Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the English Language Arts Classroom

Kimberly R. Foster
Kennesaw State University

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Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the English Language Arts Classroom

By

Kimberly R. Foster

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education
In
Secondary Education
English

Kennesaw State University

December 2016
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my past, present, and future students. When I started this journey, I was driven by a desire to learn more about teaching English. In doing that, I have implemented new approaches to teaching, which ultimately resulted in a totally different mindset about not only teaching English, but also about my students. My students are what changed my mindset; they changed me. They have taught me so much more about life and learning than I could have ever anticipated. Their voices and their thoughts have become an unquenchable driving force for my desire to be a better teacher and person.
Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank my husband for encouraging me in and loving me through this journey; we both know that it was not an easy task. Being that we are both overly ambitious and passionate individuals, it could be difficult to achieve all of the goals we both desire. However, time and again, he put me first and seldom complained. He has been my rock and my safe place. Thank you, Conor.

I would also like to thank my parents who have instilled in me not only drive and ambition but also confidence to achieve any goal that I set for myself. They have always been incredibly supportive—emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually, and financially—all of my life. They will never truly know how grateful I am for their support. Thank you, Momma and Daddy.

I would like to thank the influential administrators that I had early in my teaching career. My first principal, Dr. Sheila Kahrs, hired a small town, Mississippi girl and gave me a chance to grow as a teacher leader. Not only did she encourage me to pursue this degree, she developed me as a confident teacher leader who strove for excellence. She provided opportunities which stretched me and grew me as a professional. Additionally, I would like to thank my second principal, Dr. Mark Albertus, whom I only had the pleasure of working with for one year, for believing in me as a teacher and as a new doctoral student. He encouraged me to pick my topic early, so that I could build my work around it throughout the entire program. I am so very grateful for this advice. Furthermore, my year under Dr. Albertus was the single most difficult year of my life, and he supported me in ways that I will never be able to thank him enough. Thank you, Dr. Kahrs and Dr. Albertus.
I would like to thank Krista Bowen, a fellow cohort member. She was so encouraging throughout the entire program. I am grateful for her long hours spent in libraries on days where we both would rather be outside enjoying the day and for her listening to my frantic phone calls. She is an incredibly loyal colleague and friend. Thank you, Krista.

Lastly, I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Ritchie, Dr. Rish, and Dr. Rodriguez. You all brought such different qualities to this experience for me. Thank you Dr. Ritchie for encouraging me and affirming me always; thank you Dr. Rish for pushing me to think more deeply and critically about my English teaching practices; and thank you Dr. Rodriguez for guiding me to see my work from various viewpoints. You all have molded my thinking in such lasting ways. Thank you for working at such a quick pace to ensure my completion; I genuinely appreciate that more than you know.
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the cultural identities of students in a twelfth grade English language arts classroom. Additionally, this study sought to explore and to better understand how implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the English language arts classroom may enhance students’ literacy experiences, may empower the cultural identity of students, and may shape students’ perspectives of themselves and their peers. A case study method was utilized; there were five cases: teacher, four students, and whole class. Multiple interviews, classroom discussions, and student writings were used as data. The findings show that with the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom, there needs to be an intentional emphasis put on building cultural competence, the second tenet of CRP. This focus leads to students’ abilities and confidence in acting on the third tenet, challenging the social structures. Additionally, cultural competence leads to a deeper level of authenticity among the students; this enabled students to really see others’ cultural identities and how they inform and influence perspectives. Further research needs to be done in more schools, with more students, and over longer periods of time.

KEY WORDS: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Sociocultural Learning, Cultural Identities, Authenticity, Literacy Processes, English Classroom
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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is the fall of 2007, and I am a student teacher at Robert E. Lee High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The halls are dirty, filthy even. The heating and cooling in the building have not worked properly in years, my cooperating teacher laments to me. The desks are a pitiful excuse in which students must reside. The ceiling tiles are disgusting; in fact, some tiles are missing, and there are boards of some sort to replace the tiles. When the 6:55 bell rings, a barrage of diverse faces file into the twelfth grade English classroom. Because Lee High School is the “ESOL school” for East Baton Rouge Parish, the school population is largely made up of minority students.

“Get out your textbooks, and turn to Hamlet, Act Three,” I say to the students. I receive mixed feedback, but nonetheless, the students are compliant in opening their textbooks. As I walk around to ensure their compliance, I gaze upon a student who is secretly reading the novel, The Kite Runner, under his desk. I was in absolute astonishment. “This particular Middle-Eastern student never reads anything in this classroom,” I think to myself. He puts it away, and we go on with the reading of Hamlet.

After class, I pull him aside and ask him, “What are you reading?” He shows me the book but does not respond orally. I comment, “That’s really awesome! You have never seemed interested in reading anything in class. What about this books sparks interest for you?” He responded, “This book is about my people.”

His response immediately changed my perspective of what teaching English to students of all populations should look like in the American classroom. If this student, who claimed “not to be a reader,” was reading a 200+ page book, then I needed to ascertain how to incorporate
more reading as such, so that my students would be as invested as he was in that moment of reading.

Not until five years into my teaching career, did I really understand what this student desired from me as his teacher. He was longing to see himself, his perspectives, and his people in the classroom. This small, seemingly insignificant encounter which lasted less than three minutes has shaped the trajectory of my teaching career forever. This young man desired a teaching pedagogy that he nor I could articulate at that time—culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Statement of the Problem**

With a rapidly rising non-White child population—by 2050 almost two thirds of all American children are projected to be students of color—and the fact that 63 of the 100 largest U.S. school districts are already composed of more than half students of color, we must accept and embrace that the “changing dynamics of our nation’s schools indicate that white teachers currently in classrooms will find themselves with learners who possess markedly different experiences than their own” (Goldenberg, 2013, p. 113). Students are not only markedly different from teachers; they also are markedly different from one another. However, these different experiences that students embody can have the power to be utilized as assets within the English classroom. Students’ literacy is intricately connected to their cultures; therefore, embracing a student’s culture is also embracing a student’s literacy experiences. In a Common Core era where standardized testing is prominent and privileged, embracing students’ cultural experiences as a powerful vehicle for literacy is quickly thrown by the wayside. Teachers can be somewhat forced to turn to the department of education to look for “effective lessons;” however, the department of education cannot be in every classroom to develop highly individualized, meaningful lesson for students. As schools are confronted with increasing numbers of
linguistically and culturally diverse learners, a “just good teaching” approach will simply not be
good enough” (Jong & Harper, 2005, p. 120). Additionally, González (2005) points out that
increasingly students draw from an “intercultural and hybrid knowledge base, appropriating
multiple cultural systems, as youth culture permeates greater and greater spheres” (p. 38).
Students are able to operate under many cultural systems simultaneously, and they do this
regularly across their lived experiences.

To instruct students effectively, English teachers specifically can benefit from becoming
more knowledgeable about their students’ diverse cultural backgrounds. Appropriate and
acceptable ways of communicating vary culturally; inviting and understanding students’ cultures
will provide insight to teachers in how to build upon students’ existing practices and empower
them in the classroom. Davidson (2010) asserts that “North America’s increasingly diverse
population demands that responsible educators acknowledge, respect, and draw on students’
cultural and social experiences with respect to literacy learning, and that they adopt pedagogical
perspectives that foster social and educational equity” (p. 255). In stark contrast to the rapid
change in student diversity, according to a study conducted by the National Center for Education
Information in 2011, there is little to no change in teacher diversity; 85% of teachers are white,
7% are black, 4% are Hispanic, and 4% are other (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011). As a
literacy educator, I am keenly aware that the diverse student population possesses a variety of
literacy experiences and practices. I believe that students achieve the highest levels of
understanding when they feel valued in the classroom, and one way this is accomplished is
through culturally relevant pedagogy which values their cultural identities. Beach, Johnston, and
Thein (2015) posit that:
Viewing identity as social and cultural makes evident the need for curriculum and instruction that moves away from an inward, myopic focus on identity as a static, individual, intrinsic state to an outward focus on a fluid, shared, historical, generational, and cultural perspective on identity construction. (p. 22)

Positioning students as cultural beings can prove challenging and can be met with opposition. First students can be taken aback when they are asked to consider what their cultural identity *is*, and *how* their cultural identity impacts their understanding of themselves and of their peers. This type of identity work forces students to look at themselves in ways that they never have before, and that can be uncomfortable. And uncomfortable is not savvy with high school students. Additionally, teachers can be leery of this type of pedagogy because of the personal nature. However, as a literacy educator, I argue that it is detrimental to ignore that students’ literacies are culturally and socially situated (Vygotsky, 1980). Milner (2011) states:

“Teachers teach a range of students who bring an enormous range of diversity into the learning environment. There are no one-size-fits-all approaches to the work of teaching. Teachers must be mindful of whom they are teaching and the range of needs that students will bring into the classroom. Moreover, the social context that shapes students’ experiences is vast and complexly integral to what decisions are made, how decisions are made, and why.” (pp. 67-68)

In order for students to learn to understand for themselves, I seek to create a classroom environment which honors, embraces, and values students’ cultural identities. Beach et al. (2015) assert, “Recognizing the diversity of students entails drawing on knowledge of differences in students’ cultural backgrounds and communities that shape their identities” (p. 8). I argue that culturally relevant pedagogy allows for students to utilize and to share their funds of knowledge
in ways that will inform their literacies as well as shape their cultural perspectives of themselves and one another. Because I believe that literacy education is about teaching students how to think and to understand, meaningful learning cannot exist separate from one’s culture. Amanti (2005) argues, “As educators, we must stop giving our students the idea that culture comes in a neat package” (p. 132). Culture can be a messy matter, but it is a significant matter which is why I believe culture is crucially important in how students come to know and to understand. A definition of culture will be provided at the end of this chapter. Furthermore, because of the increased diversity of students, there is a dire need for students and teachers alike to grapple with understanding their own cultural identities as well as how others’ cultural identities can inform their knowledge, their understanding, and their perspectives.

**Research Purpose and Questions**

This study, situated in sociocultural theory and culturally relevant pedagogy, seeks to understand the cultural identities of students in a twelfth grade English language arts classroom. The purpose of this study is to explore and to better understand how implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the English language arts classroom may enhance students’ literacy experiences, may empower the cultural identity of students, and may shape students’ perspectives of themselves and their peers. In order for students to embrace their cultural identities, they must feel safe to portray their cultural experiences and how these experiences inform their ways of understanding. I have found that encouraging students to embrace their cultural identities can be very challenging because of its personal nature. I am interested in how students will articulate their cultural identities and share this with others through written and oral means of communication. I believe that this sharing and classroom discussions will inform and shape students’ perspectives in a way that traditional schooling does not necessarily allow.
Within this study, I seek uniqueness more than commonalities or generalities. I do not believe that this research will prove a specific way that culturally relevant pedagogy looks or works for all classrooms; to even state that is possible would be terribly misleading. I do believe that this research may show the potential of utilizing students’ cultural identities as powerful vehicles for rich understanding. Below are the research questions that I have developed for this study.

**Research Questions**

- How do I, as the teacher, intentionally implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the English-language arts classroom to position students for richer literacy experiences?
- How does positioning students’ cultural identities as assets in learning instead of deficits inform students’ perceptions of themselves as learners?
- How does understanding and sharing one’s cultural identities change students’ perspectives and inform literacy?

**Local Context:**

The high school in which the study is taking place is located about forty-five miles northwest of a large city in the southeastern United States. The community is considered suburban. The high school is a part of a city school system, which is different from a county system. The city school system has its own school board and governing body separate from the county. A unique aspect of this city school system is that there is only one elementary school, one primary school, one middle school, and one high school. There is a strong sense of community and tradition. People of all ages are intensely proud to be a part of this school system and the community it serves. The students who attend this high school must live within the city limits, or students who live outside of the city limits have the option of paying a yearly fee. Out-of-district students are accepted on the basis of availability and through an application process;
within this high school, roughly eighteen percent of students are considered “out of district.” The high school has roughly 1,200 students, and the ethnic breakdown is as follows: 60% Caucasian, 18% African American, 12% Hispanic, and 10% Asian/Pacific Islander/other. Roughly 40-50% of students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. The high school has experienced unprecedented growth over the last ten to fifteen years, particularly within the Hispanic populations. The school system projects that student population will continue to grow.

The context of the classroom is a twelfth grade English classroom; the course is Advanced Composition. The title of this course can be somewhat misleading; this is not an advanced placement course. Advanced Composition is considered the “regular course” which twelfth grade students take. In the 2013-2014 school year, British Literature was the twelfth grade course at the high school; however, when I began teaching in the 2014-2015 school year, I was the first and only teacher to teach the Advanced Composition course. This course is designed to focus primarily on communication, whether that be written or oral. There are five to six units in the course: “Beating the Odds,” “Movers and Shapers,” and “Millenials in the Workplace” are the units preceding the “Culture and Identity” unit, which is the focus of this study. Within each of the units leading up to the “Culture and Identity” unit, I have made an intentional effort for students to view themselves as cultural beings; I have organized their literacy experience so that they begin to realize and to understand the impact that their cultures have on their understanding of texts, of themselves, and of their peers.

Conceptual Framework

Sociocultural theory and culturally relevant pedagogy are the driving force for this study. I believe that meaning and understanding are socially constructed; literacy is a social practice (Vygotsky, 1980; Street, 1984). Therefore, my English classroom is intentionally designed to be
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a space in which social interactions are thriving. My students spend a great deal of time sharing ideas, concepts, and perspectives. I believe that there is value in hearing one another’s thoughts and interpretations of texts. Vygotsky (1980) asserts that students attain the highest levels of cognition through social interactions. Smagorinsky (2011) argues that to separate literacy from the social and cultural aspect is detrimental for students:

To assume that learning can be separated from its social foundations is to misunderstand the nature of the expanded, culturally-grounded conception of the ZPD (zone of promiximal development); and to assume that the study of learning can be conducted through culturally neutral means is to misconceptualize the role of mediation in human development and to underestimate the effects of the introduction of any research tools into the learning environment. (p. 68)

The studying of literacy cannot take place through culturally neutral means; higher mental functions are afforded by cultural practices, but whose cultural practices are represented within the classroom? Because the cultural processes drawn on most typically resemble those found in the homes of middle-class students, school success looks differently for those whose home cultures provide them with a different toolkit, a different set of goals for learning, and different notions of what counts as literacy (Smagorinsky, 2001). I desire that all students experience success, which is a driving force for understanding how to best utilize culturally relevant pedagogy; I must acknowledge and value the differences amongst my students.

Understanding and believing these ideals, I posit that culturally relevant pedagogy is a mindset which could potentially enhance students’ literary experiences in the classroom. Ladson-Billings (2009) defines culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart
knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). The challenging aspect of defining culturally relevant pedagogy is that it looks differently for each teacher, each student, each school, each community, etc. There is no one “effective” way to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. Milner (2011) argues that teachers do not “do” culturally relevant pedagogy; he suggests that teachers embody this type of culturally relevant way of thinking and being with their students. Culturally relevant teaching is not prescriptive but rather descriptive. Knowing your students on a cultural basis, knowing how their cultures influence their literacy practices, and acting on that knowledge is what I contend is effective culturally relevant pedagogy.

Believing that a student’s culture is so intricately woven with how they know and understand, I assert that culture and identity are in close relation with one another; culture and identity inform one another. Culture is comprised of students’ lived experiences; identity is how they view oneself. The literacy classroom affords the opportunity and the space to see how students process information, both orally and written. Through these processes, students’ cultural identities unfold; I posit that students’ cultural identities are powerful vehicles in students’ literacy. Beach et al. (2015) argue that an identity-focused approach to English reframes traditional instructional approaches in that the focus is on identity work. How teachers position students as learners in the classroom may significantly influence students’ learning. When students are making assertions in the classroom, whether that be through writing or speaking, the assertions are stemming from their perspectives, and perspectives come from lived experiences. These lived experiences are the make up of students’ cultural identities. I believe that school is a particularly important place for mediating the processes by which my students become literate and for reflecting societal views of what constitutes literacy (Ferdman, 1990). I propose that when the students’ cultural identities are represented, heard, valued, and embraced, students may
begin to grapple with preconceived notions and assumptions which may lead to refining and reshaping of personal perspectives, which I argue may lead to richer and higher levels of thinking and understanding.

Students want to be valued; value equates to trust, and once a student trusts the teacher, the opportunity for meaningful learning can take place; this is my mindset as I go about creating relationships with my students. In the English classroom, value can be unclear. When a teacher assigns a numeric value to a written paper or an oral response, which are the dominant types of assessment in my classroom, the teacher is assigning a numeric value to the students’ cultural identities in some manner. The spoken or written information of the student came from the student’s thoughts, influenced by his or her lived experiences which are intricately connected to his cultural identity. Wertsch (1998) asserts that when asking about someone’s ability level, we are actually asking about someone’s skill in appropriating a certain cultural tool. One cannot ignore culture as an essential piece of literacy; resisting culture to construct personal meaning is a futile quest (Smagorinsky, 2001). School, as an institution, has created excellent apprentices of observation, as Smagorinsky (2011) calls them, which means my twelfth-grade students know how to craft a five paragraph informational essay on a esoteric topic with their eyes closed, yet if I ask them to write a concise, one page position paper on a social issue, they struggle immensely with the autonomy of thought. Understandably so, asking students to present their personal thoughts is seen by them as an opportunity to critique their perspectives. I find that students are extremely apprehensive, and there is a negative association with personal writing. Teaching through the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to shift the apprehension to invitation. Students feel valued, and therefore, they may invite the critique.
Students need ownership of their learning in order for it to be meaningful; giving students opportunities to design their own learning experiences allows students to perceive school less as something that is being done to them and more as something that they feel ownership of and therefore care about enough to fully engage (Beach et al., 2015). Within a culturally relevant, student-centered approach, students are afforded the space to express their unique perspectives and take more ownership of their learning. Students may better recognize the opportunity for autonomy as a positive. The intent of experimenting with and sharing a variety of perspectives and understanding is not to necessarily change the students’ beliefs, nor is it to ensure that students take up better or different perspectives (Beach et. al., 2015). Realistically and hopefully, the goal is to encourage students to become more flexible in their thinking and to more thoroughly understand the array of perspectives that exist with any given issue. Beach et al. (2011) posit, “That through grappling with these competing perspectives and dialogic tensions, students had to formulate, defend, and reflect on their beliefs and attitudes, leading to changes in those beliefs and attitudes for some students” (p. 212). Given the space and the opportunity to learn and to share writings and thoughts, I believe that students can build powerful, meaningful knowledge together and create a classroom environment where cultural identity is the avenue through which rich learning takes place.

**Review of Relevant Terms**

*culture*- the recurring social practices and their artifacts that give order, purpose, and continuity to social life (Smagorinsky, 2001)

* cultural identity* - the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms of the ethnic group of which one belongs (Ferdman, 1990)
sign- words, texts, and other semiotic systems that mediate one’s appropriation of cultural values and the means through which people communicate them (Smagorinsky, 2011)

tool- a means by which one communicated and acts on one’s environment (Smagorinsky, 2001)

cultural tool kit- mental functioning of students is informed and shaped by cultural identities (Wertsch, 1998)

diverse- referring to culturally, ethnically, racially, linguistically, geographically, sexuality, gender, and age (Ladson-Billings, 2009)

culturally relevant pedagogy- a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 2009)

funds of knowledge- historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992)

Organization of Study

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study. This chapter explains the researcher’s thoughts perspectives, and approach of the topic. Chapter 2 is the review of relevant literature of the study. This chapter examines theories that inform the study as well as empirical studies with similar projects. Chapter 3 is the explanation of methodology of the study. This chapter describes the background of the school and classroom in which the research is taking place. Additionally, this chapter describes the details of how the study will be carried out by the researcher. Chapter 4 will be an exploration of the results of the study. Lastly, Chapter 5 is the discussion of implications and future direction of the study’ results.
Chapter Two: Introduction

It is the fall of 2008, and I have just started my first year of teaching. I am bright-eyed, excited, anxious, and ready to teach my students how to read, to write, and to think. I am an English-language arts teacher; it is my job to teach students how to “do” those things. I decide on the first book that my eighth grade students will encounter—Nothing But the Truth, by Avi. This will be a fun book for my thirteen and fourteen year olds because it is about a boy whose lying goes too far. I quickly determine that the students will relate to this thematically because they are silly, young, and developing in maturity, and so is the main character of the novel.

We are going to have all sorts of graphic organizers that I will show the students how to use because I am the teacher, and I know what is important in this book. I will deliver important information about setting, plot, character development, and theme to them. I am the teacher, and I have the knowledge. Students just need to read the book out loud in class. I will ask the right questions, and I will point their minds to what is most important concerning literary elements. There is really no need for discussion of topics because I have so clearly and intentionally read the book, and I know what is most important.

During that first unit, my eighth grade students were robbed of the opportunity to create meaning for themselves. I told them what to read and how to read. I framed for them what I thought to be a perfect analysis of the text according to the notion that I as the teacher was the only person in the room who had any capacity for expanding my understanding. After a few weeks of reading the novel so rigidly, as my fellow colleagues had so eagerly encouraged and supported, I found that disinterest permeated throughout the room. Students were beginning to fall asleep, to disconnect, and worst of all, to disrupt and misbehave. As a brand new teacher, I was desperate to find a way to win over my students’ interest and engagement.
When I began my first year of teaching, I simultaneously began my master’s program in English Education. I was introduced to an instructional method of having discussions with students; this method of was called “Chalk Talk.” Students were given thematic questions on the board and were allowed to write comments. Additionally, they were encouraged to respond to other classmates’ responses. Seeing as that I was searching for a way to engage my students in the novel, I gave Chalk Talk a try. I wrote one simple question on the board: “What is the difference between a truth and a lie?” The written and oral discussion that ensued was incredible. I learned a very valuable lesson that day; if you give students the space to express their thoughts with one another, the knowledge and the understanding that takes place is substantially richer and more meaningful than any contrived lesson I may muster up as the teacher. Through this teaching experience, I became less of a warden of their learning and more of facilitator of their learning. Students desire an instructional approach that is meaningful, and in the English classroom, an approach framed within a sociocultural theory of learning affords the space for teaching and learning that is meaningful. In this chapter, I will introduce theories informing this study and provide examples of similar studies that draw upon these theories.

**Sociocultural Theory**

Speaking to and with people is a way of not only communicating but an avenue for understanding and learning. When a personal problem, issue, or decision arises, there are usually conversations held in order to better understand the complexities of the problem, issue, or decision. People often connect through speaking and writing to arrive at possibilities, answers, or solutions. Very similarly in the English classroom, a sociocultural perspective values social connections amongst teachers and students to create knowledge and to possess understanding. Chang (2013) suggests that “sociocultural theory affords a pedagogy of possibility, where
cultural, linguistic, and literacy practices are not something that students and teachers are born and stuck with” (p. 350). The construct of literacy is not stagnant nor are students’ literacies. Through the lens of sociocultural theory, literacy is a social act, and literacy practices are always evolving. Students do not think in only one dimension; therefore, they do not only read or write in one dimension. The channels available to students in which to communicate continue to increase due to technology; students are communicating through texting, Facebook messaging, tweeting, emailing, YouTube videos, Skype, FaceTime, and the list just keeps growing and growing. Students are incredibly and undeniably social beings which supports the notion that literacy is a social practice. I assert that to deny the social aspect of literacy is to deny a crucial aspect of literacy. Davidson (2010) states, “From the sociocultural perspective, children’s literacy development is understood by exploring the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which the children have grown” (p. 249). These contexts are worth exploring because I argue that literacy can be much richer and more meaningful for the students and me as the teacher, I can understand these contexts for my students. Additionally, Wertsch (1998) states that “the task of sociocultural analysis is to understand how mental functioning is related to cultural, institutional, and historical context” (p. 3). I am most keenly interested in the cultures of my students because I believe that literacy is a reflection of students’ cultures; their thoughts and perspectives flow from their cultural values, norms, and behaviors. I posit that the intentional use of this understanding of students’ cultures can be a facilitator of meaningful learning.

Students’ thoughts and perspectives inform how they think and interpret and therefore how they communicate. These thoughts and perspectives come from their cultural identities. Vygotsky (1980) argues that learning occurs through mediation, meaning how students come to know and to understand, is culturally situated; through this lens, I believe that one cannot
separate mediation from one’s culture. Wertsch (1998) asserts that the power of language shapes human thinking and other forms of action. For the purposes of this study, student language is seen as how students use words to communicate through writing and speaking. Language, in this way, can be seen as a meaningful cultural tool to empower students. Because language and the use of language vary among cultures, language poses unique affordances and constraints in the English classroom. In a policy statement on students’ right to their own language, NCTE poses the question that teachers must grapple with: Should the schools try to uphold language variety, or to modify it, or to eradicate it? In this same position statement, teachers are challenged to question their assumptions:

We need to ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually rejecting the students themselves, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural origins.

I assert that as a teacher, I need to consider how I can position students to see their language as enhancing their literacy experiences, not hindering them. This is challenging when working with diverse populations because there are so many “languages” to be valued; however, there is reward and purpose in the challenge.

In my English classroom, effective communication is the ultimate goal for my students. I desire that students be able to communicate through written words and spoken words. Therefore, understanding the process of mediation and the role it plays in learning to communicate is important. Communication is mediated through language, through signs. I argue that the most significant aspect of mediation is the cultural aspect; Smagorinsky (2011) states, “Signs mediate a person’s appropriation of cultural values and the means through which people communicate...
them” (p. 31). Additionally, Vygotsky (1980) asserts that signs have no meaning to people if the sign has no cultural significance; he postulates that how a sign comes to mean something is how a person is acculturated to read the sign. Culture situates meaning for students; students come to know and understand text through their cultural ways of understanding. Students from all cultural backgrounds are going to read the same text yet interpret, process, and think about the texts in very different ways. I argue that this is not only acceptable and appropriate, but that as a teacher, I should affirm students in their understanding. I assert that cultural tools are the mediators of action, which is why cultural tools are essential in understanding, embracing, and utilizing in the classroom (Wertsch, 1998). Cultural tools are the means of communication influenced by one’s cultural identities. Unbeknownst to probably most students, their cultural identities situate how they think and communicate in various settings; I suggest that as a teacher, I should position students to see the value in how their cultural identity informs their thinking. Smagorinsky (2001) states that culture is both the “primogenitor of sign and tools and the product of sign and tool use” (p. 134). Culture from this perspective, provides the basis for meaning; therefore, literacy is intricately and irrevocably linked to culture. In the English classroom, I view tools as way as communicating through speaking and writing; signs are the words or texts that are communicated via the tools. Culture plays a significant role in how tools are appropriated; a sociocultural lens allows one to look at how people appropriate the mediational tools of culture. Understanding how different cultures sanction and use tools and signs is crucial for me as an English teacher because I am teaching students how to communicate.

Sociocultural perspectives on literacy also require an understanding that what is authentic and meaningful in one context might not necessarily be so in another; “The contextualized nature
of authenticity requires nuanced understandings of literacy practices in order to make literacy instruction relevant and meaningful” (Perry, 2012, p. 63). As a teacher, I must look at how students interact, communicate, and relate with one another. An issue that several sociocultural authors agree on is “the need to go beyond the isolated individual when trying to understand human action, including communicative and mental action” (Wertsch, 1998, p. 19). When only focusing on the individual, there is potential to disregard or to miss the larger social and cultural constructs involved. Students are multi-faceted, incredibly complex with rich cultural ways of knowing and understanding. Through a sociocultural lens, my role as a teacher is to understand how students’ mental functioning is related to their cultural backgrounds and to use this knowledge to enhance students’ literacy experiences and practices.

From a sociocultural perspective, teaching “involves a cultural understanding of the practices and routines that provide the behavioral norms, orientations to social institutions, notions of appropriate behavior in academic settings, religious beliefs, and other factors that these new demographics bring to school settings” (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 115). Bartlett & Garcia (2011) conducted a study at a largely Dominican-populated high school in which they found that the students appreciated the opportunities to share humor, cultural references, popular culture, and their beginning English; these opportunities afforded teachers and students the space to display, to embrace, and to utilize students’ cultures valuable in the mediation process. Similarly, Nieto (2013) worked with teachers who recognized that “language and culture are assets not to be wasted or disparaged” (p. 91). As a classroom teacher gaining a cultural understanding of all students is an enormous task; however, it is a task worth working toward because culture is the starting point for students’ mediation processes.
Cultural Identities as Asset

As displayed in the previous section, culture is a driving force of literacy (Smagorinsky, 2011; Vygotsky, 1980). People are reflections of their culture; the ways in which people think, read, and communicate are closely connected to their culture, and as such in education, culture can be seen as an asset to learning or as a deficit to learning. Therefore, I argue that to ignore the role that culture plays in literacy is to devalue an essential piece that students bring to the classroom. Lived experiences are a part of the foundation of one’s culture, and these experiences make up one’s cultural identity. Ferdman (1990) defines cultural identity as “the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms of the ethnic group of which one belongs” (p. 182). Knowing that culture plays such a significant role, as a teacher, I have the choice to view culture as an asset or as a deficit to a student’s learning. I argue that students may possess multiple cultural identities, and that these identities can be a tremendous asset in the English classroom. I believe that viewing literacy as a diverse set of contextualized practices helps me to understand the range of ways in which people use literacy in their everyday lives as well as the various types of complex knowledge that students need to have in order to effectively engage in literacy (Perry, 2012). The literacy practices are culturally situated, and as a teacher of a student population that is becoming increasingly more diverse, it is beneficial for myself and my students to view their cultural identities as powerful in enhancing literacy. I feel a sense of urgency to encourage my students to see their own cultural identities as a vehicle to meaningful learning. Because Smagorinsky (2001) contends that culture is always at play as a reader and a writer, as a teacher, why would I demand that my students read and write in ways that do not embrace and involve thinking that draws on and builds upon their cultural identities? This type of instruction seems counterintuitive to meaningful learning. Smagorinsky (2012) asserts that oftentimes cultural practices, “facilitated
by a limited toolkit of mediational means used to produce a limited set of textual forms,” restrict students whose toolkits are not necessarily sanctioned by “normal” in-school literacies (p. 130). Culturally and linguistically diverse students possess a limited toolkit according to traditional schooling; I posit that as a teacher, I must see these toolkits as an asset to their learning abilities. I desire that all students feel and believe that their toolkits are not only useful but essential to enhancing their literacy practices.

González (2005) states that there was a time in education when there was a push for educators to “know the culture” of their students. However, what this became was a futile, micromanaged process to improve teachers’ interactions with students. Additionally, this is a lower-level, simplistic approach to creating a culturally relevant classroom. There is really no emphasis on students’ cultural identities being viewed as assets in the classroom. González (2005) posits:

Although one might suppose that the concept of culture as applied to diverse populations would be a positive affirmation of diversity, this has not always been the case. In fact, several trends viewed the culture of poor and minoritized students as the cause of educational failure...The idea that poor students shared a ‘culture of poverty’ that was to be considered antithetical to school achievement led to the development of ‘cultural deficit’ models in schooling. Poor and minority students were viewed with a lens of deficiencies, substandard in their socialization practices, language practices, and orientation toward scholastic achievement. (p. 34)

Instead of blaming non-dominant cultures, I argue that we must position all students and teachers to view culture as a positive, powerful tool in literacy. González’s (2005) statement supports that there is a dire need for the culture-as-deficit narrative to change. The cultural diversity of
students is only going to increase, so teachers using this as an excuse about why students are not being successful in the English classroom is hopefully not going to be acceptable for much longer. Amaro-Jiménez and Semingson (2011) suggest that overall, teachers agree that students’ cultural resources should be valued; however, they argue that teachers need to be more proactive in seeking ways to incorporate the lived experiences of students within the classroom. I concur that as a teacher it is not enough for me to celebrate my students’ cultural differences in the form of a multicultural day where everyone dresses up and brings in food. I argue that I must seek intentional ways to leverage students’ cultural identities in the literacy process.

As a teacher of diverse high school students, I often hear from other teachers of the same students that the students just do not know how to read and to write. The teachers express this to me, the English teacher, with disdain and seek to find confirmation from me. There is some truth in that some students in high school struggle to read and to write at an acceptable level. However, as Beach, Johnston, and Thein (2015) propose that teachers may conclude that a student lacks motivation because of internal attitudes, “applying deficit thinking to fail to notice how cultural expectations have shaped how that student came to see herself at school,” is a key part to understanding why students “can” or “cannot” read and write (p. 3). In what ways are we as teachers asking our students to read and to write? Young (2010) argues, “as standard-based curriculum increasingly deposits the essential basic knowledge necessary for students to survive and function in the existing social world, minority students’ knowledge, culture, and language are also becoming increasingly standardized” (p. 258). Therefore, the majority of our students’ diverse literacy practices may or may not have been embraced as valuable in literacy processes and practices throughout their schooling experiences. To change this frustration of lack of reading and writing skills amongst teachers and students seems impossible. I argue that there
needs to be a shift in mindset from the teachers and the students. Teachers need to see cultural identities as a valuable and accessible way to enhance students’ literacy; simultaneously, students must acknowledge and feel empowered to see their cultural identities as an asset to their learning.

Students’ cultural identities are not fixed; they are fluid, evolving, and can be a powerful tool in literacy. Moje and Luke (2009) suggest that literacy and identity breathe life into one another; they posit that if identity and learning are connected, then identity and literacy warrant some further delving into; “The boundary between identities and cultures is murky and remain unexplored: Where does identity stop and culture start? Does one presuppose the other? Are these synonymous? What is the difference between a social identity and a culture?” (p. 420). I argue that culture informs and influences students’ identities. Not only are students’ identities fluid, but the processes in which students form their cultural identities also are fluid and constantly shifting. As Moje and Luke (2009) suggest, this boundary is messy, but yet it is the boundary of which I seek to bring to light in my classroom and in my students. Moje and Luke (2009) offer five metaphors of how identity is conceptualized within literacy studies; identity as difference is the metaphor most often associated with studies focused on cultural identities. Literacy is seen as varying dependent upon which group to which one’s identity is tied. However, is this study, I am taking up the perspective of identity as mind or consciousness. This particular metaphor is derived from Vygotsky’s (1978) work in which identity is seen as always growing, “with each activity leading to the use and generation of higher and higher levels of awareness, which lead to new activities, and new tools” (p. 425). This metaphor supports that students’ cultural identities are fluid; this metaphor supports that identity may be molded and
shaped by activities, which is the case of this study will be the oral and written communication amongst students focused on their cultural identities.

The English classroom affords teachers the opportunity to guide students in how to understand, utilize, and appropriate their cultural identities to better make meaning of themselves and therefore their worlds. A pedagogical emphasis on identity can help both students and teachers gain an intentional and critical awareness of how they and others are positioned in the many diverse contexts of their lives. Beach et al. (2015) suggest that identity work is at the heart of English teaching because “identities are constructed, performed, and negotiated through language, narrative, discourse, and text” (p. 2). When students become aware that their perspectives are often rooted in their cultural upbringing, they can begin to recognize and grapple with other cultural perspectives in a meaningful and respectful manner. The work of Beach et al. (2015) supports that how students may see their cultural identities is situated socially and may potentially inform their thinking. This mindset should challenge teachers to delve into understanding their particular students’ cultural identities and to seek ways of motivating and teaching students that build upon cultural identities as an asset. Bartlett & Garcia (2011) conducted a study in a predominantly Dominican population high school which focused on an instructional approach called the additive approach. The additive approach views home language and culture as an asset to learning. This additive approach is not to be confused with James’ Banks (2012) critique of the ethnic additive approach to multicultural education in which students are “exposed to famous people such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and classrooms are decorated with posters containing African-American themes” (p. 840). Bartlett & Garcia (2011) found that students experienced a sense of belonging when in a community of support which contributed to academic well-being and persistence;
“Luperon’s teachers help students learn about the culture they are coming from, feel pride about from where they come from, and about being who you are” (p. 205). I posit that this sense of belonging comes from one’s cultural identities being valued, accepted, and appreciated in the learning process. I assert that too many of the students I teach are not aware of how influential their lived experiences are to informing, to building, and to empowering their literacy. Creating a classroom environment that values and supports students in this way demands that students’ cultural identities be acknowledged and utilized; being perceived as valuable resources by their peers displays competence in ways that can bolster self-confidence (Beach et al., 2015).

Understanding the possible power of utilizing cultural identities in the English classroom could hold incredible potential for literacy and deep, meaningful levels of learning.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy positions teachers to view students’ cultural identities as valuable in teaching and learning. From the sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky posits that the “social context of learning provides the environment in which one learns how to use tools” (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 35). In an English classroom focused on improving and enhancing literacy, multiple interpretations of texts and varying ways of writing are inevitable and should be welcomed. These interpretations and perspectives can be shared and even encouraged in a culturally relevant classroom. Ferdman (1990) suggests that when many cultures exist within a given society, what counts as literacy will vary. I argue that this variance is a positive, enriching aspect to enhancing literacy. However, I posit that the onset of Common Core standards for English-language arts has created an unnecessary and unrealistic expectation of how students are to think, to read, and to write in the classroom; students are cultural, multi-faceted beings, therefore the ways they think, read, and write are cultural and multi-faceted unlike the ways in
which some Common Core English classrooms are being conducted. Culturally relevant teaching seeks to intentionally and purposefully weave students’ culture into the literacy process and practices. Ladson-Billings (1995) posits that culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria:

(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of social order. (p. 160)

I would argue that most teachers want their students to experience academic success; however, the latter two aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy can prove to be more challenging within the academic setting in which I teach. I posit that in order for students to maintain cultural competence, they must first and foremost be aware of their own culture and cultural identities and how that informs their thinking. I believe that once students possess this understanding and awareness of themselves, that there is an opportunity for critical consciousness, which I will address later in this section.

I assert that culturally relevant teaching is not prescriptive and requires an active and progressive mindset. Ladson-Billings (2009) conducted a study with eight teachers and their ways of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2009) notes the differences in instructional approach in teaching reading between two teachers; however, she noted that both of the teachers make the students’ culture a point of affirmation and celebration. Ladson-Billings (2009) states, “Rather than chastise them for what they do not know, these teachers find ways to use the knowledge and skills the students bring to the classroom as a foundation for learning” (p. 135). Students’ cultural knowledge, when seen as a positive catalyst, can be an irreplaceable asset in teaching literacy. I find that Ladson-Billings’ accounts are fairly similar to Milner’s (2011) explanation of culturally relevant pedagogy: “Teachers practice
culturally relevant pedagogy because they believe in it, and they believe it is the right practice to foster, support, create, and enable students’ learning opportunities” (p. 68). Milner (2011) conducted a study with a science teacher whose focus was to build relationships with students in and out of the classroom in order to build upon and bring students’ cultural competence into learning in the science classroom. Cultural competence means that students are aware of their own cultures and how their culture informs their thinking and learning. Additionally, and more importantly, building cultural competence involves knowing your fellow classmates’ cultural identities and sharing is what creates spaces for students to grow their cultural competence.

Milner’s (2011) findings show that teachers can potentially play a critical role in how students engage, conduct themselves, and learn in an urban classroom. I assert that this is true for all classrooms, not just urban classrooms. Students want to know that who they are is valued within the classroom; teachers have a significant influence on how students perceive themselves in the classroom. In this study, Milner (2011) focused on the teacher and his interactions with the students, the faculty, and the larger community. He found that this particular teacher embodied the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy because the teacher wanted to build cultural competence in his classroom, not because the teacher was forced into any type of teaching. Milner (2011) posits that the teacher’s ability to implement culturally relevant pedagogy rested on his ability to build cultural competence, which is “student acquisition of cultural knowledge regarding their own cultural ways and systems of knowing society and thus expanding their knowledge to understand broader cultural ways and systems of knowing” (p. 71). Milner (2011) suggests three larger outcomes with students who experience culturally relevant pedagogy:

**EMPOWERS** students to:

- Examine educational content and processes
• create and construct and deconstruct meaning
• succeed academically and socially
• see contradictions and inequities in local and larger communities

**INCORPORATES** student culture in:
• curriculum and teaching
• maintaining it
• transcending negative effects of the dominant culture

**CREATES** classroom contexts that:
• are challenging and innovative
• focus on student learning (and consequently academic achievement)
• build cultural competence
• link curriculum and instruction to sociopolitical realities

Similarly to Milner (2011), Young (2010) conducted a study with students, teachers, and administration in an attempt to define, implement, and assess culturally relevant pedagogy in an urban high school. Young (2010) states, “Teachers who practiced culturally relevant pedagogy set rigorous learning objectives, engaged students in critical thinking, held high expectations and long-term goals for their students, and utilized real-life examples to help students understand difficult concepts” (p. 252). When stated in this manner, it seems clear that all teachers should seek to practice culturally relevant pedagogy. Rigor, critical thinking, high expectations, goals, and real-life examples are concepts which have become buzz words in education, yet when asked to define and to clarify what these concepts look like, there are varying responses. That is to be expected since educators are unique individuals. However, what I find more poignant in Young’s study is that three common themes exist amongst culturally relevant teachers:

knowing your
students, building relationships with them, and affirming their cultural identities. Affirming students is valuing students, communicating to students that their voices and perspectives matter. This study supports that affirmation is most effective and meaningful when directly tied to their cultural identity— the essence of who they are and where they come from. Young (2010) contends that the role of a culturally relevant teacher is “to invite students to question, challenge, and critique structural inequalities that exist in society” (p. 255). Culturally relevant teaching provides a space for students to recognize, to honor, to value, and to share their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture through the sharing of self-created texts. One cannot assure that students will buy into this way of thinking and processing; however, giving students the opportunity to participate in literacy in this type of culturally affirming atmosphere affords them unique opportunities that I find rarely happen in high school English classrooms. One particular teacher in Young’s study felt that “without a proper and positive image of oneself, it would be difficult for minority students to affirm and respect other cultures in turn” (Young, 2010, p. 252). Again, I argue that this is true for all students, not just marginalized students; all students need to have a proper view of themselves.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is not just being utilized and studied in urban contexts; in a study conducted at a suburban high school in Connecticut where the free and reduced lunch population is increasing, and the student population is becoming more diverse, the principal is seeking ways to help all students. Clark (2013) tells of this school’s journey in pairing up with SERC, State Education Resource Center, which stresses that “a culturally and racially relevant approach enables educators to relate to students and allows students to connect to the curriculum and demonstrate their knowledge in meaningful ways” (p. 28). This school, which has 78% of students taking AP tests, is focusing less on testing and more on building students’ cultural
competence. There are specific workshops facilitated by the SERC leaders; the facilitators deliberately select and share anecdotes from their lives to display how aspect of culture directly impacted their lives. Students are then asked to contemplate and discuss how they view themselves and how society views them; they are then asked to consider how this influences one’s identity. A SERC leader reports; “Then they have to grapple with the inconsistencies between those two views, and the fact that society’s view of us can significantly impact our individual choices” (Clark, 2013, p. 29). Culturally relevant teaching creates an environment of opportunity to confront social inequalities in an academically safe manner.

Building on Ladson-Billings’ notion of culturally relevant pedagogy, Paris and Alim (2014) define culturally sustaining pedagogy as “the seeking out, understanding, and utilizing students’ cultural, social, and historical contexts in the classroom” (p. 87). Culturally sustaining pedagogy operates on the premise that students have rich and innovative linguistic, literate, and cultural practices that are constantly changing. Not only do I desire to embrace students’ cultural identities, I want the students to feel sustained and empowered in their thinking, their reading, and their writing. Students’ literacies, which are an outpouring of their cultural identities, should be valued and embraced when operating under an asset lens. The asset pedagogy approach “repositions the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of working-class communities as resources” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 87). Culturally relevant pedagogy allows for students to potentially become linguistically and culturally flexible across multiple language varieties and cultural ways of believing and interacting (Paris & Alim, 2014). In this context, flexibility indicates a willingness and openness to embrace a perspective other than one’s own. In a classroom of diverse students, linguistic and cultural flexibility is significant in creating an atmosphere of trust and understanding. Students are more likely to express empathy and
understanding if they can see the origin of their thoughts and ideas as well as and their classmates’ thoughts and ideas.

I assert that the third and most overlooked component of culturally relevant pedagogy of critical consciousness is made possible when students are able to see and to see from others’ perspectives which comes through and from the building of cultural competence. To return to Ladson-Billings’ (2009), whom the phrase culturally relevant teaching originates, she states, “Culturally relevant teaching is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exists in society” (p. 140). Academic success and cultural competence are positive in and of themselves; however, neglecting to enact the questioning of societal structures is neglecting a large piece of culturally relevant pedagogy. In a study with three classroom teachers, Ritchie (2013) sought how these teachers were addressing the component of critiquing the existing social order, so that “students may see the need to effect meaningful, culturally sustaining change that transforms their world to make it more equitable, inclusive, and just” (p. 5). He found that these teachers positioned students as co-constructors of knowledge in the classroom, which I argue allows gives voice to students’ perspectives. I posit that providing students the safe space and opportunity to construct knowledge together is an avenue that allows the recognizing, the questioning, and the challenging of social order.

**Funds of Knowledge**

Students’ literacy processes, thinking, reading, writing, and communicating, are informed by their cultural identities. I assert that within students’ cultural identities, there are funds of knowledge. These funds of knowledge are what students draw from to make meaning for themselves. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) define funds of knowledge as “historically
accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Each student possesses funds of knowledge; some knowledge is welcome and honored in schools, and other knowledge is not. To be a culturally relevant teacher, I need to know my students as unique individuals, taking into account all of the multiple spheres of the student; this can be described as a “thick and multifaceted” relationship (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). In their work with US-Mexican students, Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) argue that “grasping the social relationships in which children are ensconced and the broad features of learning generated in the home are key if we are to understand the construction of cultural identity and the emergence of cultural personality among U.S.-Mexican children” (p. 313). This work supports the need to know and to understand students on a cultural level. I desire to cultivate these types of relationship with my students, and an essential part of that cultivation is knowing, understanding, and incorporating my students’ funds of knowledge.

A funds of knowledge instructional mindset is one which believes learning does not take place just between the ears, but is inherently a social and cultural process. Moll et al. (2005) posit that students’ learning is bound within larger contextual, historical, political, and ideological frameworks. We live culturally; therefore, we think, we read, and we write culturally (Smagorinsky 2011). Classroom instruction that builds on students’ funds of knowledge is not just affirming what students have learned in different contexts outside of school, but it is about using students’ knowledge and prior experiences as a scaffold for new learning (Amanti, 2005). Recognizing students’ funds of knowledge serves a foundation in which one can create and deliver meaningful instruction. Amanti (2005) argues that bonds with students and appreciating and valuing their funds of knowledge are enormously important:
Because you can know the academic standards inside and out, and write the most creative lesson plans, but if positive, affirming, and mutually respectful relationships are not the norm in our classrooms, no learning will take place. Even academic knowledge must be distributed through social relations. (p. 140)

Designing classroom instruction that incorporates students’ funds of knowledge as an asset to teaching can prove to be powerful for students.

In a study conducted by Tan and Barton (2010), one middle school science teacher intentionally sought ways to incorporate nontraditional funds of knowledge for students; this instructional approach positioned students to have more ownership and authority in their learning. The teacher believed that students bring valuable knowledge to the science classroom, and he as a teacher wanted to harness and channel that knowledge in an academic environment. Tan and Barton (2010) found that within the science teacher’s classroom, students were able to gain more voice and to position themselves and their learning in more diverse ways. I argue that understanding and utilizing students’ funds of knowledge will allow students the space to grow in their perspectives of themselves and of their classmates in powerful and meaningful ways. The results of this study provides further support that the students’ lived experiences and funds of knowledge were valued and utilized to inform the learning process. Students even commented on how much more engaged in the work of science they were than in previous years.

Each student has unique funds of knowledge which are deeply connected to one’s upbringing and culture. Moll et al. (1992) conducted a study of funds of knowledge in Latino households; they were particularly interested in the connection between home and family with schooling. Later in 2005, Moll et al. state that the concept of funds of knowledge is based on a simple premise: “People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have
given them that knowledge” (pp. ix-x). Each particular person possesses unique life experiences that no one else possesses; these experiences are the make-up of their funds of knowledge. Affirming these experiences empowers students. These lived experiences are connected to students’ perspectives, and I argue that students’ perspectives are informed by their lived experiences. Street’s (2005) work in his writing classroom shows that when students use their lived experiences as a platform for writing, meaningful work takes place. Traditionally, in funds of knowledge projects (Moll et. al, 1992), researchers go into students’ home and conduct lengthy home interviews to attain a grasp of what funds of knowledge are cultivated. However, Street (2005) found it impossible to meet with each family of his secondary students. Therefore, he believed that “using writing as a window into our students’ hidden areas of expertise and funds of knowledge may be a practical way to learn more about what our students know and who they consult for help with academic tasks” (p. 23). Street (2005) saw that allowing his students to write about themselves allowed him the opportunity to weave his students’ experiences into instruction. This study supports that the intentional incorporation of students’ funds of knowledge can shift the dynamic of instructional practice and therefore the dynamic of literacy practices within the classroom. Street (2005) posits that by giving students opportunities to bring in their funds of knowledge through writing, “new patterns of dialogue emerged” (p. 24). This is significant in that when students’ knowledge and expertise are valued, the conversations that follow are meaningful and can be used to empower students. This is why having students share their funds of knowledge, whether it be through writing or speaking, is crucial. There can be an important, yet sometimes scary, shift in this type of instruction; the student becomes more of the expert, and the teacher becomes the learner. Street’s work shows that this shift is worth the risk
because utilizing students’ funds of knowledge can serve as an educational tool that moves us toward the ideal of better connecting with the lived experiences of students (Street, 2005).

I argue that, as a teacher, embracing students’ funds of knowledge is essential to building these types of social relations. Students may trust you, respond to you, and often times, respect you when you are accepting and teaching to their ways of knowing and understanding. Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992) conducted a case study with families on the American/Mexican border. They found that children’s funds of knowledge are cultivated by a process directed by the child and not the adult; children are given opportunities and encouraged to learn on their own. Because of this process, children felt comfortable to self-evaluate and self-judge. This concept is what I call student-directed learning in education. This study shows that when students are able to act on and utilize their funds of knowledge as an activator, they are more comfortable and more in charge of their learning. I posit that funds of knowledge are an intricate part of students’ operational and cultural systems of their daily lives. As a teacher, I want to leverage my students’ lived experiences as a positive driving force for learning and understanding.

Summary

In this chapter, the relevant theories of this study are discussed. Sociocultural theory informs this study in that I argue that learning takes places through understanding that signs and tools, which are culturally situated, mediate learning. A tenet of sociocultural theory is that literacy happens through the social avenue, which means students need to be sharing and discussing their thoughts and ideas through oral and written communication. To build on this concept of learning through social means, culturally relevant pedagogy is the framework driving this study; culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to view students’ cultural identities as assets and to enhance learning. Culturally relevant pedagogy can be experienced through the talking, sharing,
and discussing of one’s cultural identities. I also seek to link the importance of funds of knowledge to culturally relevant pedagogy. As a teacher, if I am seeking cultural competence and the potential change in perspectives for myself and my students, we need to acknowledge and utilize our funds of knowledge. Furthermore, within each theory, I provided examples of previous studies which inform the work of this study.
Chapter Three: Introduction

It is the fall of 2013, and I have just started a new job in a new town. I taught eighth grade for five years, and now I am finally getting to do what I set out to do when I got an English Education degree—teach high school. I am beyond excited to get the opportunity to have real conversations about literature with older students. (I learned to love eighth grade students, but I am a little too glad to be done with my middle school teaching experience. For now anyways.) In addition to starting a new job in a new place, I have also just recently started a doctoral program in Secondary English Education. My brain is completely in system overload. I am reading and hearing information that I literally have never heard before. I thought I might be a bit smart, but now I realize just how much I do not know! I have been humbled, no doubt.

As a part of one of my summer classes, I had to write a research proposal. I had no clue what I was doing. I threw some important people’s names together, created what I thought might be an argument about the importance of culture in the classroom, and asked a pretty basic question: How does the taking up of students’ funds of knowledge in writing instruction support the students’ writing development? With the encouragement from a professor, I reluctantly and haphazardly took this idea into my ninth grade classroom as a pilot study. As a very, very novice researcher (I am not sure you can even call what I did “research.”), I conducted this study with my students; I chose four students as participants in the study. I remember reading parts of a book, On the Case, by Anne Haas Dyson (2005), while I was trying to conceptualize my “study.” Needless to say, I learned a lot about what not to do in the future.

As poorly as this initial research experience seemed to go at the time, I am now incredibly grateful that I took this opportunity as a “researcher.” Little did I know that my
dissertation research topic would be a consequence of my initial thoughts from three years prior. I still believe that culture informs the ways in which we think, we act, and we communicate, and hopefully, three years later, I am better equipped to articulate the significant role one’s cultural identities can play in literacy.

**Practitioner Research**

As a high school teacher, I spend a full 180 days with my 160 plus students. I spend countless hours in and of a classroom establishing rapport with my students. As the classroom teacher, I hope to possess pertinent knowledge about my students and my classroom dynamics. When seeking empirical research in which to situate this study, I found that the majority of studies were conducted by researchers outside of the classroom. Researchers came into teachers’ classroom as an observer, not as a participant. As valuable and valid as this type of research may be, I argue that the teacher, as instructor, facilitator, observer, and participant can be, in some ways, the truest form of researcher. Cochran and Lytle (1990) call this type of research, practitioner research, which is “systemic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 3). Within the realm of culturally relevant pedagogy and funds of knowledge studies, I posit that the teachers’ voice, knowledge, and insight is a crucial part that is somewhat lacking. There are accounts of teachers, but these accounts are analyzed and articulated through the perspective of an outside entity. Cochran and Lytle (1990) argue that teachers, who have daily access, extensive expertise, and a clear stake in improving classroom teaching, need to be a part of the literature on teaching. Teachers’ experiences conveyed through personal perspectives should be of value to the educational community. Additionally, Lytle and Cochran (1993) propose that “teacher researchers stand in a different relationship to their own knowledge, to their students as knowers, and to knowledge generation in the field” (p. 63). I acknowledge that this “different relationship”
of teachers can be messy and challenging to articulate; although, I argue that should not be a reason for dismissing teacher voices. I am aware that as the teacher and the researcher in the classroom, I am going to represent certain bias in my teaching and probably in my students. However, as Lytle and Cochran (1993) posit, I am the knower of my room, my students, and myself; therefore, my knowledge as a teacher-researcher is valuable.

Teacher researchers conduct research through the lens of inquiry as stance, meaning that teachers seek to understand what is happening in their classrooms (Cochran & Lytle, 1990). When working with adolescents paired with analyzing and evaluating one’s own methods of teaching, there are obvious ethical considerations that need to be acknowledged. Mockler (2014), building upon Cochran and Lytle’s (1990) work, states that there are five critical ethical dimensions of practitioner research conducted within classroom contexts: “informed consent, avoiding harm, student voice, power dynamics within the classroom, and teacher judgment” (p. 153). Informed consent is making students aware that they have choice in whether or not to participate in a study. They need to understand and trust that they will be represented as authentically as possible. Students also need to know and to feel safe that no harm will come to them as a result of participating in a study. With educational research, this is typically not an issue. I argue that student voice is one of the most significant aspects of practitioner research because they are the ones in the classroom who are being instructed. They have a unique and valuable perspective that needs to be heard. Furthermore, teachers need to recognize their position of power in the classroom and how that can potentially influence the dynamic of the research. I, as the teacher, cannot ignore that in some ways, I am the authority in the classroom. Lastly, and what I consider to be a point of contention is teacher judgment. As teachers collect evidence in their own classrooms, there needs to be an awareness of the reflexive nature of this
A part of practitioner researcher is engaging in authentic research where students’ voices are privileged. Students’ voices are an element that is left out, and I believe that is due in part that the data can become messy and challenging. Mockler (2014) suggests that practitioner research requires teachers “to foster authentic dialogue with students regarding their learning experiences and a willingness to adapt and tailor learning experiences according to the experience, needs and preferences of students” (p. 154). This type of instruction is characteristic of culturally relevant pedagogy, one of the driving forces of this research, in that one’s experiences are a critical part of culture. However, authentic dialogue and a willingness to adapt learning experiences for students require a great deal of effort on the part of the teacher. Additionally, as both Cochran and Lytle (1990) and Mockler (2014) posit, the teacher researcher needs to trust the inquiry and embrace the flaws, the surprises, and the potentially problematic nature of practitioner research. As a practitioner, I desire to design my lessons, create meaningful assessments, and produce better students than when they walked into my room in August; I want to see “results” because results are what my administration, parents, and students want to see. These results do not come in numbers but in the hope that students learn to think more deeply, analytically, and critically. However, as a researcher, I additionally desire reflection and deep consideration of the instructional process; I have more of an intentional purpose to see flaws and holes in my teaching. Because I believe that this culturally relevant teaching can be powerful and transformative, I am apprehensively yet confidently open to what may happen in my classroom. Mockler (2014) postulates that practitioner research has a transformative intent that leads to action, which is a part of my hope for this study. I desire that through this instructional unit, that
my students may be more empathetic and understanding of themselves and their peers. I hope that they may experience and come to embrace varying perspectives.

In a paper written by teacher researchers, Schaenen, Kohnen, Flinn, Saul, and Zeni (2012) argue that one of the values of practitioner research is that teachers embody a variety of lived experiences and perspectives, and this insight is needed in today’s educational world that seems to be driven by those who are outside of the classroom. Schaenen et al. (2012) argue that practitioner research involves teachers and other professionals, along with their students, as active participants in the inquiry process. Inquiry is a dominant catalyst in practitioner research as it should be. One of the teacher researchers states it in this way; “All good teachers think about and change their work based on experiences, but teacher research is the act of making that thought visible, documented, systematic” (Schaenen et al., 2012, p. 72). The additional step of documenting the research is what I believe separates teaching from teacher research.

Research Questions

1. How does a teacher intentionally implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the English-language arts classroom to position students for richer literacy experiences?

2. How does positioning students’ cultural identities as assets in learning instead of a deficits influence students’ perspectives of themselves as learners?

3. How does cultural identity/sharing of cultural identities change students’ perspectives and enhance student literacy experiences?

Setting

I conducted my study in a twelfth grade English classroom at a high school in a small city in the southeastern United States. The high school has roughly 1,200 students, and the ethnic breakdown is as follows: 60% White, 18% Black, 12% Hispanic, and 10% Asian/Pacific
Islander/other. My actual classroom population, however, is more diverse than that; my students are roughly 48% White, 26% Black, 16% Hispanic, and 10% Asian and Multi-Racial. Roughly 40-50% of students are eligible to free or reduced lunch. Advanced Composition is a new course at the high school; I am first teacher to teach the course. I developed the unit plans for the first time during the 2014-2015 school year. Previously the seniors who were not taking AP Literature or AP Language took British Literature. From my conversations with current teachers at Cartersville and other teachers of Advanced Composition, I developed the course very similarly to a college freshman English class. There is a strong focus on composing for various audiences in multiple modalities. My classroom size ranges from 29-31 students, and I have three twelfth grade classes. I chose my fifth period class to conduct this study.

Sample Populations

I sent home consent/assent forms with the students for the students and parents. I emailed parents to let them know what was coming. Of the thirty students, twenty-four returned the forms and were willing to participate. I chose four students to interview in addition to the regular classroom activities. I chose two males and two females, all of whom were very willing to be interviewees. Additionally, I called each parent/guardian of the interviewees; I wanted each parent to hear from me what is actually going to happen in the study. I believe this is necessary, particularly when working with youth. I wanted the parents to be aware. (See Appendix C for script.)

Methodology

Because I explored real-life, contemporary bounded systems, “cases,” over a period of time, using detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, case study is an appropriate means of looking at the data (Creswell, 2012). I conducted my studying
using a multiple case study approach in which I used four students as cases; I conducted a cross-case analysis utilizing the four students and the classroom as well as an within-case analysis of the four students. Young (2010) states that most of the studies on culturally relevant pedagogy to date have been case studies which supports my decision to use this methodology. Because of the unique emphasis on cultural identity, I believe that case studies reveal the rich complexities of culturally relevant teaching in the classroom. I chose four students who were willing to participate in interviews and to share their writings.

The unit I taught, “Culture and Identity,” spanned about eight weeks. However, because I have taught these students since August, I possess knowledge and insight into their perspectives from previous units of instruction that informed how I constructed and aligned this unit. I taught this unit last year for the first time, and I have changed a few aspects so as to fit the needs of my students. I have an outline of assignments and readings; however, this changed as I deemed it necessary for the students. (For example, state testing lasted three weeks instead of two weeks, so I had to drop one of the critical discussions.) Throughout this unit, students were expected to explore their own cultural identities and beliefs while simultaneously learning about their classmates’ cultural identities and beliefs. My belief is that students engage in identity work through interpreting and constructing texts (Beach et al., 2015). Students participated in critical discussions surrounding cultural diversity topics. Beach, Thein, and Parks (2008) argue that “simply reading portrayals of cultural diversity is a necessary, but not sufficient, method for challenging students’ status quo discourses and cultural models of race, class, and gender. What is also needed are instructional activities and peer interaction that allow for challenging these status quo discourses” (p. 278). Students were expected to discuss and to hopefully grapple with issues and their own assumptions. For the writing component, students wrote two compositions;
one being a three- to four-page paper exploring their cultural identity, and another being a 350 to 500 word essay expressing a “This I Believe” statement. I have found that students recognize and grapple with their cultural identities when they have authentic audiences to display their work. My students hopefully wrote for more than just a grade that I will give them; they wrote for their peers’ feedback and perspectives. Furthermore, both compositions have a visual component to them, and both compositions were shared with their classmates to elicit feedback and to gauge impact. I believe that through sharing written texts about their lives, students show how their past experiences inform their present perspective in ways that influence their cultural identities (Beach et al., 2015).

During this unit, I took detailed notes during the critical discussions, as well as I videoed the discussions. I conducted interviews prior to, during, and after the study. I view my role as interviewer as Moll, González, and Amanti (2005) positioned themselves in their research: “We may not always agree with what hear, but our role is to understand how others make sense of their lives. Sense-making processes may be contradictory or ambiguous, but in one way or another, understanding what makes sense to others is what we are about” (p. 9). My purpose was to ask questions with the intent to learn more about my students, their funds of knowledge, and their cultural identities; I used this information to better understand my students as I move throughout the unit. I believe these conversations are a way of establishing the validation of community-based knowledge (Moll et al., 2005). The interviews were informal and conversational.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The formal data collection took place during the spring semester of 2016 when I taught the eight week unit on “Culture and Identity.” Because I am the teacher of the classroom, the
instructional units leading up to this final one have incorporated culturally relevant pedagogy as well. Students in my classroom have been encouraged to grapple with similar concepts that will be further fleshed out in this particular instructional unit. In this unit, two critical discussions were conducted in addition to two to three compositions and several readings. (See Appendix E. for an outline of the unit.) I collected my data in three ways: interviews, discussions, and writings of participants. I examined how their writing connected with the thoughts from their interviews. Were there similarities or contradictions? Were there new meanings or revelations, or were there reversals in thoughts? I conducted semi-structured interviews with the selected participants before the study, during the study, and after the study. I conducted these interviews one on one; I recorded and transcribed each interview. (See Appendix B.) The data I gathered provides insight into the research questions, particularly the interviews in which students were able to express their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives. In the interviews, I obtained unique information or interpretations held by the students; my intention was to tailor the questions to the individual student and to ask probing questions to clarify and refine the information and interpretation (Stake, 2010). During the unit, I had participants share their thoughts and perspectives with me after the sharing of students’ Cultural Identity compositions and “This I Believe” essays. I was specifically interested in evolving perspectives of their fellow classmates and of culture, beliefs, and identities.

In addition to interviews, I will also be observing frequently. As the teacher in the classroom, I am afforded the space to observe my students on a daily basis. I believe that these observations will be invaluable to my study. I will make notes of daily interactions of participating students, but I will primarily focus on the critical discussions and use the protocol in Appendix B. to chart my observations. Young (2010) states that participant observation is rare
in case study research of culturally relevant pedagogy; oftentimes, I plan to be an active participant in which I will join in the critical discussion as a facilitator. As an observer, I view my responsibility to know what is happening, to see it, to hear it, and to try to make sense of it. Cochran and Lytle (1993) posit that teacher researchers are uniquely positioned with a true insider’s perspective that “make visible the ways that students and teachers together construct knowledge” (pg. 43). While I believe this to be true, I must hold myself accountable for my thoughts. Through coding and reflecting, I was able to see the data more from an outside perspective; as I coded and wrote analytic memos, I viewed the data more reflexively and objectively because I was removed from the immediate classroom environment.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

In the data analysis, I examined these multiple perspectives and tensions that arose as students grappled with understanding their own cultural identities as well as their peers’ cultural identities. As Ladson-Billings’ (2009) hope was to represent as accurately as possible the teachers of her study, my hope and my purpose was to represent as accurately and authentically as possible my students’ thoughts, perspectives, and cultural identities. When I began the analysis of the data, I first analyzed at the transcriptions of the interviews. From there, I analyzed the two critical discussions and finally the student writings. I then moved to more of an axial coding approach in which I looked for ways to categorize and make sense of the identified themes (Saldaña, 2013). I utilized Dedoose to conduct the coding. Once the coding was complete, I looked at common trends and themes amongst the sources of data to ensure triangulation (multiple methods and multiple participants). I focused primarily on the more prominent themes that I identified, so that my analysis was thicker and deeper than attempting to analyze all trends. Because of the personal nature of culturally relevant teaching, understanding
outcomes is more important than generalizing outcomes. I did not have any desired outcomes, per se, because I wanted the data to tell the story (Smagorinsky, 2011). I conducted a cross-case analysis and a within-case analysis to see what themes appear amongst all of my cases as well as what themes appear in each unique case. After the analysis, I met with each of the focus students for member checking.

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure credibility, I utilized the case study approach, which is a common approach in culturally relevant pedagogy studies (Young, 2010). I chose three to four students who were willing to participate as interviewees. I provided a thick description of the school setting and my classroom. I took observational/field notes, conducted multiple interviews, analyzed student writings, and participated in member checking. When I completed coding of data, I met with each participant individually to check that what I have identified is accurate of what they portrayed. This member checking was essential because I wanted to be sure that my participants are seen, heard, and presented in the most authentic manner. I desire that my students’ voices be portrayed authentically and accurately.

Prolonged engagement and prolonged observation were a natural part of my study because I have been with these students since August. To ensure dependability, I utilized researched methods and frameworks. To ensure confirmability, I explicitly described my personal cultural identity and beliefs. I acknowledged the shortcomings, challenges, and potential holes in the research. Furthermore, I created a table which illustrates which pieces of data support my findings. (See Appendix D.)
Limitations and delimitations

The greatest limitation of this sociocultural study speaks to the richest part of my interests, and that is attempting to capture and to understand all facets of culture that students utilize to make meaning. Smagorinsky (2011) says, “One peril of working in the Vygotskian tradition is its emphasis on a social-cultural-historical approach and the problem that accounting for all relevant social interaction grounded in cultural and historical antecedents is simply not possible” (p. 255). Aspiring to describe the complexities of how one’s cultural identities negotiate and shape their learning and evolving perspectives is going to be challenging. However, I think that it is important and invaluable in my teaching and in my research, which is why I believe that explicitly explaining the context and the methods of the study will account for and situate the study’s meaning. However, it would be virtually impossible to truly conduct a study as such simply because one has to account for the social, cultural, and historical contexts, things that are beyond the scope of this research. Stake (2010) claims that qualitative research can often take a long time to come to understand what is going on, and because of the given time frame, this is nearly impossible.

Another limitation, which posed a unique difficulty for my particular study, is that a crucial part of my argument is that literacy is culturally situated. My high school is a very traditional setting; therefore, taking up sociocultural ways of instructing are not always embraced. I have found that oftentimes, the conservative values of school do not afford the space for literacy as personal development; instead, literacy is treated as a medium by which students demonstrate their ability to recall course material (Smagorinsky, 2011). I find this to be alarmingly true of my school setting. There have been numerous occasions on which I received interesting looks and comments from fellow colleagues concerning my methods built around the
idea of authentic talk and discussion in the classroom. For example, when students participate in debates, they choose the topics, not me. I was advised to assign them so that “things didn’t get out of hand” while they were debating. I, however, chose to let the students pick their topics, which were abortion and gay marriage. The debates were highly academic and incredibly emotionally charged; the students’ research was impeccable. Nonetheless, these debates were not always well-received by my colleague. I will account for this dissension by grounding my teaching in previous research on culturally relevant pedagogy, funds of knowledge, and cultural identity. My hope is that the results of my students’ evolving thinking in relation to the instructional unit will speak for itself. I believe that what Vygotsky refers to as the “smysl-the thinking that takes place prior to or concurrent with articulation into coherence; the storm cloud of thoughts that produces the shower of words” can only be inferred and not empirically demonstrated (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 167). I cannot show what thoughts are going on in my students’ minds; I can attempt by utilizing interviews and probing questions as well as member checking, but I still believe this will be very challenging, particularly with high school students.

In taking up culturally relevant teaching, there can be gray area. I cannot know exactly what my students will share, which can be alarming as a teacher. I cannot exactly “plan” all instruction in advance because I will expect to build on the funds of knowledge of my students. Rather than coming to class with specific lessons that I want to teach students, I will come to class with meaningful texts and questions that I hope to explore with students. Furthermore, a frustration that Young (2010) posits that exists amongst teachers when attempting to take up the culturally relevant pedagogical stance is:
As we worked to apply culturally relevant pedagogy into curricular planning, the question that kept surfacing was “How?” Will represented the participants’ frustration well when he commented, “How do you do [culturally relevant pedagogy] without deviating too far from the curriculum? Are our kids really mature enough to address such deep inequalities? Do they even know how? Do we as teachers? . . . It’s a great idea . . . [but] how do we do it?” (p. 258).

Because Advanced Composition is not an End-of-Course class, I do feel more freedom to experiment with culturally relevant teaching; I do not feel the pressures of high-stakes testing like others do. However, I do grapple with whether my students are really mature enough to address their cultural identities as well as their classmates. However, whether they are mature enough or not, I believe that I must guide them in understanding and in the social appropriateness of dealing with such issues. Knowing what I have learned, I cannot ignore that culture is an essential part of literacy. I desire to embrace the power of one’s cultural identities, which will hopefully encourage and model for my students how to embrace cultural identities.

**Ethical considerations**

In conducting research utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy, students will most likely reveal personal information. There are ethical issues to consider, and I want to be certain that my study is ethically sound. There are several non-negotiables for me as a researcher. The first and most important is informed consent; I want the students to know and to understand what they are agreeing to be a part of. I do not want anyone to feel pressured into anything. I will make sure that students realize that participation in this study will not impact their grades. I also want to accurately represent my classroom and school background/dynamic, and my students’ perspectives. An accurate understanding and representation of students’ cultures is going to be
challenging, and I plan to include my students so that I do this correctly. I will ask clarifying questions as we go through the interviews. Additionally, in the analysis phase, I want students to review my assertions to confirm or clarify my interpretations.

I want students to know that I will keep their information confidential; otherwise, they may not feel comfortable confiding in me. In order to do this, I will need to established, authentic rapport with my students. I also plan to share my interpretations with the participants so as to ensure that I am representing them accurately. I plan to be intentional in balancing the relationship between my students and my involvement in the research. Because I want my research to not only be meaningful to me, I will situate my study within current, reliable, and relevant research. This study poses no serious ethical problems in that students will be safe and free from any physical harm.

Positionality

In my eight years of teaching, I have been fortunate to always teach diverse populations. In my attempts to meet students where they are, I realized when I started the Ed.D. program that this practice of recognizing, valuing, and incorporating students’ cultural backgrounds actually had a name: culturally relevant pedagogy. I felt encouraged and invigorated to know that others saw the importance of empowering students by valuing who they are and what they bring to the classroom. Taking up culturally relevant teaching sounds simple in theory, but it is actually very challenging and rewarding at the same time. I have chosen to research, to study, and to intentionally implement culturally relevant pedagogy because of my personal experiences in the classroom—from what I saw happening and not happening. I know how essential my cultural background is to my learning; therefore, I know firsthand that incorporating each student’s cultural background into learning in my classroom can be very meaningful for students. Milner
(2011) refers to Freire’s (1998) idea that “teachers create learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate (more fully) in the multiple discourses available in a learning context by not only consuming information but also through helping to deconstruct and to construct it” (p.72). This is precisely the type of environment that I desire for my students to experience which is why I am in invested in the study of culturally relevant pedagogy. I desire to be a culturally relevant teacher because this mindset is consistent with what I believe and who I am. I believe that my job as an English teacher is to foster and to support students’ learning opportunities.

I see myself as a social constructivist, as one who seeks understanding of the world in which they live and work. I serve a diverse population of students; however, in my humble opinion through observation of my students’ schooling experiences, the previous ELA teachers’ approaches to teaching are not always meaningful for the students. The ethnic background of the U.S. classroom is changing tremendously and rapidly, which means teacher instruction needs to change also.

I recognize that my background will shape my analysis and my interpretations, which is why I want to acknowledge my cultural identities. I identify myself as a white, middle-class, thirty-year-old Christian female; I am married, and I have one daughter. I was born and raised in southern, rural Mississippi in a tiny farming community called Church Hill. If one were to look for Church Hill on a map, one would most likely not be able to locate it. In this community, there are two stop signs, two churches, farm lands, and my family’s homes. I was raised in a very Christian, conservative home with an emphasis on discipline and respect for authority. Family events are as sacred as Sunday morning church attendance. I attended an all-white, private Christian school from kindergarten until twelfth grade where I graduated with forty-eight people.
My identity roles include Christian, wife, mother, daughter, friend, educator, and student. My culture influences each of these roles in ways that I am aware and probably unaware of. I am incredibly dedicated and loyal to my faith and family, as I was raised to conduct myself in this manner. My faith is a driving force in how I view my role as an educator; I believe strongly that I am called to teach in a way that students see their value and their worth. As a young Christian, I was not as accepting of people who were not like me. However, on my educational and career journey as a teacher, my heart has grown in ways that I did not anticipate. As a white, middle-class, Christian female, I have been overly fortunate with opportunities for success. When I started teaching, I quickly learned that what I thought was the norm for students, which is what I experienced, was a rarity. Because I was privileged as a child to live in a two parent home where love and sustenance were amply provided, I honestly was astounded my first couple of years of teaching at the perception of a lack of love in some of my students’ homes. Because of this continuous changing in my heart, I want to intentionally show love and care for my students in the ways that I received love my entire childhood and still do as an adult. There are students who seemingly find no value in themselves and therefore no value in their education. I believe that my mindset as a culturally relevant teacher may change that for my students. In acknowledging my cultural identity, I desire to be keenly aware of how my own interests and my own funds of knowledge can color and filter what I observe and how I interact with my students (Moll et al., 2005). Because my culture has played such an important role in my learning experiences, I believe that our assumptions about culture shape what we consider to be important information about ourselves and others, and how we interpret and judge human behavior (Amanti, 2005). My assumptions, perspectives, and privileges as a teacher are obviously going to differ from that of my seventeen to nineteen-year-old seniors. In order to keep these in check, I will need
systemically to take a step back from the research and view it from other perspectives, just as I will be asking my students to do with their work.

My research interests are deeply entrenched in understanding, embracing, and utilizing students’ cultural identities which will then empower my students in ways that they nor I can predict or imagine. I piloted some of my ideas last year in my senior classroom, and I was astounded by the results. When students began to grapple with their own cultural identities and to realize different aspects of their classmates’ cultural identities, students’ perspectives were more empathetic and understanding of one another.

Summary

When reading research, one typically wants to skip to the results sections to see if whatever the study is about “worked.” This study is not necessarily about culturally relevant teaching “working;” this study is understanding the power that cultural identity may hold for meaning-making and shaping of perspectives for my students. Moll (2005) acknowledges this tension in his work with funds of knowledge; he says, “We have been asked whether we collected test data on the students to ‘prove’ that the approach works. The answer is no. We did collect test data in several classrooms in an earlier version of the study but found much of the information uninterpretable given variations among classrooms, differences in instruction, and other confounding aspects of practice” (p. 23). I originally planned to look at students’ writing to deem if culturally relevant teaching “worked;” however, the more I piloted my ideas in my classrooms, I noticed that I am much more interested and intrigued by the transformation of my students’ perspectives than I am about their actual “grades” or writing style. I cannot quantify improvement in writing, as Moll (2005) indicates. However, I did perceive a change in my students’ perceptions and a change in the classroom atmosphere as a result of culturally relevant teaching. This change is what I hope to capture throughout this study.
Chapter 4: Introduction

I spend a great deal of time in the summers in Mississippi because I grew up there, and all of my family still lives there. Truth be known, a large part of my heart still resides in Mississippi. On one ordinary Friday in July, I visited my grandparents; they are both retired and in their eighties. My Grandpa has Parkinson’s disease, which makes his movements weak and shaky; however, his mind is as strong and sharp as ever. I love talking with him because he possesses a plethora of wisdom about the world. In eighty-three years of life, he has acquired quite a diverse set of experiences.

When we talk, we discuss politics, religion, and of course football. Somewhere in the discussion, he always asks me about my doctoral studies as he is very proud of my work. He listens with such intent and interest; he has been asking me for going on three years now about what I am reading, what I am learning, and how I am applying my new knowledge to my teaching. Our conversations revitalize my mind, my heart, and my passion.

This particular Friday morning, Grandpa asks me where I am in the process and how close I am to being finished. I reply that I should be done this coming fall. His face just beams with pride and delight. He asks, “Tell me about what you are working on right now.” I tell him that I am analyzing my data and beginning to write the final chapters of my dissertation. He nods his head and questions, “So what did you find out?” I communicate that my students showed me that teaching from a culturally relevant viewpoint is much richer than what I had anticipated.

Overview of Results

For the results, I used a within-case analysis approach. I began with myself as a case and how I sought purposefully and meaningfully to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. I then focus individually on four particular students and their experiences with writing about and
sharing their own cultural identities. I analyzed their writings and interviews to see trends within themselves. I then shift the analysis of the entire class of students to see as a whole what students’ experiences were throughout the unit. I summarize my results in the conclusion.

Within-Case Analyses

Foster

As the teacher, I was very much a part of this research study. For the first question, I have looked at myself and how I intentionally implement culturally relevant pedagogy. Defining what a culturally relevant teacher is and does can be challenging; however, when I analyzed my specific motives, ideas, and intentions, it became clear to me that I was purposefully creating an environment where culturally relevant teaching and learning could take place. To reflect a moment, Ladson-Billings (1995) states that culturally relevant pedagogy has three main pillars: students experiencing academic success, developing cultural competence, and challenging social structures. I will explain how I established a culturally relevant classroom in the following section.

Academic success is a construct that can be defined differently in any given subject, circumstance, and space. For my students, academic success is defined as growth in confidence and assurance as a critical reader, writer, and communicator. At this point in the year, which was March through May, I have established relationships with students, and they hopefully felt comfortable and confident in my classroom. Because of this positive rapport, students tended to work more authentically than at the beginning of the year. The students, as all student do, assessed what level and type of relationship I would establish with them from day one of this course. I have diligently and intentionally given warm, critical feedback on all types of assignments at this point in the year. Students are clear on what to expect from me and what I
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expect of them. Because of this, I believe that my students have experienced academic success in a variety of ways—through written and oral assignments. They have developed a sense of empowerment in themselves as I attempt to show later in the chapter.

As explored in chapter 2, Ladson-Billings (1995) stated that culturally relevant teachers use culture as a vehicle for learning; she argued that cultural competence is utilizing cultural knowledge in the classroom as a starting point. In my English classroom, I agree with Ladson-Billings and further build on her definition of cultural competence, which means that students are aware of their own cultures and how their cultures inform their thinking and learning. This criterion of culturally relevant pedagogy required me to have some type of base knowledge and understanding of my students in order to create spaces for them to develop and/or exercise cultural competence. This was the most difficult aspect of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy. It was not until just a few years ago, when I began to look closely at CRP, that cultural competence became something that I even really understood and considered as important in my classroom. As an adult, I believe that I am still learning how what it means and looks like to be culturally competent in different areas of my life. In thinking about how I could intentionally facilitate learning opportunities for students to develop cultural competence, I wanted them to initially see a need for cultural competence in the classroom; I have attempted to do this throughout all units, however, in this particular unit, I began with a reading and analysis of two articles. One article was a difficult textbook chapter on cultures, subcultures, contact zones, etc. (Jandt, 2004); and the second article was from National Geographic which focused on the changing faces of America. The students were to complete “Think Pieces” as they read (See Appendix F). These articles and think pieces created an opportunity for students to grapple with their own concepts of cultures, what their cultures are, and where these ideas come from. I
purposefully created this as the first activity of the unit because I wanted students to view
themselves and their classmates as cultural beings.

In continuing to work toward cultural competence the first composition that students
wrote was an exploration of their cultural identities (See Appendix B). The writing was based on
specific pieces from the initial readings; students explored their rituals, cultural events, values,
etc. This type of writing, looking deeply at oneself, positioned the students to see and to view
themselves as cultural beings. Matthew commented in his follow-up interview after the writing
and sharing of this composition, “I think it was easy like talking about how you are, and it was
hard to see why you are like that.” In addition to writing these compositions, the students also
created a visual representation of their cultural identities. Upon completion of both the writing
and visual piece, the class spent an entire class period in the media center sharing their cultural
identities. Students were required to view at least seven of their classmates and to give warm
feedback to each. This day was powerful; this type of sharing allowed the students to see into
windows of one another’s lives that quite possibly they had not before. My goal for beginning
the unit with a focus on culture and cultural identities was to purposefully create a sense of
awareness of the role of culture in the classroom in order to build cultural competence in the
students.

As for the third criterion of culturally relevant pedagogy, challenging the social
structures, my entire curriculum is infused with this notion. From day one of my classroom, I am
challenging the students to broaden their perspectives. In the critical discussions and in the
interviews I am digging deeper and asking to students to think with questions like these:

And that’s true in America. Right? What you are saying is absolutely true in America. I
think about other countries...and we talk about race like it’s white better than black, black
is better than whatever..whatever the construct is. If I was to do this exact same thing in German classroom. What would they say? Would it be about Jews? What would be the pressure points right? What would be the pressure points in China? What would be the pressure points in Brazil? So for here, the pressure points are black and white because the white people historically have had power whereas in France it may be different. In England it may be different. In Portugal, it may be different. One of my hopes for us too is that we are going to step outside of just America, which some of you have...so you do know the power constructs.

In what ways do beliefs clarify or confuse our perspectives and perceptions of each other? In what way does it clarify or confuse or both?

Was there ever been a time when your core beliefs were shaken or tested perhaps in ways that were uncomfortable or dangerous?

Do you think that most people would be proud to claim their actions as beliefs?

How does this knowledge move you forward in your thinking of the world and of yourself? Let me say that in a different way...So like, what you were saying about the discussions and in the ways that you can think deeper or what’s puzzled or what’s confirmed-that way of thinking-How does that move you forward in thinking about yourself and other people and living in the world?

I believe that when students are able to see situations and circumstances from varying viewpoints, they can begin to challenge the status quo. Brookfield (2012) states that asking students to challenge their assumptions can be “an unsettling, even rebellious act. It disturbs both those being asked (particularly if they’re comfortable with the way things are) and those in
power (who would rather people did not ask such questions)” (p. 196). As seniors in high school, some of my students have been exposed to very few viewpoints other than their own. I do not necessarily deem this as a positive or a negative. In order for the varying perspectives of my students to be shared and developed, I use a critical discussion protocol develop by Brookfield (2012); he cautions that discussion must not become centers of personal response where participants passively accept anything as true.

Discussions must become safe spaces where participants:

- identify their own and their peers’ assumptions
- check the validity of assumptions; attempt to identify contexts in which the assumptions are valid
- seek evidence to confirm or disprove generalizations
- generate as many perspectives as possible
- remain suspicious of early consensus

The purpose of these discussions are to generate as many viewpoints as possible as well as to identify and challenge assumptions. Because students have been participating in discussion like this all year long, these critical discussions in March and May flow very naturally and authentically. Students were in a place in which they knew that I expected them to grapple with comfortable and uncomfortable notions about culture, cultural identities, and the like. I challenged their assumptions as well as they challenged one another very appropriately. I have found that building my classroom around these types of discussions has led to some very powerful and real explorations of difficult topics.

Because of this study, I have grown personally and professionally. Personally, I am
more aware of the need to create a community in which all students are heard and valued. I knew community was important in the classroom, but I saw through the data analysis process how much the students really appreciated the opportunity to express themselves. Students commented frequently on the authenticity that was present among their classmates; I was not expecting this. Additionally, because I persistently challenged students to look deeper within their own biases, I had to do the same in order to listen and to model listening for my students. My professional growth steamed from the personal growth; I will now teach with a mindset of getting students to recognize and to challenge inequalities, to always question, to think deeper, and to ask why of themselves and their classmates. Culturally relevant pedagogy does not just exist in one unit; CRP exists every day in every lesson. Culturally relevant teaching is a mindset that teachers possess (Milner, 2011). I realized the power of having students share everything that they think and create; the sharing opens up conversations that may or may not surface. In future years, I will introduce this unit at the beginning of the year. I want more time and space to create an environment which allows for the recognizing and challenging of social structure throughout the rest of the year. Additionally, I will utilize more critical discussions because I believe this is where students were really able to grapple and to see one another grapple with social inequalities (Brookfield, 2009).

**Tiffany Young**

Tiffany Young is an seventeen year old female; her parents are divorced, and she lives with her mother. She has a great relationship with both parents and values family. When asked how she identified herself racially and ethnically, she responded, “I would define myself as Christian...Being a Christian, it moves my ways..it affects me, how I do things and the decisions that I make.” Later in conversation, she identified herself as black:
I mean...most people say...well I know I am black, but most people say I have Caucasian ways, but I think it’s just the way...I wouldn’t define myself as Caucasian, but I think it’s just the way I hold myself...like growing up, my uncle- he would call me “white girl” and call my sister “black girl”...he didn’t like mean anything by it; it’s just the way I act.

Throughout the study, Tiffany’s understanding of culture expanded. Initially for her, culture was about religion:

Before when I thought about culture, I thought about your religion. I never really thought about the things that I do on a daily basis or tradition of what I do. I never thought of it like that. And that’s changed because when I was doing the project, I was like “I never really thought of this (values, rituals, traditions, etc.) as culture.”

Through reading and seeing others’ understandings of culture, Tiffany began to see culture as a much broader concept; she believed culture to be more about learned behaviors and how you were raised. She saw herself as a more multi-faceted person and in turn, saw her classmates as more multi-dimensional as well.

For Tiffany, the concept of identity was very much affirmed; her cultural identities are firmly rooted in family. When I asked her what she wrote about in her cultural identities paper, she responded, “I wrote about family mostly because that’s what I was brought up in.” Tiffany stated that she spent more time with family, particularly her auntie, than friends; “I hang out a lot with her (auntie). I would say I hang out there more than I am probably at my friends’ houses.” She consistently made comments in the interviews which showed her loyalty and respect toward her family. She commented that when making decisions, she always pondered how this decision would impact her family. In her first interview, she said, “When I typically do something, I think
back to like, ‘Would this look good on my family?’ Because one thing I never want to hear is for my Dad to tell me that he is disappointed in me.”

Tiffany was very proud, confident, and comfortable of her cultural identities; in the opening paragraph of her cultural identities composition, she wrote:

When you first hear of a young black female, what are your first thoughts? “Gold diggers. Baby mamas. Uneducated sisters. Ratchet women. Angry black women. Mean black girls. Unhealthy black women. Black barbies. Negative imagery and stereotypes of black women abound in today's media,” writes Dawnie Walton at Essence. Being a part of the “Black Female Culture” I am often put into these stereotypes because of what is encountered regularly on TV, in social media, in music videos and from other outlets seen on television and social media. But, if Tiffany Young is said around someone who knows me well then these thought wouldn’t even come up. I am rather part of the Young Phenoms, Real Beauties, Individualists, Community Heroines, Educated, and Independent Black Women Culture- shared patterns or behaviors that is taught/learned through generation, community, or tradition. My culture is sacred and unique to me because my culture makes me, me.

When receiving feedback on these compositions, Tiffany received many encouraging and positive comments on this particular section of her paper. In an interview with me, she talked about how affirming it was to see her classmates’ comments; she spent a great deal of time getting that paragraph perfectly clear, so she was very pleased with the outcome. During this unit of study, Tiffany’s cultural identities were confidently displayed and well received by her peers; therefore, she saw herself as someone who could and would learn alongside of her classmates.
Throughout the creating and sharing processes in this unit, I identified two themes that ran through Tiffany’s writings, reflections, and interviews. In terms of the impact of culturally relevant teaching, Tiffany’s perspectives were influenced by the level of authenticity and her literacy practices were changed by her “thought processes.”

**Authenticity-change in perspective**

As confident and comfortable as Tiffany is in her own skin, she was intrigued by the authentic environment that was established in the classroom throughout the year but particularly in this unit. In the final interview, she stated, “I know people’s true feelings.” When I asked her to tell me more about this, she said, “I think when we are in here, we can all like be ourselves. Not only like you make us, but...It’s just cause we’ve been doing it all year, so like feelings just flow when we are in here.” Tiffany recognized that there was something different, unique about how this level of authenticity creates a different learning environment. She commented that this is not present in other classrooms or even in the hallways at time. She also mentioned a conversation with a student I taught from the previous year; she explained that they discuss how real the discussions are and how that has shaped their perspectives and will continue to shape them in the future. When asked if she felt that this level of authenticity would transfer to other parts of her life, she answered, “I think it will because this has like opened my eyes-- don’t be quick to judge.” Furthermore, Tiffany mentioned that having to share writings, to give feedback, and to hear one another’s voices contributed to the authenticity; “When you see it or hear it, it’s more of a reality.” Tiffany began to not only see herself more authentically but also her classmates which led to a shift in her thought processes as well.
Literacy practices - change of thought processes

Before taking her final English class in high school, Tiffany had always taken honors English courses, including Advanced Placement Literature during her junior year. In our final interview, when I asked her how this English class had been different from her previous experiences in English classrooms, she said:

Yes...I’ve taken AP and Honors like every year with Lit, so it’s been like, like nouns, pronouns, verbs. It’s been like type of Lit, but in here, it’s like you give us something, and you can’t really like study for it. You have to like think. That’s the only thing you have to do in this class is think.

Tiffany recognizes my intent for this class, and that is to get the students thinking in ways that they quite possibly never have before. In Tiffany’s previous English classroom experiences, school literacy practices were about grammar and regurgitating information. In the follow up interview after writing the cultural identities composition, she mentioned that she had rewrite and think deeply about how she wanted to word certain sections or sentences; “But I actually have to sit down and think. Like I couldn’t just write my first thought. I had to write and rewrite and change some things and like reword some stuff.” She wanted to be sure to portray herself accurately and precisely. Ultimately for Tiffany, what was deemed as “thinking” has changed; “Uh, my thought processes have changed. Like I said for the first question. Like how I look at it has changed.” Tiffany’s literacy practices have changed; she is thinking deeper and more critically than in her previous English classroom experiences.
Audree Willis

Audree Willis is a nineteen-year-old female; she comes from a home with twelve siblings of which she is the oldest. She is currently living with a friend’s mother; her siblings are mostly in foster care. Her mother is living alone, and her father is in prison. When asked how she identified herself racially and/or ethnically, she answered, “Black and white.” She claims that she identifies more with being black because she spent more time with her father’s family, who is Black, growing up. However, for her, there was a conflict of cultures:

I think race is a part of regulating. Because what you grew up and like with me. I grew up in a white household; my mother is white, so I took...I go off of what she goes off of. But when we go to my Dad’s house, when they are were together, it was a mixed thing. We were in two different cultures, so…

Audree was the only student in the study who had a strong sense of identity based in race, and for her this seemed the case because she had such negative experiences as a child being bi-racial. She commented in interviews and in classroom discussions how, from a young age, she was ridiculed and made to feel like an outsider because she was both black and white. In the first critical discussion, she shared how societal structures positioned her and how she pushed back against the structure:

But what does bother me is when like...on CRCT when they used to fill out the thing, and they used to put black. And I have no problem with just being black, but that’s not what I am. I am two different colors. I have...I respect my mother just as much as I respect my father, so I feel as equal because that’s what I am. So when they used to fill in black, I
used to go in there and fill in the white. And I may have gotten in trouble, but I am both colors. You can’t leave one out; I am both.

Even though Audree did not live in a home with her parents and siblings, she strongly believed that her culture was firmly rooted in family; “When it comes to my family, it’s always them first.” In her first interview when asked about how she would define culture, she stated, “Mine would be my family because that’s all I know.” Throughout the unit, her definition of culture did not change; it was confirmed by her classmates. She felt as though most of her classmates shared a similar idea of culture in that it was rooted in family and family upbringing. When asked how she felt about her confirmation by classmates of the importance of family, she said, “Umm, good just because I’m glad that everybody else feels the same way about their family like I do.”

Throughout the creating and sharing processes in this unit, there were two overarching themes that I identified in Audree’s writings, reflections, and interviews. In terms of the impact of cultural relevant teaching, Audree’s cultural identities were affirmed by her classmates which lead to an interesting transformation; her self- perceptions were shifted to positive and empowering.

**Cultural identities affirmed**

Collectively, in interviews, discussions, and writings, Audree identified herself as a motherly-figure. Because she is the oldest of twelve siblings who have been in and out of foster care and other homes, she has taken the burden of mothering her siblings, which in turn she mothers anyone close to her. In defining her roles in her cultural identities composition, this is her perspective on mothering, “That is just something I can not help. I want nothing but the best for others sometimes more than I want for myself. I usually put others before myself and some
see that as a problem but wouldn’t your mother put you before herself?” In looking at the comments that her classmates gave her, there was an overwhelming amount of feedback on this particular section. Close friends and just acquaintances commented on how this section of the composition was “So true” and “So you!” In the follow up interview, I asked her how these comments made her see herself; she replied, “Because I’m forever trying to be someone’s mom or tell them this or that...or trying to help somebody. I am always trying to help somebody.” I saw a shift starting to occur here; Audree began to see her motherly nature as a positive aspect. The confirmation from her classmates led to affirmation and confidence in her; she commented, “It does. Cause I don’t think that people notice or appreciate it, so to know that people notice it, it’s a lot. It means a lot.”

Audree never self-identified as strong; yet in discussions and in writings, she absolutely portrayed strength. She did not recognize it, but her classmates did. In her final interview, she revealed:

Because...I don’t think I am as strong as everyone else sees me. But people who’ve looked in or sees through all that I am going through, they say, “You’re strong. I wish I could be strong like you.” And I am just like, “I don’t see where y’all see strong.” But I understand what they are saying now.

For Audree, being able to share who she is gave others a chance to see who she really is. Audree carried this idea of how others saw her, and through the sharing of her writings and her thoughts in discussions, her classmates were able to see a more authentic version of who Audree really is. And it was because of this authentic sharing that I saw Audree’s most significant change- a shift in self-perception which led to her own personal empowerment.
Change in self-perception: Empowerment

Audree is very clear in her struggle with attitude problems. She openly discussed her bad attitude throughout middle school and most of high school; in her first interview, she commented, “I can have a temper.” However, she has worked intentionally in the past year to overcome her “smart mouth” and quick temper. Audree expressed to me that she has felt judged a large part of her life because of her poor reputation in school; “Well I gave reasons to, but they (school) always think I am bad and just starting trouble.” However, through her growth and maturity over the past year, she admitted, “Because I think that’s the big thing...people don’t get to know me, so I can’t be judgmental and then expect them not to judge me.” She realized that she had been somewhat judgmental, and her attitude had to change toward others in order for their attitudes toward her to change. In talking with Audree one on one, I saw that she possessed the seeking-to-understand mindset that I was wished to present to my students:

I’m always like, “What if this person? Or what did this person do? What happened to this person? Or this and that?” Just because of the things that have happened to me, and nobody when they talked to me...they just was like, “No, they didn’t happen to you.” Or they didn’t believe me, so knowing what goes on in my life, nobody believes it or nobody knows about it. I can’t...I just have to question, “Did that person go through this too?” or “They are quiet because this happened to them.” So I have always questioned.

Audree desired that others extend her grace and ask “why” instead of just make assumptions of her. She desired this because that is the questioning mechanism that she had inside of her. Yet, she was not very confident that her classmates would extend to her this opportunity.
Be that as it may, because of Audree’s authenticity and vulnerability in her writing and sharing, her classmates were able to see the real her; as a result, they, surprisingly to her, accepted and affirmed who she is. In her final reflections on this “This I Believe” experiences, she wrote, “It made me smile to know others that have seen that side of me also see a change in me. My attitude is something I truly struggle with. Knowing others see a differences makes me feel accomplished.” To see the transformation in Audree was powerful; it was unlike her fellow classmates in that her perception of herself had shifted. She could now see someone who was smart, motivated, strong, caring, and changed. The confirmation of her identity from her classmates empowered her to see herself in such a positive way. Her perceptions of her classmates remained fairly similar to the beginning of this process; but the most powerful transformation was seeing her true self. In my final conversation with Audree this summer, after coding and data analysis was complete, I said to her, “Seeing what others see you in you has empowered you and given you voice.” Tears immediately came to her eyes, and she shook her head in agreement. In an interview with Audree, she expressed, “Everybody has been through something, some story. Everybody has a story. Nobody is perfect.” Now people knew her story, and she was the one who really changed because of sharing her story.

**John Thomas**

John Thomas is an eighteen-year-old white male who lives with his adoptive mother. He has three siblings; one sister who is older, and a younger brother and sister. In his own words, John describes his home life; “Obviously, I don’t have the stereotypical ummm... home life.” John’s mother is in and out of his life, and his father is a constant after many years of not being in his life. However, John lives with the grandmother (he calls her mother) of his youngest sister. Ms. Thomas is actually of no relation to John. He believes that as a result of his unique
upbringing, he is able to sympathize with all types of people rather than just one group; “I feel like that helps me too...helps my culture a lot, and it helps me to make the right choice and see things through other peoples’ eyes.” John defined culture as “how your experiences have shaped your life and like the way you live and the choices you make,” which is not surprising considering his background. Throughout the entire study, John’s concept of culture did not waiver; it was confirmed, and in some ways expanded, in the discussions, in his writings, in his reflections, and in his conversations with me. In his final interview, when asked had his definition of culture been changed, shaped, or expanded, he explained:

    Ummm, I feel like it’s the same. Like it’s just ummm, it’s like the things that you have been through that have shaped how you are and how you think and how you approach different things. Because like one person may take the same situation differently than someone else, and it is all based on like who you are and what you have been through.

John seemed to better understand and acknowledge that each and every person has different experiences and therefore different responses and reactions based on those experiences which in turn is the make-up culture.

    John regularly referred to the maturity of himself, his classmates, and of all peoples and situations; for him, maturity was linked to experiences. Maturity played a large role in how he viewed his own cultural identities; he commented, “I feel like it (maturity) gives a better understanding of everybody as a whole.” He chose to view experiences as a springboard for thinking about and approaching certain situations; he asserted that people who learn from their mistakes and the mistakes of others grown from the experiences and grow in maturity. In John’s life, this had held true for him. Because the concept of cultural identity was firmly rooted in
experiences and in maturity, the two dominant results of a culturally relevant environment for John were gaining deeper insight of his classmates and a change in perspective.

**Gaining deeper insight**

John is a deep, analytical thinker; he displayed a desire to dig deeper throughout the entire year. In his initial interview, I asked him where the desire to know people more stemmed from; he posited, “I guess I was just...I was just born that way. I just watch.” Particularly in this unit, he delved into better understanding his classmates, their life experiences, their stories. (It is no surprise that John wants to major in psychology in college.) In his final interview, he said, “And I’ve never really thought about the whole—-that one question that you asked where it was like--in what ways can it confuse or explain like the type of person they are...I feel like that’s a really good way to put that because I’ve never thought about it in that way but it makes a lot of sense.” John openly embraced and grappled with new ways of thinking and perceiving during this unit. He was okay with creating new knowledge and understanding alongside of his classmates. He longed to see the real versions of people. In the final reflections, he wrote, “I don’t see any of my classmates differently necessarily, but it’s more like I have a better and deeper understanding of their life experiences and the things they’ve struggled with and overcome.” Because of this desire for deeper insight of people, John saw a change in his perspectives which also brought about changed perception of literacy.

**Literacy practices: Altered perspectives**

In the final class discussion and final interview, John recognized his own changes in perspectives; he attributed this to maturity; “I am maturing a lot more, and I am realizing what priorities I need and like I’m taking into account more like...I consider other people’s
perspectives and feelings more often than I used to. I think it all just comes with maturity.”

Allowing for students to openly share their thoughts, their beliefs, their ideas in a safe environment creates a space in which students can really see and hear one another’s voices. John recognized the power and the impact that sharing experiences may have. He noted:

> And I feel like it’s (change in perspective) also gonna help me when I like meet new people or when I hear new peoples’ stories, it’s gonna help me be able to understand, and to take into consideration like, “Oh well, maybe they went through this, and maybe that’s why they are this way” and stuff like that.

John’s change of perspective has shown him the power and influence of asking why instead of just assuming we know peoples’ stories. John has historically been a successful English student, making As in previous classes including an Honors English class. When I asked him had this English classroom experience been any different for him, he responded:

> I feel like the biggest way it was different was just like rather than focusing more on content and focusing more on like take this test, do this project, write this paper...it was more like, look at these people, think about how these people think...Like it’s more like testing our ummm, social skills and our perceptions and our ability to perceive other people and take in their perspectives. Rather than just take a test on Shakespeare or something.

John’s literacy experiences in a culturally relevant classroom have enabled him to think in a way that previous literacy experiences have perhaps not allowed. He is building the cultural competence to see himself and his classmates through newly informed lenses. In the final
interview, I asked him how the sharing of his own cultural identity and the sharing of his classmates has impacted him; he readily replied:

I don’t even know where to start with that! I feel like your class has like opened up a whole new horizon of like of what, of different ways I can view people. I’ve always thought the way you think and like the way you’ve taught us. Just that like people are made up of their experiences, and it doesn’t matter whether you agree with it or not. It doesn’t matter if it’s right or if it’s wrong. But it’s like just who they are, and I feel like I have always thought that way, but this class like really solidified that.

John’s change in perspectives has opened up a whole new world and way of thinking for him. Literacy for him is no longer just memorizing information and taking a test; literacy is about knowing and reading your world.

**Matthew Torres**

Matthew Torres is a nineteen-year-old Mexican-American young man who lives with his parents and three younger siblings. Matthew comes from a very large family; his mother has three siblings, and his father has fourteen siblings. All of his family still lives in Calvillo Augascalientes, Mexico, so he and his family visit there one to two times a year. His parents came to the United States when they were married. For Matthew, the concept of culture is very much rooted in family, and he did not waiver from that; he firmly believed that the way you were raised had a great influence on you, which was very true for him. In his initial interview, I asked him about his definition of culture, and he stated, “Like...my parents and how they taught me to be...how they raised me and like the people I grew up with.” He takes being an older brother very seriously. He mentioned on numerous occasions how important it was for him to be a positive example for his younger siblings; “I made a lot of mistakes, so… I try to like be an
example to my brother and sisters, so they won’t do the same as me. I try to help them out. So they won’t fail like I did.” Knowing that he is the first to graduate from high school attend college is a huge deal for him as the oldest sibling; he said, “I am really proud. Really proud. I like it, so I can be the first one. So I can push my brothers and sisters to do it too, so that I won’t be the only one.” For Matthew, his parents played an important role in his cultural identity; he spoke of them often, particularly his father, and how their work ethics had such a profound impact on him. In his final interview, he stated, “I am really family-oriented. I guess I wrote about my family a lot, and I really respect my parents. And I didn’t really think I did, but I do.” He wants to make them proud with his grades, his choices, and his future. Matthew was a quiet deep-thinker who values family above all else; I had to often say to him, “Take your time in answering these questions. No rush.” In his cultural identities paper, he wrote about how when his family gets together, they tell stories. That is how they come to know about where they come from and who they are, which is so important to Matthew. Because of this story-telling upbringing, Matthew experienced how sharing cultural identities creates community and understanding in the classroom which led him to dig deeper and ask why of himself and of his classmates.

Sharing creates community and understanding

In Matthew’s Cultural Identities composition, he acknowledges the importance of story-telling; he wrote, “We tell stories and learn more about each other. When our parents get into the conversations, it turns into a question asking fiasco. We love hearing about past experiences. It’s always interesting to know more about someone's life. Even if you think you know all of them.” Sharing stories is an avenue to see into peoples’ authentic lives, and Matthew has been raised in an environment that values sharing stories. Therefore, it is not at all surprising how much he
gained from learning about his classmates. When I asked Matthew about how he felt about creating and sharing his cultural identities through writing, he said, “Hmmm, I kinda wanted to put it, if like, like not me explaining it, but putting people in my shoes. To see how it felt. So that’s how I wanted to like really show my story. Kinda wanted them to be in my shoes, to see what I felt.” He wanted his classmates to experience his culture through a story, not an explanation. For Matthew, the focus on cultural identities created a community in which authentic sharing was the norm and the expectation. He eluded to the fact that some of his classmates were more “real” than others, but that was their choice of what they wanted to “put out there.” He felt that it would benefit the person more if he or she was more real, but he also acknowledged that was the personal choice of the student. In his personal written reflections, Matthew mentioned a particular student’s work that really struck him in terms of authenticity:

I really liked Jessie’s video. First because I don't really know much about her, and for her to come out and actually share her story takes a lot of courage. I really respect that. I liked that it wasn't really “peaking around the bush” but that it was real and straight forward. She said what she really wanted to say. I liked it.

Matthew values sharing and authenticity because of his family experiences with sharing stories; sharing is an avenue that creates understanding and creates community. In his final interview, Matthew shared:

Uhhh, I feel like this class has helped us get closer to each other because we actually share stuff. In other classes, we just learn about school. In this one, we actually like express ourselves and kinda learn a little bit more and get closer to everyone in here.
This English classroom experience was powerful for Matthew; getting to know one another gave him access to learning in a way that was authentic and real. Creating and sharing caused Matthew to dig deeper into himself and his classmates.

**Digging deeper: The power of asking why**

After a few weeks into the unit, I interviewed Matthew a second time about his experience of creating and sharing his cultural identities composition and visual piece; he said, “I think it was easy like talking about how you are, and it was hard to like see why you are like that.” This was profoundly significant as Matthew recognized that saying one thing and understanding where the thought is coming from are two different thought processes that seem to go really well together, but that seeing the *why* is much deeper than a first glance. This really struck me as I saw Matthew begin to realize this about himself first; he was asking the *why* of himself before he was asking it of his classmates. This *why* leads to a desire for a deeper, richer understanding of people and their worlds. When I asked him to tell me more about what made seeing the *why* hard, he explained, “Well, ummm, I kinda like it cause it’s like a reflection of what is happening in your life. So it’s like... Like, more thinking about what’s happening.”

Matthew knew that there was more thinking required upon making a statement; the digging deeper may be hard, but it was worth the outcome of deeper, richer understanding.

As the unit progressed, Matthew shifted this inward asking of *why* from himself to his classmates’ writings and projects. In his final interview, he and I talked about how his perspectives of his classmates had changed or had expanded, and he stated, “So you like want to talk to people and actually get to know them instead of just standing there and not knowing who they are. Like now you actually want to learn about people ...to see like where they came from.”

Matthew now understands the power of people’s stories and how that may inform your
perspectives of them; therefore, he wants to know people, know their stories, and know where they came from. He recognizes the insight that can potentially follow the why. In the final reflections, he was asked to describe what it was like watching his classmates’ videos as a whole class, and did he see any of his classmates differently? He wrote, “Yes, it opened your eyes to see how other people around you are living. You come to a reality that unfortunate things actually do happen and they happen to people around you.” On numerous occasions throughout the sharing process, Matthew acknowledged how his perspectives had changed, which seems very closely related to his mindset of asking why. In the final interview, Matthew mentioned that possessing this deeper understanding can keep you from judging people before you really know them. He recognized that knowing the why could keep you from becoming judgemental of others and making inaccurate assumptions of others. The most consistent shift for Matthew was digging deeper, and in his own words in reference to his classmates, “You kinda learn like why they are the way they are.”

**Whole Class**

In this cross-case analysis, I looked at the classroom as a whole. I analyzed two formal class discussions and two main writings of students who participated in the critical discussions: Cultural Identities Composition and Final Reflections. The first discussion took place at the beginning of the unit, and the second discussion took place at the very end of the unit. There was originally a discussion planned for the middle of the unit, but because of state-mandated testing, there were time constraints that did not allow for the middle discussion. The first critical discussion was centered around two articles the students read in class that addressed culture and cultural identities from two varying perspectives; one text was a textbook chapter on culture and identity (Jandt, 2004), and the other text was a National Geographic article about the changing
faces of America (Funderburg, 2013). The second critical discussion was centered around the students’ This I Believe readings and personal compositions which included a video aspect. There are some unique themes among the class, and there are similar themes as the focus students. The following themes are what I identified as responses in how students’ understanding and sharing of cultural identities inform students’ perspectives and inform literacy: Regulators of Culture, Affirmation: Product of Sharing, Change in Perspective, and Gaining Deeper Insight. The Gaining Deeper Insight strand is broken down into two smaller themes of: Recognizing Inequalities and Challenging the Social Structure.

**Regulators of culture**

In the initial critical discussion, the students primarily led the conversation. I did not ask initiating questions, only follow-up questions. One of the topics they primarily discussed spawned from one student’s question which was, “What do y’all think regulates culture?” There were several very insightful responses; some responses were how certain regulators brought us together as cultural beings, and most responses were how certain regulators divided us as cultural beings. The students’ offered multiple reasons as to why technology was a regulator of culture. They expressed that rapid onset of technology has created a larger concept of culture; John stated, “I feel like uhh the technology thing, it like connects everybody and puts us all into one big culture, like a technological society, and within that there are very many different subcultures that is what we consider cultures.” To follow that up, another student further explained the role technology played in bringing people together; Sam posited, “I think a major part of that was...would have been is that we were so separated from each other before technology came around that we had no way of communicating with each other to keep together, so we eventually adapted to our environment instead of each other.” Although Sam may feel that people were
separated prior to technology, as an adolescent, he has limited insight and knowledge to what life was like prior to his idea of technology. Sam continued in explaining that technology brought environments together because people are able to communicate across cultures in various positive and productive ways. Overall, technology was viewed as a regulator and mediator that brought people together.

Somewhat similarly, another regulator of culture that was thoroughly discussed was the time and flow of people and generations. Previous to this unit, we completed a unit on “Movers and Shapers” in society in which each student chose an influential person and read an autobiography, biography, or a memoir of that person. Several students made references to how these types of people regulated culture either positively or negatively. One particular student, Carter, said, “I think of like icons and leaders like regulate culture...like going back to that unit of ‘Movers and Shapers.’ I think that movers and shapers like move and shape culture.” Students recognized the power of societal influences. Students also harkened to how previous generations can influence current culture; one student commented, “I think that like generations before us, like generations before us brought us up, and that is what we was brought up into.” They acknowledged how “Baby Boomers” and Gen-Xer’s” attempt to pass on certain expectations, ideals, and values to younger generations.

There were two main regulators of culture that seemed to be discussed as more divisive than the previous two regulators: geographical region and race. There was a small mention of the influence of socio-economic status, which I was intrigued by, but students did not seem to be as interested in discussing it. A student suggested that geography had a lot to do with one’s culture; John immediately agreed:
I agree a lot with that point...I feel like, even to use a small example--Georgia, like you’ll have the small country towns that may not have a lot of technology, at least not as much as like the cities as much. And then you have big urban cities like Atlanta, and the cultures of the two places are completely different. Just because like one is focused on working, working with their hands, working out in the sun and stuff, and the other is focused more on technology and having a world-wide understanding. And that can change or shape your culture a lot.

John did not seem to be necessarily insinuating that one way was preferred over the other rather than explaining how different regions can regulate and maintain culture. Another student shared a similar sentiment as John but from a somewhat different perspective; Kaliah stated:

And I think each one is different because of location. I believe each one is based off of the surroundings. Like if you are born in Africa, you are more of the surrounding of the earth and the wind and mother nature and stuff like that. But in America, you have like different, multiple religions because you have people all over the world coming into one place and then over there in China, you got...well, I don’t even know what they got over there. It’s way different than what we do in America, but I think it’s the location, to be honest.

Kaliah recognized that different geographical regions have different aspects that regulate culture are outside of the peoples’ control; therefore, the influence of region on culture is somewhat outside of the cultural beings’ hands. However, Kaliah does makes some assumptions here about Africa that are inaccurate, but her point remains the same that region can regulate culture.
Race was discussed more apprehensively as a regulator of culture. Race was really only discussed specifically as a part of culture in this first critical discussion; race did not appear but sporadically in other discussions, writings, and sharings, which was surprising to me as it was initially a heavily-discussed topic. One self-identified Hispanic male student, Michael, spoke passionately when race was suggested as a regulator of culture; he said:

This article...like people are more curious how people are. Like where are you from? I get asked a lot like where I am from, and when I say Mexico right... Many people consider all of the ones who speak Spanish to be Hispanics, not just one race because mostly people say we are Mexicans, and that kinda bothers me because I have a friend who is from Colombia, and if he is with me, they are going to define us as Mexicans. That’s the first thing they are going to think about, but I honestly think that we are just Hispanics. We are just one group, and yeah…

Michael did not like or appreciate being defined by assumptions; he felt as though the assumption of his race often placed him in an undesirable or inaccurate category. He was very frustrated by others solely wanting to know where he was from because he did not necessarily fit in with the mainstream of America. Similarly, Audree shared the tension of growing up in a biracial home; she shared:

I think race is a part of regulating. Because what you grew up and like with me... I grew up in a white household; my mother is white, so I took...I go off of what she goes off of. But when we go to my Dad’s house, when they are were together, it was a mixed thing. We were in two different cultures, so…
Audree portrays how race can be divisive in that she did not always know where she “belonged” in the racial aspect of culture. Crenshaw (1991) names this as a part of intersectionality; she states, “Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different” (p. 1242). This notion that identities can cross boundaries and be associated in marginalized notions is precisely what Audree is wrestling with. She felt that there was a divide between the two—black and white—and she was stuck right in the middle. A fellow white, male classmate, Casey, offered his opinion on what Audree was living every day. He said, “I think that sometimes when people are determining race like with you— you are saying you are white too— I feel like people would look and like...it’s almost like it’s a threshold. You are either one way or not at all. People can’t be accepted in both.” When Casey made this statement, there were multiple nods and mumbles affirming what he said— that people cannot be accepted in both. Interestingly enough, this was where the conversation about race ended. No one was willing to go into why one cannot be accepted into both, or they were ready to move on to a less uncomfortable subject.

**Positivity of sharing**

Because the students have been in class with one another for an entire year, there is a certain level of comfortability of sharing their work. Yet, having students share such vulnerable pieces of who they are has the potential to be scary, inauthentic, fabricated, and possibly not well-received. However, the feedback from students powerfully supported the positive influence that sharing their cultural identities had on them and their classmates. In his final reflections, Michael concluded, “I think my classmates have respect for each other, and it all comes down when we all do something that would bring us together and which make us feel like when can all trust each other.” The sharing led to understanding which led to respect which led to trust; this is
incredibly meaningful in a classroom that learns together. Roberto mentioned in his reflections that “it was an awesome experience to see other people's perspectives and feelings about a particular subject. Without this activity we would've never know this about our peers.” Sharing allowed an avenue for the students to see into one another’s’ worlds and shift one another’s’ perspectives. A few students had specific comments on how the sharing impacted them.

Sam: It was interesting to see how my fellow classmates would respond to me talking about my history in such a personal way. They surprised me by their ability to watch and understand the things I was explaining to them, and be able to give feedback that seemed sincere.

Sally: It also doesn't make me feel alone because some people came and told me about how they were bullied also.

Jessie: It made me happy, because it made me feel like I had won a medal. No, not a medal for best writing or best construction. A medal because I understand that struggle doesn’t last forever and struggle doesn’t define who I am.

I posit that sharing work created an opportunity for deep authenticity; some students took the chance, and others did not. Sharing allowed the students to experience a change in their perspectives of themselves and one another.

**Change in perspective**

Throughout the entire study, my goal as a culturally relevant teacher was to create and allow for experiences in which the students’ perspectives would be changed in some way, shape, or form. I believe that in order for students to think critically, their challenges, ideas, and perspectives need to be challenged, and they need to challenge others (Brookfield, 2009). Therefore, I have positioned the students to challenge their own ideas and motives as well as
their classmates. From the initial critical discussion, John notices, “The word Barbarian meant just different from what was Greek, and I think that is interesting because like now Barbarian now is a word that means savage or inhuman or uncivilized person.” He is already noticing that over time, certain words and phrases can have completely neutral connotations but can take on totally different meaning. However the change can be seen through a more critical lens meaning that one is challenging assumptions or previously held ideas; Roberto notes that “the transformation from going from one point to another. Learning from other cultures is so, so cool.” Learning about cultures can be a positive and enlightening experience when done through open and critical lenses. Sharing our cultural identities can be positioned into a learning opportunity instead of a judgement opportunity. John and Audree both commented on how this can be true. John posited:

I feel like learning about stuff like that just helps you have a better understanding of peoples’ experiences, and they don’t have to like react to it positively or negatively, and you don’t have to relate to it, but just to be able to see it and say, “Wow, they’ve been through so much…” is just so…it helps shape your perspective of that person.

John recognized that the understanding does not have to been seen as positive or negative but just a clearer understanding. Audree comments on how she has become less judgmental; “It could make you feel like you think of them one way, and then you watch theirs or read their essay, and you think, “Oh I am judging them this way, but really this was going on, and I should give some grace.” Roberto commented that there was a shift in his perspective that changed how he saw people and life itself. His mindset has changed to think and to see people and situations through different lenses. He still holds on to his viewpoint without losing himself, yet he gains so much more in adding the eyes and perspectives of his classmates. Finally, this shift in
perspectives leads to an essential piece of culturally relevant teaching, and that is the space, opportunity, and the ability for students to recognize and challenge social structures.

**Gaining deeper insight: Recognizing inequalities and challenging social structures**

Because students experienced shifts, changes, and expansions of their personal perspectives, they were able to gain deeper insight. In the case of the whole class, I saw this manifest itself in two very distinct ways. Gaining insight began as recognizing the inequalities in society and became a platform for challenging social structures. In the opening critical discussion, students were very quick to recognize and discuss the inequalities of society. The majority of this conversation surrounded the inequalities connected to race, which were brought up by mostly students of color. Roberto very strongly shared his frustration as a Hispanic male desiring to break into the business world:

> Therefore, since I am Hispanic and all Hispanic countries are emerging markets, they think I don’t know stuff or that I don’t know stuff, or that I was not well educated. You know I am dumb or I don’t have money or whatever...that’s kinda bad in a way because not all people are ignorant based on where they come from.

Roberto recognized and called into light the notion that certain stigmas are attached to certain ethnicities. To support his notion, Jacquan noted the discrepancies between white and black:

> “Therefore, when you say white, there is a high probability to be smart, to be educated, the best manners than if you say you’re black because black people did not have the same opportunities as white people.” Upon Jacquan’s comments, there are several head nods and “uh huhs” that mutter throughout the room. Another student grappled with the concept of superiority; he said, “Like superior...why does it have to be superior? Why does it have to be that way? We are all humans.” Students see how silly yet intricately complex inequalities can be. For the students,
there seemed to be more commonalities that should bring people together instead of create unnecessary hierarchies that divide. Roberto also commented on how he despised predetermined judgements that led to inequalities. He stated:

And I hate when people... like uhhh have put an image that you’re not...just because I don’t speak English the perfect way that y’all do or something like that, that doesn’t mean that I am not smart...that doesn’t mean that I don’t know stuff like you do. I may be smart, and you may not even know it because of my race or my skin color. You automatically think, “Oh this guy is dumb, or this guy doesn’t know this.”

Lastly, the students shared irritation about being asked what race or ethnicity they are because of what certain races imply about one’s competence. One student expressed in annoyance, “When people are asked their race, they are more concerned about what are you going to do with this information rather than their race because they want to say the race that benefits them the most. You know and that’s...all races should benefit the same thing!” Students were very open and authentic in sharing their opinions and experiences with existing inequalities; for the most part, students’ perspectives were well-received and understood by their classmates, even if there was not a mutual agreement. I believe this respect and understanding came with having known one another all year long.

In the final critical discussion and in the final written reflections, students expressed that because they were challenged to think differently, they learned what it means and looks like to challenge their own thoughts and perspective and therefore what society impresses upon them. Matthew noted his ability to challenge came from opportunities to process and to discuss real life issues with his classmates; he said:
Because we talk about like, life. And it’s like, oh...we have something in common, or we see things the same or differently, or I didn’t see things like that. Like every single discussion that we had---like what was confirmed, what puzzled you---it’s like really real life. You really do think about it, and it challenges things.

Stepping outside of yourself and your perspectives and choosing to see how your own assumptions were confirmed, challenged, or what puzzled you was a very different way of thinking for my students. It forced them to look more critically at themselves and into their worlds. As a result, they developed a way of thinking that allowed for challenging and questioning. In the final critical discussion, John asserted:

I feel like that’s what so good about this class because it challenges that social structure. Like seeing something at face value and just judging it. But in this classroom, we have these discussions, and we get to dig deeper, and then we understand why people act the way they do.

John’s experience in this classroom is what culturally relevant teaching is all about. Ladson-Billings (1995) states, “Students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162). John’s statement supports that the building blocks for a growing critical consciousness which will hopefully carry into his future, and he will be able to critique his world as Ladson-Billings (1995) posited.

**Summary**

I chose a within-case approach because I believe that it would reveal a deep analysis of this unit of study. I first examined myself and how I was implementing the three tenets of
culturally relevant teaching. I then examined four focus students’ individual experiences within a culturally relevant unit of teaching; I analyzed their data to see how their sharing their cultural identities changed and/or expanded their perspectives as well as the potential influence on their literacy experiences. Lastly, I examined the class as a case to see amongst all of the students how their perspectives were changed and/or expanded as well as what informed and/or enhanced their literacy experiences.
Chapter 5: Introduction

It is Open House at school, and it is the beginning of my ninth year of teaching. (Am I really that old? How have I already been teaching for eight years?) Several of my students from the previous year, who are now proud juniors, stop by to say hello. These moments absolutely warm my heart: “Hey Mrs. Foster!!”; “I wish you were teaching American Lit!”; “I am going to miss you!”; “Ahhh, wow! Are you pregnant?!.” These are all comments that I receive from students passing by. However, one student’s inquiry stops me; he says, “Hey, is it time for me to finally call you Dr. Foster?” A big smile spreads across my face when I reply, “You know what? You will finally call me Dr. Foster at the end of the semester.” Wow, finally.

Because it is finally the fall of 2016, I have begun the final semester of what feels simultaneously like a lifetime and like a blink of an eye. I will finally finish my doctoral degree. I embarked on this journey four years ago when I took my first teacher leadership course, and it is very difficult to grasp that I am almost done. There is a part of me that does not really believe I am at the end; on the other hand, there is a part of me that can hardly envision what my life will be like without 4:00 am wake up calls to meet deadlines for readings and writings.

As I reflect on these past four years, I am completely inadequate in articulating all that I have learned because one of the most powerful understandings I now have is that there is so much that I do not know. However, the research of Cochran and Lytle (1993) clearly displays how becoming a teacher researcher has impacted me; “We show that inquiry by individual teachers and communities of teacher researchers realigns their relationships to knowledge and to the brokers of knowledge and also necessitates a redefinition of the notion of a knowledge base for learning” (p. 43). My ideas, concepts, and notions of what teaching English-Language Arts should be and should look like have radically been shaken up and changed for the better. As
excited as I am to finally be finished with this particular journey, I find that I am somewhat beginning to feel a weird sense from it finally being over. Because I know what it feels like to be empowered, knowledgeable, and confident as a teacher, I find that I want to continue the teacher research mindset in my classroom in some way, shape, or form. Cochran and Lytle (1993) state:

Teacher research is a powerful way for teachers to understand how they and their students construct and reconstruct curriculum. By conducting inquiry on their own practices, teachers identify discrepancies between their theories of practice and their practices, between their own practices and others in their schools, and between their ongoing assumptions about what is going on in their classrooms and their more distanced and retrospective interpretations” (p. 51).

My teaching practices have been revolutionized along this adventure; I have been revolutionized along this adventure. And I finally see a light that is not at the end of a tunnel but rather leads to tunnel after tunnel after tunnel. I am ready to walk through those tunnels.

Discussion

Throughout the process of this study, an open mindset was one of my goals because I wanted to see all the data for how it really was. There were findings that I somewhat anticipated based on previous years of implementing culturally revelant instruction, and there were findings that I was not expecting, which I believe will always be true because students are vastly different year to year. The two major findings discussed below are the influence of creating a culturally relevant classroom and the variations of the shifts in perspective.
Creating a Culturally Relevant Environment

As I grappled with what it really meant to create a culturally relevant classroom based on the three tenets of Ladson-Billings (1995), I found that I largely fell on the second point of creating cultural competence. Because my students were diverse in ethnicity, social class, and “how they were raised,” I wanted them to not only see how their own cultural identities informed their cultural competence but also how their cultural identities interacted and meshed with with their classmates. Since I believe learning is sociocultural, I had the students anything and everything from informal thoughts and ideas to formalized writing and digital compositions. In my intent of creating a culturally relevant classroom, sharing became a powerful and necessary avenue for cultural competence.

Power of Sharing

By March of the school year, my students knew that there was an indisputable expectation of sharing thoughts and ideas in class, whether that be through writings or discussion. In this research study, sharing was taken to a different level because the topics were much more personal and individualized in getting students to think of themselves as cultural beings. Because sharing was already the established expectation, students were slightly hesitant because of the personal nature of their work; however, they overcame this apprehension. I found that sharing student work is crucial to a culturally relevant classroom. Students learn invaluable information about one another through the sharing of thoughts and ideas. When sharing becomes the expectation, apprehension turns into an invitation to learn about one another, not to judge one another but to learn about and from one another. This learning about one another builds the students’ cultural competence. Multiple students commented on how the sharing of their work impacted and informed their perspectives of themselves and one another. Considering sharing
has always been the expectation in my classroom, I was not overly surprised by the positive and powerful influence; however, the level of authenticity that followed the sharing processes was not anticipated yet pleasantly welcomed.

**Authenticity**

I had a mentor in college tell me, “Kim, vulnerability leads to more vulnerability.” These words ring very true for this research study. The more students shared, the more vulnerable and real they became with themselves and with one another. As a teacher, I want students to feel and to know that they can be real with me and with one another, but the notion of authenticity in a high school environment can be very challenging, particularly with a student body who is diverse in many ways. Looking in, I could see and hear students listening to one another and sharing with people of whom they had never shared before. In my final interviews with the four focus students as well as in the final reflections of all the students, there was a resounding voice of that sharing had led to “being real.” One student wrote, “It (sharing) provided a sense of reality.” Additionally, another student commented, “I feel like it (sharing) has the ability to bring us all closer together by sharing our experiences and beliefs so openly and I really like that.” The students recognized the authenticity that was developing in them and in their classmates. Because students experienced this type of authenticity, there seemed to be a newfound or rekindled desire to know one another more and/or deeper. There was on particular student in which the level of authenticity radically changed her and her classmates; her final *This I Believe* digital composition permeated throughout her classroom, other classrooms, and ultimately the entire faculty. She comments in her final reflections:

> Hearing my voice allowed me to understand this is real. It brought me to tears, because after so long things I’ve been hiding to say are finally released. I was scared people
would look at me differently, but it was the total opposite. My classmates and teachers will never truly understand how much gratitude I hold for them.

Sharing lead to authenticity and being comfortable and safe in the classroom. The authenticity opened the door for students to question, to ponder, and to challenge societal structures alongside of one another.

**Challenging the Social/Power Structure**

As I prepared for this research and developed this instructional unit, I struggled with how I was going to create spaces for students to have opportunities to challenge the social structures. Even as I embarked on this unit, I still was not completely clear on what “challenging the social structure” would look like. However, as I began to focus on building cultural competence within the students, that foundation is what led to spaces and opportunities for students to questions, to ponder, and to grapple with social structure. At the beginning of the unit, I had students read a textbook chapter on Culture and Identity; they wrote a think piece and then participated in a critical discussion. My intention was for them to see how their cultural identities fit and possibly do not fit within society norms and expectations. In the beginning, students mostly discussed and celebrated each other’s differences. Because I wanted them to experience tensions, I asked that we discuss the section on “Contact Zones,” which addressed the areas that cause pressure amongst cultures. I said, “This is touchy, I know. I am trying to push y’all, and I want y’all to think about that.” I wanted to model for them and set the expectation that it is not only ok but acceptable and necessary to discuss the tensions.

As stated before, as students shared their work, they became more vulnerable with one another because of shared experiences, which led to authenticity. I posit that because students
knew more about one another and because authenticity had inadvertently become the expectation, students felt confident and empowered to question. In one of the discussions, a student commented, “Like superior...why does it have to be superior? Why does it have to be that way? We are all humans.” He was questioning the bureaucracy and hierarchies in society; being a Hispanic male, he felt that he was seen as inferior. His question led to a great conversation about superiority and inferiority and where these come from and why. Later in the same discussion, the topic of multiracial, multiethnic populations came up; an African-American female questioned, “Yeah, it’s normal to me so, it’s like...why aren’t your eyes big enough to see the different variety of people?” This student came from a very diverse home where types of races and ethnicities were present. It was very difficult for her to understand why categories were necessary for people, and she was quick and confident to voice that. Once the door was opened for these types of conversations, the students just followed one another’s lead.

The culminating discussion was a revelation of the empowerment of students to question and to challenge assumptions. One student commented, “I feel like that’s what so good about this class because it challenges that social structure. Like seeing something at face value and just judging it. But in this classroom, we have these discussions, and we get to dig deeper, and then we understand why people act the way they do.” Upon this statement, students were nodding their heads and mumbling affirming “uh huhs.” As I said before, I was not certain on how to create opportunities for students to question and to challenge, but this comment and the class reactions completely affirmed *how* and *why* culturally relevant teaching is so important. Students were able to better understand themselves as cultural beings and through sharing, they were able to see one another as cultural beings; this not only built cultural competence but also put an
emphasis on being culturally competent. This competence lead to the ability, the confidence, and the safe expectation of challenging social structures.

**Shift in Perspective-Variations**

In focusing on building cultural competence, students are exposed to the array of perspectives of their classmates. This exposure was one of the most powerful aspects of this study. I believe that you only truly know what you live; your lived experiences inform how you see the world. When students began to think about themselves as cultural beings and to share themselves as cultural beings, their perspectives shifted. They not only saw the world through one lens but now through many lenses; they were able to add the cultural lenses of their classmates.

One of the most intriguing aspects was the different types of shifts in perspective. For one student, it was more of an inward shift of how she saw herself that changed; others affirming her work in turn affirmed and empowered her to see herself in a more positive, authentic light. She had not always had very positive thoughts of herself. For another student, it was a shift in seeing the reality of his classmates; the assumptions that he had carried were removed and replaced with the knowledge of who his classmates really were through their writings and conversations. In final reflections, he stated, “It was an awesome experience to see other people's perspectives and feelings about a particular subject. Without this, we would've never know this about or peers.” And for others, it was a deeper, richer understanding of one another; the shift was the “aha moments” about themselves and their classmates. The shift in perspectives compelled a desire for greater depth of knowledge of oneself and one another. In the member checking conversations with John, I was discussing my findings about him in particular, and he commented, “You may have had those labels, but it was neat to watch them fall down.” The shift
in perspectives enabled him, and hopefully his classmates, to challenge their own perspectives. My hope and desire is that this way of thinking will carry over into all facets of their lives, so that they may be more critically aware of their worlds.

**Implications**

The findings from this study hold important implications in teaching and in research. In conducting this study, my goals were to answer my research questions and to learn more about and to contribute to the body of research on culturally relevant pedagogy in the English Language Arts classroom. I was initially compelled to conduct research on culturally relevant pedagogy because I see a dire need for a change in mindset in my current school because the population has changed so drastically in the last fifteen years. As I continue to implement culturally relevant instructional practices in my classroom, I firmly believe that this pedagogical stance has value, purpose, and place in teaching and in research.

**Teaching**

As a classroom teacher, my role has changed drastically in the short nine years that I have been teaching public school. The increased importance of standardized testing and the increase of state mandates paired with the increase of diverse student population have created an interesting environment for teachers, not necessarily all teachers but for some teachers like myself, it has. I assert that the need for culturally relevant teaching has and will continue to rapidly increase as student populations continue to grow and to change. From my personal experience, students are more and more diverse each year- diverse in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, religious views, etc. The changing face of America demands that we as teachers think seriously and critically about how we are teaching students to
think and to operate in the world. I have found that the tenet of building cultural competence in students is critical. As stated previously, because of the increase in diversity, students need to understand who they are and how they fit with others. Additionally, this cultural competence leads to the more critical awareness of societal structure and order, thus enabling students to question, to ponder, and to challenge, hopefully, in appropriate and meaningful ways. I believe that helping students to *navigate* their worlds, not telling them what to think or how to think, is essential in secondary education; and I believe that a culturally relevant pedagogical mindset is an avenue to help *all* students.

*Research*

When I first started researching classroom studies on culturally relevant pedagogy in classrooms, I mostly found studies of researchers coming into teacher classrooms; there were very few studies of teachers conducting this type of research in their own classrooms. I knew that there was a need for classroom teachers, the insiders, to be conducting this type of research. Having completed the study, I now understand why fewer teachers do studies like these; it takes a huge amount of time and effort. Qualitative research including multiple interviews, student writings, and classroom discussions can be very overwhelming, especially as not only the teacher researcher but also as the teacher who is writing lesson plans, sending parent emails, grading assignments, and a plethora of other duties and responsibilities. However, the insight that I have gained as both a teacher and teacher researcher are invaluable as I moved forward in the profession. I posit that there is a need for more teacher research of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. Furthermore, because teachers are the insiders and have established rapport with their students, they are able to portray the voices of the students very authentically through the research. I believe this aspect to be very powerful and meaningful and
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rarely found in this aspect of research due to the lack of practitioner research. Alim and Paris (2015) posit that the linguistic and cultural flexibility of many children of color ideally positions them for success in a diversifying, globalizing world. They encourage researchers to think forward in ways that both challenge societal norms and support the flexibility that students will increasingly need for access and opportunity.

Limitations of Findings

There were, of course, limitations to this study. One limitation was availability of consistent participation. One of the focus students received a concussion the second week of the study; he missed four days of school, and upon his return, he had a doctor’s not that he was not to read or to write. He could only sit and listen; therefore, he missed completing and participating in one of the major assignments. Additionally, the testing plan at the school changed drastically at the last minute, and I accommodated as well as I could for the change. Students who were involved in Work-Based Learning missed multiple days of class, and students taking AP tests also missed days. For two weeks, it seemed as though someone was always missing from class.

A second limitation of the study was the time length, which was eight weeks. The implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy has really been prevalent throughout the entire school year, so these eight weeks capture only a small portion of the larger growth of students. Additionally, this unit ideally belongs in the second semester somewhere around October-December, so that students have been exposed to the concept of cultural identities, and the building of cultural competence can more explicitly begin earlier in the year. I would have liked for students to have this cultural competent foundation more so throughout the year.

A third limitation was the depth of the study. I believe that the data would have been richer an more meaningful if there were more focus students with more interviews. I found the
one-on-one interviews to be incredibly insightful, and I wish I could have involved more than four students. Because of the time and the scope of what I was hoping to achieve as a first time teacher research, four students was what I believed to be feasible. However, the more student voices that could have been represented, the stronger I believe the research could have been.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in the English Language Arts classroom and the influence that CRP may have on students’ cultural identities and perspectives. Coming into the study, I had some preconceived notions of what this research may or may not look like and what may or may not happen. The findings about myself as a teacher and of my students were much richer than I could have anticipated. I believe that the greatest finding about the implementation of CRP in the classroom is that there needs to be an intentional emphasis put on building cultural competence, the second tenet of CRP. This focus leads to students’ abilities and confidence in acting on the third tenet, challenging the social structures. Additionally, cultural competence leads to a deeper level of authenticity among the students; this enabled students to really see others’ cultural identities and how they inform and influence perspectives. Furthermore, students began to think and to process metacognitively; they are thinking about their thinking when they are challenged by someone else’s reality that does not match their reality. They question. They wonder. They challenge. They think. Henry Ford said, “Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probably reason why so few engage in it.” As challenging as developing curriculum like this may be, I assert that culturally relevant pedagogy in the English Language Arts classroom is significantly needed in the field of education.
References


Appendix A. Interview Questions

**Pre-Study Questions:**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. How would you define yourself ethnically/racially?
4. How would you define “culture”?
5. How would you describe your own cultural identities?
6. How does culture play a part in how you communicate (through writing and speaking)?
7. What funds of knowledge (meaning the areas of your life where you believe you have understanding of something) do you bring to this classroom?

**Post-Study Questions:**

1. How has your definition of culture been changed, shaped, and/or expanded?
2. How has your description of your personal identities been changed, shaped, and/or expanded?
3. How does hearing/seeing others’ cultural identities shape and/or change your perspective of culture?
4. How does hearing/seeing others’ cultural identities shape and/or change your perspective of how you perceive others?
Appendix B. Observation Protocol.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Notes:</th>
<th>Reflective Notes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical setting of classroom during critical discussion of texts:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2 circles---inner circle consists of 10 students who want to speak; outer circle consists of the remaining students who will respond to reflective questions as inner circle speaks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-teacher is outside of both circles looking in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inner Circle students participating in discussion:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-mannerisms</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-voice inflections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-facial expressions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outer Circle students reflecting (writing) on discussion:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-mannerisms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-facial expressions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-desire or lack of desire to speak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions being asked: (to what extent are questions…)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-higher order thinking?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-making connections?</td>
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<td>-challenging assumptions?</td>
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<td>-addressing cultural issues?</td>
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<tr>
<td>-addressing identity issues?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-perspectives changing/being shaped by peers?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Student verbal responses: (to what extent are questions…)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-higher order thinking?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-making connections?</td>
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<td>-challenging assumptions?</td>
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<td>-addressing identity issues?</td>
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<td>-perspectives changing/being shaped by peers?</td>
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</table>
Appendix C. Script for Call Home to Parents.

Good afternoon name of parent,

My name is Kim Foster, and I teach your student Advanced Composition at Cartersville High School. How are you today? I hope that you have been receiving my weekly emails about what is going on in class.

I am calling to inform you about a research study that I will be conducting this spring in your student’s classroom. Not only am I a teacher, I am also a doctoral candidate at Kennesaw State University. I will be doing an eight-week study on the potential influence that students’ cultural identities play in literacy. I have chosen four students to be participants in the study, and your student is one of them. If you are interested, I will be glad to explain a little more of what that might entail.

I will conduct interviews prior to, during, and after the study with your student. That will be the only task that needs to be done outside of the regular classroom. I plan to do the interviews during the students’ lunch periods, so that they will not miss any instructional time. Participation in the study will not affect your student’s grade in any way. My hope is that this study will create learning and literacy experiences for all of my students in meaningful and purposeful ways.

Do you have any questions for me? If you are willing to allow your child, and your child is willing, I will send home a form for you to sign and return.

Thank you for your time today.
## Appendix D. Research Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question:</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Data:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How does a teacher intentionally implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the English-language arts classroom to position students for richer literacy experiences? | ● Sociocultural theory  
● Culturally relevant pedagogy | ● Critical Discussions (in classroom)  
● Observations of student sharing of self-created texts  
● Student Interviews |
| How does positioning students’ cultural identity as an asset in learning instead of a deficit in learning influence students’ perpectives of themselves as learners? | ● Culturally relevant pedagogy  
● Funds of knowledge | ● Student Interviews |
| How does cultural identity/sharing of cultural identity change students’ perspectives and enhance student literacy experiences? | ● Sociocultural theory  
● Culturally relevant pedagogy  
● Funds of knowledge | ● Student Interviews  
● Student writings |
## Appendix E. “Culture and Identity” Unit Outline

| What is Culture?  
- Define and discuss.  
- Handout with “culture” definitions. | How do culture and identity inform one another?  
- Reading of book chapter: “Culture and Identity”  
- Think Pieces | How do culture and identity inform one another?  
- Reading of book chapter: “Culture and Identity”  
- Think Pieces | How do culture and identity inform one another?  
- Critical discussion #1 | How do I convey my cultural identity through writing about events in my life?  
- Counternarrative approach: “I am not” poems | How do I convey my cultural identity through writing about events in my life?  
- Explanation and models of Cultural Identity compositions  
- Creating composition. | How do I convey my cultural identity through writing about events in my life?  
- Creating composition. | How do I convey my cultural identity through writing about events in my life?  
- Creating composition. | How do I produce a counternarrative that portrays my cultural identity in a different way?  
- “I am not” poems  
**Day prior to Spring Break** | How do people articulate their beliefs through lived experiences?  
- TIB reading and analysis  
- Think Piece | How do people articulate their beliefs through lived experiences?  
- TIB reading and analysis  
- Think Piece | How do people articulate their beliefs through lived experiences?  
- TIB reading and analysis  
- Think Piece | How do people articulate their beliefs through lived experiences?  
- TIB reading and analysis  
- Think Piece  
- Show models | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in writing?  
- TIB compositions | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in writing?  
- TIB compositions | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in writing?  
- TIB compositions | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in writing?  
- TIB compositions  
- Show models | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in writing?  
- TIB compositions  
- Show models | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in writing?  
- TIB compositions  
- Show models | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in writing?  
- TIB compositions  
- Show models |
| How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in video? -TIB DMC | How does the viewing of others’ TIB compositions change/impact my perspectives? -Sharing and analysis of student DMC’s (small groups) -Feedback/Gauging impact | How does the viewing of others’ TIB compositions change/impact my perspectives? -Sharing and analysis of student DMC’s (whole groups) -Feedback/Gauging impact | How do I articulate my beliefs through lived experiences in video? -TIB DMC | How (if at all) have perceptions of cultural identity of yourself and others informed how you think? -Critical Discussion #3 |

***These days are built in order to have some wiggle room throughout the unit. In having seniors at the end of the year, there are always reasons for them to be out of class.***
Appendix F. Think Pieces

Peter Elbow calls “writing that is a bit more thought out and worked over--but not yet an essay; exploratory but not merely freewriting” a think piece. They offer a means for students to write to think and learn. The goal of this type of writing for students is to come to understandings and to figure out what they don’t yet know; it is writing to learn and to think critically. As you write, you should ground your wonderings, questions, tensions, etc. in texts. I recommend quoting passages that stand out to you, raise questions for you, or are confusing.

At the end of each think piece, you should pose one-two questions for discussion. These should be deep, thoughtful questions with which you are genuinely grappling and seeking an answer. They should be questions that will provoke discussion and deeper exploration of ideas.

Think Piece 1- Monday- full page (pgs 5-16)
Think Piece 2- Tuesday- full page (pgs 17-33) *You will have choice in what section to read.
Think Piece 3- Wednesday- Critical Discussion
**I will take these up on Wednesday.
Appendix G. Cultural Identities Informational Composition and Collage

Jandt (2004) describes cultural identity as “the identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has a shared system of symbols and meanings as well as norms for conduct” (p. 7).

Do you agree with this definition, or based on our readings and conversations, would you like to create your own definition of cultural identity? If so, please write it here:

__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

Jandt (2004) also states, “We can have no direct knowledge of a culture other than our own. Our experience with and knowledge of other cultures are limited by the perceptual bias of our own culture” (p. 8). In this writing and collage, let’s try to open the eyes of our fellow classmates into other cultural identities that maybe they didn’t know existed.

TOPIC: Cultural Identities
AUDIENCE: Classmates
FORMAT: Informational Composition and Photo Collage

Informational Composition

Use these headings to organize and guide your writing:

→ Introduction (1 short paragraph)
→ Values (1-2 paragraphs)
→ Rituals (1 paragraph)
→ Cultural Events (2-3 paragraphs)
→ Identity (description of roles) (2-3 paragraphs)
→ Conclusion (1 short paragraph)

Collage

You will need:

→ 15-20 pictures which represent your cultural identity
→ 4-5 quotes which represent your cultural identity
→ half of a poster board (or something of similar size)
→ TO BE CREATIVE! Remember---this represents YOU! :)

Plan

March 22: Work on Collage ideas; brainstorming/outline for composition
March 23-25: Type informational composition; revise/edit
March 28-29: Work on Collage/Finish composition
March 30: Share compositions and collage; peer feedback/responses

You will receive 3 grades:
➔ Brainstorming/Outline- completion
➔ Final Draft
➔ Collage

Outline:

➔ Introduction (1 short paragraph)
  ◆ Who am I? Where do I come from? SHORT, sweet, enticing info. MAKE ME WANT TO READ MORE ABOUT YOU!

➔ Values (1-2 paragraphs)
  ◆ Value 1---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?
  ◆ Value 2---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?
  ◆ Value 3---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?

➔ Rituals (1 paragraph)
  ◆ Ritual 1---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?
  ◆ Ritual 2---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?

➔ Cultural Events (2-3 paragraphs)
  ◆ Cultural Event 1---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?
  ◆ Cultural Event 2---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?
  ◆ Cultural Event 3---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?

➔ Identity (description of roles) (2-3 paragraphs)
  ◆ Identity role 1---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?
  ◆ Identity role 2---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?
  ◆ Identity role 3---
    ● What story or information supports/displays/informs?

➔ Conclusion (1 short paragraph)
  ◆ What am I proud of about my cultural identities? REMIND ME OF WHY YOU ARE SO AWESOME! :)
Appendix H. Collage Examples