changing because if it's the same all the time. Well, it doesn't feel sincere, if nothing else. It just feels like, oh, that's the only trick." For Michael, sincerity in teaching involves continuous evolution to meet students' changing needs, ensuring educators can effectively engage with them meaningfully.

Building on the theme of cultural understanding in Michael's teaching, our discussions in the fifth meeting underscored the importance of recognizing and incorporating students' out-of-school literacies. As described by Germán (2021), these literacies encompass a range of activities such as engaging with social media, composing rap lyrics, texting, and speaking various languages, reflecting contemporary forms of literacy. This closely resonates with the idea of community practices articulated by Alim and Django (2017), emphasizing the dynamic and modern nature of cultural ways of being. During our discussions, I highlighted the importance of a culturally sustaining teacher who acknowledges and builds upon these literacies. Michael connected to this concept by linking it to extracurricular activities like clubs, sports, church, and music lessons. When prompted to consider literacies that occur without parental involvement, Michael highlighted "trash talk" during sports as an example. He noted that despite its seemingly unkind nature, it served as a way for students to display belonging and camaraderie.

Furthermore, Michael shared specific examples of how he engaged with his students' out-of-school literacies, recounting how his female students taught him the rules for TikTok and learning about baptism preparations. Michael ended his summary of examples, stating, "I guess the way I would just define it is what are the outta school literacies? It's almost like the things that they're... that they choose among themselves. This is important to me. I wanna run this down. I want to get better at this." These examples illustrate Michael's efforts to comprehend his students' cultural practices outside of school, enhancing his ability to connect with and understand them beyond the confines of the classroom. This highlights Michael's cultural competence development as he begins to understand the multifaceted nature of cultural practices.

Michael's awareness of the importance of effectively engaging with students' cultures is matched by his acknowledgment of the complexities inherent in this endeavor. The data from the

third session further highlights Michael's nuanced understanding of culture. Following their reading of Ladson-Billing's text, both participants were tasked with linking the concepts discussed to a recent professional development presentation based on Sonia Nieto's work. Nieto's chapter, "Culture and Education," delineated six attributes of culture, including its dynamic nature (2008). Michael specifically emphasized this attribute, noting the challenge it poses in comprehending his students' culture, which he perceives as rapidly changing. This notion resurfaced in the fifth meeting, where Michael expressed feeling "overwhelmed" by the pace at which his students' cultures evolve, noting the challenge of keeping up with these changes. He questioned his ability to maintain pace with topics that are significant to his students at the beginning of the year but lose relevance by the end.

My analysis also offers valuable insights into Michael's pedagogical approach, particularly regarding using surface cultural elements to establish meaningful connections with his students. Surface culture encompasses the observable and tangible facets of culture (Hammond, 2015, p.22). Michael's adeptness at cultivating rapport with his students can be attributed to his deliberate attention to and appreciation of these surface-level cultural attributes. His observations regarding the rapid fluctuations in cultural behaviors, such as shifts in sports participation and evolving interests over the academic year, suggest a nascent understanding of culture. While valuable in fostering relationships, Michael overlooks the deeper, more impactful aspects of culture on learning and student development by focusing on these surface attributes. Hammond (2015) suggests that the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching hinges on an adept understanding of deep culture.

I encouraged both participants to reflect deeply on how they integrate deep culture into their classrooms, framing it as a form of "heart work" that involves aspects such as respect,

friendship, and conflict. This prompted Michael to reflect on his experiences during parent-teacher conferences, where parents showed a strong interest in their child's character over academic performance, asking if their students were "good people." Michael pondered his role in fostering these aspects of deep culture, questioning if he might be missing opportunities to address these matters with his students. He remembered an instance where he used discussion questions while teaching "The Giver" to prompt students to think about how they determine right and wrong, aiming to cultivate critical thinking and an understanding of differing perspectives. This example demonstrates how Michael grapples with incorporating deep cultural elements into his teaching practices.

The intricacies of culture pose ongoing challenges for Michael as he endeavors to navigate their implications in his teaching practices. The data illustrates Michael's belief in the fundamental role of culture in cultivating authentic relationships with his students, striving to ensure they feel valued and understood. However, he grapples with how deeper cultural dimensions contribute to relationship building and academic development. While Michael occasionally incorporates these deeper understandings into his teaching, it is not a deliberate or foundational aspect of his instructional practices. This highlights the complexity inherent in integrating the multifaceted dimensions of culture into educational approaches and emphasizes the continuous learning process for educators aspiring to create culturally sustaining environments.

Cultivating Sociopolitical Consciousness

As defined by Ladson-Billings (1995a, p.162), sociopolitical consciousness encourages students to critically examine cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions perpetuating social inequities. This concept stands as a foundational element of culturally sustaining pedagogy

(CSP), as discussed in previous sections (Paris, 2012). CSP advocates for educators to remain cognizant of the sociopolitical landscape influencing their students' experiences. As previously noted, Michael initially perceived Covid-19 as a sociopolitical issue impacting his students' lives. While those were his initial thoughts, as our sessions progressed, the data revealed the ways in which Michael attempted to assist his students in cultivating their critical consciousness as a way to contend with the system.

One of the approaches was through vocabulary development. In session nine, our conversations about demystifying and destigmatizing also addressed vocabulary. Michael expressed the importance of students understanding words often not discussed in schools. Notably, he emphasized the significance of unraveling the meanings of words such as racism, prejudice, and bias. Michael provided examples of how his students held surface-level understandings of the terms that caused them to have misconceptions. In a previous session, Michael recounted how, at the start of the school year, his students characterized all unjust actions they encountered as racist, leading them to overuse the term. The ramifications of such oversimplification were vividly illustrated in our ninth meeting through a specific incident recounted by Michael. He shared an incident where one of his female students told another student their skin was darker than hers. One of the boys in his class heard the statement and told the student she was being racist. Michael shared that he corrected the male student, telling him it was not racist and the student was merely making an observation.

Building on his efforts to address misconceptions, Michael dedicated substantial time to destigmatizing key terms. One approach involved facilitating structured discussions and providing relevant reading materials to actively engage students with these concepts. These interactions were pivotal in familiarizing students with the vocabulary, enabling them to move

beyond initial discomfort and gain a more nuanced perspective. Additionally, Michael ensured his students' comprehension by offering explicit definitions. For instance, he deconstructed the term "prejudice," guiding students to understand its literal meaning of "pre-judging" and prompting them to reconsider their initial perceptions. This methodical approach aimed to dismantle preconceived notions, contributing to a more nuanced understanding and aligning with Michael's broader goal of demystifying crucial concepts.

Reflecting on his students' progress, Michael recounted a significant moment involving their revised understanding of racism during a small group reading session. Due to his prior efforts in elucidating the term, students could discern whether certain situations constituted racism. Michael noted their increased confidence in applying the concept, as they could now analyze situations against the definition of racism and differentiate effectively. This development demonstrated a significant shift in their comprehension, as they were able to identify instances of racism with greater clarity and sophistication. Michael expressed pride in their progress, noting their increased comfort in discussing sensitive topics such as race and racism, indicating a substantial transformation in their awareness and understanding.

Another way Michael attempted to assist his students in developing their critical consciousness is by empowering them to understand they have power. Michael's commitment to empowering his students manifested in multiple ways. For instance, in our fourth session, Michael recalled classroom experiences where he repeatedly emphasized to his students that they can actively participate in effecting change rather than merely observing it. He noted a prevalent mindset among his students, wherein they often perceive societal change as someone else's responsibility. To address this, Michael provided resources that showcase how children their age have contributed to combating inequality, emphasizing that they, too, have agency. By sharing

examples like the story of an individual who used his engineering skills to create sustainable footwear materials for Nike, Michael aims to broaden his students' perspectives on their possibilities.

The data not only highlighted Michael's perceived successes in fostering his students' sociopolitical consciousness but also revealed inherent complexities in the process. While discussing the fourth chapter of *Textured Teaching*, Michael expressed frustration with the lack of application he sees in the classroom related to students applying some of the conversations around students using their power to impact change. He shared how they will discuss topics related to “changing the world” or “becoming leaders” in the classroom. The students will express their commitment, but their actions will not match their words once they are in a different setting. In expressing his frustration, Michael stated, “They had it, they repeated it, they seemed to get it, you know, they were there. And yet, three minutes later.” While the students' lack of application frustrates Michael, he shared how he understands that their lack of application means they need more repetition. He shared,

You gotta do it over and over and over. One and done is not enough. Because a lot of times, you know. I mean, think about no matter what it is you're trying to teach these kids. Well once might be enough to get the idea in their head, but that doesn't mean they can do it.

Michael's insights underscore the complexities involved in fostering critical consciousness and the importance of providing time for persistent reinforcement and support.

Providing time to disrupt commonly held beliefs was reinforced as our conversation continued. As we continued discussing student behaviors, our conversation evolved into a conversation regarding classroom dynamics he experienced growing up and those same dynamics showing up in his current classroom. Michael recounted how he has students in his classroom who he perceives as "outsiders" within his class dynamics. These two students, one

female and one male, struggle to interact with students in his class. Michael recounted how he attempted to coach them to join other groups that had formed in his class, stating to the female student, “Why don’t you walk up? Just stand there and see what happens.” Michael shared that the student took his advice, and the other students “instantly enveloped her.” However, when the same approach was suggested to the male student, it did not yield the same positive outcome. Instead, Michael shared how the students “ignored him” and “acted like he wasn’t there.”

Michael's reflection on the ways some students are included and others excluded led him to deeper introspection regarding his childhood experiences. He acknowledged a childhood tendency to be shy and quiet, which he felt might have contributed to a lack of effort in getting to know his classmates better. While recognizing this aspect of himself, he also questioned why such dynamics continue. Michael stated, “So some of that was me, but why does that keep happening? You know, all these decades later, here we are. I’m seeing the same things.” This introspection reflects Michael’s growing awareness of the broader systemic focus at play within his classroom environment. His recognition of these patterns as part of a more extensive system of inclusion and exclusion suggests a developing understanding of the embeddedness of sociopolitical issues.

Michael's comments prompted me to draw his attention to the concept of the norm. I stated, “I think it's the norm. Like our society is, is based on the norm and standards. And if you don't fit that norm... in, in many different cultural ways of being. If you don't fit that norm, then you're...I'm not gonna say ostracized, I if the right word, but then you're...othered guess say that.” Michael responded, stating, “It’s almost like they’re invisible. Nobody picks on them. Nobody goes after them. They just don’t see them.” This exchange showcased Michael's ability to recognize dominant belief structures without explicitly labeling them as such. While this

awareness might not have been at the forefront of his mind before our conversation, it highlights the importance of educators like Michael becoming knowledgeable about dominant structures that may appear normal. Understanding these norms assists teachers in providing the space to disrupt them, creating a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment.

Self-Examination

Another salient theme from the data related to resisting the system is Michael's growing understanding of himself. The data connects with the work of scholar Zaretta Hammond's levels of culture (2015). Hammond's framework consists of three dimensions of culture, which include the surface level, which encompasses the observable and tangible elements of culture; the shallow level, which consists of the unspoken rules around what is considered normal, influencing our daily social interactions; and the deep culture, which comprises "our tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions governing our worldview" (Hammond, 2015, p. 22). The data pertaining to self-awareness aligns with the realm of deep culture. According to Hammond (2015), self-examination of one's culture is particularly challenging as it influences our behaviors in ways that may be invisible or normalized. What is normal is molded by our deeply ingrained social habits, ultimately resulting from implicit bias (Small, as cited in Hammond, 2015, p. 55). This notion is echoed in Michael's reflections after the third session, where he emphasized the necessity of self-awareness in understanding his students. He articulated, "I can definitely tell you that the one thing that became crystal clear to me is I can't know my student if I don't know myself. If I don't know who I am, where I come from, what's important to me. If I don't have a starting point."

In further reflecting, Michael noted how understanding his biases regarding parents has helped to improve his interactions during conferences. Michael explained his biases associated

with a parent's gender, sharing that he believed a mother would be more reasonable than a father. However, he acknowledged that this assumption was unfounded and questioned the basis of his beliefs, stating, "Why do I always assume, you know, the moms are going to be gentler, kinder, patient, more understanding? I just always assumed that you know." Michael shared how he has experienced fathers in a similar way, but admitting "that bias is still there." Despite realizing this bias still exists, Michael explained that awareness of it has helped him navigate conferences more effectively by allowing him to consciously consider his personal beliefs and their potential impact on his interactions. These reflections highlight the importance of self-awareness and disrupting normative beliefs. Michael's consciousness of his biases assisted him in resisting dominant beliefs about gender roles, leading to more effective parent-teacher conferences.

During the sixth session, self-awareness related to bias continued to emerge. At the start of the meeting, Michael shared a quote from the text *Textured Teaching* that resonated with him. Germán (2021) states, "The existence of bias in our lives is out of our control. Its persistence, however, is not" (p.10.). Michael expressed how powerful the quote was for him and then recounted his conversations with his mother and father regarding the content of our collaborative sessions. Michael shared that he has traditionally kept his mother informed on what he is studying in school, starting in college. He shared that his mother disagreed with the content of what he was sharing and asserted, "I'm not racist." Michael challenged her, stating, "Believe it or not, yeah, you kind of are." He then expressed to his mother that everyone has biases and prejudices. Michael reflected on how that was highly challenging for his mother to receive, although it was coming from her son. This interaction confirmed for Michael how difficult this content is if you are not actively "seeking it out." The data illustrates Michael's ongoing journey of understanding the connection between bias and self-awareness. He recognizes the complexity

of navigating these discussions and acknowledges the resistance that can arise even when addressing loved ones.

While continuing our discussion of the text, Michael shared his thoughts on the author's assertion about the inherent bias in educational content. Germán (2021) contends that biases are ingrained through regular socialization and, consequently, influence the educational content produced. Michael grappled with the implications of this idea, stating the following,

If we all have biases through normal and common socialization, and I feel like it's pretty easy to get people to admit that they've got biases. I feel like that's a fairly safe thing to do. But this one's kind of, you know, if it's true that we all have biases, um, as previously discussed, then why wouldn't the content that we have also have those things in it? I thought that would be really nice way to put it, you know? Well, if we have those things, why wouldn't the content that was built, you know, by those same types of people have the same biases? You know?

This contemplation underscores Michael's understanding of the ubiquitous nature of bias and the interconnectedness between personal biases and the biases embedded in educational materials.

In this session, the participants and I also discussed Germán's definition of "the work." She defines it as "the intense effort to unpack our biases and identify ideologies that have shaped our thinking" (2021, p. 4). I asked the participants to reflect on where they fall on the "continuum of the work." Michael candidly conveyed that this work demands intentional and labor-intensive efforts from him, as he has to force himself to remain focused consciously. He acknowledged that "the work" is not a natural or second-nature state for him, exemplified by his ongoing struggle to ensure diversity in the books within his classroom library. Michael acknowledged the intricacies tied to his identity and upbringing, challenging his journey toward becoming a culturally sustaining practitioner. This recognition is illustrated in the following quote, "everything about me has kind of led me to where I am now." Michael highlighted the hindrance posed by his identity markers of being White, male, and Christian. He posits, "I am

literally the norm. I am the norm.”

The data revealed Michael’s reflective insights into the influence of his upbringing and awareness of what his students’ parents might perceive as suitable for his instructional decisions. For instance, in the ninth session, our discussion of *Textured Teaching*'s third chapter focused on destigmatizing and demystifying uncomfortable concepts (Germán, 2021, p. 46), sparking a reflective conversation on addressing student interests while considering appropriateness in the classroom. Michael pondered if he might inadvertently avoid certain topics based on his subjective perception of student readiness, noting, "Now, generally, my rule of thumb is if kids bring it up, I won’t dodge it. I won’t ignore it. But then I think, well, but sometimes I say, yeah, that one you’re gonna have to talk to your family about that.” When asked how he determines suitable topics while honoring student curiosity, Michael explained, “Um, the thing that became really apparent to me was, for the most part, I use my upbringing, my belief system, and you know, what I think is right and proper to help decide whether or not these kids are ready.” The inherent complexity in his decision became evident as Michael laughed and stated, “Talk about a can of worms. So that’s literally one person deciding at that moment. Are these kids ready for this?” He emphasized his tendency to trust that if students ask, they are ready, but acknowledged that parental views also influence his decisions.

During our conversation about “the work,” I explained that because of this connection to dominant cultural ways of being, his experiences would be different from many of his students, stating, “I know things have not always come easy, and I’m never gonna say that, but because you have been able to navigate it. Because you are more connected to the norm. It may be more of your work to question some of the thought processes and patterns that you may have.” I then referred him to a quote from the introduction of *Textured Teaching* that states, “Who do you

bring with you when you walk into the room?” (Paris, as cited in Germán, 2021, p. xv) The normative status, deeply ingrained in his socialization (Hammond, 2015), contributes to moments of defensiveness or what he characterized as “bristling.” As a White teacher, the process of unlearning ingrained biases and acquiring new perspectives to effectively educate historically and currently marginalized students is a formidable task (Germán, 2021). Michael’s reflections illustrate the disparities between his lived experiences and those of his students, necessitating an awareness of his unconscious bias. Despite grappling with ideas that challenge his long-held beliefs, Michael is committed to transforming his defensiveness. He emphasized his evolution, noting that he does not become as defensive as much as he used to.

Furthermore, Michael candidly shared that he has to remind himself that he is not the teacher he used to be, stating, “That’s not who I am anymore,” and “I don’t wanna be that anymore.” Instead, Michael articulated that he “literally wants to be anti-racist” and that he wants to “actively go after it.” While Michael desires this, he transparently admits to not fully reaching this goal, illuminating his ongoing desire. This longing was captured in the fourth session when Michael revealed a yearning to profoundly understand his students, relating it to the effortless understanding portrayed in a television series. He cited a scene from the television series *Bel-Air* where a character, Jeffrey, easily comprehends the main character, Will, creating a supportive and comfortable environment for him. Michael honed in on the fact that Jeffrey could “understand who Will was, understand who Jeffrey was, and meet him where he needed to be met and make him feel comfortable.” For Michael, that scene illustrates the relationship he hopes to have with his students. He aims to meet their needs regardless of their reactions to him, drawing attention to the uncomfortable moment when Will initially distrusted Jeffrey. Michael’s statements demonstrate the importance of educators being aware of their deeply ingrained biases

that may cloud how they interpret their students' deep cultural ways of being.

The data mentioned above demonstrate the facets of Michael's self-awareness. They illustrate the tensions he navigates in developing his critical consciousness and evolving understanding of how his deep cultural background influences interactions with students and their families. Understanding one's deep culture is linked to developing critical consciousness, a prerequisite to CSP. Michael's aspirational goal is to internalize this understanding to the point where fostering critical consciousness becomes instinctive, underscoring the profound commitment essential for this ongoing process.

The preceding chapter outlined the constraints that hinder Michael's ability to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy. It also elaborated on the data illustrating his strategies for resisting these constraints and the resultant tensions. With Michael's views and experiences outlined, I will now look across both chapters to situate how my participants' data is more deeply understood through a whiteness perspective. The subsequent chapter will expound upon how whiteness informs the constraints experienced by both participants and the tensions that ensue when they seek to resist the constraints imposed by the system.

Chapter 6: How Does Whiteness Inform the Tensions?

As a socially constructed phenomenon, Whiteness maintains the status quo and perpetuates existing power dynamics (Green et al., 2007 & Castagno, 2014). Despite presenting itself as neutral, equal, and compassionate (Castagno, 2014), whiteness operates as an overarching system that upholds dominance under the guise of tradition and normalcy. Thus, the challenges articulated by Ashley and Michael in this study are not isolated incidents but are deeply intertwined with the pervasive nature of whiteness within the educational system. This systemic influence is compounded by a culture that perpetuates the existing system. As previously noted, the inception of whiteness also established White supremacy (Aguilar, 2020; Okun, 2010), which serves as the fundamental system facilitating dominance and its associated privileges (Leonardo, 2009). Ashley and Michael's experiences are shaped by the mechanisms upholding this system, exerting a pervasive and often invisible influence on individual and collective ideologies and behaviors. This influence is sustained through the cultural norms produced by White supremacy. Culture is defined as a complex combination of knowledge, beliefs, morals, customs, and other societal traits that guide and regulate daily life, fostering consistency and predictability in human actions (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 29). Within the context of White supremacy, culture teaches “overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value” (Okun).

As outlined in chapter one, scholar Dr. Tema Okun has identified fifteen distinct yet interconnected behaviors that uphold and perpetuate White supremacy, contributing to its self-reinforcing and self-sustaining nature. This section will elucidate how two of these characteristics, the binary paradigm and one right way, inform the tensions encountered by the

participants. Furthermore, it will elaborate on how whiteness complicates the participants' endeavors to challenge this system.

Confined to the System

In the examination of the data, I discerned the manners in which the binary and one right way belief system influence the tensions experienced by Ashley and Michael. These characteristics contribute to the systemic and personal tensions experienced by the participants. The subsequent section will elaborate on these influences. Additionally, this section will expound upon how the culture of scarcity, informed by whiteness, perpetuates and reinforces the tensions outlined in this study.

Systemic Influences

Understanding these influences begins with exploring the historical roots of the binary. Binaries serve as a foundational mechanism for defining and solidifying power dynamics. Throughout the history of the United States, binaries have been utilized to delineate distinct groups, beginning with the categorization of Christian versus pagan, followed by the division between European settlers and African or Native workers, and culminating in the segregation of White individuals from non-White individuals (Kivel, 2002, as cited in Okun, 2010). This binary framework fosters a dualistic mode of thinking, characterized by the perception of opposing qualities such as good versus bad, right versus wrong, and strong versus weak. Notably, within this construct, whiteness has been symbolically associated with attributes such as “honor, purity, cleanliness, and godliness” (Kivel, 2002, as cited in Okun, 2010, p.18).

The concept of whiteness can also be likened to property, as it is invested in and serves as a means of accumulating and safeguarding wealth (Lipsitz, 2006). This “possessive investment”

in whiteness creates unequal educational opportunities exhibited in schools. This creation of “the haves” and the “have nots” is another instance of the binary framework at play. School districts that routinely have more students pass standardized tests are located in areas inhabited by White individuals from mostly middle to upper-class backgrounds. The school receives generous amounts of funding compared to its counterparts and provides more “enriched intellectual property” in the form of curriculum materials (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.54).

Consequently, these schools consistently have the reputation of being exceptional, creating a clear separation between neighborhoods of schools where the majority of students pass the test and the neighborhoods of schools where the majority of the students fail. That separation is intentional. There needs to be a difference between the two populations, so there is a difference in prestige as whiteness is understood in relation to the other (Green et al., 2007). Whiteness is constituted by what it is not. It is the production of dominance, and within the binary, it is the norm rather than marginal and the privilege rather than disadvantage (Green et al., 2007).

The separation is maintained through the continual reliance on standardized tests as the primary measure of a school's effectiveness, perpetuating one right way to be successful. Within the education system, these tests reflect a standard rooted in whiteness, serving as the norm against which all other standards are compared (Lipsitz, 2006). As outlined in chapter two, this norm creates hyperstandardization and hyperaccountability through standardized testing with the goal for everyone to achieve a standard of excellence entrenched in White upper and middle-class values (Royal & Gibson, 2017). Consequently, schools with predominantly White upper and middle-class student populations have an advantage in achieving success in these tests. Conversely, schools like Ashley and Michael's, with more diverse student demographics,

struggle to excel in standardized tests. This is not due to any disparity in intelligence but rather because the tests, rooted in whiteness, are structured in a manner that predisposes these students to failure (Kendi, 2016). The focus on the assessments creates a belief that something is wrong with those not passing the assessment. With one right way, those who are introduced to the correct way need to adopt it. If they do not, something is wrong with them.

Within this context, educators encounter obstacles in pursuing anti-racist pedagogical approaches such as CSP. Royal and Gibson's (2017) insights shed light on the enduring impact of standardization and accountability in education. The authors explored the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in Philadelphia public schools before and after the 2001 state takeover, noting a significant shift. Royal and Gibson found that before neoliberal reform measures and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) implementation, many Black educators infused the tenets of CRP into their pedagogical practices. However, the legislative act created an era characterized by the normalcy of hyperstandardization and hyperaccountability. Consequently, states began creating and monitoring standardized assessments with consequential rewards and punishments based on the outcome of the tests.

When school districts serving historically marginalized student populations fall short on state tests, they come under intense scrutiny from stakeholders, often amplified by media coverage. However, this scrutiny oversimplifies the complexities of the educational system. Instead, it functions more like a “meat cleaver; they deliver short, sharp blows, separating one part of the bone from another - a kind of either/or on the butcher’s block” (Eisner, 1994, p. 2). As such, district leaders and teachers feel the weight, and the cycle of standardization and accountability continues. School districts rush to make as much progress as quickly as possible. Resultingly, instructional approaches rooted in urgency that value quantity over quality, and one

right way become dominant. This emphasis on rapid improvement often masks the underlying issues, perpetuating a cycle where the same problems resurface, and the same solutions are repeatedly attempted.

The participants' experiences highlight the pervasive influence of White supremacy culture characteristics, particularly the binary and one right way, within their educational context. Their district's pursuit of improved performance on standardized assessments has led to an environment characterized by standardization and accountability. This environment is underpinned by a fundamental belief in the existence of a dichotomy between "good" and "bad" schools and districts, with performance on standardized tests serving as the sole determinant of this classification. This dichotomy obscures the complexities of the educational system and creates a hierarchy that reinforces oppressive constructs, which Okun argues is the primary function of the binary (2010, p.25). The oppressive constructs manifest in prescribed curriculum, restrictive schedules, and frequently mandated testing.

This environment creates tension for the participants as they endeavor to understand and implement culturally sustaining pedagogy. This tension manifests as a clash between two conflicting systems: one that perpetuates the status quo and another that seeks to disrupt it. Despite the district's commitment to equitable educational practices, as evidenced by its equity-oriented strategic plan, the development of equity facilitators, and professional learning focused on asset-based teaching strategies, the pressure to exhibit tangible progress on standardized tests undermines the adoption of the nuanced and culturally sustaining approaches advocated by CSP. The systemic perspective suggests that the educational system is structured in a way that inherently produces these outcomes, making it challenging for educators like Michael and Ashley to navigate and find fulfillment within the existing framework.

Personal Influences

The data revealed the ways the binary functions at a personal level for both participants as well. The binary operates at the personal level to maintain the struggle to understand ourselves in either/or terms (Okun, 2010). As we try to define who is good and who is bad, we desire to be good, “which we understand as a kind of immutable perfection” (Okun, 2010, p.24). Ashley’s responses exhibited this dichotomous construct. The data conveyed that Ashley felt a demarcation between what she was supposed to do as defined by district mandates and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Her reference to an “angel” on one shoulder and “devil” on the other highlighted this. When Ashley made this statement, she characterized the “angel” as the “rule follower” and the devil as the “buck the system person.” The binary creates an idea that there can only be one or the other. It reinforces and designates power, encapsulating a dichotomous worldview in which one facet is intrinsically aligned with virtue (“good”). In contrast, the other is invariably designated as vice (“bad”) (Okun, 2010). This simplistic dichotomy creates an innate aspiration to align oneself with what is perceived as “good,” thereby perpetuating a desire for conformity. For Ashley, the “rule follower” embodies virtue and adherence to established norms, while the “bucking the system” characteristic exemplifies deviance. The conflict between these two identities echoes the broader implications of the binary construct in creating a framework that prioritizes one side over the other, consequently reinforcing existing power dynamics (Okun, 2010).

Furthermore, the inherent incompatibility demonstrates the contradictions and complexities of the binary, as posited by Okun (2010). The perceived deviant pedagogical approaches, such as CSP, are aligned more closely with the educational needs of Ashley’s students. Ashley second-guesses these approaches, perceiving them as insubordinate. Okun’s

assertion that “The whole part of the binary is to erase complexities while creating a hierarchy that reinforces oppressive constructs” (2010, p.25) illuminates the underlying dynamics. The educational system, characterized by its confining schedule, predetermined curriculum map, and rigid state standards, exemplifies how the binary can erase complexities and, in turn, foster hierarchical structures that mandate specific pedagogical approaches that reinforce oppressive constructs. This, in essence, perpetuates the prevailing status quo.

The application of binary thinking is also evident in Michael's perceptions of his students. Michael frequently characterized his students as unmotivated creating a dichotomy of unmotivated and motivated. This dichotomy confines his understanding to dualistic thinking and hinders his ability to consider other factors that may contribute to his students' disengagement (Okun, 2010). Okun argues that binary thinking leads us to simplify complex situations through dualism, providing a false sense of understanding and control (2010). For Michael, this manifests in his belief that his students lack motivation, a perspective reinforced by the observations of parents and colleagues who also perceive a decline in student effort. Michael's frequent remark about his perceived loss of influence, expressed as "my power is gone," reflects his struggle with this binary perspective as well. As stated previously the binary operates to keep us confined to understand ourselves in either/or terms. For Michael that is a dichotomy of having power and not having power. Binary thinking leads to urgency in decision-making and hinders time to reflect and consider alternatives (Okun). In Michael's case, the structural constraints within which he operated did not afford him the luxury of time for reflection or contemplation of alternative explanations for his experiences. Instead, every aspect of his experience seemed to reinforce the notion of the binary.

The data analysis further elucidated the influence of the belief in one right way on Ashley and Michael's experiences. As previously underscored, this particular trait manifests as a conviction that there exists a singular, optimal approach to tasks and that once individuals comprehend this correct method, they will readily embrace and adopt it (Okun). Both Ashley and Michael expressed trepidation regarding the integration of culturally sustaining pedagogy into their mathematics curriculum. Mathematics is usually taught within a perceived objective structure. The teacher models what the students are expected to learn, and the students practice those expectations. There is not a lot of subjectivity or room for autonomy. This educational paradigm is informed by the inherent belief in one right way. There is a prevailing notion that a singular, universally correct method is used to approach mathematics. Teachers are encouraged to teach with fidelity to the prescribed curriculum. This adherence to the prescribed curriculum is often used to ensure compliance, thereby making it difficult for the use of asset-based approaches.

Michael's comparison between former and current students' engagement reflects a specific expectation connected to one right way. When unchallenged, whiteness can be a defining framework for motivation and achievement (Green et al., 2007). Michael's perspective on his students' motivation exemplifies how these ideals manifest in the data. His understanding of motivation appears to be influenced by a particular framework—one that equates effort with adherence to specific task completion criteria. In this view, students are perceived as lacking motivation if they do not conform to a predetermined model of diligence, as evidenced by their failure to complete tasks in a manner that aligns with Michael's expectations. This narrow conception of motivation, rooted in a specific performance-based paradigm, overlooks alternative forms of engagement and undermines the diverse ways in which students may

demonstrate their commitment to learning. Michael seems to grapple with a desire to mold his current students into replicas of his past experiences, potentially overlooking how they express engagement and motivation.

Culture of Scarcity

The maintenance of whiteness through White supremacy culture characteristics like the binary and one right way cultivates and reinforces a culture of scarcity within education. This mindset manifests as a pervasive sense of not being enough and not doing enough (Okun). Brown (2012) identifies three key components of scarcity culture: shame, comparison, and disengagement. Whiteness contributes to the perpetuation of shame by tying self-worth to achievements, productivity, or compliance. It fosters a culture of comparison by imposing a singular standard against which all are measured, disregarding unique contributions and talents. Finally, it creates a disengagement where people are afraid of taking risks. This dynamic is deeply rooted in the history of education, where specific standards of success and worthiness have been established and upheld by those in power. The pressure of high-stakes testing and the need to cover a multitude of standards within a limited timeframe create an environment where educators often struggle to feel a sense of accomplishment. This system, primarily geared towards producing quantifiable results, prioritizes quantity over quality and does not adequately recognize the importance of nurturing meaningful relationships within the learning environment.

Scarcity showed up with both participants in the conversation around time. Ashley and Michael felt an overwhelming sense of limited time to meet the needs of their students. They both expressed frustration with balancing what they believed to be true about good teaching and the structures they were operating in. They questioned their ability as teachers and struggled to feel like they were doing enough for their students. While there were similarities between the

two, there were also differences. With Ashley, this showed up in her belief in herself. Ashley referred to herself as a perfectionist, stating that she stresses herself out more about this job than anything else, also calling herself an overthinker.

Ashley's statement communicates the pressure she feels to achieve. Brown (2020) provides insight into the nature of perfectionism, distinguishing it from healthy striving or self-improvement. She characterizes perfectionism as a "debilitating belief system" that equates one's worth with one's accomplishments and the quality of those accomplishments (Brown, 2020, p. 76). This belief is rooted in the idea that perfection, as defined by external standards, is attainable and indicative of one's value (Okun). Consequently, perfectionism is often driven by a concern for external validation and a fear of judgment (Brown, 2020). In the context of White supremacy culture, perfectionism serves as a tool to maintain inequities by directing individuals' focus toward achieving external standards rather than questioning or challenging the existing system (Okun).

Michael's perception of his students' lack of motivation can be seen as a manifestation of the culture of scarcity perpetuated by whiteness. By viewing his students from a lens of scarcity, Michael may have been predisposed to see them as falling short or "lacking" in meeting certain standards, reflecting the pervasive "never enough" mindset described by Brown (2012). In the context of education, where the emphasis often lies on achieving more and meeting external markers of success, this culture of scarcity can dominate beliefs and perceptions, leading to a constant sense of inadequacy. Brown (2012) describes scarcity as "the great lie," a concept that resonates with the pervasive feelings of insufficiency that can result from a scarcity mindset. This mindset can be particularly deceptive, as it leads individuals to constantly compare themselves to others or previous standards, perpetuating a cycle of dissatisfaction and a sense of

never measuring up. Michael's tendency to compare his current students to his past experiences with other classrooms aligns with this pattern of comparison as a form of scarcity, wherein the past is idealized and used as a benchmark for evaluating the present.

Contending with the System

As chapters four and five demonstrate, Michael and Ashley felt confined to the systemic impact of whiteness and their efforts to challenge its constraints. The data indicated that both participants contended with the system through two primary strategies: creating an atmosphere of belonging and developing critical consciousness. However, despite their efforts, the pervasive influence of whiteness adds layers of complexity. The next section delves into the ways in which whiteness shapes the challenges associated with creating inclusive environments and fostering critical consciousness.

Creating Inclusive Environments

Culturally sustaining pedagogy aims to establish spaces of belonging that honor and sustain the cultural practices of historically marginalized communities that have endured erasure within educational contexts (Django & Paris, 2017, p. 1). Michael and Ashley articulated various ways they have tried to create a sense of belonging. However, these efforts are complicated by the prevailing dominant culture that emphasizes assimilation over belonging. Assimilation, deeply intertwined with whiteness (Django & Paris, 2017), challenges Ashley and Michael's initiatives. Brown (2020) posits that individuals are often pressured to conform to established norms to gain acceptance and approval. Fitting in involves evaluating a situation and modifying one's behavior to align with prevailing expectations, thereby perpetuating a culture that prioritizes specific individuals and fosters an exclusive "in-crowd" dynamic that others aspire to

join (Brown, 2020). This normative behavior is often disguised as a standard or simply the customary way of operating. White supremacy, as Okun suggests, thrives on a toxic sense of belonging that masquerades as normalcy (Okun).

The data revealed the manifestation of this dynamic in Ashley and Michael's context. For instance, as illustrated previously, creating trust was a salient theme for Ashley. She articulated the ways she strives to create safety in her classroom so her students feel they can be themselves, free of performing or masking who they really are. Ashley spoke of the unspoken rules among her students that hinder her ability to create this safety. Similarly, Michael detailed how certain students are perceived as "outsiders." Reflecting on his own experiences of exclusion in the past, Michael attributed this to his personal traits, such as introversion, and extended this reasoning to his students who faced similar challenges. Initially, Michael seemed to perceive these dynamics as normal, drawing from his own experiences. However, through ongoing conversations, he began to perceive these occurrences through a different lens, questioning why the same patterns he experienced in his youth were still prevalent in his classroom.

In both of the participants' contexts, their students inherently understand how to fit in. Ashley and Michael expressed frustration with this phenomenon and emphasized the challenges of altering it. One specific challenge, as articulated by Ashley, is the parallel between the dynamics in her classroom and those in broader society, highlighting schools as microcosms of the larger sociopolitical landscape (Safir, 2017, p. 61). This observation underscores how whiteness contributes to the tension experienced by Ashley and Michael as they navigate the educational system. Their experiences are situated within a broader belief system that promotes a normative standard aligning with the dominant group, marginalizing those who diverge from this standard. This is not only evident with their students, but also in Ashley's articulation of

unspoken rules regarding teachers. White supremacy culture encourages one to conform and acquiesce to the dominant way of being. This influence is so pervasive that individuals collude in an effort to survive (Okun, 2010, p. 7). Survival, in this context, is closely linked to fear, with the primary strategy of White supremacy culture being the cultivation of fear, particularly fear of not belonging or not being enough (Okun). This pervasive influence of White supremacy culture makes challenging the systemic impact of whiteness a formidable task (Django & Paris, 2017).

Developing Critical Consciousness

Diverging from the traditional operational norms within the educational system necessitates a shift in thinking, particularly in recognizing and challenging the pervasive influence of whiteness and White supremacy culture. This process involves a deliberate effort of unlearning and relearning, facilitated by cultivating critical consciousness. The data analysis identified the development of critical consciousness as a prominent theme for both participants. They both emphasized the significance of guiding their students in examining prevailing ideologies that perpetuate inequalities while also empowering them to recognize their agency in challenging these inequities. However, the prevalent influence of whiteness presents a daunting barrier to the cultivation of critical consciousness.

This barrier was evident for both participants. For example, Ashley and Michael expressed difficulties in assisting their students in recognizing they have the power to affect change within their communities. Despite their efforts, the students seemed to lack belief in their own agency. Additionally, both participants faced challenges in encouraging their students to look beyond their immediate circumstances and consider broader societal issues. They expressed frustration at their students' tendencies toward self-centeredness rather than viewing their actions from a communal lens. Ashley and Michael expressed a desire to see their students develop their

consciousness and for that development to be evident in a change in their behavior. The participants not only noted the development of critical awareness in their students but also expressed a personal commitment to their own ongoing growth and development of critical consciousness. They emphasized the importance of this process as a continuous journey, acknowledging that there is always more to learn. While both educators framed this journey as ongoing, they also wanted their heightened consciousness to become second nature or automatic. Although the desire to see tangible evidence of transformative change is understandable, the process is inherently challenging and has many complexities.

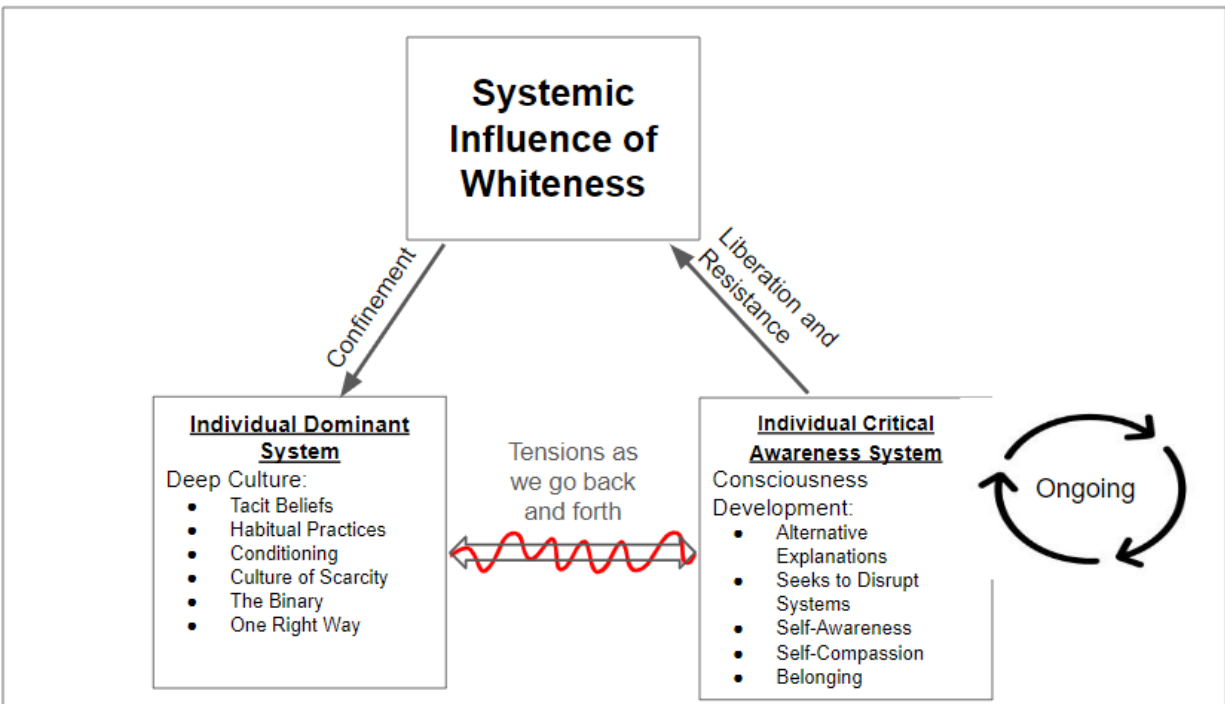
Whiteness informs these complexities as it plays a role in our conditioning. Conditioning happens subconsciously and is shaped by our close relationships with others (LePera, 2022). Hammond (2015) refers to this level as our deep culture. We learn, subconsciously, to embody the same beliefs, ways of communication, ways of expressing or coping with emotions, and other habits as those we are around (Hammond, 2015; LePera, 2022). Given the pervasive nature of whiteness, our conditioning is inherently informed by White supremacy (Okun). The thoughts and behaviors ingrained through conditioning are reinforced over time through repetition, strengthening neural pathways associated with these patterns. Consequently, challenging dominant narratives necessitates the development of new neural pathways to accommodate alternative belief systems (Hammond, 2015), marking the beginning of consciousness development, which is the foundation of transformation (LePera, 2022). I did not find much evidence that the two participants were fully cognizant of how deep and challenging it is to cultivate consciousness in this way.

The process of developing consciousness poses a formidable challenge, as it involves becoming aware of the tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions (Hammond, 2015) we

hold, which can create tension when acquiring new thoughts. When embarking on the journey of developing critical consciousness, individuals encounter messages that reinforce their existing beliefs and discourage the exploration of alternative perspectives. This phenomenon, known as confirmation bias, predisposes individuals to seek information that aligns with their preconceived notions, thereby perpetuating and protecting those beliefs (Aguilar, 2020; Eberhardt, 2020). Eberhardt (2020) notes that confirmation bias can allow inaccurate beliefs to persist, hindering the development of critical awareness.

The aforementioned challenges have direct implications for Michael and Ashley's endeavors to develop their consciousness and facilitate the development of critical awareness in their students. The aspiration to attain automaticity or observe tangible behavioral changes can hinder consciousness development. This process is akin to establishing a new system within the brain, as our existing thought patterns are structured around automatic assumptions and beliefs ingrained in us since birth. The coexistence of our dominant system and the development of a new system of thinking represents a dialectical relationship, echoing Nieto's assertion that culture is dialectical in nature. Nieto (2008) posits that culture is not inherently dichotomous as "good" or "bad" but instead reflects values that have evolved from historical and social contexts. She further cites scholar Rafael Ramirez's conceptualization of culture as comprising two contradictory subsystems: survival and liberation. The culture of survival encompasses attitudes, values, traditions, and behaviors developed in response to perceived threats to survival posed by political, economic, or social forces. In contrast, the culture of liberation embodies values, attitudes, traditions, and behaviors that encapsulate liberatory aspects of culture. This subsystem is instrumental in challenging and disrupting societal inequities.

Figure 1:
Two Opposing Internal Systems



Essentially, the challenges encountered by Ashley and Michael reflect the interplay between an overarching system rooted in whiteness and two types of internal systems—one that confines individuals and another that resists systemic constraints. Thesaurus.com offers a range of terms that can be used to describe systems, including arrangement, organization, structure, conformity, ideology, and setup, all of which illustrate the objectives of whiteness at both societal and personal levels. As depicted in Figure 1, whiteness, as an overarching system, creates confinement by influencing our individual dominant belief system. This belief system, shaped by our tacit understandings, constitutes our deep-seated cultural norms. As we cultivate our critical awareness, we construct an alternative system that disrupts the beliefs shaped by whiteness. We navigate between these two systems, reconciling our prior knowledge with newfound awareness. This oscillation creates tensions as the insights we acquire may contradict the foundational beliefs we once considered truths. Through the cultivation of awareness, which

includes self-compassion, we embark on the journey of liberating ourselves and resisting the pervasive influences of whiteness. It is imperative to acknowledge that the pursuit of consciousness-raising is perpetual and ongoing.

The daunting task of cultivating critical awareness was evident. Ashley's reflections capture the overwhelming nature of this task as she stated, "To me it feels overwhelming at times just because like there's so much that's deep-rooted in our systems that we need to change. And like, it makes me feel powerless sometimes." Similarly, Michael's experiences highlight the complexities involved in navigating these conflicting systems. He frequently expressed frustration over his perceived inability to motivate his students, feeling powerless at times. While he often expressed frustration with his students' lack of change, there were instances where the data suggested a shift in perspective, indicating that Michael himself was undergoing a process of change. This was particularly evident in his reflections on his past self and his aspirations to rekindle the qualities of the teacher he once was.

The interplay between the two internal systems articulated does not adhere to the simplistic either/or framework characteristic of White supremacy culture. Rather, it reflects the intricate nature of these systems, which are born out of necessity. Our individual dominant system evolves as a means of navigating and surviving the pervasive impact of whiteness as it produces ways of being that require us to "armor up" (Brown, 2020) and create coping mechanisms against external pressures, leading us to disengage from our authentic selves (Bryant, 2022). The recognition of the necessity for a "homecoming," as articulated by Bryant (2022), signifies an awakening to the need for heightened awareness and a critical reevaluation of deeply ingrained beliefs and perceptions.

The recognition for critical evaluation is not always apparent. Hammond (2015) notes, "Culture is the air we breathe, permeating all we do." The most challenging culture to examine is our own because it feels normative. Without this examination, we remain unaware of the pervasive influence of White supremacy culture on our lives and the ways in which we have colluded with it to survive (Okun). This examination takes time, as Freire (1970) notes, "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one" (p.49). Rushing through or trivializing these internal conflicts is a tactic of White supremacy as it obscures the complexity of human beings and fosters a need for certainty and an illusion of arrival. However, arrival in this context is an illusion, as the journey of consciousness development is ongoing and ever-evolving.

The preceding chapter delineated how whiteness, under the auspices of White supremacy, informs the tensions experienced by the participants. This knowledge underscores the significance of comprehending how the pervasive influence of whiteness, and consequently White supremacy, operates at both the structural and the deepest personal levels. As Okun posits, "We are all swimming in the waters of White supremacy culture. We are all navigating this culture, regardless of our racial identity" (Okun). Consequently, we are tasked with "navigating the complexity of our conditioning without losing sight of the inherent humanity in each of us" (Okun). The next chapter elaborates on my approach to humanizing our experiences while responding to the participants.

Chapter 7: How do I respond to these findings to increase our understanding of CSP?

The preceding chapters have addressed my research questions by elucidating the insights gained from the collaborative endeavors with the participants to deepen our understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Furthermore, they have highlighted the impact of whiteness on these insights. This final chapter will extend the analysis with a closer look at my own practice as I consider the question: How do I respond to these findings to increase our understanding of CSP? I will offer insights into how my personal growth has shaped my interactions with participants, followed by an in-depth examination of three critical incidents that exemplify my responses. Subsequently, I will discuss the implications of these findings and outline future steps for both personal development and the advancement of others in this field.

My Journey

A year before starting this project, I began therapy for the first time in my life. This pivotal experience unveiled my generalized anxiety disorder, and I began to develop a profound understanding of its manifestations in my life. This newfound awareness illuminated how my anxiety was intricately intertwined with my childhood experiences, persisting into adulthood. I started to realize my enduring struggle with seeking external validation and grappling with self-doubt. This recognition prompted a transformative journey toward emotional healing and self-discovery. As a result, I became aware of phrases like people-pleasing, perfectionism, and suffering in silence. These were phrases I had never heard of before but encapsulated my life's trajectory.

Craving to learn more, I began listening to podcasts that focused on self-awareness and healing in addition to therapy. Concurrently, I avidly sought literature to augment my

understanding, leading me to the profound insights of Dr. Thema Bryant, a distinguished Black female psychologist. Her seminal work, *Homecoming: Overcoming Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole, Authentic Self*, published in early 2022, became an integral part of my journey. I began reading her book as I navigated this research project.

Dr. Bryant's impactful insights resonated deeply with my personal journey. She provided concrete examples of how I had not been living authentically. Dr. Bryant suggests that one may be in need of a "homecoming." Homecoming, as she describes it, "is returning to authentic living that is based on truth, self-acceptance, and aligning of action with values and purpose" (2022, p.4). She articulates being at home within oneself entails freedom from the need to prove anything, liberation from pretense, and the absence of performance pressure. This realization struck a chord with me, as I came to recognize that I had been living a performative existence shaped by my childhood experiences that fostered disconnection from who I truly am. Dr. Bryant's conceptual framework not only provided concrete examples of my inauthentic living but also served as a guiding light in my journey toward reclaiming my authentic self.

The insights gleaned from therapy and Dr. Bryant's work profoundly influenced my approach in the sessions with the participants. As I internalized the concept of homecoming and its implications for authentic living, I learned how to humanize myself. Collins dictionary defines humanizing as "to make humane; make kind, merciful, considerate; civilize; refine." In looking at this definition, it is important to define humane. Dictionary.com defines humane as "tenderness, compassion, and sympathy for people and animals, especially for the suffering or distressed." It also defines it as "acting in a manner that causes the least harm." For me, humanizing is about first understanding the complexities that we all have as individuals. This requires looking below the surface to understand how dominant systems have been deeply

ingrained into our psyche and influence how we see ourselves, each other, and society in general. Understanding these complexities within oneself is crucial for understanding them in others. As I began to understand how Whiteness caused the disconnection from self that I was experiencing, I learned to have grace for my struggles and understand them in the context of the entire system and not see them as individual acts. This self-awareness allowed me to see the participants and their students more intricately.

Consequently, I became committed to fostering a space where the participants could humanize themselves and their experiences as well as their students. In reviewing the data, I found various moves I made to center and recenter our discussions towards a deeper understanding of ourselves and our students.

Humanizing the Work

After analyzing the data, I identified three interactions I consider to be critical incidents that exemplify my efforts to humanize the work. Tripp (2012) characterizes critical incidents as commonplace interactions perceived as critical. They are deemed critical due to our interpretation of the incident as significant, often revealing underlying trends, motives, and structures (Tripp, 2012). While numerous incidents occurred, these particular examples crystallize how I attempted to navigate the responses of my participants by humanizing our shared experiences. In reviewing the data, I discerned two ways I tried to cultivate an understanding of humanity in our experiences: embracing complexity and cultivating self-compassion. By acknowledging the complexity of systems, we can begin to develop self-compassion, thereby shifting our focus from individuals to the system itself. A systems thinking approach helps us see “interrelationships and patterns of change rather than isolated events and helps us identify the structures that underlie complex situations” (Aguilar, 2020, p.25). The

subsequent section provides a detailed description of the three interactions and my actions, illustrating how these principles manifested.

Critical Incident 1: Discontinuity

As mentioned in earlier chapters, each of our sessions was underpinned by texts centered on culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Analysis of the data indicates a recurring pattern wherein I frequently steered the participants back to these materials in an effort to reframe our conversation. A notable time occurred in our first session when reading the Ladson-Billings text. Here, I guided the conversation back to the text by prompting the participants to consider specific language embedded within the readings. My intention was to assist the participants in adopting a more nuanced perspective of their students. I perceived that they were viewing their students through a simplistic lens and aimed to facilitate a shift towards a more complex understanding, both to humanize their students and to humanize their experiences.

After engaging with the text, I prompted the participants to reflect on what resonated with them. Both Ashley and Michael expressed concern over what they perceived as a lack of motivation among their students. As previously detailed, Michael attributed this to a perceived loss of power, while Ashley shared her belief that she was not effectively fostering intrinsic motivation and academic excellence. As the discussion unfolded, Ashley shared a specific example of a student whom she believed possessed intrinsic motivation to complete assignments but whose social motivation outweighed the intrinsic drive. I encouraged them to reconsider their student's actions through the lens of the phrase "locate the problem of discontinuity between the students' experience at home and what they experience at school" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 159), asking, "Do you think that is what is the root of it?" Ashley asked for clarification, stating, "So like what is um...important at home isn't bridged here to what's important? Is that kind of

what you're saying?" To aid Ashley's comprehension, I elucidated that there exists a gap or discontinuity between students' experiences at home, which encompasses not only their physical residences but also their social and extracurricular activities outside of school, and their experiences within the school environment, stating,

There is a gap or discontinuity between their experiences that they're having at home. And when I say home, I'm not just talking about in their home, I'm talking about like socially and um, outside of school period. And then what they have...and then what happens here at school.

In framing our discussion back to the text, my intention was to introduce language that would challenge Ashley and Michael's preconceptions regarding their students' motivation. I aimed to prompt them to consider alternative explanations for their perceptions, as "language is a means through which we can imagine and create alternatives to our current reality" (Aguilar, 2020, p.146). By doing so, I sought to encourage a shift in their perspectives and foster a deeper understanding of their students' experiences within the context of culturally sustaining pedagogy and disrupt simplistic notions.

In response to my questioning, Michael stated that the student's parents would agree that students are unmotivated. As discussed in the previous chapter, Michael also provided examples of speaking to teachers in other disciplines that confirm this belief. Michael's statements illustrated that he did not understand what I was asking. After giving examples of the adults who would confirm his belief regarding student motivation, he lamented the ways his students do not put forth effort, stating,

And again, I, I know it's not like a negative teacher, but it just seems to be like, every aspect of these kids' lives is let's do it quick. Let's give it everything we've got for five minutes, and then we're done and then we'll move on to something else. It's like the concept of, or the idea of, 'Hey, this isn't gonna come easily to you.' You know, a lot of repeated work day after day after day. And by the way, your brain actually works better when you struggle really hard with something, then you take a break, then you come back and do it again. That's actually...like your long division. Ooh. Yeah. That was three

weeks of total nightmare trying to get these kids to understand it's okay if you don't get it yet. That's normal. They, they expected to get it in 10 minutes. And to me, it's more that than anything else.

Michael ended his reflection stating, “Do I feel like there’s a disconnection between what I’m seeing here at school and what, what the families are seeing at home? Doesn’t sound like it.”

I then interjected, stating,

Not even what they're seeing at home, but like that there's a separation between what they, what they are interested in, like what they are. Um...so bridging that link between, so like if you have a child that is...whose home life is just very different from what is happening in school. So you can see that disconnect there, but sometimes it's not so drastically different. It's just that what they're interested in is very different than what we're talking about in school. And then there's that discontinuity. So not necessarily what the parents are seeing, but just like this is home. This is school. I'm real interested in these easy things. Like you talked about, I'm real interested in Roblox. I'm real interested in the instant gratification things. So, there's a disconnect between home and school. Am I making sense?

In this exchange, my aim was to guide Michael in recognizing that even the students' interests can contribute to a disconnect from the classroom content. Furthermore, I sought to convey that parents might not perceive this disconnect either. Given that Michael taught students identified as high-ability, I speculated that their home lives might align closely with the norm, making it challenging to discern any disconnect. I pointed out that such subtle disparities might be overlooked if the students and their families' ways of being closely mirrored the dominant culture. My intention was to encourage Michael to consider that the disconnect might be more nuanced and unfamiliar than he had previously contemplated.

I asked Michael if what I stated made sense to him. Michael responded with more examples of how his students struggle to stay engaged beyond a short period of time. In his reflection, he shared how he tries to remedy the disengagement in math by allowing the students to struggle and then creating a way for them to “see success really fast.” Michael shared that his goal is to help his students not panic and build their confidence. While this is something he’s

learned to do, he also expressed that this does not always work, stating, “But then a lot of times, I’ve already lost them.”

As the conversation progressed, Michael continued to share what he has learned throughout his tenure, focusing on the importance of “planning success” as a way to build his students' confidence. He reiterated that even by doing that, his students struggle to be engaged, stating,

And I'm just, I'm looking out here at my classroom of desks, and I'm thinking, and again, this year in particular, it just seems like most of those kiddos or girls where they can have that success, they can be excited. They were excited, but then when it comes time for, okay, now I'm gonna go work with this other group or now it's time for you to do this work independently. Just, I don't know.

Once Michael shared his thoughts, Ashley shared her understanding of the disconnect between her students and schools. She related the disconnection to the negative interactions students have within her classroom due to social media. She explained,

“I think a lot of the disconnects I see is just the way that they, um, just interact with one another, like they have. Um, and it's something that we're still learning about, cuz we didn't have it as much when we were younger, but like social media and things and how they're able to communicate with one another. It's not the same as when your in person.”

Ashley expanded on this, articulating that her students are using social media to hurt each other intentionally with no repercussions. The lack of repercussions leads them to exhibit the same behavior in class, which is causing her to struggle. She expressed that her students “don’t really care how people feel.”

I responded to Ashley by affirming her thoughts. I characterized the tension she described as a “battle,” stating, “It's like you're battling, um...So there are positives with the instant gratification type of things like with social media or Roblox and all that kind of stuff.” I then shared how my daughter recently began using Roblox and the difficulty I was having with limiting her time as a way to relate to what they were experiencing. I then stated that social

media usage has positives and negatives. I expressed that social media can cause one to desire unrealistic things and that teachers have to battle the messages students receive about instant gratification. It was important to validate Ashley's feelings as a way to humanize what she was experiencing. At this point, I perceived the shifts I attempted to make as not working. The participants could not see beyond their initial understanding of their experience. Realizing this, I then switched to another topic related to the text.

In the preceding incident, I attempted to reframe the conversation to the language in the Ladson-Billings text. My aim was to guide the participants toward recognizing that a perceived lack of motivation among students could be symptomatic of a broader discontinuity between their home environments and the school setting. This intervention was intended to facilitate a shift in perspective, steering the discussion away from a deficit-oriented viewpoint towards a more nuanced understanding. In reviewing the data, I interpreted Michael's responses as the shift not working. His reiterated belief in students' supposed lack of motivation appeared reinforced, with examples provided seemingly confirming this viewpoint. While Ashley's response was different, I also perceived them as not working. She related the disconnection to the negative interactions students have within her classroom due to social media. Ashley's responses illustrated to me that she is identifying a discontinuity between her students' home and school life, but not in the way I hoped she would. I perceived both participants' responses as attributing the issue to the students themselves, framing their lack of motivation or engagement as personal failings rather than as a result of divergent interests or influences.

This exchange underscored the challenges inherent in the process of understanding CSP. In my post-session journal entry, I reflected on the discussion. Upon reflecting, I wrote,

This is going to be harder than I thought. There were some misconceptions that came up today that I didn't expect to come up because they have been EF's (Equity Facilitators)

for the past year. I don't know that they truly understand what CRP really is. I also don't think they really understand what culture means.

This initial encounter served as a pivotal moment, shaping the trajectory of subsequent meetings. In my journal, I noted several strategies I needed to employ to help Ashley and Michael grow in their understanding. I contemplated the most effective strategies to facilitate their learning. I recognized the importance of focusing on shorter sections, preparing questions, and remaining flexible to allow for organic shifts in the discussion.

While the initial attempt to address the concept of discontinuity did not yield immediate results, a noticeable shift in the participants' perception of their students' cultural backgrounds emerged over the course of our sessions. This provided evidence of reflective practice and underscored the complexity inherent in gauging the efficacy of our discussions. Rather than viewing our interactions as discrete successes or failures, it became apparent that they functioned more as seeds planted during our exchanges, with the potential to germinate and mature over time. As noted earlier, The cultivation of critical consciousness entails a process of unlearning and relearning, challenging established thought patterns, and adopting new frameworks. This intricate, iterative process was vividly illustrated as I endeavored to center our conversation around the human experience to enhance our understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Critical Incident 2: Getting in the Way

Another incident I identified as critical occurred during the eighth session, which involved a planning discussion with Ashley. The objective of this meeting was to collaboratively devise a culturally sustaining lesson. Drawing from our previous sessions, I was aware of Ashley's struggle with perfectionism. Therefore, I sought to approach the planning process in incremental steps, aiming to avoid overwhelming her. It was imperative to me that she perceived

this as an enhancement of her existing practices rather than an additional burden. Furthermore, I aimed to ensure her comfort with the complexities of striving for CSP within a system that does not inherently support it. All of these objectives were rooted in my intent to humanize her and her experience. However, upon reviewing the data, I realized that my approach may have inadvertently hindered the planning process.

At the session's onset, Ashley outlined her pedagogical intentions for an upcoming lesson centered on *The Watson's Go to Birmingham* (Curtis, 1995), a novel set in the 1960s, depicting an African American family's life in Flint, Michigan. The narrative follows the family's journey to Alabama due to the eldest brother, Byron, behavioral issues. Ashley planned to highlight Byron's decision to perm his hair, aiming to explore the characters' emotional responses and connect them to cultural themes within her students' lives. She also intended to compare the societal norms and expectations in Flint, Michigan, and Alabama, recognizing the potential for insightful discussions. Ashley expressed her commitment to making the unit personally meaningful for her students, ensuring that the content resonated with their experiences.

As our discussion progressed, my goal was to help Ashley open up to her students, guiding the direction of the discussion based on their interests and preparing them to extend their associations by proactively planning for action, calling it the "so what." Ultimately, I aimed to shift her focus from viewing students as objects to seeing them as subjects (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Ashley's statements demonstrated that she was finding it challenging to come up with a culminating activity. Because of this, I shifted our focus to immediate actions the students could take with their connections and instead focused on cultivating open-ended conversations about topics of interest to the students. As stated previously, I did not want Ashley to feel overwhelmed. I wanted her to feel as though this is not something extra and that she can work

with me to create a unit or lesson that is culturally sustaining. This is illustrated in my post-reflection journal, where I wrote, “I really had to sit and think about a way to help Ashley with this. I had to be mindful of where she is in her understanding and not overwhelm her.”

As the conversation continued, Ashley articulated her perception of the challenges inherent in planning open-ended units guided by student responses. She noted that such units deviate from her usual approach to planning. I continued to reiterate the importance of students being the subjects and not the objects, stating, “So how do we make them the subject? How do we make it be about them? And then, and then sit and, and think about, “Now what do I do with this information?” Because I think that's half the battle is just doing that is making it more about them and less about the text itself.” Ashley expressed uncertainty, stating,

So is that gonna come through things...cuz it won't come through like our reading standards, which are gonna be about setting and theme and things like that. But could it be something that would be like if we come up with a theme for the book and they could talk about, I don't know, they could connect big ideas and themes to their lives. Cuz there are questions that could be, I don't know.

In response, I provided Ashley with specific examples to illustrate how she could integrate these ideas into her teaching. I believed offering concrete examples would support her as she navigated the complexities of adapting her instructional practices to a more student-centered focus, as illustrated in the following dialogue:

Me: It could be as simple as you, you read through the, the next chapter whatever you're getting ready to read and, and you and I could tease it through right now of like what could be some possible things that could come up for them and it could look like, like what keeps coming to my mind is this thing called, um, a storying connection where they read it, they read a text and they write about, um, the connections that they make through it. And it could be like, you could collect those connections or however, you know, electronically or whatever the case may be. And you look through them and you find common themes, common connections that they're making. And then it could be them having a discussion about those connections and seeing like in, in some form or fashion.

Ashley: Like, um, as a whole class or, like pulling them into small groups. Like, ‘You guys really, I noticed that a lot of you wrote about this. Could you guys just kind of talk about your experiences since you all wrote about this?’ Kinda like that? Kinda separating them into small group type things. (She begins taking notes)

Me: Mm-hmm. And then depending on what they say, um, it could even be just you have a visual of... these are the connections that are coming up for us here in this chapter. Okay. You read the next chapter, and these are the connections that are coming up for us here. Is there a common theme? Are the same things coming up for us? I don't know if that works or not, but like you just kind of... like piecing it together of, what are the common, the things that keep coming up, and maybe from that there's a culminating activity or something like that. But it's really just really interrogating what they think. And then where do you go with it?

Ashley: So like, they could still maybe do the one-pager culminating project, but it might be instead of working with their table groups, it might be groups based on their like connections to the story.

Me: Mm-hmm. And it could be more about...because when we read a text, when we read a book, we don't read it just to talk about the characters, the setting, and the plot, right? Like we read a book, it can be life-changing. It could really teach us about ourselves. So it could be where you go to a one-pager, it could be a different approach of whether we look at all these connections that you have made, all these thoughts that you have had and they culminate in some kind of way. Again, it is about them and not really about the...it is about the book, but their connection to the book. But you've helped them piece it together as they've gone.

In the preceding exchange, my aim was to assist Ashley in conceptualizing practical methods through which she could facilitate her students' transition from being the objects to the subjects of their learning. As stated previously, I wanted to ensure she did not feel overwhelmed, so I tried to build on her thinking to help her make connections. Ashley's responses indicated that she was comprehending the suggestions I was providing. She took notes throughout the discussion and extended my suggestion, connecting it to ideas she already planned.

The aforementioned interaction illustrates my support in assisting Ashley with a lesson she was uncertain about. However, a discernible shift became apparent upon reviewing the data as the discussions progressed. I continued to provide Ashley with resources that I believed would enhance her lesson, one of which was a strategy I had previously utilized with facilitators

in our district, known as "storying connections." During our conversation, I began explaining the directions for this activity. After I explained the directions there was a pause where Ashley did not say anything. I then asked her to share her thoughts with me. Ashley shared that she struggled to "anticipate" her student conversations because she is a planner. She expressed that she was trying to "let that go." I asked Ashley to elaborate on her statement. She explained that she found it hard to reconcile the students' connections with what she was "supposed to do with the book." She expounded, stating that she was on a timeline and she wanted to finish the book before the end of the year. Additionally, she expressed that she wants to ensure that she is "doing the book justice." Ashley further stated,

I think it's just honestly like that teacher control, like you wanna make sure that you're guiding them in the right direction, but with these connections and conversations, you can't really do that because they're the guides. So it's just what I'm used to and like what I'm trying to get to. So it's, it's me.

Ashley's responses underscore the shift in her perspective that I observed. Upon reviewing the data, it became apparent that this shift could be attributed, in part, to the multiple examples I presented. I believe that this contributed to Ashley's sense of being overwhelmed. In hindsight, I should have remained focused on her initial idea and assisted her in developing a plan around it. Instead, I continued to present additional examples. While I cannot definitively assert that my approach directly caused the tension Ashley began to experience, it seems that prior to my offering of further examples, she expressed confidence in her chosen instructional practices. Subsequently, after receiving them, her confidence waned, and she became uncertain about the direction of the unit and her own capabilities.

In response to Ashley's uncertainty, I emphasized the importance of being receptive to the unpredictability inherent in the process, stating that she must "be open to the messiness of it." Additionally, I provided her with guidance on how she could model the cognitive approaches she

aimed to cultivate in her students, viewing this as a form of "controlling" the outcome. Throughout our conversation, I continued to offer various strategies and approaches to help structure her lesson. My intention was to alleviate the perceived pressure on Ashley and bolster her confidence. At one juncture, I reassured her, stating, "And don't worry about perfection. Just get your feet wet with what you think matches your understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Do whatever you think. There's no right or wrong." Furthermore, I acknowledged the challenges inherent in navigating this process without a predefined roadmap, expressing to her that the sense of messiness stemmed from the absence of a clear path. In response, Ashley articulated her struggle, stating, "The sitting in the ick and the messiness, that's where I struggle. Cuz I like to have things together, and I like to have a plan. But I know that sometimes the plan is, no plan."

This critical incident underscores the intricate nature of the work involved in supporting educators like Ashley who want to use asset-based pedagogy. In reviewing the data, I found the ways I humanized Ashley by acknowledging and respecting her multifaceted nature. I acknowledged her struggle with perfectionism, which manifested in challenges related to planning lessons that diverged from traditional structures and offered strategies that built upon her existing practices. While these approaches occurred, I also recognized that I may have inadvertently hindered the process.

During our interaction, I had the opportunity to assist Ashley in formulating the initial stages of her instructional unit. Initially, Ashley appeared receptive to the ideas I presented. Instead of offering additional suggestions, I could have paused and proposed a more explicit planning session with her, where we collaboratively mapped out the lesson. Upon reflection, I realized that my persistent offering of resources may have stemmed from an excessive focus on

providing support. I mistakenly believed that by continuously offering examples, I could illustrate the simplicity of the task to her rather than meeting her at her current level and progressing from there, as originally intended.

In hindsight, I should have prioritized active listening without immediately attempting to rectify what I perceived needed to be fixed. I needed to create a space for Ashley to explore her thoughts through thoughtful questioning (Aguilar, 2020). By not doing so, I missed valuable opportunities to delve deeper into our discussion.

Critical Incident 3: Connecting to Dominant Systems

During our fifth meeting, a notable critical incident unfolded. I found this session to be significant for various reasons. In reviewing the data, I found that this conversation highlighted the ways I tried to humanize the tensions we all experience and connect those tensions to dominant systems. Particularly, I attempted to guide the participants towards an understanding that the challenges we face appear natural and normal, but they are in fact products of the dominant system that both informs and perpetuates these challenges, thus engendering the tensions we collectively feel. This was the first session I made the connection to mental health and the first time I shared my personal experiences. With this knowledge, I wanted Ashley and Michael to think complexly about themselves, their students, and the system we are navigating.

During this meeting, we read and reflected on the introduction to *Textured Teaching*. In this part of the book, Germán recounts her experiences in school, detailing how she attended a school where the population was predominantly Latinx students and the educators were White and the impact that experience had on her. Following our reading, Ashley reflected on Germán's experiences, which sparked a discussion on trauma as illustrated in the following dialogue:

Ashley: Um, I just was thinking about our power as a teacher and the kind of trauma that we could create or alleviate and <laugh> that feels overwhelming at times. Just making sure that we're not re-traumatizing. And, um, I think when you get into upper elementary too, like they're ready for more. So there's always that line, like you wanna make sure that they are informed without overwhelming. And so that was what was kind of on my mind as I read this just because she spoke about her trauma in education and I just wanna make sure that I'm not doing that to anyone <laugh>.

Me: I think that that's very valid because, um, I'm reading a new book called Homecoming by a, um... it's a mental health book, but she talks about a section on...she talks about many different things. She talk about anxiety and people-pleasing and that is me. And she talked about how ways in which why you are a people pleaser, all the different, um, characteristics were me. And one of them was harsh schooling. Like how do we unintentionally teach children that there is one right way to be, one correct answer, one...like this is the mode. And then how many of our kids then some rejected, they resist it rightfully so, cuz it takes away from who they are. But what about those that, that clamor towards that? Cause that's the only way they get attention. And then they turn out to be people who are people pleasers who are constantly doing things over putting too much on their plate. <laugh> filled with anxiety.

Ashley: Doesn't sound familiar. I dunno what you're talking about, but don't you think that teachers are that way just in general a lot?

Me: I don't think it's just because we're teachers. I think it's because we've been socialized into being that way through many different experiences. And I do. So I take that back. And then I think that teaching does, there is a...the systematic way of teaching that feeds you, we probably were that before from different ways. But then, because the whole idea of teaching is you want results.

Michael: Right

Me: It shouldn't be messy. Everybody should be sitting quietly doing their work, getting A's, and that's it. And if there's any discord, then it's a problem.

Michael: Right

Ashley: That's the way that we're trained, that's the way, that's what's constantly validated to us at work. Um, I don't know, it just kind of feels like the systems that we're trying to push against that's not always welcome.

Me: And the more I think about it, when I think of disrupting systems, I start to think about it more, more, um, mentally than, than even curriculum-wise or instruction-wise. The idea that it is really hard for people to ask for help. To say, I don't know, to say come watch me. The idea of like...or to say, or to come to someone and say, you know, what you said to me really bothered me. We've been socialized to just suffer in silence <laugh> and to just continue going and just to let it, not even let it go, but act like we've

let it go. So, when I think about disrupting systems, I'm trying to think more of mental fitness and how it connects to this as well.

Ashley: Yeah. And I agree with that totally. But I think that some of that even has been unwelcome by different, um, like my last school was like, I went to work for a really great principal and then he got promoted and so then someone came in that did not understand the culture of our school and she was not open to..Um, any kind of questioning. Like you couldn't talk to her.

Me: Yep. And it wouldn't be welcomed because who does it benefit? So none of this is gonna be really welcomed.

Ashley: Yeah

Me: And challenging that way of that system isn't really welcomed either because there's this dominant way of, of being in society, not just for kids, but for us too, of how we're supposed to be. We just do what we're told. We are babysitters. We just use the book and keep it moving. We don't question anything.

This discussion underscored my efforts to facilitate Ashley and Michael's comprehension of the dominant systems that underpin the often tacitly accepted norms within the educational system.

I aimed to illustrate how these ingrained norms manifest in educators' behaviors and

subsequently influence students. As the conversation ended, I expressed my evolving

understanding of the relationship between culturally sustaining pedagogy and mental health,

underscoring a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness. I explained,

There's so much that I'm starting to learn about how systems... how it connects way more than I thought. To our, our mental well-being and just who we are is really our deep culture. I never really thought about it in relationship to this work, but the more I start to study about disrupting my own thought patterns, the more I start to realize how really deep this really goes. I don't know if I'm making sense, but I'm starting to see connections.

Ashley articulated the profound challenge inherent in disrupting entrenched systems, conveying,

"But, to me, it feels overwhelming at times just because there's so much that's deep-rooted in our

systems that we need to change. And like, it makes me feel powerless sometimes." This

statement not only reflects Ashley's evolving comprehension of the pervasive influence of

dominant systems but also underscores a shift toward a more nuanced perspective. Her focus on the systemic level rather than solely on individual students indicates a deepening awareness of the complex layers at play within the educational landscape.

I affirmed Ashley's sentiments and expressed that we are trying to create healthy communities. I defined those communities in the following way, "And in healthy communities, you are honest about who you are. You challenge, you set boundaries, you have courageous conversations." Michael articulated the difficulty in achieving this, stating, "That's a hard switch to make." I continued to explain my understanding of healthy communities as "allowing space for our students to be who they are. Allowing space for us to shift our understanding and thinking and be challenged so that we can understand this better. We just allow a lot more space for progression that we typically have."

As the session came to an end, Michael reflected on the section of the text we read. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Michael shared how closely aligned he is to the standard of normal in society, stating, "I am the norm." I connected his response to the quote highlighted in the text by Django Paris that states, "Who do you bring with you when you walk into the room?" Michael's reflections demonstrated to me that, similar to Ashley, he was seeing a connection between the dominant systems and the work he has to do as a teacher.

As previously mentioned, I expressed to Michael the importance of reflecting on his connection to the norm and how that shows up in his classroom. I then elaborated on the quote by connecting it to myself, stating,

And the more I learn about my, um, I don't know how to word it. Like my, um, I become more critically conscious of myself. I realize what I'm bringing in, bringing into school that I didn't even realize I was bringing. Like a lot of, um, I don't know if I would use the word trauma, but a lot of experiences that have created walls or created ways of thinking that have impacted the way in which I dealt with kids that I didn't even realize I had until like recently.

My intention in sharing this reflection was to foster a sense of self-compassion. I aimed to convey to Michael that each of us enters the classroom with a unique set of experiences and perspectives and that my own process of self-discovery is ongoing. It was important for me to emphasize that uncovering these influences is a universal task, not exclusive to him. Michael responded to my statement connecting to a practice he has started implementing in his classroom. He explained that if there is a student who is in need of support, he will elicit help from their peers as a way of removing himself. For Michael, this allows him to learn from his students to see if there is another way of approaching the student he is unfamiliar with.

The preceding data exemplifies my efforts to facilitate Ashley and Michael's comprehension of the impact of the dominant system, thereby humanizing our collective experience. This session assisted us in developing our understanding of the impact of whiteness. While I did not name the dominant system as whiteness, there was a nascent understanding that there is a force that we all experience that guides the standard way of being and is hard to resist and disrupt. That force, whiteness, engenders tensions that manifest as normative practices. By naming the systemic influence, the participants began to define the problem differently, shifting the focus from individuals to systemic structures at play. The way we define the problem determines how we define the solution (Aguilar, 2020, p. 49). In this session, participants began to define the problem as inherent within the system rather than inherent within the students themselves.

I found this session to be transformative in shaping our subsequent discussions, as the nuanced complexities we explored laid the foundation for deeper, more intricate conversations. This development can largely be attributed to the influence of the *Textured Teaching* text, which cultivated a more multifaceted lens encompassing a broader range of considerations for both

participants. Our understanding of complexity continued to evolve, particularly in session seven, where we were introduced to the characteristics of White supremacy culture. This introduction served to validate and reinforce concepts we discussed in this meeting and provided us with a framework and vocabulary that had previously been lacking. This enabled us to name the tensions we experienced in relation to Whiteness, allowing us to humanize our experiences by understanding how these characteristics have historically been used to maintain the status quo. Personally, this revelation was enlightening, significantly advancing my comprehension of my own lived experiences and furthering my ongoing development.

Conclusion

Examining the critical incidents detailed above reveals my concerted efforts to underscore the humanity of the participants, the students, their experiences, and, at times, myself in order to enhance their understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). I endeavored to respond in a manner that would help them recognize the complexity of our experiences, thereby fostering compassion for themselves and others. These incidents vividly illustrate the intricate nature of facilitating conversations aimed at deepening understanding of CSP.

The complexities inherent in this work are evident in the deliberate decisions I had to make, such as when to push the conversation forward and when to exercise restraint, when to speak, and when to listen. These incidents, along with a comprehensive review of my responses, have deepened my understanding of the multifaceted nature of this endeavor. Additionally, my journal entries highlighted moments of perceived success, as well as instances of uncertainty and doubt. My journal entries detail my internal complexities as they revealed a profound sense of uncertainty, particularly concerning my proficiency in facilitating these conversations. This uncertainty stems from my internal struggles mentioned previously. Thus, while I endeavored to

help participants recognize their humanity within the system, I also found myself in need of acknowledging and understanding my own humanity.

Ultimately, I recognize the importance of embracing the journey rather than fixating on reaching a predetermined destination (Aguilar, 2020). Facilitating conversation requires a commitment to the process and a willingness to navigate the complexities inherent in challenging long-held beliefs and fostering understanding.

Summary and Implications

This dissertation emerged from my work with equity-centered teachers striving to engage in courageous conversations with their school staff, aiming to foster culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). In my role as the group's coordinator, I encouraged facilitators not only to discuss CSP with their staff but also to apply its principles to themselves. Drawing on my extensive experience attempting to create culturally relevant classrooms throughout my career, I recognized the inherent challenges in this endeavor. I sought a deeper understanding of the complexities of implementing asset-based pedagogies, aiming to illuminate these complexities for others.

My research delved into the impact of assisting equity facilitators in enhancing their grasp of CSP. I sought to identify and understand the tensions that arise in this process, particularly how whiteness influences these tensions. I also explored my own ability to navigate these tensions while facilitating such conversations. This inquiry illuminated how whiteness, through White supremacy culture, restricted my participants from embodying culturally sustaining practices and how they navigated those restrictions. Additionally, it revealed how recognizing the link between the dominant system and our deepest conditioning can help

navigate these constraints, fostering a view that emphasizes the humanity in others and in our experiences, thereby shifting the focus from an individualistic perspective to a systemic one.

As a practitioner inquiry, my research bears significant implications for my future practices as I continue this work. While rooted in practitioner inquiry, my findings also extend beyond my immediate context, offering insights that may benefit other equity-centered leaders engaged in similar endeavors. Specifically, this research sheds light on considerations for facilitating transformative conversations with educators to cultivate their critical consciousness. The subsequent sections will elaborate on these implications, starting with equity leaders and ending with myself.

Implications for Equity-Oriented Leaders

A central part of this study was my role in facilitating discussions with equity-minded educators seeking to deepen their understanding of CSP. Through this process, I recognized the knowledge that equity leaders should strive to acquire. This study suggests the need for equity leaders to understand the influences of White supremacy culture, the process of developing critical awareness in response to dominant cultural norms, and the significance of selecting texts that offer both theoretical and practical insights.

Understand the influences of White Supremacy Culture: Personally and

Structurally. Palmer (2017) posits that the act of teaching originates from the innermost being of the individual "for better or worse" (p. 3). Without a profound understanding of oneself, leaders may struggle to authentically comprehend others, perceiving them "through a glass darkly, in the shadows of their unexamined life" (Palmer, 2017, p. 3). This study underscores the critical importance for equity leaders to cultivate self-awareness, particularly in understanding how White supremacy culture informs their identity at the deepest level.

As previously noted, culture can be likened to the air we breathe, serving as the lens through which we perceive the world (Hammond, 2017 & Nieto, 2008). It is multifaceted, comprising opposing forces—one rooted in the beliefs, values, and traditions aligned with our authentic selves and the other stemming from a need for survival. This survival instinct is influenced by whiteness and perpetuated through White supremacy culture (Nieto, 2008). These intricate understandings of our conditioning are tacitly understood and remain largely unacknowledged until consciousness is developed (LePera, 2022). As Chapter Six mentioned, our cultural conditioning is particularly challenging to interrogate due to its perceived normalcy (Hammond, 2015).

Consequently, leaders aspiring to cultivate the critical consciousness of others must dedicate significant time to self-examination. Personally, I was unaware of how whiteness shaped my need to develop cultural survival strategies, nor did I recognize how White supremacy culture influenced and perpetuated my defensive mechanisms. This introspection significantly informed my initial understanding at the outset of this study, enabling me to facilitate conversations from a perspective that acknowledges the shared humanity in our experiences.

As leaders cultivate this heightened self-awareness, they are better equipped to compassionately guide others in their own journeys toward consciousness. By comprehending the inherent tensions in this endeavor, they recognize it as a challenging task due to the conflicting cultural forces at play. The data from this study illuminated the way Ashley and Michael grappled with these opposing forces internally. Ashley openly expressed her struggles with perfectionism, and Michael candidly acknowledged his proximity to dominant cultural norms. The data revealed how their internal struggles, shaped by whiteness, constrained them as they grappled with understanding CSP and how whiteness influenced their efforts to resist this confinement. Equity leaders who understand how they grapple with the system can assist others in understanding their experiences in relation to the system. They can facilitate an understanding that the tensions individuals experience are not inherent or natural, but rather historical and purposefully used to maintain the existing social order.

Additionally, this study underscores the critical importance for equity leaders to delve into the historical underpinnings of White supremacy culture and its manifestations within societal structures, particularly within the educational system. Equity leaders must grasp how the characteristics of White supremacy culture influence decision-making processes at the national, local, and district levels. This comprehension fosters a sense of acknowledgment—not in acquiescence to the prevailing norms, but rather in recognizing the complexities and tensions engendered by whiteness. Armed with this understanding, equity leaders can navigate the educational landscape with informed urgency, recognizing and addressing inherent contradictions that challenge their objectives. By preparing themselves for the inevitable tensions that arise, these leaders can provide informed guidance to others seeking to implement instructional strategies that challenge the status quo.

Mere comprehension of these tensions is inadequate; it is imperative that equity leaders actively engage in resistance efforts. This resistance should be directed towards assisting both themselves and those under their guidance in rediscovering their authentic selves, thereby facilitating a journey back to a place of inner integrity, or "home," as conceptualized by Bryant (2022). Furthermore, equity leaders must acknowledge the origins of resistance, as highlighted by Heather McGhee (2021), who emphasizes the deep-seated nature of the zero-sum mindset in American society. This mindset has historically persuaded economically disadvantaged White individuals to embrace narratives of scarcity and to perceive people of color as threats to their social standing, reinforcing a cycle of division and fear. These narratives, deeply embedded into one's conditioning, are not the fault of any individual; nonetheless, equity leaders must develop strategies to navigate the emotional tensions that arise from resistance. In navigating those tensions, they must find a way to come from a place of empathy, recognizing the inherent complexity of each of us as we navigate this oppressive system.

Understand the Journey. The aforementioned implications underscore the notion that this work, "an intentional intense effort to unpack our biases and identify ideologies that have shaped our thinking" (Germán, 2021, p.4), is a journey. This dissertation highlights the essential nature of equity leaders, recognizing that developing awareness is an ongoing journey without a definitive endpoint. Consequently, leaders must resist the temptation to expedite this journey and instead acknowledge its inherent intricacy. A key component of this recognition involves understanding the importance of neuroscience in this context. Neuroscience informs us that learning occurs through the creation and strengthening of neural pathways (Hammond, 2015). Developing critical consciousness entails unlearning old patterns or neural pathways and

acquiring new habits or pathways. This transformative process is time-consuming and challenging, particularly as developing such awareness runs counter to prevailing cultural norms.

As individuals encounter new information, they must integrate it with their existing knowledge, a process that is influenced by their deep culture. Deep culture cultivates the way vital systems in our brain are organized and function, causing each person to comprehend the world in a way unique to their upbringing (Winfrey & Perry, 2021; Hammond, 2015; & Eberhardt, 2020). As such, within one's deep culture, ingrained beliefs guide how we view the world. As large amounts of data enter our brains, the process of understanding that information can lead to implicit bias (Hammond, 2015 & Eberhardt, 2020). According to Eberhardt (2020), these biases act as distorting lenses that are a product of both brain architecture and societal disparities. Aguilar (2020) notes that once a belief is established in the mind, the brain seeks out information that confirms it, thereby reinforcing and protecting the belief. These factors present challenges in acquiring new knowledge. However, it is important to recognize that the brain has an infinite capacity for learning (LePera, 2022). Despite the challenges, we all have the capability to learn new ideas and challenge commonly held beliefs, but this process must occur in a supportive environment that does not rush the learning process. Learning is inherently vulnerable, and individuals learn most effectively in a supportive community setting (Hammond, 2015). In such a supportive environment, new neural pathways can be established, strengthened, and reinforced, facilitating the process of acquiring new knowledge and challenging existing beliefs.

Selecting Texts. This study emphasizes the critical role of equity leaders in selecting texts that offer both practical applications and theoretical frameworks. The foundational works of scholars such as Ladson-Billings, Django, and Paris were instrumental in providing the necessary language to ground discussions in the fundamental principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Their inclusion allowed me to draw upon the insights of established scholars in the field while integrating my own experiential knowledge. Notably, their contribution to the participants' understanding of essential terminology associated with CSP challenged and expanded their knowledge of concepts such as academic achievement, culture, engagement, compliance, and sociopolitical consciousness. By engaging with these texts, Ashley and Michael were able to cultivate a more nuanced and multifaceted perspective.

As previously discussed in Chapter Six, a noticeable shift occurred in our discussions upon the introduction of *Textured Teaching*. This text provided a framework that resonated with the participants, offering concrete examples of how they could integrate CSP into their existing instructional practices. It also assisted them in recognizing the elements of CSP already present in their work. Additionally, the text furnished a foundational understanding of key terms like social justice, the work, and bias. Of particular significance was the introduction of the concept of White supremacy culture characteristics, a theory that was unfamiliar to us all at the time. This exposure not only deepened my comprehension but also facilitated meaningful connections to my lived experiences and assisted me in aiding the participants in making similar connections.

Implications for Myself

As a practitioner inquiry, this study has provided valuable insights that will guide my future endeavors in leading equity work. Through this research, I have gained a deeper understanding of both myself and the complexities of this field. Upon reflection, I have identified

specific strategies that will be essential as I continue to support educators in comprehending, resisting, and ultimately disrupting dominant systems within education.

Continue to Understand White Supremacy Culture. I am interested in furthering my understanding of the impact of dominant culture, particularly in relation to trauma. Throughout this study, my comprehension of trauma was limited. However, I have since come to understand trauma as emotional wounds that many of us have. According to Dr. Gabor Maté and his son Daniel Maté (2022), trauma permeates our culture, influencing personal functioning, social relationships, parenting, education, popular culture, economics, and politics (p. 19). The authors suggest that finding an individual without the effects of trauma would be an anomaly in our society. I am beginning to recognize the trauma I have personally experienced and have started to connect it to the influence of White supremacy culture. I aim to continue this exploration and assist others in understanding this relationship as well. I believe this knowledge will enhance my ability to approach my work with greater empathy and mindfulness, especially when faced with tensions that may appear to impede progress. It will enable me to better comprehend these tensions, both in myself and in others.

Cultivate Wholehearted Living as Resistance. As previously detailed, I often perceived my attempts to facilitate participants' understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy as ineffective. Throughout these interactions, I grappled with the pervasive influence of White supremacy culture. These characteristics coalesced to instill a sense of inadequacy and the need for greater effort on my part. I wrestled with feelings of fear, perfectionism, and binary thinking. This realization dawned on me as I commenced the analytical process. This study has illuminated the necessity for me to develop strategies to resist these influences. As I continue this work, I anticipate encountering ongoing tensions. Given the intricacies delineated throughout

this dissertation, it is imperative that I find ways to center and ground myself, recognizing that I cannot evade the inevitable tensions that will arise. However, I must be prepared to confront and resist them when they become apparent.

Furthermore, I aspire to establish environments where I can assist others in nurturing their capacity for resistance. I firmly believe that having effective strategies to counteract the influence of whiteness is crucial in equity-focused endeavors. This resistance is pivotal in cultivating a cultural identity that emancipates us from the detrimental messages asserting we are not enough. My aim is to foster what Brene Brown (2020) refers to as wholehearted living, wherein both myself and those with whom I collaborate learn to cultivate authenticity, compassion, resilience, gratitude, trust, creativity, play, rest, calmness, and laughter.

Conclusion

But if you read these characteristics, it's everything that we battle against as teachers. <laugh> Like, rights of comfort and fear of conflict, denial and defensiveness, individualism, one right way, and either/or, the binary. Yeah. There were another ones, progress is more, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, urgency. And what's not on here is perfectionism. But we've talked about that. So these, we are going to battle as you try to incorporate these lessons, because you're fighting against a system that is embedded in our school district, in our school systems, period. So when you feel that tension, maybe a question you can ask yourself is, 'Am I feeling this tension cause I'm going against the culture of White supremacy?' And then how do I pivot that?

This quote, taken from our last session together, was a statement I made to Michael in an effort to name the struggles he was feeling. Yet, it also serves as an illustration of the complexities we all encountered throughout this process. Through this study, I began to understand how whiteness operates to foster a disconnection from one's authentic self. In doing so, it obscures our inherent humanity. By encouraging superficial engagement and discouraging deeper introspection, whiteness perpetuates the status quo. The characteristics of White

supremacy culture entrench this dynamic by promoting shallow understandings of ourselves and others, perpetuating a pervasive sense of inadequacy and blinding us to underlying realities.

Prior to this project, I was unaware of how dominant belief systems influence the tensions teachers feel as they try to implement culturally relevant practices. I did not understand how specific belief systems, deeply engrained since childhood, shape our instructional approaches and interpersonal interactions. This research helped me think more about the question, “Who do you bring with you when you walk into the room?” Paris, as cited in Germán, 2021, p. xv). This question is so complex and has to be interrogated at the deepest levels with an understanding of how dominant systems manifest in one’s life.

This introspection facilitates a more nuanced understanding of one’s experiences, revealing the complexities of personal identity. Through this process of reflection, individuals begin to humanize themselves, which in turn fosters a capacity for humanizing others. Moreover, this project has also been instrumental in deepening my understanding of the interplay between mental health and White supremacy culture. Previously, I was unaware of how my experiences with self-doubt, shame, perfectionism, and people-pleasing were manifestations of whiteness perpetuated by White supremacy culture. Through this realization, I have come to grasp a profound connection between mental health and these systemic influences.

I recognize now more than ever that culturally sustaining pedagogy transcends mere strategies or tools. It is heart work. It has the potential to alleviate the mental stress we endure by challenging dominant beliefs that fuel anxiety, people-pleasing, perfectionism, and other responses to oppression. Culturally sustaining pedagogy fosters an environment of safety where individuals can authentically navigate their lives. Django & Paris state,

CSP is indeed about providing our children with the opportunities to survive and thrive, but it is also centrally about love, a love that can help us see our young

people as whole versus broken when they enter schools, and a love that can work to keep them whole as they grow and expand who they are and can be through education. (Django & Paris, p. 14).

This perspective is equally applicable to educators. CSP provides them with opportunities to flourish and persevere. By gaining a deep understanding of their true selves beyond the confines imposed by the system, educators can begin to perceive themselves as whole. As Christopher Emdin (2021) suggests, “achieving this wholeness allows individuals to attain a state of consciousness where their mind, body, and spirit are fully engaged, affirmed, and integrated, free from distortion or compromise” (p.1). In this state, educators can extend the same affirming perspective to their students, fostering an environment where all individuals can thrive and realize their full potential.

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Education

Indiana University School of Education at Indianapolis Indianapolis, IN
Degree: Education Doctorate, Language Education, 2010-2024

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- G.P.A. 3.8

Indiana University School of Education at IUPUI Indianapolis, IN
Degree: Bachelors of Science, Elementary Education, May 2006

- Major: Elementary Education
- Licensure: Indiana Teaching License K-6
- G.P.A.: 3.2

Administrative Experience

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Coordinator, Pike Township July 2022/Present

- Provide professional development to entire leadership team in the area of Culturally Sustaining Practices
- Oversee training for the district's Equity Facilitators
- Support administrators with implementing Culturally Sustaining Practices
- Lead the district's equity council
- Oversee district's equity-oriented strategic plan

Assistant Principal, MSD Pike Township, July 2020/July 2022
Eagle Creek Elementary

- Building 504 Coordinator
- Building Testing Coordinator
- Facilitator of District Equity Training
- Evaluator of Teachers

- RTI Coordinator

Administrative Intern, M.S.D. Pike Township August 2014/June 2015

- Lead Culturally Relevant Professional Development
- Lead professional development for resource team to improve reading instruction
- Participant Superintendent Leadership Academy
- Participant in discipline data meetings to discuss strategies to reduce disproportionalities

Administrative Intern, KIPP Charter School August 2013/June 2013

- Attended and organized community meetings
- Lead Culturally Relevant Professional Development
- Organized and implemented strategies for managing discipline
- Participant in Instructional Leadership Meetings

Teaching Experience

Instructional Coach, MSD Pike Township August 2019/June 2020

New Augusta South Elementary

- Provided professional development for teachers
- Coached teachers on instructional approaches
- Acted as ELL teacher/coordinator
- Lead equity training

2nd, 3rd, 5th Grade Teacher, M.S.D. Pike Township August 2014/June 2019

Eagle Creek Elementary

- Participant in Math Workshop Professional Development
- Participant in Social Studies Text Book Adoption
- Participant in Math Committee and ELL Committee
- Planned and Implement Authentic Assessments
- Participant in Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

6th Grade Teacher, KIPP Indianapolis August 2013/June 2014

- Assisted in Math Curriculum Development
- Assisted in Literacy Intervention

4th Grade Teacher, Sunnyside Elementary August 2012/July 2013

Responsibilities

- Participate in Cultural Relevant Committee
- Organized several enrichment activities for students

4/5 Teacher, The Project School, Indianapolis, IN July 2008/July 2012

Responsibilities

- Assisted in curriculum development
- Facilitator of Mentoring Program
- Mentor for newly hired teachers
- Lead Culturally Relevant Professional Development

2nd Grade, Lowell Elementary School, Indianapolis, IN July 2006/June 2008

Responsibilities:

- Organize Reading and Writing Workshops
- Tutor for struggling readers
- Remediation teacher during intersession

Activities/Participation

- Recipient of Superintendent's Above and Beyond Award
- Participant on ISTEP Review Panel
- Featured on National Public Broadcasting (NPR)
- Indiana Partnership for Young Writers Leadership Group
- Responsive Classroom Training
- Reading Workshop training at Columbia University
- 2011 Commencement Speaker at the IU School of Education at IUPUI

References Available Upon Request