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Creating Inclusive Classrooms with Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

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By

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative phenomenographic study that uses the theoretical frameworks of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012), Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport 1954), and Social Constructivism (Smagorinsky, 2007) to evaluate how 7th grade students at a Title I middle school in the Southeastern United States experience the phenomenon of peer relationships in the context of a CSP writing unit. Students created, peer edited, and shared multimodal "Where I'm From" (Lyon, n.d.) poems in intentionally created groups. The researcher collected data via participant interviews, participant journals, and a researcher reflection journal. Findings indicated that students developed a better understanding of their peers, built connections, felt more comfortable in class, improved their relationships with their peers, and made new friends as a result of the intervention.

KEYWORDS: Culturally sustaining pedagogy, Intergroup contact theory, Social constructivism, Peer relationships, Title I, Middle school, Cooperative learning methods

DEDICATION

To my students: former, current, and future. You deserve to be understood. You deserve to be

seen and heard. You deserve to have friends. You deserve to have a positive school

experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I've been waiting to write this acknowledgements page since I heard my mom read hers in 2018. To be honest, writing an acknowledgements page was my main motivation for writing a dissertation (lol, just kidding… but seriously).

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Last but not least, Tommy. You are a saint, my hero, my godsend. You came into my life exactly when I needed you, and you have loved and supported me in ways I didn't even know I needed. If it weren't for you, the house would have literally fallen down around us. You have never hesitated to pick up the slack when I was holed up in the library or just needed a nap. You have a way of tricking me into calm without me even realizing what you're doing. Whenever I said I'm done, I can't go on, you've never failed to remind me that if I don't finish, you and my mom were going to go on a cruise without me, or how you already have plans to spend my raise. Honestly, those reminders have been a great motivator. As I sit here writing this now, it's 1:40 in the morning, and, even though you have to be to work in 5 hours, you're still awake to keep me company and make sure I submit this thing before I go to bed. Thank you. Seriously. You are my person, and I can't wait to be your wife <3.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background and Role of Researcher

In my eight years as an English teacher, I have taught middle school for seven of those years, and seventh grade for five of them. In that time, I have become very attuned with the fact that "teaching" is actually one of the least important parts of my job. In order to achieve success, I prioritize relationship building not only between me and my students but also amongst my students. Creating a safe classroom where students are able to be themselves without fear of ridicule is the most important part of teaching, especially in an English classroom where students must be vulnerable in order to grow. When students feel safe, they are more willing to fail; when students are more willing to fail, they are also more willing to take risks and attempt new and rigorous writing tasks that they would never have tried before.

Honestly, it is difficult for me to separate my professional and personal motivations at this point because they are so intertwined; nonetheless, I have quite a few different motivations for my research interest. For one, I have almost exclusively taught at schools with a very high population of Black and Latinx students, and I have experienced the struggle of changing the curriculum to include more diverse and relevant reading and writing opportunities. At one point a few years ago, I was in the middle of teaching argumentative writing using Ben Franklin and his kite experiment, and it hit me as students were nodding off that the reason they hate writing so much is because the writing prompts we give them are so irrelevant, and, frankly, boring.

Additionally, I have frequently seen students bully and be bullied by each other. Usually, they say something like, "Oh, I was just messin' around, he knows that…" or "Ms.

Kane, I know he didn't mean it," but in middle school, students are so vulnerable, and the actions and words of their peers can completely change their outlook, whether it just be for that day or for longer. At my school, we've made great strides at improving student-teacher relationships, and now I would like to see us move toward improving the relationships between students. My hope is that through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) in the classroom, students can build and gain empathy, or, at the very least, get to know their peers better, which would, in turn, improve their relationships with each other.

These motivations have me approaching this topic less from an "English Language Arts (ELA) teacher" perspective, and more from a "middle school teacher" perspective; I am more interested in the social-emotional component of school than the academic component at this point. I believe that if the social-emotional piece is missing, the academic piece does not stand a chance. When students' minds are focused on what their friends think about them, or what so-and-so said earlier, it is difficult for them to shift their focus back to the learning aspect of class. More importantly, though, I believe that academics and social-emotional learning (SEL) could be taught hand-in-hand, achieving the best of both worlds: students are learning standards while also learning how to be good and functioning people. As Brauer and Clark (2008), Smagorinsky (2007), and Smagorinsky (2016) explain, it is important to use the ELA classroom to teach culturally aware, well-rounded, and open-minded students. Through the exploration of one's thoughts through reading and writing, students can achieve this goal. Moreover, as I have personally witnessed as a middle grades ELA teacher, and as countless researchers have also documented, bullying and classroom disharmony are a rampant problem

in middle schools (Brown, 2019; Fabes et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2019; Juvonen et al., 2019; Nishina et al., 2019; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018).

At this time, my agenda is twofold: one, to make it so that CSP is more easily incorporated into the ELA classroom, especially as a way to help students develop their own cultural understandings of themselves and others; and two, to show the importance of fostering relationships between students and building inclusive classrooms where all students feel safe. My experiences as a middle school teacher at diverse schools have influenced this agenda. My bias is that I believe all students are inherently good, but some may need some guidance. Moreover, teachers need tools to reach and include the "challenging" students into their classroom in a safe and positive way. I also believe that as students learn more about themselves and become more comfortable with who they are, the more open and accepting they will be of others. I believe a positive classroom climate is just as important as a positive school climate. My goal as a researcher, therefore, is to determine if students who engage in a CSP might have more positive interactions with their peers, which will, in turn, create a classroom that is more inclusive and welcoming of all students.

Statement of the Problem

It is important to study the connection between CSP and how students perceive its impact on creating an inclusive classroom because improving relationships between peers could potentially increase student learning outcomes and graduation rates (Brown, 2019). For one, students in middle grades have a difficult time building and maintaining strong relationships with their peers (Brown, 2019; Fabes et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2019; Juvonen et al., 2019; Nishina et al., 2019; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Brown (2019) goes on to argue

that "…teachers, principals, and school districts are tasked with not only providing a welcoming and inclusive learning environment for all of their students, but also helping their students respectfully work with other diverse individuals" (p. 322). Schools are becoming more diverse, not only in regards to ethnicity, but also in regards to a diverse LGBTQ community and in the diverse academic needs of their students. These new levels of diversity add a new set of challenges in that students struggle with accepting those that are not only ethnically different from them, but also different in the sexual orientations, gender identity, and academic abilities. Because many students are unequipped to accept those that are "other," they frequently miss class due to discipline issues that occurred as a result of conflicts with their peers.

The open nature of the ELA classroom affords opportunities to develop students' social and emotional needs while also working toward achieving academic goals (Brauer & Clark, 2008; Smagorinsky, 2007; Smagorinsky, 2016). Smagorinsky (2016) claims that "first, high school curricula do not make it clear that, at the core, literature is concerned not only with character, plot, and setting but with moral and philosophical issues" (p. 110) He goes on to explain that the two concepts are reciprocal of one another; in other words, in order to understand literature, one must study moral and philosophical issues, yet, to understand moral and philosophical issues, one must study literature. This seeming paradox provides an opportunity in the ELA classroom for students to apply what they already know of moral and philosophical issues to literature, and to use literature to enhance their knowledge of moral and philosophical issues. Therefore, the ELA classroom offers a safe space for students to

expand and hone their own moral compass, and embedding CSP into the curriculum could help guide students along their own moral development journeys.

CSP applied to a writing unit could be one way to accomplish the goal of mastering both academic standards and social emotional development because at its core, "…CSPs are conscious enactments of love to combat the dehumanization of marginalized communities by preserving and nurturing linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism" (Coppola, et al., 2019, p. 227). This study is necessary because it could determine if using CSP is a feasible and actionable way to improve peer relationships and create more inclusive classrooms.

This study could have an impact on the broader educational setting for many reasons. For one, there is a growing amount of diversity in our public schools, and all students deserve the opportunity to explore, engage with, and share their culture while also learning about the cultures of others (Behizadeh, 2017; Bomer, 2017; Coppola et al., 2019; Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018; Woodard & Kline, 2016; Woodard et al., 2017; Zapata & Laman, 2016; Zoch, 2017). Zapata and Laman (2016) describe the opportunities provided by CSP as "a developing and democratic vision for teaching writing that strives to value, leverage, and teach into students' everyday languaging practices," (p. 366) whereby students are given the opportunity to develop their own cultural understandings, and those cultural understandings of their peers.

Additionally, most will agree that subject area instruction is no longer the sole domain of teachers; addressing social and emotional learning and providing inclusive classrooms is a key component of our modern educational system (Brown, 2019; Fabes et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2019; Juvonen et al., 2019; Nishina et al., 2019; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Fabes et al. (2019) claims outright that "when the social climate of a classroom provides a foundation for

students' relationships to be inclusive, cooperative, and positive, academic and social outcomes are significantly enhanced" (p. 271). Using culturally sustaining pedagogy could be one way to teach curriculum and develop social emotional learning that fosters inclusive classrooms at the same time.

Finally, this study includes the implementation of a CSP writing unit in which students created "Where I'm From" poems (Lyons, n.d.), provided feedback to their peers on their poems, and shared their poems with the class at large. The success of this unit proves an actionable way to bring CSP from research to practice—it provides a clear and replicable outline for other teachers to begin the practice of implementing CSP into their own classrooms.

Research Question

Because I am interested in studying the phenomenon in which students view their experiences, the following research questions guide this research study:

1: How did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive their relationships with other students who participated in the unit?

2: How (if at all) did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive the unit as affecting their relationships with their classmates?

Local Context

The research site for this qualitative phenomenographical study is a suburban Title I middle school located in a major metropolitan city in the southeastern United States. As of October 2020, 63.95% of students are recipients of the Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) program (GADOE, 2020b). Likewise, as of October 2020, 25.8% of students identify as

Hispanic, 61.5% of students identify as Black, 8.6% of students identify as White, and 4.2% of students identify as Multiracial (GADOE, 2020a). In the 2020-2021 school year, despite the diverse make-up of the student body, most teachers at this school were White women.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (see Appendix A) I use was developed with the Hopscotch Model (Jorrin-Abellan, 2016), and it centers around middle school ELA teachers implementing a culturally sustaining writing unit to determine if CSP has an impact on peer relationships and creating inclusive classrooms. Determining if CSP has an impact on peer relationships and inclusive classrooms matters because both are key components in academic success amongst middle schoolers, and teachers need an actionable way to improve those relationships (Juvonen, 2007). CSP has a positive impact on school climate, and it may, therefore, also positively impact the relationships students have with one another, thereby creating a positive classroom climate as well (Juvonen, 2007). Rather than focusing on the individual, this study aims to focus on the development of relationships over time given a specific CSP intervention.

This research reveals that CSP can positively impact the relationships between students and create more inclusive classrooms. This is informed by the belief that, through CSP, students learn more about themselves as people, and are more willing to listen to and accept people that are different from them. Furthermore, as students become more accepting of others and learn to listen to each other's stories, they will understand each other better and build better relationships and bonds with one another. In turn, they will be kinder and more thoughtful to one another, creating a more inclusive classroom environment in which students

feel safer, more accepted, and are therefore better able to focus on their academic development.

The research design is a phenomenographic qualitative study that relies on participant interviews, participant journals, and a researcher reflection journal. A phenomenographic qualitative study was selected because phenomenographies are concerned with exploring the ways in which humans experience certain phenomena, and I am interested in exploring how students experience the phenomenon of CSP. Interviews, student journals, and a researcher journal were chosen for data collection because the provide insight into how the participants experienced the phenomenon being studied. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion to allow for a fluid yet consistent conversation between myself and the participants. Journals included student reflections of their experiences with their peers throughout the study. All of these data collection methods were evaluated using the suggestions of Gonzalez (2010), which enabled me to determine how the group experienced the phenomenon of CSP. A visual representation of the conceptual framework for this study can be found in Appendix A.

Definition of Concepts

The following section discusses the relevant terms used in this study in order to provide a more clear understanding for the reader.

Cooperative Learning Methods. A method of learning that "require[s] input from all group members to make progress toward a common goal, to achieve individual and group success (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2013; van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018)" (as cited in Juvonen et al., 2019, p. 258).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). A method of teaching that develops students academically, nurtures and supports their cultural competence, and develops their sociopolitical or critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). A method of teaching that "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 90). CSP is an expansion/continuation of the principles developed by Ladson-Billings (1995).

Inclusive Classroom. A classroom that is made up of "positive peer relationships and intergroup harmony" (Juvonen et al., 2019, p. 250).

Intergroup Contact Theory. The theory that intergroup contact is an effective way to decrease in-group and out-group prejudices, and even develop friendships between members of different groups (Allport, 1954).

Phenomenography. "The study of how people experience, understand or conceive of a phenomenon in the world around us… [It] is not directed at the phenomenon as such, but at the variation in people's ways of understanding the phenomenon" (Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007, p. 56).

Social Constructivism. The theory that humans construct meaning from the experiences they have with the environments and the people they are exposed to (Smagorinsky, 2007).

Organization of Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter one is an introduction that attempts to clarify the terminology used in the study, explain why the study is necessary and relevant,

and briefly discuss the theoretical underpinnings that guide this study. Chapter two is a

literature review that synthesizes the literature relevant to the study to provide a context for it,

and to highlight gaps in the literature, further emphasizing the necessity of this study. Chapter

three discusses the methodology, a phenomenographic qualitative study, used for the study.

Chapter four explains the findings and major themes revealed in the study, and, finally,

Chapter Five is a discussion of the findings and their implications.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to demonstrate a connection between culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and inclusive classrooms that promote "positive peer relationships and intergroup harmony" (Juvonen et al., 2019, p. 250). As such, this review begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework, which takes a deep dive into the three main theories guiding this study: social constructivism (Smagorinsky, 2007), culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995; Paris, 2012), and intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954). The theoretical framework concludes by explaining the relationships and connections between the three theories. Next, the body of the literature review begins by looking into the literature on CSP and inclusive classrooms separately, and then synthesizes the information to highlight how the two concepts are connected and support each other.

Theoretical Framework

Social Constructivism

Vygotsky developed the theory of social constructivism during the Russian Revolution, in which the Socialist government was in its infancy, and the idea that members of society must depend on each other was growing (Liu & Chen, 2010). The idea grew from the previous theory of cognition in which, as the metaphor states, students were empty vessels to be filled. As a behaviorist, Vygotsky recognized that students came to the classroom with pre-existing knowledge and behaviors, and he recognized that leveraging that in collaboration with peers, teachers, and classroom materials could allow students the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught than if they were just memorizing facts they were being told.

Of course, there are critics to social constructivism. According to Liu and Matthews (2005), critics argue that

> (a) it emphasizes the role of the social and the collective, but ignores the role of the individual (Resnick, 1996); (b) it fails to address how the external world is bridged across to the internal mind (Fox, 2001 and Cobb, 1996); and (3) it implies a "blinkered social consensualism" (Fox, 2001), and therefore epistemological social relativism. (p. 391)

In other words, the critics say that social constructivism is too one-dimensional and does not address other realities of the learning and social process. While it may be true that social constructivism is not the only way we gain knowledge, it is still an important component in the learning process (Liu & Matthews, 2005).

Smagorinsky (2007) indicates that a key component of Vygotsky's social constructivism theory is that we construct meaning from the experiences we have with the environments and the people we are exposed to. Moreover, he suggests that those interpersonal experiences become part of our intrapersonal dialogue (self-talk), which in turn helps us construct more meaning. This cycle is extended and amplified in classrooms that allow for learner-driven discussions. In other words, as students are exposed to new experiences and engage with new people, they gain new understandings. As they think about those new understandings, they gain new perspectives. Students then share those new perspectives with their peers, and through that dialogue, understanding is further expanded.

Powell and Kalina (2009) argue that it is necessary to facilitate students' co-construction of knowledge through the creation of safe places in the classroom in which

students can share their thoughts and ideas with each other in a collaborative process. They argue that "students should not only work with teachers one-on-one, but they should also work with other students. Students have a lot to offer one another[…]. Vygotsky believed that internalization occurs more effectively when there is social interaction" (p. 244). This happens because as students participate in collaborative dialogue with one another, they begin to internalize the concepts they are studying. This internalization leads to self-talk, which helps a student to think more deeply about the topic of study, and thereby develop a deeper understanding of it.

One ideal place for the implementation of social constructivism is in a writing class, where dialogue takes place both verbally and through writing. Writing is an external expression of one's internal dialogue that forces the writer to think deeply on a topic in order to express it clearly and effectively. Powell and Kalina (2009) explain that when students are made to collaborate (i.e., throughout the writing process of pre-writing, peer feedback, publishing, and sharing the final product) they are also able to construct, expand, and share their understandings with one another. Therefore, through writing and collaborating, students are participating in the cycle of both internal and collaborative dialogue to increase their knowledge and understanding.

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is defined by Ladson-Billings (1995a) as a method of teaching that develops students academically, nurtures and supports their cultural competence, and develops their sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings began her work in the early 1990s when educational reform was focused on creating more

equitable and just opportunities for all students. Ladson-Billings (1995b) explains that her research followed that of others who "have looked at ways to develop a closer fit between students' home culture and the school" (p. 159). At the time, many of these efforts were focused on reforming teacher-education programs.

Unfortunately, many of these reform efforts focused on what was going wrong with teaching marginalized students; Ladson-Billings decided to instead focus her research on what was going well (Ladson-Billings, 2014). She hypothesized that there were teachers and schools that were already exhibiting the desired characteristics, which inspired her to visit actual classrooms to find out. In her own words, she explained that "instead of asking what was wrong with African American students, I dared to ask what was right with these students, and what happened in the classrooms of teachers who seemed to experience pedagogical success with them" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 74). She discovered that not only were there teachers who were already doing this work, but that they all had certain characteristics in common.

Thus, Ladson-Billings (1995a) conducted her research in classrooms where marginalized students, primarily African American, were achieving success as determined by parents and principals (p. 471-472). Based on her observations, she identified key components that these successful teachers were doing: 1) developing students academically, 2) nurturing and supporting cultural competence, and 3) developing sociopolitical or critical consciousness. These three components became the foundational framework for her theory.

Since the development of CRP, it has evolved as both researchers and practitioners have implemented the framework using their own understandings. Ladson-Billings (2014) laments that

> my work on culturally relevant pedagogy has taken on a life of its own, and what I see in the literature and sometimes in practice is totally unrecognizable to me. What state departments, school districts, and individual teachers are now calling 'culturally relevant pedagogy' is often a distortion and corruption of the central ideas I attempted to promulgate. The idea that adding some books about people of color, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting 'diverse' images makes one 'culturally relevant' seem to be what the pedagogy has been reduced to. (p. 81-82)

In other words, researchers and practitioners have, over time, oversimplified the original intentions of CRP.

Observing the over-simplification and shift away from the original intention of CRP, Paris (2012) suggested shifting away from a culturally *relevant* pedagogy toward a culturally *sustaining* pedagogy (CSP). In his words, CSP "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 93). Paris (2012) goes on to argue that the goal of education should go further than just being relevant or responsive to students' cultures, but that it should also give them the tools to sustain their own cultures while also being given the tools to access the dominant culture. Moreover, as Ladson-Billings (2014) recognizes, there are many more cultures at play in modern education than just the cultures of one's ethnicity (e.g. youth culture, LGBTQ culture,

sports culture, etc.). CSP creates space in the classrooms for all of these different cultures to come into play and have room to be recognized, honored, and, well, sustained.

Ladson-Billings (2014) acknowledges Paris' (2012) claim and calls CSP the *remix* or *version 2.0* of CRP. Because of Paris' (2012) very valid arguments, and because of Ladson-Billings' (2014) own acknowledgment of and encouragement to use CSP over CRP, I use Paris' (2012) terminology rather than Ladson-Billing's (1995a) terminology. With that being said, many researchers continue to use the terminology of CRP and CSP interchangeably, and much of the work of CRP is relevant to work now being done in CSP (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Therefore, I did not exclude articles referring to CRP rather than CSP from my investigation.

Intergroup Contact Theory

In the early 1950s, the United States was beginning to experience one of its largest and most important cultural shifts: that of desegregation. At the time, many folks argued against desegregation on the basis that people from different ethnicities (specifically White folks and Black folks) would not be able to get along. Allport (1954) hypothesized based on earlier research that favorable intergroup contact was possible, regardless of previous beliefs, assumptions, or experiences, given that certain conditions be met.

Looking at previous research, and based on his own observations, Allport (1954) developed the concept of intergroup contact theory, which he explained was an effective way to decrease in-group and out-group prejudices, and even develop friendships between members of different groups. Pettigrew (1998) explained that for Allport's (1954) theory to be effective, four conditions must be met over a prolonged period of time. Those four conditions

are "equal group status within the situation; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom" (p. 66). He emphasizes that all four conditions must be met in order for the theory to be consistently successful. In studies in which even one of the four conditions was omitted, intergroup harmony was not achieved (Pettigrew, 1998).

Classrooms are an ideal setting for intergroup contact to occur because all four conditions have ample opportunities to be met; however, teachers must be deliberate in the arrangement of the classroom for it to work. For example, students from different groups must be put together to work to achieve a common goal, and every member of the new group is responsible for its overall success. There should not be a hierarchy amongst these students (i.e., there should be no group leader), and achievement of the goal should be emphasized over competition. The teacher and classroom expectations play the role of "authority, law, or custom."

Additionally, while schools are now, arguably, desegregated, this model still has a place in the modern educational system. For one, as Juvonen et al. (2019) point out, people exhibit preferences for similar others. Moreover, schools are becoming increasingly diverse and full of students from a vast array of cultures, and many students are still uncomfortable or uncertain of how to interact with these differing cultures. When Allport's (1954) conditions are met and successfully implemented, peer relationships are likely to blossom across different groups of students in the classroom. However, again, it is important to caution that the teacher must consistently and deliberately ensure that all four conditions are being met, and she must intervene when they are not, or else the results could be detrimental.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, Intergroup Contact Theory, and Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is, arguably, an implied component of both CSP and intergroup contact theory. CSP emphasizes the need for cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012) while social constructivism and intergroup contact theory support the development of cultural pluralism through the sharing of cultures that takes place in a CSP classroom. As students share their culture with others, via intergroup contact, they in turn learn more about both their own cultures and the cultures of their peers, or, as social constructivists refer to it, they build a co-construction of knowledge.

Classroom teachers, including ELA and writing teachers, are typically in the foreground of the classroom (Smagorinsky, 2007). When the teacher is in the foreground, the teacher's culture is, in turn, put into the foreground, and it becomes the filter through which content is presented to students (Bomer, 2017). Acknowledging that (as explained by social constructivism) students create meaning from both their environment and the people around them, this typical classroom arrangement does not allow much room for a truly culturally sustaining pedagogy. Therefore, the frameworks of both social constructivism and CSP require that the teacher decenter herself and place the students in the foreground of the classroom, all without losing sight of how her culture frames her own understanding and meaning making. Intergroup contact theory provides teachers a model for arranging the classroom that allows the teacher to accomplish this goal. In so doing, students have the opportunity to develop a deeper meaning of their own culture while developing an understanding of others' cultures rather than just learning about the culture of the teacher, which is, not always, but typically, that of middle-class White America.

Naturally, then, these theories can promote success in the writing classroom. As teachers step out of the way by providing writing prompts and writing opportunities that are culturally sustaining, and forming groups where students are exposed to students who are different from them, students will take the lead in their own learning and share that learning with their peers. In this model, teachers are there as a resource to support student learning and to learn about their students, but not there as the primary means of student learning. Moreover, because social constructivism taps into the idea that our reality is defined by the experiences we have had (Crotty, 1998; Smagorinsky 2007), students may become more empathetic and accepting of each other as they get to know each other better through intergroup contact (Allport, 1954). As students work with people outside of their in-group, they may learn from each other and use their combined experiences to make each other's lives (and perhaps the world in general) a little better—a primary goal of CSP.

Culturally Sustaining Writing Pedagogy

For this study, I am particularly interested in the integration of CSP into the writing curriculum. Woodard et al. (2017) explain that culturally sustaining writing is "shifting between ways of making meaning to communicate with multiple communities" (p. 216). In other words, culturally sustaining writing problematizes the concept that "Standard American English" (SAE) is the primary English taught in schools because it is the dominant English (read: dialect spoken by most White Americans). Moreover, culturally sustaining writing challenges the idea that the traditional school essay, whether informative, narrative, or argumentative, be the primary genre taught in schools (Behizadeh, 2017; Bomer, 2017;

Coppola et al., 2019; Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018; Woodard & Kline, 2016; Woodard et al.,

2017; Zapata & Laman, 2016; Zoch, 2017).

    Simply stated, culturally sustaining writing embraces the idea that literacy is a social

construct. ELA teachers who use a culturally sustaining writing pedagogy provide their

students with literature and mentor texts from a variety of cultures. Additionally, they provide

a variety of writing opportunities for students to participate in. These writing opportunities

should allow students to explore their own culture and writing style. Through the process of

peer editing, publishing, and sharing, students learn more about the various cultures of their

peers. Equally importantly, the class begins to build its own unique culture (Whitney, 2018;

Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018).

    Moreover, given writing opportunities and mentor texts that allow for student choice

and embrace a variety of cultures, students can work through the process of sustaining their

own cultures and gain access to the dominant culture as Paris (2012) urges. However,

Coppola et al. (2019) emphasize that

    the goal is not to socialize "other" students into adopting these dominant educational

    norms, which are deeply informed by racism, sexism, classism, ableism, linguicism,

    and homophobia. Rather, it is to critique these limited value systems and to empower

    perspectives that demand seeing all youth as dynamic and full beings who assert their

    identities and practices in multiple, yet equally valid, ways. (p. 68)

Educators must balance the paradox of helping students access the dominant culture while being diligent not to promote it over students' own cultures and ensuring that students learn to sustain their cultures.

CSP and Authentic Writing Opportunities

In general, researchers and practitioners have seen more interest and engagement in writing when students are given authentic writing opportunities, which is to say, opportunities to write about topics that are meaningful to them and in situations that are authentic to them (Behizadeh, 2017; Carter, 2006; Coppola et al., 2019; Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018; Stormer et al., 2017; Whitney, 2018; Woodard et al., 2017; Zoch, 2017). Whitney's (2018) student specifically acknowledged that "openings for [her] to share her stories and be heard" gave her the courage to express herself through different forms of writing (pp. 650-651). Paris (2012) specifically explains that CSP should allow students to have opportunities to experience "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism" (p. 90). Authentic writing is an opportunity for teachers to deliberately imbed CSP into their curriculum while also giving students a safe and welcoming space to grow, develop, and share their own voices, which, again, allows students to sustain their cultures.

In a unit on spoken-word poetry, Coppola et al. (2019) embedded CSP into the curriculum by having students read mentor texts from diverse authors and compose their own poems. Through the process of composing, students drafted, provided peer feedback, revised, and shared their own poems. Over the course of the unit, students became more comfortable sharing more personal parts of their identities with their peers. In so doing, students learned and acknowledged that their culture was informed by factors other than ethnicity. For

example, some students shared with their classmates both physical and learning disabilities such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, and cerebral palsy. Coppola et al. (2019) explain that "their poems became showcases that allowed them to challenge narratives (e.g., Leo the 'math whiz,' Jeremiah the 'jokester,' and Ning the 'quiet new kid') that had been constructed for them by their peers" (p. 243). Through this sharing process, peers learned about each other's struggles and there was a noticeable shift away from bullying and toward support within the classroom as students were able to reframe their own narratives.

CSP, Dialects, and Identity

The concept of Standard American English (SAE) is one challenge facing the culturally sustaining writing classroom. When SAE is prioritized in the classroom, it is upheld as more correct than other dialects, and there is little room to challenge that power dynamic— the idea that SAE is better than other dialects (Woodard et al., 2017, p. 228). Woodard et al. (2017) point out that from their research, most ELA teachers were accepting of non-SAE dialects in speaking, but they strongly discouraged it in writing. One step in creating a more CSP supportive classroom is for teachers to evaluate the role of different dialects in the "academic" writing process.

Through an 8-lesson summer writing course, Behizadeh (2017) had middle schoolers critically consider whether African American Vernacular English (AAVE) had a place in school or academic writing. At the beginning of the course, most students had a very negative view of AAVE, despite it being the primary dialect used by the students and their families. This is an example of how youth had been conditioned, whether from school, their families, or society at large, to believe that the dominant culture is valued above their own cultures. By

asking students to reflect on statements such as no language or dialect is better than another; languages and dialects are not wrong, but they can be inappropriate for the setting or context; the more languages and dialects you know, the more you can say and the more people you can reach (p. 59) students' perception of AAVE as negative or less than shifted into a more positive light, and Behizadeh (2017) was able to help her students develop a more culturally sustaining view toward the dialects from their ethnic culture.

Similarly, Zapata and Laman's (2016) study revealed that emerging bilingual students' English language acquisition was greatly improved when students were allowed (and even encouraged) to code-mesh (compose writing that contains different languages and/or dialects) in their writing. Within those classrooms, students whose first language was English felt compelled to begin learning and speaking in new languages and dialects, broadening the scope of people they could communicate with. If the ultimate goal of CSP is for students to sustain their own cultures and gain access to new cultures, code-meshing is an excellent opportunity for students to get there.

Challenges with Implementing CSP in the Writing Classroom

Naturally, there are some challenges to implementing CSP into the writing classroom. One challenge, developing a learner-centered classroom, must be tackled at the personal (teacher) level. This challenge requires the teacher to be open-minded and consistently reflective. Two additional challenges, mandated curriculum and high-stakes testing, are arguably more systemic challenges. These challenges can still be managed at the classroom level with careful and deliberate planning. The following sections explore these challenges more thoroughly and offer some suggestions for overcoming them.

Developing a Learner-Centered, CSP Classroom when Curriculum is Mandated.

Bomer (2017) argues that by its very nature, "*literacy education* is always culturally responsive" (p. 11). The problem, however, is that it is typically responsive to the culture of the teacher, rather than that of the students. He further points out that, while there is typically a focus on one's ethnicity as being the root of one's culture, there are many other components that make up one's culture (e.g., youth culture and LGBTQ culture) which are often omitted when considering curriculum choices. In essence, a classroom cannot be culturally sustaining unless or until the teacher is removed as the gatekeeper of knowledge, and a learner-centered classroom is created.

In a learner-centered classroom, students are given some control over their learning opportunities. While a standards-based education does require that certain learning expectations be met, there are ways to teach the standards that are, in fact, learner-centered. Providing authentic writing opportunities is one way to achieve both goals. Additionally, in an ELA classroom, teachers can provide choice to students in their reading selections and provide mentor texts to students that are reachable and relatable to the students in their classroom. Moreover, when authentic writing is shared, students are sustaining their own pedagogies and sharing their cultures with their peers, thereby helping their peers to gain access to more cultural perspectives. Throughout this process, teachers are creating a more learner-centered classroom, which is in turn more culturally sustaining.

In their studies, Bissonnete (2016), Dyches (2017), and Myers (2019) acknowledge that there are times when curriculum, specifically reading choices, are mandated. All three

studies looked at teachers who desired to implement CSP into their curriculum but were required to teach British literature in urban settings. These teachers were still able to implement a CSP by focusing on the universality of the themes in the literature and then tying those themes back to the students' own lived experiences through the writing opportunities provided. For example, Dyches (2017) observed a teacher make *Beowulf* relevant by asking students to write their own versions of the story with themselves as the archetypal hero. Likewise, Myers (2019) observed a teacher use *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a jumping off point to lead a discussion about the good and evil in their own communities, and the dangers of not knowing both sides to peoples' stories. Students then created PSA posters about a cause they cared about as part of their argumentative writing assignment tied in with the unit. In other words, while the texts being read were still considered canonical, the teachers were able to make the curriculum culturally sustaining by focusing on the themes, lessons, and writing opportunities, rather than simply analyzing the text with no real-world connections.

CSP and High-Stakes Testing

Adopting a culturally sustaining writing classroom is complicated by the high-stakes testing environment of most ELA classrooms. Because of the pressure for students to perform well on state mandated tests, and for teachers to "show growth" from year to year, writing opportunities in the classroom are often made to mimic the writing prompts on the test. Kiss and Mizusawa (2018) describe these practices as being "(1) generally divorced from situated practice, and (2) governed by universal standards and prescriptive structures rather than social realities" (p. 60). Students are encouraged to follow a formula for writing that leaves little

room for critical thinking or creative expression. Writing prompts leave little room for choice, exploration, or discovery. Furthermore, "Standard American English" is considered the ideal for this type of writing, leaving many students demoralized and feeling "less-than."

Kiss and Mizusawa (2018) go on to argue that because of the high-stakes testing environment, students are missing opportunities to develop "intercultural communicative competence" (p. 60), or, as Behizadeh (2017) calls it, "code-meshing" (p. 56). Behizadeh (2017) defines code-meshing as using "more than one language or dialect in a single composition" (p. 56). The advantage of encouraging code-meshing is that it helps students develop multiple linguistic competencies and opens the door for them to communicate effectively with a broader group of people. When the emphasis is placed on teaching to the test, though, there is no room for code-meshing. Ladson-Billings (1995a) offers a simple solution to this challenge: when teaching is culturally sustaining, students are more engaged, learn more, and therefore perform better on high-stakes tests. Therefore, teachers who use CSP, including the use of non-SAE dialect and code-meshing, can still achieve high scores on standardized tests.

Inclusive Classrooms

Juvonen et al. (2019) explain that two important characteristics of an inclusive classroom is that they have "positive peer relationships and intergroup harmony" (p. 250). This resonated with me and my purposes for this study. Creating an inclusive classroom is the key to improving peer-relationships, and improving peer-relationships is a crucial component in creating an inclusive classroom; the two are delicately intertwined and reliant upon one

another. Most researchers agree that a classroom that is considered "inclusive" must be made up of students who have positive peer relationships with one another, and therefore, the literature in this review is derived from studies on inclusion rather than merely peer-relationships (Brown, 2019; Fabes et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2019; Juvonen et al., 2019; Nishina et al., 2019; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018).

The Dangers of a Non-Inclusive Classroom Environment

Creating an inclusive classroom environment is a necessary component of teaching: academic learning cannot take place if students do not feel like they are in a safe and supportive environment. Peer relationships directly impact student engagement, and therefore student learning outcomes (Juvonen, 2007). Also, students without friends in middle school and students who are bullied receive lower grades and are more likely to drop out of school than their peers (Juvonen, 2007).

Bullying decreases when perceptions of school climate are positive (Gowing, 2019; Juvonen, 2007; Turner et al., 2018), and an understanding of each other's cultural backgrounds increases positive peer relationships, which also decreases instances of bullying (Habib et al., 2013; Juvonen, 2007). Moreover, bystander apathy regarding bullying has a negative impact on school climate (Wang & Goldberg, 2017). Naturally, students with positive peer relationships have an increased connectedness to school, and therefore a positive perception of school climate (Gowing, 2019; Juvonen, 2007; Turner et al., 2018). Finally, students report that their peer relationships are the most important aspect in determining school climate (Gowing, 2019).

Cooperative Learning Methods to Improve Inclusive Classroom Environments

First, researchers across the board recommend cooperative learning methods (which are supported by Allport's (1954) theory) to increase interdependence and form cross-group friendships (Brown, 2019; Fabes et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2019; Juvonen et al., 2019; Nishina et al., 2019; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). During these cooperative learning opportunities, students must be working together to achieve their goal rather than working competitively against one another (Juvonen et al., 2019; Van Ryzen & Roseth, 2018). Of import is to note the role of the teacher in this endeavor: teachers, as the authority figure, must deliberately establish and maintain classroom norms and expectations that support successful group work in a well-managed classroom (Brown, 2019; Farmer et al., 2019; Juvonen et al., 2019).

Juvonen et al. (2019) contend that "one challenge in effectively promoting inclusion through cooperative learning is forming working groups that break down homophily but avoid creating negative intergroup interactions" (p. 258). A classroom that reinforces competition can cause those negative intergroup interactions to occur. Teachers who are not actively engaged in the group dynamics of the classroom can also inadvertently cause negative intergroup interactions. Group formation must be deliberate and re-evaluated frequently to work correctly.

CSP to Improve Inclusive Classroom Environments

Nishima et al. (2019) point out that "positive ethnic identity development could ultimately create a sense of inclusiveness within the school" (p. 310) because as students

become more comfortable with their own identity, they in turn become more comfortable with other students who may identify differently. Additionally, as students are encouraged to explore more deeply their own identities, they in turn learn about the identities of their peers in the same classroom. Two ways Nishima et al. (2019) suggest for teachers to promote this exploration is through a culturally sustaining pedagogy and project-based learning (p. 313).

Fabes et al. (2019) reinforce the idea of a transactional cycle of comfort begetting comfort in their study on gender integration. They point out that girls typically gravitate toward other girls and boys gravitate toward other boys, but when this system is intentionally interrupted, "improved intergroup attitudes and behavior lead to more comfortable cross-gender interactions, thereby reinforcing and promoting greater levels of gender integration" (p. 275). This phenomenon occurs as students are exposed in positive ways to, and learning from, any peers who are different from themselves.

A struggle of promoting an inclusive classroom, and thereby improving peer-relationships, is the lack of diversity in many schools. Juvonen et al. (2019) point out that people exhibit preferences for similar others. Brown (2019) points out that even within ethnically diverse schools, students are frequently segregated by ability group (i.e., gifted, special education, English language learner). Due to the fact that students of color are disproportionately placed into special education and ELL programs, and White students are disproportionately placed into gifted classes, ethnically diverse schools can still become segregated at the classroom level (p. 323). Arguably, though, in-groups and out-groups are formed on more than just one's ethnicity—groups are also often formed based on similar

interests, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation, to name a few. Therefore, while schools and classrooms are not always ethnically diverse, there are still opportunities to bring members from different groups together. CSP, in which students are being deliberately exposed to "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism" (Paris, 2012) can also support the process of bringing different student groups together.

Conclusions

Culturally sustaining pedagogy can promote more inclusive classrooms where diverse groups of students experience positive and harmonious peer relationships. Through intergroup contact theory, we have a model in which to group students to promote inclusive classrooms. As students work through authentic and choice driven writing opportunities, students get to explore their own cultures and identities more deeply. As they work through their intentionally designed feedback groups, students will work together to accomplish their goals, and in so doing learn more about each other's cultures. Through the process, students will develop their social competence while peer relationships in the classroom improve, thereby begetting a more inclusive classroom.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the ways in which students experienced and perceived the relationships they had with their peers while participating in a culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) writing unit. A phenomenographic tradition was chosen to highlight the perceptions of seven seventh grade students with various comfort levels in making friends and from various backgrounds. The qualitative data collected elucidates the ways in which students perceived their experiences with their peers in the context of a CSP writing unit and paints a picture of the ways in which they viewed their experiences.

I begin this chapter by outlining the goals and research questions of this study, followed by an explanation and defense of the use of the research design. Next, I lay out the instructional context used in the study, explain the data collections processes, and justify the researcher as instrument. Finally, I discuss ethical consideration and the strategies used to ensure trustworthiness and reliability in this study.

Goals of the Current Study

To truly understand a qualitative research study, one must first grapple with the reasons the researcher chose to do their particular study in the first place (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). As such, it is necessary to contemplate and outline the personal, practical, and intellectual goals I had that inspired me to develop and conduct this study. This reflective process helps to set the scene and emphasizes the importance of the study. For me, the personal, practical, and intellectual goals for this study are all deeply intertwined, and difficult to parse out individually, but I will attempt to do so in a way that makes sense.

Firstly, I was very practically wanting to learn ways to make my curriculum more engaging and relevant to the students I teach. My school at the time had a very heavy

emphasis on standardized test preparation, and as such, we were using materials that were geared toward "teaching to the test." The texts were boring, the writing assignments were formulaic, and there were little to no opportunities for speaking, listening, or collaborating. Student engagement was low and behavior problems were high; hence, goal one was to increase student engagement and decrease student behavior problems.

In my very early research, I stumbled across Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). I was inspired by a statement she made about state testing in a classroom that is culturally relevant:

> None of the teachers or their students seemed to have test anxiety about the school district's standardized tests. Instead, they viewed the tests as a necessary irritation, took them, scored better than their age-grade mates at their school, and quickly returned to the rhythm of learning in their classroom. (p. 482)

Given that I was at a school that placed such a high emphasis on preparing for state tests, and in which test anxiety was high across the board; this inspired my second, and intellectual, goal to learn more about CRP.

Around that same time, I also started reading about the struggles middle schoolers have with building and maintaining peer relationships, and the host of negative outcomes associated with a lack of positive peer relationships at school (Juvonen, 2007). This spoke to me on a personal level because I had experienced the negative impact of not having good peer relationships in middle school as both a student myself and as a teacher. This very personal struggle led to my third goal of finding ways to help middle schoolers get along with each other better.

While my practical and personal struggles continued at school, I continued to learn more about CRP, which led to a discovery of CSP. Independently of my CSP and CRP research, I continued to investigate the importance of peer relationships in middle school. Taking a step back, I realized that my personal, practical, and intellectual goals, which seemed independent of one another, could actually work together to support one another, and thus my research questions were inspired.

Research Design and Rationale

Because I was interested in studying how participants experience peer relationships in the context of a CSP writing unit, phenomenography was the most appropriate research design and tradition. Larsson and Holmstrom (2007) explain that "phenomenography is the study of how people experience, understand or conceive of a phenomenon in the world around us…. [It] is not directed at the phenomenon as such, but at the variation in people's ways of understanding the phenomenon" (p. 56). Cope (2004) explains that,

> phenomenographic studies typically involve small groups of participants and use open, explorative data collection to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which a phenomenon can be experienced. The utterances of the participants are combined to form a pool of meaning with regard to the phenomenon. (p. 6)

This type of study is appropriate for my research because of my interest in how the context created by a CSP writing unit may inform students' experiences and understanding of their peer relationships in my classroom in various ways. The participants, seventh grade students at a Title I middle school in a suburban area in the southeastern United States, were interviewed, their journals were analyzed, and I kept a detailed researcher journal to obtain the data from the study. ATLAS.ti was used to support the process of analyzing the data.

Before the CSP writing unit began, students were intentionally grouped with peers that were outside their normal friend/acquaintance groups (Allport, 1954). The grouping decisions were based on teacher observations and knowledge of student behaviors and interactions in the class. Throughout the unit, group members were expected to collaborate and present to one another. Students collaborated by sharing ideas with one another and by providing feedback to one another using the "Praise, Question, Polish" (PQP) feedback method. When done, students presented their multi-modal "Where I'm From" poems with the members of their groups. After their presentations were over, students wrote thank you notes to each of the other members of their group. In the notes, students were instructed to thank the member for sharing, tell them something they learned about the member, and tell them at least one thing they enjoyed about the member's presentation.

Value of Specific Methodology

Phenomenography is valuable for this research study because it allowed me to discover how each participant experienced peer relationships while participating in a CSP writing unit. Through phenomenography, I analyzed students' own voices in order to interpret and make meaning of the experiences that each student had regarding peer relationships while participating in the CSP the unit.

<p align="center">**Research Questions**</p>

Because of my interest in studying the ways in which students experience a phenomenon, the following research questions guide this research study:

1. How did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive their relationships with other students who participated in the unit?

2. How (if at all) did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive the unit as affecting their relationships with their classmates?

Context and Setting

The research site for this qualitative phenomenographical study was a suburban Title I middle school located in a major metropolitan city in the southeastern United States. The study was done in my classroom, and as such is considered to be backyard research (Glesne, 2016). As of October 2020, 63.95% of students in the school were recipients of the Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) program. Regarding ethnicity, 61.5% of students identify as Black, 25.8% identify as Hispanic, 8.6% identify as White, and 4.2% identify as Multiracial (GADOE, 2020a). In the 2020-2021 school year, despite the diverse make-up of the student body, most teachers at this school were White women. This is significant to this study because, as Bomer (2017) explains, in a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher's culture is also the center of the classroom. In many instances at my school, the teacher is still the center of the classroom, and therefore a predominantly White, middle-aged culture is the center of our classrooms while our students are predominantly Black or Hispanic adolescents. As such, reframing the classroom to be more culturally sustaining is an important task to accomplish.

My Classroom

Demographically, my classes are representative of the student-body at large. Although I do not have any co-taught classes, I do have students with IEPs, 504s, and who are on RTI. I also have students who are gifted, advanced learners, English language learners, and general education students. Two of my classes are considered to be advanced content (AC) and are made up of gifted students and advanced learners. In the AC classes, students learn the same

standards as the general education students, but the rigor of the classes is higher. In the general education classes (of which I have three), all students, regardless of ability, learn the same standards, but different scaffolding measures are provided as needed to help all students access the content. Some students receive additional supports such as Read180, an ESOL reading class, or after-school tutoring.

My classes range in size from 24-32 students. Rather than having standard student desks, I have tables that seat four students. The majority of the daily visual instruction is displayed on a 70-inch smart screen, with hand-made anchor charts displayed around the classroom with information that students need daily. The whiteboard is utilized to display the daily agenda, upcoming assessments, and learning targets. Classes are typically 50 minutes long, and we are on a traditional schedule, so I have each class daily and for the entire school year. All students have their own school-issued laptops that they are expected to bring to each class every day. Through their laptops, students have access to our digital classroom, in which daily assignments and resources are posted.

As a teacher-researcher, I was drawn to conducting my research study in my own classroom. Glesne (2016) argues that while there are challenges associated with backyard research (largely due to the confusion others have over your role), it can still be valuable, particularly because the setting is easily accessed and the research is valuable to the researcher both personally and professionally. For me, both of these things were true. I found that because I had a rapport with my students, many were eager to volunteer to participate in the study. Moreover, students were very open and willing to talk to me during the interviews. Researching in my own classroom, however, was challenging because I had to be a teacher first and a researcher second. The daily minutia of teaching (taking attendance, managing

behavior, dealing with administrative disruptions, etc.) made collecting data frustrating at times. I was able to overcome this challenge by conducting interviews before school, collecting student journals at the end of the unit rather than at the end of each class, and writing in my own researcher journal at the end of each class rather than throughout the class.

Sample Selection and Size

Once IRB approval was granted by both Kennesaw State University and the school district in which the study took place, participant selection occured. The sample size was seven seventh grade general education and accelerated content ELA students at a Title I middle school who participated in a culturally sustaining writing unit in my classroom. All students were given a Parental Consent Form to have signed and returned. Student participants were selected out of the pool of students who returned consent forms using the representative purposive sampling method in order to ensure a sample of students that represented the population of the class and school (Palys, 2008). Representative purposive sampling is justified in this study because of the CSP intervention. One aim of CSP is to create more opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to interact with one another, and so representative purposive sampling allowed me to select students from different backgrounds in order to study their experiences as it was important that gender and racial demographics be representative of the student body overall.

Those students selected were given a Minor Assent Form, which I read to them. Students were able to ask questions, and, on their own, decide to sign the form or not. Seven of the selected students chose to return assent forms and participate in the study. Copies of

parental consent and minor assent forms were kept by the parent, researcher, and school principal.

Participants

Table 1 provides the pseudonyms of student participants and an explanation of their selection. All students were in the seventh grade. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of all participants, and students self-identified their gender and race/ethnicity. Again, using the representative purposive sampling method, I explicitly chose students who represented the various groups of students at the school where the study took place.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Class Served In	Relevant Context
Carlos	Hispanic	Male	General Education, receives ESOL services	-New to the gen. ed. Classroom from an ESOL intensive classroom -Self-identified as having friends, but that they're mostly from his ESOL classes
Jasper	White	Male	General Education	-Shy student -Self-identified as not having many friends and being an outcast
Nate	Black	Male	General Education	-Outgoing student -Self-identified as making friends easily, but doesn't get along with a lot of people
Iyanna	Black	Female	Accelerated Content	-AC student -Self-identified as having friends, but not really getting along with people that well
Ashley	Hispanic	Female	Accelerated Content	-AC student -Self-identified as having plenty of friends and getting along with others easily
Hannah	White	Female	General Education	-New to this school this year -Self-identified as not always fitting in, but still has friends; most of her friends are "not popular like her"
Keke	Black	Female	General Education	-New to this school this year -Self-identified as not having many friends, being shy, and having low self-confidence

Protection of Vulnerable Populations

Participants were required to provide consent forms signed by their parent or guardian and signed their own minor assent form. There were no grades associated with the interview or journal data collected. Participant selection was based on students who returned consent forms and assent forms. Student names were changed and identifying information remained confidential and was deleted after data analysis was completed.

Because the school district in which the study took place does not allow audio or visual recording of students, I took diligent notes during the interviews and reviewed those notes with participants upon the conclusion of the interview in order to ensure accuracy and allow the participant to share and clarify if any information was left out or if any information was misinterpreted.

Recruitment Procedures

Potential subjects were recruited from within my classroom. I explained to students that they were all participating in the unit, but only between 7 and 12 of them would be a part of the study. Students needed to bring consent forms from their parents to be considered for the study. Participation in the study did not impact student grades in anyway. Thirty-two students returned parental consent forms, and out of those thirty-two students, I chose twelve students to participate; however, five students failed to come to the initial interviews, and were therefore excluded from the study (See Table 1 for participant demographics and relevant contextual factors).

Access to Site

For this study, I was the teacher-researcher. With IRB approval, and permission granted from my principal, the study was conducted in my own classroom, and therefore, access was granted to me as such.

Instructional Context

Seventh grade general education and accelerated content English language arts students participated in a CSP writing unit as the instructional context for this study (see Table 2 for a day-by-day breakdown of the unit). Prior to the unit beginning, students were placed into intentionally designed groups based on Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory. Groups were designed to place students from different in-groups together. I developed these groups based on my previous observations of how students interacted with one another, and with whom they interacted. My objective was to ensure that students were sitting with peers they did not typically engage with, and with whom they might be slightly out of their comfort zone sitting with. I considered many factors when making these grouping decisions, including, but not limited to:

- Race

- Gender

- Sexual orientation

- Popularity

- Ease of making friends

- Extra-curricular/club involvement.

Student responses to the question "Would you consider yourself shy or outgoing? Do you make friends easily? Can you elaborate on that?" during the pre-unit interviews also guided my decision-making when creating student groups.

The unit, in which each student created a multimodal "Where I'm From" poem (modeled off of the original poem "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyons), lasted seven school days. On day one, we held a class discussion on culture in order to set a general class definition of the term. Students then read and listened to Lyon's original poem, and then viewed examples of multimodal "Where I'm From" poems created by other students. In their groups, students annotated the original poem and took notes of the culturally significant components of the various student poems, then shared their findings with their group members, and then the class at large.

Table 2

Instructional Context

Instructional Day	Opening (See Appendix D for journal prompts)	Work Session	Closing
Day 1	Journal prompt and discussion.	Students will establish a class definition of "culture." Students will read along as they listen to Lyon's "Where I'm From Poem," and then annotate the poem as they do a second, independent read. Students will watch and take notes on student examples of "Where I'm From" poems.	Ticket out the door (TOTD): Write down 3-5 things that stood out to you from the student versions of the "Where I'm From" poem.
Day 2	Journal prompt and discussion	Teacher will model completing a "Where I'm From" template for students using the Think-Aloud strategy. Students will complete their own templates, or jot down notes and ideas if they choose not to use the template.	Share out: What is something you learned about someone in the class today that you did not know before?
Day 3	Journal prompt and discussion	Students will write the rough drafts of their poems and begin creating the multimodal component of their poems. They may discuss their ideas with their group members during the process.	Turn and Talk: what are your plans for the multimodal component of your poem?
Day 4	Journal prompt and discussion	Students will finish creating the multimodal component of their poems.	TOTD: What are your struggles and success so far?
Day 5	Journal prompt and discussion	Students will provide PQP feedback to their peers using the PQP feedback forms provided to them.	Share out: Share one thing you loved about a peer's poem.
Day 6	Journal prompt and discussion	Students will revise and edit their poems and presentations based on the peer feedback they received.	Turn and Talk: What are you most proud of in your work so far?
Day 7	Journal prompt and discussion	Students will present their poems to their groups and write thank-you notes to their group members.	Share thank-you notes with your peers.

Having completed an initial review of the original poem and student examples as mentor texts on day one, students began to work on their own multimodal "Where I'm From" poems on day two. Specifically, I modelled writing my own poem and provided a template (see Appendix B) as a scaffolding measure for students that used broad terms such as "product name" and "home description" to help guide them into exploring their own experiences (although students were not required to use the template when actually drafting their poems).

In a classroom that is embracing CSP, the teacher decenters herself and creates space for students to be the center of their own learning (Bomer, 2017). However, as teacher-writer, it was important for me to model writing my own poem. In order to ensure that the teacher-writer teaching strategy did not shift the focus of the class entirely to me, I emphasized demonstrating to students that the writing should be about self-exploration and focused on modelling how to do a self-exploration, rather than telling them what to write and how to write it. I modeled how students could draw on their own experiences in writing the poems by thinking aloud as I wrote my poem, asking students clarifying questions as I observed their writing, and allowing students to create their multimodal poem in a mode that best suited each individual student.

As such, on days three and four, when they began drafting their poems and creating the multimodal components of their works, the template offered them some structure, but because it was optional, they had the freedom to be as creative and personal as they would like. As they worked on their rough drafts, students were also encouraged to share their brainstorming and ideas with their groupmates. These elements of the unit design were

intended to put students in charge of their own learning and writing experience and to provide a structure for sharing their cultures with one another through the process.

Students then began the process of providing peer feedback (day five). As students created their poems and the multimodal components associated with their poems, they were provided peer feedback through the PQP feedback method. This feedback process added another layer of students connecting and learning about one another without the teacher in the foreground. Day 6 focused on revising, editing, and publishing their multimodal poems, which they finally shared with the class on day 7. At the end of the unit, in addition to sharing their final products with the class, students wrote thank you notes to their group members at the end of the presentations.

Data Collection Procedures

Because this is a phenomenographic study, interviews (see Appendix C) were the primary means of data collection (Cope, 2004; Dortins, 2002; Larrson & Holmstrom, 2007). I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in a three-round interview process: one interview before the unit, one interview during the unit, and a final interview after implementation of the unit. Because the district in which the study took place does not allow audio or visual recordings of minors, I took copious notes during the interviews and reviewed those notes with participants after the interviews to allow students the opportunity to make corrections, clarifications, and confirm that the notes were accurate.

As a secondary means of data collection, student participants kept journals (See Appendix D) throughout the unit, detailing their interactions with their peers. Journal writing keeps in line with phenomenographic research methods because it is another way for

participants to share their words, albeit without the presence of the interviewer (Cope, 2004).

Finally, as a third means of data collection, I kept a reflection journal of my own observations

and sentiments regarding student behavior and interactions. In phenomenographic research,

the researcher's own views and knowledge are considered to be an important component of

the data collected (Cope, 2004). Therefore, the researcher reflection journal keeps in line with

phenomenographic research.

Interview Procedures

Each of the three rounds of interviews were conducted in my classroom when no other

students were present, and they lasted a maximum of ten minutes, per district regulations.

Because the school district also did not allow for audio or visual recording of students, upon

completion of each interview, I reviewed my notes with the participants to ensure that I had

documented the essence of their responses as they had intended through a process called

member checking. Member checking allowed the students to be confident that their responses

were being captured accurately and without my own bias being added to their responses.

There were three rounds of interviews, and for each interview round, I developed

interview questions ahead of time (see Appendix C); however, because interviews were in the

semi-structured format, some questions were added, changed, or left out depending on the

direction of the conversation throughout the interview. Prepared questions were intended to

be open-ended to give students the opportunity to share their thoughts without being guided in

a certain direction. They were also intended to make students feel comfortable and willing to

talk openly and freely. Per the school district's rules on conducting research with minors,

interviews could not last longer than ten minutes.

I transcribed the interviews by typing up the handwritten notes that I had taken (and that students had checked and verified) at the end of each round of interviews. Once all interviews across all three rounds were transcribed, there were nine pages of single-spaced transcripts in total (approximately three pages per round of interviews). The pre-unit interview included three questions that were designed to gain insight characteristics that might determine students' group placement in the CSP unit. These questions were:

1. How do you identify racially/ethnically/nationally?

2. Would you consider yourself shy or outgoing? Do you make friends easily? Can you elaborate on that?

3. How would you describe your relationships with your peers at this point in the year? Can you explain your thoughts?

The set of questions used in the mid-unit interview asked specifically about how students' relationships with their classmates had changed since starting the unit, and how specific elements of the unit have improved their relationships:

1. How would you describe your relationships with your peers now?

2. How has that changed since the last time we talked? Can you explain your thoughts?

3. In what ways has working in groups and participating peer editing helped you to understand your classmates or experience them in new ways?

Interview three questions included:

1. How would you describe your relationships with your peers now?

2. How has that changed since the last time we talked? Can you explain your thoughts?

3. In what ways did sharing poems as a class help you to understand your classmates or experience them in new ways?

4. What part of the unit do you think helped you the most in getting to know your classmates better?

Student Journal Procedures

Each day, as part of the class opener, students were instructed to write in their journals in response to a journal prompt (see Appendix D) that was selected to help students think about their own experiences and to reflect on the experiences of others. The prompts were also selected to help students think about how their interactions with others may have changed over time. The questions included:

1. What kinds of things can we learn by studying other cultures? Why are these lessons so important?

2. Think about a time when you were the only person with a given characteristic in the entire room (such as the only girl or boy, the only person wearing jeans when everyone else was dressed up, or the only child in a room full of adults). Did people treat you differently from how they treated others? Did you experience any discomfort at not fitting in? Write about your experience.

3. List some of the different cultures you belong to and how you identify with them. How did you become a part of the different cultures you are involved in? Were you born into them, or did you choose to belong to them? Which culture is most important to you?

4. Write about the first time you remember meeting someone from a culture other than your own. Discuss your experience and how you felt.

5. Can you be yourself with friends, or do you have to pretend to be somebody else? Why?

6. How do you choose who to have as a friend? Why is that? Should a friend be concerned if you're one of the popular kids? Why?

7. How do you want people to think of you as a friend? Why?

After students had time to write in their journals, we had a whole class discussion in which students were able to discuss their prompts and comment on their peers' thoughts. At the conclusion of the unit, I collected the journals of the seven participants and compiled all of the participant journal entries into one single-spaced document, which ended up being four pages long in total.

<div align="center">

Trustworthiness

</div>

Reliability and Validity

Cope (2004) suggests using "a framework of a structure of awareness" to ensure the reliability and validity of a phenomenographic study. This framework implies that there are levels of awareness, and the goal is to dig into and reveal the deepest levels of awareness that do not immediately surface. Cope (2004) also claims that a phenomenographic study should be a "full and open account." To achieve this, I took the following measures, which align with Cope's (2004) suggested procedures and processes:

- Acknowledging my background and considered the ways in which my prior experiences would be a part of the analysis process because, in phenomenography, the researcher's prior knowledge and experiences inform the study (see p. 51-52, "Researcher as Instrument" section);

- I chose a sample that was representative of the student body using the representative purposive sampling method;

- The characteristics of the participants are clearly stated (Table 1);

- Interview questions (see Appendix C) were designed to be open-ended so that students could share their thoughts without being guided in a certain direction, and to make students feel comfortable and willing to talk openly and freely;

- Journal prompts (see Appendix D) were designed to get students to think about certain cultural concepts, but not to guide their thinking in one direction or another;

- My researcher journal was an observation of the interactions and activities that happened in class;

- Interviews with students could not be recorded, per the school district's policy, so I used member-checking as an alternative trustworthiness strategy. As such, I took down notes during the interviews and reviewed those notes with students to ensure that students felt their voices were being recorded correctly and authentically;

- During the analysis process, I kept in the forefront of my mind my own background and biases, and acknowledged them to keep from "imposing an existing structure" (Cope, 2004) on the data analysis;

- Data analysis and the process for controlling and checking analysis is detailed in Chapter Four of this dissertation;

- The results are open to scrutiny and presented with quotes.

I followed Cope's (2004) suggestions to increase the reliability and validity of the data.

Triangulation

In order to achieve triangulation, multiple sources of data were collected. As this was a phenomenographic study, the primary data sources were in-depth semi-structured

interviews. Participant journals and a researcher reflection journal were collected as secondary data sources to help achieve triangulation. ATLAS.ti was used to help code and visualize the data. ATLAS.ti software analyzes data sources for coding purposes. The program can help a researcher determine when data saturation has occurred "by considering the different sources of triangulation" (Cheah, 2020). Specifically, process analysis through ATLAS.ti seeks corroborating data between sources to identify categories and themes. It also "facilitates code-recode procedure which is a means to increase the credibility and dependability of the study" (Ang et al., 2016, p. 1858).

Researcher as Instrument

Because of my involvement in this study as a researcher who conducted interviews, facilitated instruction, and collected observation data, I am considered a research instrument. As such, my worldview must be considered in the ways in which it may have influenced the data collected. I have taught seventh grade English language arts (ELA) for five of my eight years of teaching. I have also taught in a variety of classroom environments, including co-taught, ESOL push-in, general education, and advanced content. Currently, I teach seventh grade ELA to general education, advanced content, and ESOL students.

I have a constructivist epistemology, which, according to Ultanir (2012) views the teacher as "a guide, facilitator, and co-explorer who encourage learners to question, challenge and formulate their own ideas, opinions and conclusions" (p. 195). This belief is the guidepost I use to develop and implement lessons in my classroom; I try to give students as much choice as possible in both how they will learn something, and how they will show that they learned it.

Moreover, I view the ELA classroom as a space that can be used to develop students academically and socially. Through the teaching of reading and writing, students are exposed to worlds outside of their own, and they learn how to communicate and interact within those various worlds. I also acknowledge that middle school is a difficult time in a young person's life, and students are dealing with complex emotions and changes, which can make relationships challenging. I strive to make my classroom a safe place where students feel welcome and are not afraid to make mistakes and grow both academically and socially.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter explains the research questions and goals that guided this study; it also defines, explains, and justifies the research methodology used to elucidate those questions. Additionally, I explain the instructional context for the study, including the daily instruction that was used. I describe the setting and justify the use of backyard research in this study. I describe the participants and explain why they were chosen for the study. Finally, I explain the data collection procedures, trustworthiness of the study, and my role as a research instrument in the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

I conducted this phenomenographic study with the intention of examining the

perceptions seventh grade English language arts (ELA) students had of the relationships they

had with their peers after participating in a culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) writing unit.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings resulting from the study based on the

research questions:

1. How did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive their relationships with other

     students who participated in the unit?

2. How (if at all) did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive the unit as affecting

     their relationships with their classmates?

This chapter discusses in thick detail the research findings (Sin, 2010; Stake, 2010). I begin

by discussing the data analysis procedures. I follow that by defining the outcome space, and

then discussing the results of the analysis, which are organized into the categories that

emerged from the data. Finally, I reflect on the results and present my insights from the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

For this study, I used ATLAS.ti software to assist with organizing and analyzing the

data collected. Moreover, I followed the seven steps Gonzalez and Sjostrom (2010)

recommend for analyzing qualitative data. Below, I list the seven steps and explain how I

applied them to analyzing the data in my study:

1. Familiarization: Read transcripts multiple times to become familiar and comfortable

     with the data. I began familiarizing myself with the data by transcribing all of my

     hand-written notes (from both my own journal and the student interviews) and

participant journal responses into single-spaced, typed documents. I then uploaded

them to ATLAS.ti, and read through them several times.

2. Compilation: Identify similarities and differences between transcripts. I conducted a

more focused reading of the data, focusing on the similarities and differences between

the different interviews, journals, and researcher notes conducted. As I did this, I made

notes in ATLAS.ti to document my thoughts and create an audit trail.

3. Condensation: Extract data that is relevant to the study. For this step, I began

highlighting and creating quotes that were relevant to my study. This highlighting

process helped create a visual that allowed me to focus on the iterations that were

relevant and meaningful.

4. Preliminary grouping: Identify and classify arising themes from the data. I read

through the quotes that I highlighted and grouped the similar ones together and

assigned a theme to them in ATLAS.ti.

5. Preliminary comparison of categories: Define the boundaries of categories and

begin sorting data into the categories. I read through the transcripts again and used the

grouping feature in ATLAS.ti to consolidate the data and ensure that the boundaries of

the categories were defined and logical.

6. Naming the categories based on their general essence: At this point, I was ready to

name the categories based on the general essence of the data contained within those

categories and define the relationships between the categories. These relationships

describe how the participants perceive the experience of peer relationships in the

context of a culturally sustaining writing unit.

7. Final outcome space: Define how the group experienced the phenomenon and interpret the results. This final step involved making meaning of the data to determine how participants perceived their experiences. The final outcome space is visually represented in Figure 1 and is the final iteration of several drafts of visual representations that I created as I worked through the process of making sense of the data. At last, I was able to establish a logical pattern and define how the group experienced the phenomenon of peer relationships in the context of a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Themes and their Connections
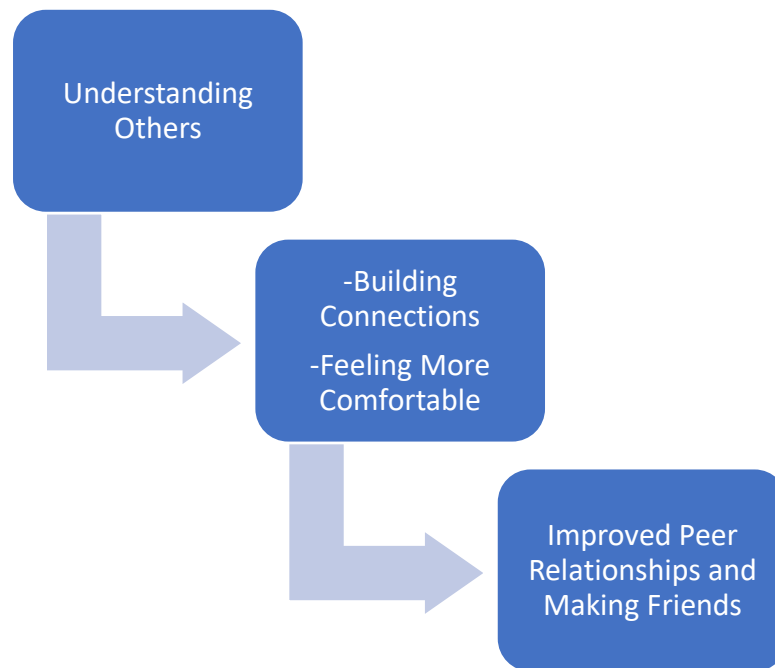
Cope (2004) explains that phenomenography is unique from other forms of qualitative research because "phenomenographic data analysis involves a researcher constituting a relationship with the data which acknowledges the variation in the data and the undeniable

influence of the researcher's prior knowledge of the phenomenon in the analysis process" (p.

6). In other words, phenomenographic researchers acknowledge their own perspectives in the

data collection and analysis process, and views that as a meaningful feature of the research.

Because phenomenography allows for the researcher perspectives to be included in the

data collection and analysis, my own research journal was a valuable data source that allowed

me to both take note of student comments and record my own thoughts and observations.

Some may argue that this methodology is more biased because it embraces rather than

discourages the use of the researcher's own prior perspectives and thoughts. In this study,

however, acknowledging that my own perspectives and biases would be present was crucial

given that I had already established relationships with the participants and used the knowledge

gained from those relationships to influence how I arranged the particulars of the study (i.e.,

creating intentional groups, making adjustments in how I presented the material along the

way, and facilitating conversations amongst students during the unit).

Results and Analysis

The three data sources used for this study were interviews with students, student

journal responses, and a researcher journal. Using ATLAS.ti, I uploaded all of the data as

primary documents. Through multiple reads of the data and using the coding and grouping

features in ATLAS.ti, I was able to organize quotes and see as categories began to emerge. In

total, four categories emerged: understanding others, building connections, feeling more

comfortable, and improved peer relationships and making friends (see figure 2). These

categories are visually represented as a process because understanding others led to building

connections and feeling more comfortable, which in turn led to improved peer relationships

and making friends. The outcome space represents the possible experiences the participants had regarding their group interactions while working through a CSP writing unit. Table 3 depicts this outcome space by providing the categories, a definition of each category, and an example for each category. In the sections that follow, I explain each of the different categories and provide data that attempts to highlight the various ways in which students experienced group interactions while working through a CSP writing unit. See Appendix E for thematic word clouds for each of the categories discussed in this study.

Table 3

Outcome Space of ELA Students' Experiences with Group Interactions while Working through a CSP Writing Unit

Categories	Definition	Example
Understanding Others	Knowing why another person acts, feels, expresses themselves, etc. the way they do.	I can understand them more and have more of a connection to them than I did before. I understand better why they are the way they are now. (Keke)
Building Connections	Finding commonalities with others and discovering that people from different groups do have similarities.	I feel like we're more of a community than we were before. I was able to relate to the people at my table and we found out we all have things in common. It was good to get to know other people better. (Ashley)
Feeling More Comfortable	Feeling safer and more at ease with others.	I did learn about the people at my table more, and I got to know them better. I got to learn about them, and *I'll probably talk to them more*. I realized we had things in common and I feel more comfortable in class now. (Hannah; emphasis added)
Improved Peer Relationships and Making Friends	Students in the same grade/class start to get along with each other better and develop close and meaningful relationships with others.	It's definitely better. I got to know [female student] better and I understand why [male student] acts the way he does now. I don't think we'll [Nate and the male student] be friends, but things are better between us now. (Nate)

The Outcome Space

I depicted the outcome space with "Understanding Others," at the top because it was the first phenomenon students experienced. "Building Connections," and "Feeling More Comfortable" come next as they are a result of "Understanding Others," and "Improved Peer Relationships and Making Friends" comes last as it is a result of the previous two phenomena. This depiction represents the fact that the first category causes the next two categories, which in turn lead to the final category. In other words, as students began to understand others, they started to build connections with each other and feel more comfortable with one another. As they built connections and felt more comfortable, they experienced improved peer relationships and began to make friends with their peers. Below, I explain the four emergent categories in more detail.

Category One: Understanding Others

The first category that became apparent upon multiple reads of the data collected was that of "understanding others." For the purposes of this study, I defined understanding others as "knowing why another person acts, feels, expresses themselves, etc. the way they do." As the unit progressed, students began to express in different ways that they were developing a better understanding of others.

In their journals, students noted the importance of learning about different cultures in order to understand others better. For example, Jasper wrote in his journal that:

> The kinds of things we can learn from studying other cultures or getting to know new people is discovering new foods, music, clothes, languages, and have a better understanding of others. Some people might misunderstand other people and their culture, so it's good to meet new people and study other cultures.

In this insightful journal entry, Jasper acknowledges that meeting new people and getting to know their cultures will help him develop a better understanding of others. Iyanna takes this thought one step further, demonstrating a more nuanced understanding of culture beyond those surface level and/or ornamental aspects of culture (e.g., clothing, food) that Jasper had identified. Iyanna said:

> By getting to know new people we can make them feel like they belong. Also, *we can learn about how that specific person views the world*. *Also, you can view a different perspective on things that you already know* of allowing you to learn more about it.
> (Emphasis added)

She selflessly acknowledged that by understanding others, you can help *them* feel like they belong. She was also aware enough to acknowledge that by interacting with others, you can also gain new perspectives and increase your knowledge on things you already knew about. Hannah gave a more personal example in her journal:

> The first time was when I went to [Middle School] and I meet this kid and there are part of the lgbtq+ community and this is the first time I heard about this I was surprised and a little shocked and I learned that you can change your gender and your identity and your name so I'm happy to say yes I have met someone from a different culture. I can learn other cultures by meeting new people and I can learn about other languages and by going to other countries I can meet new people and it might help you understand other people.

While Hannah had never knowingly interacted with someone from the LGBTQ+ community prior to her entering middle school, her willingness to get to know this student from a

different culture opened her eyes to a new culture in which she was happy to learn about and acknowledged that learning about other cultures can help you understand other people.

Collectively, these journal entries highlight what students already knew regarding the value of understanding others and learning about people from different cultures. While Jasper and Iyanna speak in broad terms about the value of understanding others, Hannah provides a more specific example that elucidates her personal experience with getting to know someone from a different culture. Likewise, Iyanna's comments stand out because she focused on the value of learning about others in order to help them feel more comfortable and welcome, while Jasper comments that he does not want to misunderstand others. These journal entries provide some insight into the responses students provided during their interviews about understanding and being understood by others.

Throughout the second and third interviews, students expressed in various ways that they were beginning to understand others in their groups. For example, during the second round of interviews, Nate said "Things are getting better. I didn't really know anyone in my new group before, but we're starting to learn more about each other. I thought [Student] was really quiet but turns out she's actually pretty talkative once you get to know her." This statement highlights that Nate is beginning to understand his groupmate and realize that there is more to her than what he initially thought: the female student in his group seemed quiet at first, but he began to understand that when she started to feel more comfortable, she was more likely to make conversation. Conversely, in the second interviews, Carlos said "I feel more comfortable now. I was kinda nervous to sit with new people, but we're getting to know each other, and that makes things better." Here, Carlos acknowledges that *he* felt more comfortable working in his group as he and his groupmates began to understand each other better.

Keke, self-identified as being shy and having low self-esteem echoed Carlos' thoughts about the benefit of understanding her peers better when she said,

> I got to know them better. I will go out of my way to talk to them now. I got to know people that I wouldn't have talked to before. The journal helped me understand their points of view better, but the poems were more direct because I got to know actually about them better.

In this statement, Keke acknowledged that sharing journals and learning about her peer's "Where I'm From" poems helped her to understand her peers' points of views and, more importantly, the students themselves better. When pressed about why it was beneficial to know her peers better, she added "It's helpful because I can understand them more and have more of a connection to them than I did before. I understand better why they are the way they are now."

In his initial interview, Nate had mentioned being in class with a male student since elementary school, but not liking that particular student. He also admitted that he did not know that student all that well. In the final interview, when asked about how things were going with his new group, he had this to say:

> It's definitely better. I got to know [female student] better and I understand why [male student] acts the way he does now. [Female student] and I will be friends now. I got to see pictures of their lives and learned specific things about them. It made a difference because it helped them be more open than they usually are and helped me understand what they think and act the way they do.

While Nate is not shy, and in fact considers himself to be outgoing, the CSP writing unit gave him an opportunity to slow down and get to know some of the less outgoing students in class. In so doing, he was able to understand his peers a little more clearly than before.

Understanding others is catalyst for many of the other beneficial things that happened during the unit. While students experienced this in different ways, for example Carlos and Keke felt more understood, and Nate felt like he understood others better, the benefits are equally valuable. This opportunity gave students an opportunity to share their voices and gave students an opportunity to *hear* the voices of their peers. In so doing, they were able to understand more about and be understood by their peers.

Category Two: Building Connections

By getting to know new people we can make them feel like they belong.

This thoughtful line was written by Iyanna in her journal as a response to the prompt "What kinds of things can we learn by studying other cultures? Why are these lessons so important?" Her response to the prompt reminded me of how insightful young people are, especially when given the opportunities to share their voice. Throughout the unit, students impressed me with the insights they came up with, especially with regards to the value of building connections with their peers.

Ashley felt that by building connections with her peers, they were also able to build a community together:

> I feel like we're more of a community than we were before. I was able to relate to with the people at my table and we found out we all have things in common. It was good to get to know other people better.

When pressed about why it was good to get to know other people better, she responded by saying "Yeah, it's good to know other people and know you have something in common with them. *You don't feel like an outsider so much*" (emphasis added). Building connections with her peers helped her to feel included in her group as a valued member rather than an outsider.

Iyanna felt that she would even begin to make friends with one of her group members through the connections they found to have with one another:

I got to learn new things and understand them better. I can connect with them more. I didn't really talk to [female student] that much because she's so quiet, but I talk to her now and I think we can become friends.

Unlike Ashley, Iyanna did not feel like an outsider before, but through the CSP writing unit, she acknowledges a connection she made with her groupmates and admitted to the possibility of making a new friend.

Jasper, on the other hand, admits that he most likely will not become friends with his group members, but he does acknowledge that:

I was definitely able to talk to the people at my table more. It caused a bond between us to know more about each other. Some of us like similar things and we connected over that. I don't know that I'll be friends with them, but I do feel more comfortable with them.

While this may seem like it is not really a big deal, Juvonen (2019) acknowledges that these small connections between students are a vital component of student academic success. Albeit subconsciously, the students began to recognize that understanding others helped them to build connections and begin to develop a sense of belonging.

As students began to understand the stories others had to share, they began to see different ways in which they were connected to one another. These small but important developments are one way in which students can begin the journey of building valuable relationships with their peers that will help them succeed in middle school.

Category Three: Feeling More Comfortable

As students began to *understand* others more, they also began to feel *understood* by others more. These connections between students had them expressing feelings of comfort and inclusion that they hadn't felt before. For example, Jasper, a quiet student who keeps mostly to himself, said "I felt more included than I had before." This simple but powerful statement demonstrates the importance of creating opportunities for students to get to learn more about one another.

Students themselves even recognized a connection between understanding others better and feeling more comfortable in class. For example, Hannah, a student new to our school this year, said,

> I did learn about the people at my table more, and I got to know them better. I got to learn about them, and I'll probably talk to them more. I realized we had things in common and I feel more comfortable in class now.

Over the course of the unit, Hannah went from being a new student, an outsider, to being a part of the community.

Likewise, Carlos, recognized the value in understanding others better to feel more comfortable in class. Carlos had recently joined the general education ELA class from a supported ESOL ELA class. He is fairly popular amongst his group of friends, mostly people

he met in his ESOL classes, but he did not really talk or interact with people outside of his group. When asked how his relationships were with the people at his table at the end of the unit, he had this to say:

> It's good. I got to know more about the people I sit with, and I feel more comfortable with them. It feels weird when you sit with people you don't know, and now it doesn't feel weird.

For him, the unit directly corelated to getting to know new people and feeling more comfortable in class. The words of these three students demonstrate a need for students to learn about and understand their peers in order to build connections with one another, and therefore feel more comfortable in the classroom.

Category Four: Improved Peer Relationships and Making Friends

As students built connections and became more comfortable with one another, they also began to see improvements in their relationships with their peers. One story stood out in particular: during the initial interviews, Nate expressed dislike for another male student in the class. He said:

> [There's] one guy I don't like… he's very… extra. He's excited all the time. Like save that energy for home. And his voice is annoying and he's rude. I don't like sitting with him in homeroom.

Naturally, I grouped them together for the unit. During the final interviews, Nate had this to say: "It's definitely better… I understand why [male student] acts the way he does now." When pressed, Nate said "I don't think we'll be friends, but things are better between us

now." While this may not be a resounding proclamation, in the terms of middle schoolers, this is a huge step in the right direction.

Similarly, Iyana's statement "I made a new friend that I wouldn't have had before," seems minor, but considering that even one friend can make a difference in a student's life by reducing their emotional distress, and improving attendance, academic engagement, and academic performance (Juvonen, 2019, p. 253), this statement is actually rather significant.

When Hannah was absent one day, a girl at her table asked me "Ms. Kane, where's my new friend? She doesn't usually miss school." I had to ask her who she was talking about, and when I realized it was Hannah, I was genuinely surprised. The two are unlikely friends, and that the other student noticed and cared about Hannah's absence showed that connections were being made both ways.

Keke, also new to our school this year, said, as a result of the unit, "I got to know them better. I will go out of my way to talk to them now. I got to know people that I wouldn't have talked to before." Early in the unit, Keke wrote in her journal that "I'm mostly introverted and most of the time I don't have the confidence to introduce myself and talk to people." Within the matter of a week, Keke had gone from not feeling comfortable introducing herself to new people to wanting to go out of her way to talk to the people at her table.

All of these interactions show a marked improvement in peer relationships, and even the beginnings of friendships being made. A CSP writing unit with intentional groupings can make a difference in the life of a middle schooler. Moreover, many students stated in their initial interviews that most teachers do not help students make friends, and in fact, sometimes

make it harder for students to make friends. For example, Keke, Hannah, and Carlos had this
to say about teachers impacting their friendships:

- I'd say I make friends despite what the teachers do and how the class is set up.
  Usually, they just expect us to come in and be quiet and do our work, it doesn't really
  help people like me who are quiet anyway make friends. (Keke)

- Usually, teachers don't help me make friends. (Hannah)

- Teachers haven't really helped or kept me make from making friends. I make friends
  on my own. (Carlos)

Using CSP and intergroup contact are tools that teachers can use to help foster positive
relationships in their classrooms, rather than interfering with friendships being made.

Conclusion

Over the course of the seven-day CSP writing unit, students experienced interacting
with classmates outside of their typical groups while creating and sharing "Where I'm From"
poems. While each student experienced this process in different ways, some consistent
categories emerged from all of the utterances: understanding others, building connections,
feeling more comfortable, and improved peer relationships and making friends. It did not take
long for students to change their attitudes toward their peers, and, frankly, it did not take
much extra "work" on my part to make it happen. As the teacher, I made intentional groups,
reinforced my expectations, remained consistent, and guided the students through their own
learning exploration rather than making myself the focus of the unit. Students expressed
satisfaction with the unit, tackled a few standards, and learned more about themselves and
their peers in the process.

All in all, the findings support the idea that, in the context of a CSP writing unit, students experienced the phenomenon of peer relationships in a positive way. Throughout the unit, students learned to understand each other better which led to them building connections with one another and feeling more comfortable in the classroom. As they got more comfortable and built connections with others, they in turn saw an improvement in their relationships with their peers and also started to make new friends.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of the phenomenographic study which sought to determine student perceptions of their relationships with their peers while they participated in a culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) writing unit. A qualitative phenomenography attempts to study the different ways in which participants experience a phenomenon. In this case, I was interested in finding out how students perceived their peer relationships while working through, and as a result of, a CSP writing unit. I begin by providing a detailed summary of the findings, in which I address the research questions. Next, I consider the implications of the findings, followed by a discussion of the limitations of the findings. Finally, I end by reflecting on my recommendations for further research.

Summary of Findings

The theoretical framework for this study is based on three distinct yet related theories: Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (Smagorinsky, 2007), Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory, and Paris' (2012) theory of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Social constructivism and intergroup contact provide a platform that allow the work of CSP to be accomplished. In other words, through the deliberate grouping of students (intergroup contact), students develop a co-creation of knowledge (social constructivism) about the various cultures represented by each of the group members (CSP). The findings of this study uphold this theoretical framework: the final outcome space indicated that students had improved peer relationships and began to develop friendships as a result of understanding others, building connections, and feeling more comfortable (see Figure 2). The discussion that follows attempt to explain how those themes emerged in relation to the two research questions.

Research Question One

> How did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive their relationships with
>
> other students who participated in the unit?

During the mid and final interviews, students who engaged in the CSP unit perceived their relationships with other students who participated in the unit as improving, and, in some cases, leading to new friendships. Based on the responses of students participating in the study, these improved relationships and friendship developments resulted from students understanding their peers better, which then led to building connections with each other, and feeling more comfortable with each other. The connection between these categories was initially unclear, however, upon further reflection, it started to make sense. To begin with, understanding others is a catalyst for having better relationships and making friends. Likewise, as students learn more about one another, they come to realize that they have connections with one another; these connections help students learn what they have in common with each other, which also leads to improved peer relationships and making friends. In other words, students begin to recognize others as beings rather than objects (Richards, 2017). Finally, as students began to feel more comfortable with one another, they felt safer and were able to open up to one another and, therefore, improve their relationships with one another and begin to develop meaningful friendships. Deliberately grouping students with peers they did not typically interact with, and having them work collaboratively with one another, facilitated this growth process.

These findings are supported by Nishima et al. (2019) and Fabes et al. (2019); they claim that as students become more comfortable with each other, their relationships with one another improve. As their relationships improve, they become even more comfortable with

each other, and their relationships are further improved. When this cycle is deliberately maintained and supported by the classroom teacher, students will continuously develop deeper feelings of comfort with one another, leading to the continuous development of more meaningful and significant relationships and friendships.

Research Question Two

> How (if at all) did students who engaged in the CSP unit perceive the unit as affecting their relationships with their classmates?

In addition to the deliberate grouping and collaboration, the CSP unit itself helped to facilitate the improved relationships and development of friendships that students experienced. The writing unit used in this study provided students an opportunity to engage in CSP both independently and collaboratively: students explored their individual cultural identities through the writing of their own unique "Where I'm From" poems, and they learned about their peers' cultural identities through the peer review and presentation processes.

Throughout the unit, students were exposed to both CSP and a variety of writing strategies. Combining these two practices provided students with the scaffolding needed to allow them to write their poems confidently (through graphic organizers, class discussions, teacher modelling, and peer reviewing), and the freedom to be creative and explore their own cultural identities. Moreover, students were encouraged to use code-meshing, in which they included the dominant dialect and their own native dialects and languages in creating their poems. The use of code-meshing not only promotes cultural sustainability, but it also allows students to develop broader and deeper language and communication skills (Behizadeh, 2017; Woodard et al., 2017; Zapata and Laman, 2016). While I was modelling my own writing, I was careful to focus on the process of self-exploration rather than the words and style I was

using in order to ensure that the learning remained student focused rather than teacher focused—an important component of CSP (Bomer, 2017).

In addition to being a valuable writing strategy, the peer review process was also key in exposing students to each other's cultures. As they participated in the peer review process, students engaged with each other in a deep and meaningful way: they asked each other questions, shared their own ideas, and generally supported one another. Because the content of the products they were working on was related to their own cultures, students were asking questions about each other's cultures, sharing their own cultures, and supporting each other's cultural experiences. In other words, they were creating a co-construction of knowledge that was culturally sustaining and meaningful (Powell & Kalina, 2009). In the final publication and sharing part of the unit, students celebrated each other's accomplishments, validated each other's writing, and solidified some of the bonds that they had started to make through the writing process.

As such, students collectively perceived the unit as having allowed them to develop an understanding of their peers, make connections with their peers, and feel more comfortable with their peers, thereby promoting improved peer relationships and making new friends. These findings are supported by Brown, (2019), Fabes et al. (2019), Farmer et al. (2019), Juvonen et al. (2019), Nishima et al. (2019), and Van Ryzin and Roseth (2018), who explain that the writing opportunities afforded to students in a classroom that is both culturally sustaining and collaborative are opportunities wherein students are able to express themselves in meaningful ways, share their experiences with their peers, and learn and grow together as a classroom community.

The findings of this study also support the findings of Coppola et al. (2019) in which students who engaged in a unit on spoken word poetry found that instances of bullying decreased while a sense of friendship and comradery increased. Moreover, Whitney (2018) and Kiss and Mizusawa (2018) also found that students who participated in a CSP unit benefitted from having a classroom that was friendlier and more inclusive. Finally, in my study, student perceptions indicate that the implementation of CSP and intergroup contact does, in fact, establish a classroom environment in which students have "positive peer relationships and intergroup harmony," thereby meeting Juvonen et al.'s (2019) definition of an inclusive classroom (p. 250).

Implications of Findings for Educational Practice

Implementing CSP and intergroup contact in middle school classrooms may have noteworthy implications stemming from the improved peer relationships that can be developed through such a unit. Prior to the CSP unit, student participants claimed in their initial interviews that they did not have a good understanding of their peers, and that teachers had not provided them many opportunities to develop those understandings. This fact is concerning because students who do not have a good understanding of their peers are less engaged, have lower learning outcomes, and are more likely to bully their peers or be bullied by their peers (Gowing, 2019; Habib et al., 2013; Juvonen, 2007; Turner et al., 2018; Wang & Goldberg, 2017). As such, it is critical to provide teachers a tangible and accomplishable way to create classrooms that are more inclusive and promote a positive learning environment.

Classes that have an abundance of positive peer relationships are considered to be inclusive classrooms (Brown, 2019; Fabes et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2019; Juvonen et al., 2019; Nishina et al., 2019; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Inclusive classrooms are critical

because they promote reduced instances of bullying, an increase in school connectedness, more positive perceptions of school climate, increased student engagement, and increased learning outcomes (Fabes et al., 2019; Gowing, 2019; Habib et al., 2013; Juvonen, 2007; Turner et al., 2018; Van Ryzen & Roseth, 2018; Wang & Goldberg, 2017).

Fabes et al. (2019) found that as students have positive exposures to others who are different from them, they begin to be more accepting of others, which can lead to a decrease in bullying. Habib et al. (2013) and Juvonen (2007) support this assertion by claiming that understanding the cultural backgrounds of their peers promotes positive peer relationships; they go on to explain that when relationships between students are positive, bullying is less likely to occur. Decreased bullying is directly correlated with improved grades and improved drop-out rates (Juvonen, 2007).

A reduction in bullying is not the only reason the findings in this study are important. Improved peer relationships are also associated with an increased connectedness to school and improved perceptions of school climate (Gowing, 2019; Juvonen, 2007; Turner et al., 2018; Wang and Goldberg, 2017). In turn, an improved school climate is associated with improved school engagement and student learning outcomes. In other words, students who feel comfortable where they go to school are more engaged while at school, and students who are engaged while at school are more likely to perform better than their non-engaged peers. This is reinforced by the student participants' own words:

- Friends make it easier for me to come to school. (Keke)

- Friendships are important because they can comfort you. Like when my dog died, they helped. They asked a lot of questions, made me feel better. (Iyanna)

- Having friends is important because they can help you when you need it. (Hannah)

- It's important though because they [friends] can help you like if you miss school. (Nate)

- They can help with anxiety, like friends can help make it go away. (Ashley)

Finally, there is concern that focusing on CSP rather than state test preparation and traditional "academic" writing could lead to lower test scores on state-mandated standardized tests (Dyches, 2017; Ladson-Billings 1995). The data from this study, however, support the idea that students will be more engaged and should thereby actually perform better on state tests. Moreover, because students were encouraged to use code-meshing, they practiced increasing their language and communication skills, which also promotes increased scores on standardized tests (Behizadeh, 2017; Woodard et al., 2017; Zapata and Laman, 2016). Ergo, CSP does not detract from, but rather enhances testing outcomes and writing scores (Bissonnete, 2016; Dyches, 2017; Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Myers, 2019).

In short, the implications of the findings from this study are that a CSP writing unit combined with intentional grouping is an actionable way to promote improved peer relationships and friendship building amongst middle school students. Moreover, teachers should encourage positive peer relationships and provide opportunities for friendship building amongst their students. The results suggest that this will lead to decreased bullying, improved perceptions of school climate and connectedness, and improved student learning outcomes (Fabes et al., 2019; Gowing, 2019; Habib et al., 2013; Juvonen, 2007; Turner et al., 2018; Van Ryzen & Roseth, 2018; Wang & Goldberg, 2017).

Limitations of Findings

This study, like all studies, is not without limitations. While a sample size of seven is within the accepted range of participants for a phenomenographic study (Cope, 2004; Dortins, 2002; Larrson & Holmstrom, 2007), critics could argue that it is not a large enough sample to develop a full picture. Additionally, because the study was conducted in the teacher-researcher's classroom, it is considered to be "backyard research," leading some to call into question the bias of the researcher (Glesne, 2016). However, in a phenomenographic study, the researcher's own lived experiences that she brings to the study are considered an asset to the study (Cope, 2004). A further limitation associated with backyard research is the complication of being a researcher and teacher simultaneously (Glesne 2016). For instance, my teaching duties took precedence over my researcher duties, which made the data collection process more challenging. I attempted to mitigate these challenges by collecting interview data before school, collecting participant journals at the end of the unit, and recording my thoughts and notes of the class in my researcher journal between classes rather than during classes.

Interviews are the primary source of data collection for a phenomenographic study (Cope, 2004; Dortins, 2002; Larrson & Holmstrom, 2007), which in and of itself is not a limitation; however, the school district in which the study took place only allowed minors to be interviewed in ten-minute intervals and did not allow any audio or visual recording of those interviews. This was a limitation of the study because it did not leave a lot of time for follow-up questions or to press for additional information. It was also a limitation because, although interview notes were reviewed with student participants through the process of member checking, when there is not an exact transcript, there is always room for something to

have been left out. Moreover, due to the shortened length of the interviews, interview

questions and the student-participants' answers had to be direct and to the point. Had the

interviews been longer, the student-participants may have been able to articulate more

nuances of their experiences and informed more nuanced findings.

Finally, the length of the CSP unit (seven days) was a limitation. While it is clear that

certain positive themes emerged, more in-depth and nuanced data could have come from a

longer study. For example, Whitney (2018) and Kiss and Mizusawa (2018) noted that in a

long-term implementation of CSP, classrooms began to develop their own classroom cultures.

While the very beginnings of a classroom culture (independent of the school culture) was,

perhaps, hinted at by the end of my study, I lacked adequate data to support that finding.

In hindsight, I would have chosen all of the participants from one class rather than

choosing them from different class periods so that I could get a broader view of students'

feelings toward each other. In other words, I would have been able to find out how Student A

felt about Student B, and also find out how Student B felt about Student A, rather than just

getting the perspective from Student A. Additionally, I would have collected pre- and post-

survey data from the class at large in order to have some data from a larger population of

students. These are all areas that that are limitations in my study, and thus areas I would

recommend for further research.

Sociopolitical Obstacles and Counter-Arguments

As with many things, the more I learn, the more I realize how little I actually know.

This study is no different and leaves me with more questions than answers. Researchers are at

the tip of the iceberg for learning about CSP and the value of fostering peer-to-peer

relationships, and the research opportunities are endless. To begin with, there are further research needs that arose based on the limitations of my own study. For instance, collecting data for a longer time-period, increasing the participant size, conducting more in-depth interviews, and collecting data from outside of my own classroom.

Additionally, several more research questions arose through the process of conducting this study. For one, we need to establish how this study would be similar or different if implemented in schools with different demographics, with different teachers and different teaching styles, in different subject areas, and at different grade levels. My study was conducted in a seventh-grade English language arts classroom at a diverse Title I school. I (the teacher in the study and the researcher conducting the study) am a middle-aged White woman with a teaching style that emphasizes the social and emotional welfare of my students as much, if not more than, the subject-area standards. All of these factors impacted the results of my study, and it is important to expand the field by conducting further research to determine how the results of this study unfold when one or all of those various factors change.

Similarly, further research is needed to determine teachers' perceptions of the impact CSP has on inclusive classrooms. Often, there is push-back from teachers when a new teaching method is suggested. When a new method that has been vetted and proved to be successful is introduced, and teachers are reluctant to implement it, the results can actually be more negative than positive. Gaining teacher buy-in through education, showing examples of successes, and allowing them to evaluate their own perceptions of CSP and intergroup contact could prevent teacher push-back and help mitigate some of the negative results of teachers implementing a new strategy that they are unfamiliar with and unwilling to use with fidelity.

This study focused on student perceptions of their relationships with their peers during, and as a result of, a CSP writing unit. Correlative data from the literature review suggest that improved peer relationships resulting from CSP and intergroup contact will positively impact student in several ways (Fabes et al., 2019; Gowing, 2019; Habib et al., 2013; Juvonen, 2007; Turner et al., 2018; Van Ryzen & Roseth, 2018; Wang & Goldberg, 2017), but further research, perhaps, more specifically, quantitative research needs to be conducted to determine if there is a direct correlation between implementing CSP and intergroup contact on improving student learning outcomes, increasing school attendance, and improving perceptions of school climate.

Furthermore, additional research is needed to gain a broader perspective of the impact CSP has on creating inclusive classrooms. This work should continue to be studied because it offers a pathway to integrating social-emotional learning with the standards-based curriculum. Discovering new ways to integrate CSP into the normal day-to-day school operations could make a difference in the lives of students by helping them be more culturally aware, increasing their sense of belonging in school, and, in fact, enhancing the prescribed curriculum.

Finally, CSP currently exists primarily in the theoretical realm; therefore, researchers need to work with practitioners to establish practical applications in the classroom. Unit plans, lesson ideas, curriculum guides, and professional development that incorporate CSP are useful takeaways that teachers can use to help establish a CSP classroom in an immediate and tangible way. The US education system is evolving faster than many educators can keep up

with, and taking CSP from research to practice is one tool to help us keep up with the needs of our ever-changing student body.

Recommendations for Teachers

There are some practical ways to implement CSP. For starters, teachers can learn more about how to implement CSP through The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which offers professional development opportunities to learn more about CSP through their online webinars, state and national conferences, and publications, including journal articles and books (NCTE, 2023). In addition to expanding their pedagogical knowledge, teachers can offer their students writing opportunities that are meaningful and engaging. These writing opportunities allow for student choice and are relevant to students' experiences. Moreover, the teacher should participate in these writing opportunities alongside of her students as a teacher-as-writer. In so doing, the teacher is providing an example to her students on how to write, sharing her own experiences, and encouraging students to explore their own experiences. Finally, and critically, the teacher must create a classroom environment that creates a community of learners that are invested in each other's successes and forsters growth over competition.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

CSP provides an opportunity for students take back control of their own learning. When implemented in combination with intentionally created student groups, it also provides an opportunity for students to learn about and share their own experiences with their peers. As students learn more about one another, they begin to understand one another, build connections with one another, feel more comfortable with one another and forge more positive relationships with the peers they spend so much of their time with.

In 2023, we are teaching in a brave new world, if you will. Students and teachers alike have experienced a pandemic unlike any in modern history. In 2020, schools were abruptly shuttered, learning transitioned online while we all quarantined away as best as we could. In that moment, our priorities shifted. We were no longer focused on preparing for the state test, it was cancelled anyway. We were focused on staying alive and staying connected to our loved ones as best we could while being locked away from everyone. When we returned to school that fall, school was virtual. As my principal liked to say, we were building the plane as we were flying it. No one knew how long we would be virtual, or what things would look like when we returned in-person.

When we finally did return in person, many students opted to continue learning from home, and a "hybrid" model of learning was developed. In my district, we taught students "F2F" (face to face) and via Zoom simultaneously. Those that did return to the building were masked, "socially-distanced," and subject to quarantine due to illness or exposure at any moment. While we did have state testing that year, it was optional for students, and everyone was told that the scores "wouldn't count."

The following year, our district superintendent declared that "everything is back to normal," and that we needed to make up for "unfinished learning." Less than a month later, I was sent home for ten days to quarantine and recover from my own bout of COVID-19. Things were clearly not "back to normal." As we clawed our way through that year, teachers and administration alike noticed an uptick in school discipline and a decrease in grade averages. We are only now, three years out from 2020, beginning to understand the impact

that the pandemic has had on students and schools. Things are still not, and likely never will be "back to normal." We were forced through unlikely circumstances into a transition and educators at all levels are still trying to find their footing.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy can be an anchor to help us weather this storm. In short, classroom teachers should make their curriculum culturally sustaining. Moreover, administration, academic coaches, and other support staff should encourage and support teachers in developing a CSP. Additionally, teachers need to create opportunities for students to interact in a meaningful way with their peers. That is, not just surface level conversations that happen naturally, but deeper conversations that lead to students developing a deeper understanding of one another. This can be done through intentional grouping, cooperative learning, and specifically designed curriculum. If we want to see school discipline decrease and student learning outcomes increase, students must get along with one another. They must learn to understand where their peers are coming from and begin to make and remake connections that have been severed by these "unprecedented times." Students must learn to be comfortable and included at school again. Students must have positive relationships with their peers, and they must have friends at school.

Overall, I learned a lot from this study, and while there are some things I would do differently if I could, the research data collected are still valuable. The three primary lessons I learned from this study are that 1) while students are resistant to interacting with peers they don't know well, it is valuable for them to do so; 2) giving students opportunities to share their cultures with each other helps them to develop more positive relationships and create

friendships; and 3) when students have better peer relationships, they have a better classroom experience.

Expanding on the implementation of CSP could also have important implications beyond the classroom. For instance, while being guided in the classroom, students will develop the habit of learning the stories of others while sharing their own stories. These habits could have long-term positive effects on them and society-at-large as they will be more open-minded, more empathetic, less tempted to bully others, and better critical thinkers. My hope is that going forward, I will be able to take these lessons and not only implement them in my own class, but to also guide other teachers into implementing them into their classes. In a world where everything is changing faster than ever, divisions are strong, and hate is rampant, CSP is more important now than ever.

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APPENDIX A: VISUAL REPRESNATION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
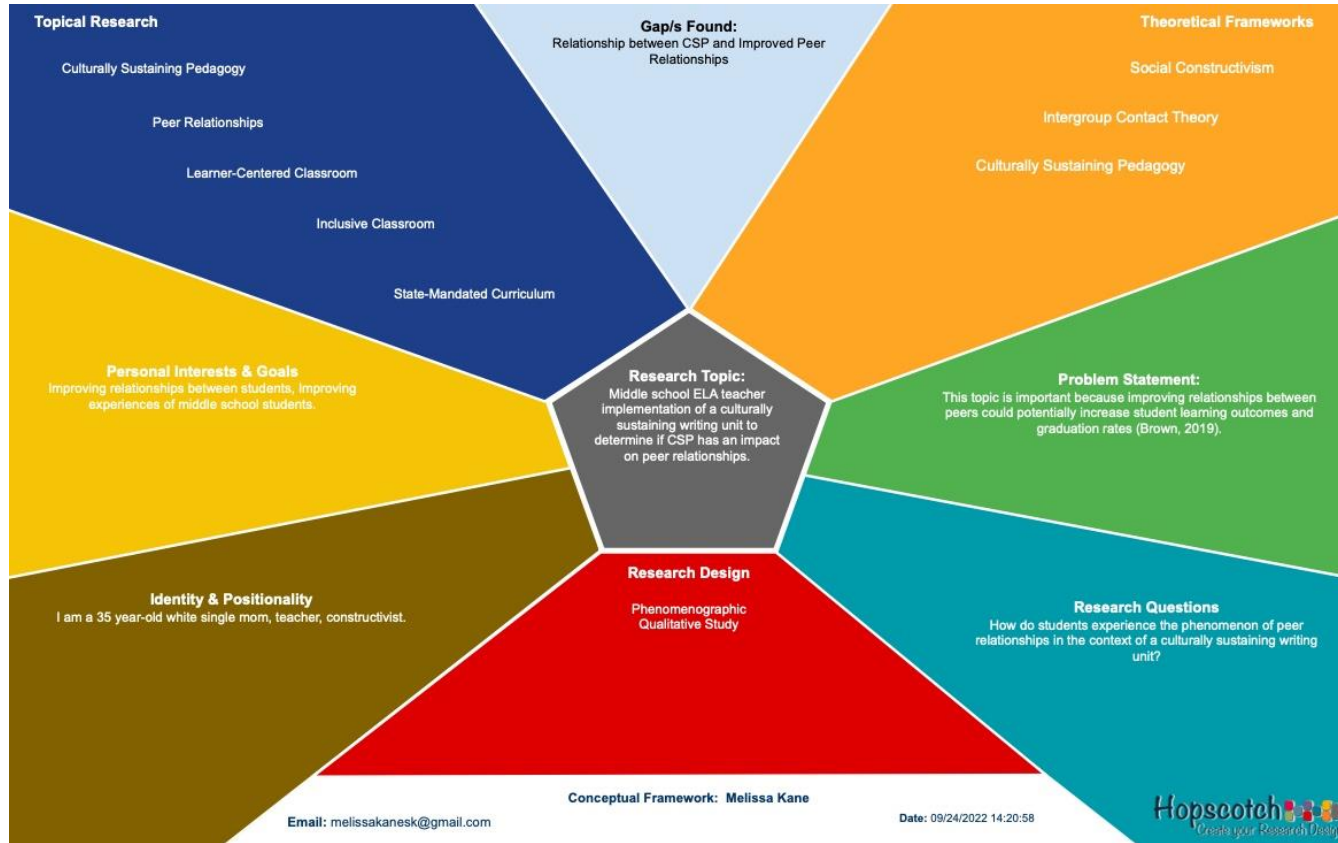
APPENDIX B: TEMPLATE FOR WHERE I'M FROM POEM (I_AM_FROM_POEM)

I Am From Poem
Use this template to draft your poem, and then write a final draft to share on blank paper.

I am from _____
(specific ordinary item)

From _____ and _____
(product name)   (product name)

I am from the _____
(home description)

_____ , _____ , _____
(adjective)   (adjective)   (sensory detail)

I am from _____ ,
(plant, flower, natural item)

_____
(description of above item)

I'm from _____ and _____
(family tradition)   (family trait)

From _____ and _____
(name of family member)   (another family name)

I'm from the _____ and _____
(description of family tendency)   (another one)

From _____ and _____
(something you were told as a child)   (another)

I'm from _____ , _____
(representation of religion or lack of), (further description)

I'm from _____
(place of birth and family ancestry)

_____ , _____
(a food item that represents your family)   (another one)

From the _____
(specific family story about a specific person and detail)

The _____
(another detail of another family member)

_____
(location of family pictures, mementos, archives)

_____
(line explaining the importance of family items)

Original Poem:	Model Poem:
Where I'm From	**Where I'm From**
By George Ella Lyon	*By Ms. Vaca*
I am from clothespins,	I am from bookshelves,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.	from vinegar and green detergent.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.	I am from the dog hair in every corner
(Black, glistening,	(Yellow, abundant,
it tasted like beets.)	the vacuum could never get it all.)
I am from the forsythia bush	I am from azaleas
the Dutch elm	the magnolia tree
whose long-gone limbs I remember	whose leaves crunched under my feet like
as if they were my own.	snow
I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,	every fall.
from Imogene and Alafair.	I'm from puzzles and sunburns,
I'm from the know-it-alls	from Dorothy Ann and Mary Christine
and the pass-it-ons,	Catherine
from Perk up! and Pipe down!	I'm from reading and road trips
I'm from He restoreth my soul	From "Please watch your brother" and
with a cottonball lamb	"Don't let your brother hit you!"
and ten verses I can say myself.	I'm from Easter sunrises and Iowa
I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,	churches at Christmas
fried corn and strong coffee.	I'm from Alexandria and the Rileys,
From the finger my grandfather lost	Sterzing's potato chips and sponge candy.
to the auger,	From my Air Force dad's refusal to go to
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.	Vietnam,
Under my bed was a dress box	from my mom's leaving home at 17.
spilling old pictures,	On a low shelf in my new house is a stack
a sift of lost faces	of photo albums,
to drift beneath my dreams.	carefully curated by my faraway father,
I am from those moments--	chronicling my childhood.
snapped before I budded --	I am from these pages,
leaf-fall from the family tree.	yellowed but firm,
	holding on to me across the country.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1

1. How do you identify racially/ethnically/nationally?

2. How would you describe your relationships with your peers at this point in the year? Can

you explain your thoughts?

Interview 2

1. How would you describe your relationships with your peers now?

2. How has that changed since the last time we talked? Can you explain your thoughts?

3. In what ways has working in groups and participating peer editing helped you to

understand your classmates or experience them in new ways?

Interview 3

1. How would you describe your relationships with your peers now?

2. How has that changed since the last time we talked? Can you explain your thoughts?

3. In what ways did sharing poems as a class help you to understand your classmates or

experience them in new ways?

4. What part of the unit do you think helped you the most in getting to know your classmates

better?

APPENDIX D: JOURNAL PROMPTS

Journal Prompt 1: What kinds of things can we learn by studying other cultures? Why are these lessons so important?

Journal Prompt 2: Think about a time when you were the only person with a given characteristic in the entire room. Did you experience any discomfort at not fitting in? Write about your experience.

Journal Prompt 3: List some of the different cultures you belong to and how you identify with them. How did you become a part of the different cultures you are involved in?

Journal Prompt 4: Write about the first time you remember meeting someone from a culture other than your own. Discuss your experience and how you felt.

Journal Prompt 5: Can you be yourself with friends, or do you have to pretend to be somebody else? Why?

Journal Prompt 6: How do you choose who to have as a friend? Why is that? Should a friend be concerned if you're one of the popular kids? Why?

Journal Prompt 7: How do you want people to think of you as a friend? Why?

APPENDIX E: THEMATIC WORD CLOUDS

Figure E1. All Themes Word Cloud

Figure E2. Understanding Others Thematic Word Cloud

Figure E3. Building Connections Thematic Word Cloud
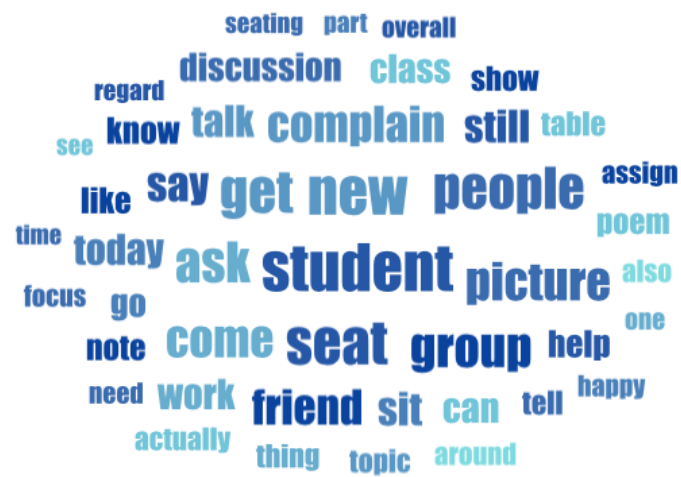
Figure E4. Feeling More Comfortable Thematic Word Cloud

Figure E5. Group Interactions Thematic Word Cloud

Figure E6. Improved Peer Relationships and Making Friends Thematic Word Cloud