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Exploring the Effective Culturally Relevant Relationship-Building Practices to Bridge
the Cultural Divide between Teachers and Justice-Involved Students
of Color with Serious Offences Backgrounds

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Ruben Carranza

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Exploring the Effective Culturally Relevant Relationship-Building Practices to Bridge
the Cultural Divide between Teachers and Justice-Involved Students
of Color with Serious Offences Backgrounds

by

Ruben Carranza

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

Professor Ron Astor, Co-Chair

This study delved into the perspectives of twelve justice-involved students of color, specifically African-American and Latinx students aged eighteen or older, who are identified as serious offenders. The primary objective was to discern effective practices that fostered a meaningful connection between these students and their teachers, thereby actively involving them in the classroom. Utilizing the CRP framework, with a focus on relationships, the research employed a qualitative design and methods within a juvenile justice facility's school setting. Through twelve semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis unveiled two overarching themes in response to the initial research question: care and humanity. Within the care theme, crucial sub-themes like patience, physical presence, time on task, and empathy were identified, offering nuanced insights into elements vital for establishing a strong teacher-student relationship. The second theme, humanity, included sub-themes such as respect, relatedness, tolerance, and sensitivity, providing

insights into the dynamics within teacher-student relationships. Addressing the second research question, motivation emerged as a pivotal factor influencing student engagement. Key motivational practices included aspects of reward, inclusiveness, and engagement. Under the engagement sub-theme, practices supporting the role of engagement, such as connecting, pushing, inspiring, and energizing, were identified. These research findings offer practical and actionable insights for teachers seeking to connect with students with serious offences and influence their motivation to participate actively in the classroom. The significance of these findings lies in their potential to bridge the cultural divide between teachers and justice-involved students of color with serious offences. The study acknowledges its limitations and proposes avenues for future research based on the identified findings.

The dissertation of Ruben Carranza is approved.

Daniel Solorzano

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2023

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the justice-involved students, whose unique journeys have inspired this research. To all those students who are doing time, stay strong, hopeful and committed to being the best person you can be. I extend my deepest appreciation to the study participants who generously allowed me to enter their world to deeply understand their educational perspectives. It will undoubtedly contribute to our practice as educators.

This dedication is also for all the teachers and educators who dedicate themselves to working with justice-involved students. Your commitment to providing guidance, support, and educational opportunities is commendable. May your efforts continue to foster environments that empower and uplift this student population, contributing to their academic success and personal growth. This dissertation sought to understand the perspectives and experiences of justice-involved students with the goal of identifying culturally relevant practices that connect with justice-involved students and that motivate them to engage in the classroom. May this work contribute to improving educational practices that uplift students and empower teachers and educators in this critical work.

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Lastly, I express my gratitude to God for giving me the energy and the purpose to stay committed during this challenging but rewarding academic pursuit.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This research aim was to investigate the relationship approaches and practices that justice-involved students of color, who are serious offenders, perceive as effective in establishing connections with their teachers and engaging in the classroom to enhance their outcomes. The study aimed to identify the practical approaches and strategies used by teachers, from the student's point of view, to connect with them and engage them in the classroom. Students who are incarcerated develop a subculture in the system, necessitating teachers to be culturally competent and relevant. Through student interviews, the study aimed to gain knowledge of the practices that either facilitate positive relationships or act as obstacles to building connections with this population. The research findings offered valuable insights into the effective relationship practices educators can use to better connect with justice-involved students and promote their academic success.

Research Problem

National Statistics

Throughout history, various groups of people have been systematically marginalized and oppressed based on their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and other aspects of their identity (Curtis & O'Connell, 2017; Picower & Mayorga, 2015). In 2015, the juvenile justice system in the U.S. detained forty-eight thousand forty-three youths, a fifty-five (55%) decline from 1999 (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2017). Of those detained, thirteen percent (13%) were under the age fifteen and fifteen percent (15%) were between the ages of eighteen and twenty. The majority (71%) of youth were between the ages of 15 and 17 years of age. While the U.S. juvenile justice system has reduced youth incarceration by sixty-five percent (65%) between 1997 and 2019 (Sickmund, Sladky, Puzzanchera & Kang, 2022), across all races, there is still a

higher percentage of incarcerated youth of color. In 2019, the population of youth held in the juvenile justice system for delinquency or status offenses was forty-one percent (41%) Black, thirty-three percent (33%) White, and twenty percent (20%) Hispanic. Youth of other races (i.e., American Indian, Asian, or two or more races) combined accounted for six percent (6%) of youth in the system. In 2019, Blacks made up 14 % of the U.S. population, Hispanics 25%, and Whites 50%. These statistics demonstrate that racial and ethnic inequalities persist, and unfair practices remain deeply ingrained in the system. For instance, the youth of color, particularly Black youth, continue to be disproportionately incarcerated after being referred to the juvenile justice system. These disparities are present in all U.S. states.

California Statistics

While there are widespread efforts at the national, state, and local levels to decrease the number of young people in the juvenile justice system, those who are being incarcerated tend to be serious offenders (Sickmund, Sladky, Puzzanchera & Kang, 2022). These include youth who have committed violent offenses such as homicide, burglary, assault, and sexual assault. Additionally, there is a disproportionate representation of youth of color among those who are being incarcerated.

In 2019, California ranked first among all states in the percentage of incarcerated youth, with fourteen (14%) of the total U.S. in detention, as reported by Sickmund, Sladky, Puzzanchera & Kang (2022). The California juvenile justice system held a youth population composed of thirteen percent (13%) White, twenty-six percent (26%) Black, and fifty-eight percent (58%) Hispanic (Sickmund, Sladky, Puzzanchera & Kang 2021). However, the California Census 2020 showed that the Hispanic population represented thirty-nine point four (39.4%), the White population represented thirty-four point seven percent (34.7%) and the Black

population represented five point seven percent (5.7%). The statistics reveal an overrepresentation of Black youth in the juvenile justice system in comparison to their population percentage in the state. Furthermore, although to a lesser degree, Hispanic youth are also overrepresented in the system. Of the counties within California, Los Angeles, in particular, has a disproportionate number of arrests of youth of color.

Los Angeles County Statistics

According to a report by the Los Angeles County Youth Work Group (LACYJWG, 2020), in 2018, law enforcement authorities in Los Angeles County recorded eight-thousand-one-hundred-thirty-three (8,133) arrests of young people. The data showed that Black youth (ages 10-17) in Los Angeles County were six point five (6.5) times more likely to be arrested and twenty-six point five (26.5) times more likely to be placed in institutional facilities compared to White youth. Not as significant as Blacks but overrepresented in the system, Latinx youth (ages 10-17) were one point eight (1.8) times more likely to be arrested and four point nine (4.9) times more likely to be placed in institutional facilities than their White counterparts.

Although the number of youth incarcerations has declined for all races, disparities persist between the youth of color and White youth in Los Angeles County. In 2018, for every White youth referred to the system, fourteen point six (14.6) Black youth and three point four (3.4) Latinx youths were referred (LACYJWG, 2020). As of 2021, the Los Angeles County Juvenile Halls and Camps detained four-hundred-thirty (430) young people, primarily Black and Latinx youth (LACDP, 2021).

School Inequities

Many justice-involved students have experienced disengagement, chronic attendance problems, school disciplinary issues, and academic failure (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, &

Puzzanchera, 2015). Justice-involved students have poor outcomes compared to those who do not come in contact with the system. Compared to youth in the general population, youth in custody have a higher percentage of not being enrolled in school, dropping out, repeating a grade, being below grade level, being suspended and expelled, and being diagnosed with a learning disability (Sedlak & McPherson, 2010). Many students in the system have low literacy skills, and they have been unsuccessful in school (Leone, Meisal & Drakeford 2002). Many of the justice-involved students are also identified as eligible for special education at a higher percentage, three to seven times, compared to those outside the system (Leone & Weinberg 2010). Further, many students in the system have a history of having school attendance problems and have repeated a grade (Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild & Legters, 2003). Balfanz et al. 2003, in a study of ninth-graders, found that more than 400 students attended only about half of the time the previous year before their detainment and they were not passing their classes.

School Discipline

Fabelo, Thomson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, and Booth (2011) conducted a statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement. They found that students suspended or expelled from school have a higher risk of ending up in the juvenile justice system. African-American and Latinx students have a higher probability of being involved in the juvenile justice system than any other group.

Since 2014, children from minority backgrounds made up the majority of children in the country's public schools (USDOE, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). According to the NCES, there were approximately 50.4 million students who entered public schools, 24.6 million were White, and 25.8 million were minority students. The ethnic distribution in California is more extreme where White students comprised 24.1 percent of the

population (CDE, 2017b). The racial composition in the juvenile justice system is even more alarming. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), nationally, youth of color are more likely than White youth to be arrested and subsequently go deeper into the juvenile justice system (e.g., Puzzanchera, 2021; Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013; Sickmund et al., 2021; Sickmund, Sladky, and Kang, 2021).

Prior to entering the juvenile justice system, many students of color had negative school experiences, including academic failure, truancy, suspensions and expulsions, and dropping out of school (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). Many students of color lagged behind White students in many categories, including reading, math, gifted identification, advanced placement classes, and college preparatory courses (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2010; Grissom & Redding 2016; Xu, Solanki, & Fink 2021). In addition, they were overrepresented in remedial, vocational, and special education classes (Wald & Losen, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010b; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Pitre, 2014). Teachers can provide opportunities for students of color to succeed and learn (Orfield, 2014). Also, they were suspended and expelled at a higher rate than their counter White peers (Wald & Losen, 2003). Moreover, many were placed in alternative education settings such as continuation or community day schools (Wald & Losen, 2003). Many youth of color missed the opportunity to establish a positive relationship, and the school practices pushed students away, limiting their access to quality learning opportunities (Milner, 2011, 2013). While the educational system might have let down students of color in the community, there remains a chance to establish connections and engage these students, irrespective of their context and background.

Ladson-Billings (2006) introduced the concept of "educational debt" to emphasize the obligation of the education system to provide students of color with a relevant education that will

connect and engage them in their learning. It is commonly assumed that all individuals are equal and have the same opportunities for success (Milner, 2013). However, people often attribute academic success or failure to the student's individual characteristics rather than the education system's shortcomings (Lynn & Adams, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Milner, 2013). In many cases, educational benefits are only given to those who meet the standards set by the dominant education system, disregarding the cultural backgrounds and knowledge of students of color. This inequity is especially prevalent in schools that serve students of color, like correctional settings, where educators tend to rely on their cultural understanding and ideas when working with students of color (Milner, 2013). Teachers who lack an understanding of the backgrounds and experiences of students of color within the juvenile justice system will struggle to establish connections and positively influence their behavior to enhance their outcomes. It is crucial to comprehend the unique needs of justice-involved students.

A Complex Population

Most students who are incarcerated are disproportionately African-American and Latinx students (Sickmund et al., 2022). Many of them have gaps in their education and are diagnosed with educational disabilities, mental health issues, trauma, and substance abuse, and come from low-income families and communities (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). Moreover, connected to their criminal background, many have ties to gangs and have developed a distinct culture that adds to the complexities of connecting with them and engaging them in the educational process (Buckle & Walsh, 2013).

Teachers in Correctional Schools

Teachers working in juvenile correctional schools require specialized skills, knowledge, and training to effectively educate justice-involved students (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010; Sapiro

& Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020). The teachers must be equipped to implement trauma-informed practices, create safe and inclusive learning environments, and differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of students with varying levels of academic and social-emotional development (Gendreau, Andrews & Theriault, 2010; Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016; Sapiro & Ward, 2020). Additionally, training in cultural competency (Cross, 2013; Vilson, 2015), restorative justice practices (Fronius, Darling-Hammond, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley & Petrosino, 2019), and de-escalation techniques ((Slaatto, Mellblom, Kleppe, Baugerud & Kjøbli, 2021) are essential for teachers to effectively address the unique challenges and barriers faced by this population. With these specialized skills and knowledge, teachers can better support justice-involved students in their academic and personal growth and contribute to positive outcomes for these students' post-release.

Although possessing the specialized skills and knowledge required to work in juvenile correctional schools is crucial for teachers to effectively educate justice-involved students, more importantly is the ability to build positive relationships with this population. Establishing trusting and supportive relationships can help create a safe and inclusive learning environment, facilitate academic and personal growth, and promote positive behavior change (Gendreau, Andrews & Theriault, 2010; Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016; Sapiro, & Ward, 2020). With a focus on relationship-building, teachers can better understand the unique needs and experiences of justice-involved students and provide the support and guidance they require to succeed.

Outcomes

Despite the implementation of several intervention programs, justice-involved youth's educational needs have not been adequately addressed (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010; Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020). The academic achievement of justice-involved

students is crucial to predicting future negative outcomes. (Maguin & Loeber, 1996). Without sufficient support and academic skills, these students are more likely to experience long-term social, economic, and educational challenges and even failure (Scott et al., 2002; Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020). Unfortunately, justice-involved students continue to struggle with poor academic outcomes, disciplinary issues, and recidivism (Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020). Additionally, due to the complexities of this population, teachers face unique challenges when trying to connect and engage with justice-involved students (Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020). To overcome these obstacles and create meaningful connections with these students in the classroom, teachers need to understand the students' culture and use effective, culturally relevant relationship practices (Vilson, 2015; Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020). Ultimately, building relationships with the students must be the first step in creating opportunities for success, regardless of the context.

Relationship Challenges

The absence of positive relationships with youth of color can be a significant contributing factor to their disengagement from school and involvement in destructive behaviors, which may have partly led to their incarceration. Key research (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016; Sapiro, & Ward, 2020) has shown that when young people feel disconnected from their schools and communities, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors and become involved in the criminal justice system. Positive relationships with caring adults, particularly those who share similar cultural backgrounds and experiences (Cross, 2013), have been shown to play a crucial role in helping youth of color feel supported, valued, and motivated to succeed (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016). Without positive relationships, many young people may feel isolated,

misunderstood, and without hope for their future, which can lead to adverse outcomes that have lasting consequences.

Due to the complexities and needs of justice-involved youth, it is crucial to conduct a precise risk and needs assessment for every individual (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990), to ensure that the most suitable treatment or effective intervention is administered. However, regardless of the treatment or intervention applied, it is essential for the juvenile justice teacher to establish a good relationship with each justice-involved student. According to Gendreau, Andrews & Theriault (2010), interpersonal interactions have the potential to enhance a student's motivation to change and engage in their learning, adhere to treatment and intervention, and improve rehabilitative outcomes. In addition, Gendreau, Cullen, & Bonta (1994) suggest that teachers must use positive reinforcement in their interactions with students by outweighing rewards to punishments by a ratio of 4:1 to maintain long-term prosocial behaviors.

Building positive relationships with justice-involved youth of color who are serious offenders can be an enormous challenge due to their complex experiences. These students have often experienced significant trauma, including violence, poverty, and discrimination, which can make it difficult for them to trust others and form healthy relationships (Sapiro, & Ward, 2020). They may also have a history of being rejected or marginalized by authority figures, including teachers, law enforcement officials, and even family members, which can further erode their sense of self-worth and create a sense of mistrust (Sapiro, & Ward, 2020). Additionally, many incarcerated youth of color who are serious offenders may have grown up in environments where violence and criminal activity were normalized, making it challenging to shift their perspectives and attitudes toward positive behavior (Gendreau, Andrews & Theriault, 2010). For teachers to overcome these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes culturally responsive

programming, trauma-informed care, and a commitment to building trust and respect over time (Sapiro, & Ward, 2020). A multi-faceted approach requires teachers to recognize the unique strengths and potential of each young person and empower them to take ownership of their future and make positive changes in their lives.

Impact of Positive Relationships

Positive relationships with incarcerated youth of color who are serious offenders have a profound impact on the student's educational and personal growth. Teachers who are able to build rapport with their students can create a sense of trust and safety that allows them to be more effective in their instruction and support (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016; Sapiro & Ward, 2020). For incarcerated youth of color who are serious offenders, positive relationships with teachers can be particularly important, as they may have had negative experiences with authority figures in the past. By building relationships based on mutual respect, empathy, and cultural understanding, teachers can help students see themselves as capable and valuable members of their classroom, school, and community, improving their self-esteem and sense of agency (McMahon & Pederson, 2020). Ultimately, positive relationships with teachers can be a lifeline for justice-involved students of color who are serious offenders, helping them see a brighter future and reach their full potential despite the challenges they face.

Gap in the Research

Currently, there is a nationwide, statewide, and local effort to reduce the number of incarcerated youth in the juvenile justice system (Sickmund et al., 2022). However, the youth who are being incarcerated are serious offenders, including those who have committed violent crimes such as homicide, burglary, assault, and sexual assault, and are disproportionately represented by youth of color (Sickmund, Sladky, Puzzanchera & Kang, 2022). This degree of

seriousness presents significant challenges for teachers who need to address the racial and cultural differences, educational gaps, and other needs and also navigate the added obstacles posed by gang involvement to establish connections with these students. Additionally, young men with serious offenses sentenced and placed in the State Juvenile Justice system have returned to their respective counties, with most coming to Los Angeles County. As a result, the State juvenile justice system has dissolved, and teachers in the counties must be prepared to effectively work with this population. There is little information in the literature on best practices in working with justice-involved students of color who are identified as serious offenders.

Thus, it was essential to capture the insights from justice-involved students of color with serious criminal backgrounds because their experiences and perspectives are often marginalized and overlooked in research. Their unique insights offered a deeper understanding of the challenges they face, as well as informed teacher practices that are effective in meeting their needs. Additionally, ignoring the perspectives of this population can perpetuate systemic inequities and prevent progress towards a more just and equitable educational system.

Redefining the Required Educational Knowledge for Educators

As the movement to re-envision the juvenile justice system continues (Pavelka & Thomas, 2019), it is crucial to consider the complexities of the needs of the youth as well as the challenges that teachers face in supporting the education and success of the justice-involved student population. In the past, young offenders who were found guilty of serious offenses such as burglary, assault, and homicide were typically sent to the state's juvenile justice system. However, recent changes require counties to develop rehabilitative plans for this population, which includes providing a quality education.

A customized education: Justice-involved students who have undergone the adjudication process require a customized education that caters to their unique needs. While ample evidence underscores the importance of building relationships with marginalized youth (Roffey, 2012; Agyekum, 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019), limited research is available on effective teacher approaches for fostering relationships with serious offenders who have undergone adjudication and who have been in the system for some time.

For example, in one study conducted in Louisiana, correctional schools found that academic challenges were associated to an unrealistic teaching approach, lack of student engagement, and classroom heterogeneity (Houchins et al., 2009). The researchers conducted a qualitative survey with seventy-eight teachers working in three different facilities in the Louisiana juvenile justice system to identify barriers and facilitators to providing a quality education for students in correctional settings. They identified nine key themes (personnel issues, academics, student needs, discipline, materials and supplies, parental involvement, funding, communication, and facilities) that formed the basis for a discussion on enhancing the quality of education for incarcerated youth. The study was limited to teacher perspectives, and the problems were primarily attributed to others, structures, and systems. In addition, the study did not explore the extent to which teachers may contribute to or hinder a quality education provision. Teachers play a critical role in the classroom and have the potential to significantly impact student engagement and education quality.

The role of the teacher: Another study conducted by Flores and Barahona-Lopez (2020), involved interviews with fifteen teachers working at four juvenile detention facilities in Southern California. The aim was to investigate the difficulties faced by teachers in providing mandatory educational instruction in the California correctional system. The study identified

three main challenges: the low level of education of students, which included those with learning disabilities; the emotional labor required of teachers to connect with students, control the classroom, and manage administrators; and negotiating interactions with administrators, correctional officers, and other on-site personnel. These challenges were found to be linked to macro-institutional barriers that both teachers and students were able to navigate but could not fundamentally change. Again however, the challenges identified were from the perspective of the teacher, but nevertheless, it highlights the challenges teachers face in connecting with students in this context.

A narrow focus on outcomes and teacher challenges: Most existing studies on students in the juvenile justice system have primarily focused on outcomes of teaching instruction (Flores, 2012; Leone et al., 2002), recidivism rates (Flores, 2016), and the impact of teacher mentorship relationships on youth behavior while incarcerated (Voisin et al., 2005). Additionally, research on correctional education has examined specific programs aimed at reducing re-offending and preventing recidivism (Duwe, 2017). Studies that have explored the education of justice-involved students have also identified various challenges associated with teaching in detention facilities, including staff harassment of prisoners (Stevens, 2015), low levels of formal education among students (Wilson et al., 2019), and limited resources available to both teachers and students (Kamarth & Gregg, 2018). However, while previous research has examined the structural obstacles of educating students in the system, there is a lack of understanding about the challenges faced by students themselves and their perspectives on what methods work best, particularly in connecting with their teacher and engaging them in the classroom.

The gap in the research

This study aimed to fill the existing research gap by exploring the perceptions and experiences of justice-involved students of color with serious criminal backgrounds. Specifically, the study sought to identify culturally relevant relationship practices that effectively establish connections between teachers and students, engaging them more meaningfully in the classroom to improve their outcomes.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the study are:

- (1) What culturally relevant relationship practices do students say influence a positive connection with their teacher and why?
- (2) How does the nature of the student-to-teacher relationship, according to students, influence students' motivation to engage in classroom activities?

The first research question aimed to identify culturally relevant relationship practices that students perceive to contribute to a positive connection with their teacher. The purpose was to gain an understanding of students' views on how teachers can establish positive relationships with their justice-involved students of color who are serious offenders within this juvenile justice context.

The purpose of the second research question was to examine what students say about how the relationship between students and teachers affects the motivation of the student to engage in classroom activities. Many students who end up in the system have been disengaged and disenfranchised from the education system. This population has very serious offenses and may not have great hope. Teachers need to better understand how students perceive their learning so as to better connect with and reignite this population. This understanding becomes even more critical with the trend of incarcerating the most serious offenders. Thus, the objective is to

understand, from the student's perspective, the culturally relevant relationship approaches teachers utilize (or not) that help them to connect with teachers and motivate them to engage in their learning.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes and patterns in the data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how culturally relevant relationship practices can foster positive relations and influence the motivation of students to participate in classroom activities. The study explored the perspectives of justice-involved students, enabling the identification of both practical and ineffective culturally relevant relationship practices that teachers can use to engage and connect with students.

Research Design

To address the research questions, a qualitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) was employed. This design was appropriate because the study involved examining the experiences and opinions of justice-involved students regarding the quality of their relationship with their teachers and the culturally appropriate relationship practices that foster a positive teacher-student connection. The research used semi-structured interviews to collect rich and textured data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017) from Latinx and African-American justice-involved students based on questions generated and guided from the Californian Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), a pre-existing school climate survey. The study applied a theoretical framework rooted in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Howard & Rodriguez-Scheel, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995) to structure the interview questions. This framework was chosen because it emphasizes teachers' need to employ culturally relevant practices and approaches to connect with and engage the students effectively.

The key collection method consisted of conducting twelve semi-structured interviews with twelve students. The development of the semi-structured interview questions was guided by, and expanded on, by an existing school climate survey conducted by the district on December 2022. The students were asked questions related to how climate-survey students responded to the survey. For example, students were asked questions such as, *Can you give an example of a trusting and caring relationship that you have experienced with a teacher?* And, *Can you describe a time when a positive relationship with a teacher motivated you to engage in classroom activities?* These types of questions elicited responses contributing to answering the research questions and identifying culturally relevant teacher practices and approaches that are effective (or not effective) in working with this population.

The school for this study, Barry J. Nidorf School, is located within the Los Angeles County juvenile justice system. It is one of the largest and most diverse in the United States, and it has a significant population of youth from communities of color. This site was selected as it is the main site where most students identified as serious offenders are housed and it is the target population for this study.

The target population for this study was twelve high school participants, African-American and Latinx students, eighteen years old or older. These students had committed serious crimes (homicide, armed robbery, sexual assault, etc.). The criteria used to select participants included (a) enrollment in school for at least six months, (b) voluntary participation from Latinx or African-American students, and (c) students who were eighteen years or older. By selecting students who have been in school for at least six months, students had a sufficient level of familiarity with their teachers to share their experiences accurately.

Significance of the Study

The study was significant as it aimed to identify students' perceptions of barriers and facilitators to effective culturally relevant relationship practices. This knowledge has the potential to bridge the cultural differences between Juvenile Justice teachers and students of color identified as serious offenders, with the goal of motivating them to engage in classroom activities. The findings of the study have significant implications for teacher practice in working with justice-involved students, as these students have often faced substantial barriers in connecting with teachers, engaging in classroom activities, and achieving academic success. Furthermore, the study's results show the potential to contribute to the broader goal of promoting equity and inclusion in the juvenile justice education system by highlighting the importance of culturally relevant relationship practices in fostering positive student-teacher relationships and encouraging classroom engagement within this population.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature review in this research had the purpose of delving into the culturally relevant relationship practices that had been studied and proven effective with students of color who have committed serious offenses. It aimed to understand how this relationship between students and teachers impacts the students' motivation to participate in classroom activities. This exploration encompassed the identification of obstacles that hinder positive relationships and practices that facilitate them.

The ultimate objective of this review was to enhance our understanding of culturally relevant relationship practices that have demonstrated success with students of color in community schools and within the juvenile justice system. Additionally, it sought to pinpoint effective Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) strategies for engaging serious offenders in correctional settings.

Positive Relationships Impact

Research (Morgan, 2010; Milner, 2011; Nganga, Kambutu, Scull & Han, 2021) has consistently shown that positive relationships can be a transformative force for youth in low-income communities and diverse youth of color. When youth have supportive relationships with adults and peers, they are more likely to develop positive self-concepts, engage in prosocial behaviors, and experience academic success. For example, studies (Roffey, 2012; Agyekum, 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019) have shown that positive relationships with teachers can lead to increased academic motivation, higher academic achievement, and improved school attendance for low-income and diverse youth. In addition, positive relationships with mentors have been linked to increased self-esteem, social competence, and decreased delinquent behavior among youth in these communities (Belshaw & Kritsonis, 2007; Watson et al., 2016). By investing in positive relationship practices, teachers can successfully help students develop the skills and resilience needed to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Building positive relationships with justice-involved students who are serious offenders can have a significant impact on their attitude and behavior toward school engagement. When teachers take the time to establish trust and a sense of safety with these young men (Butts, Bazemore & Meroe, 2010) they can begin to break through the barriers that may have prevented them from engaging in school in the past. Additionally, by creating a positive and supportive learning environment (Gay, 2010; T. C. Howard, 2010; Ladson Billings, 2009; Milner, 2011, 2013), teachers can help justice-involved youth develop a sense of belonging and a desire to succeed in school.

Furthermore, positive relationships can help these young men see themselves as capable and valued members of their school community (Butts, Bazemore & Meroe, 2010). This can

increase their motivation to learn and participate in school activities, as well as reduce their involvement in negative behaviors. When educators demonstrate a genuine interest in the success of justice-involved youth of color, they can provide a powerful counterbalance to the negative messages they may have received in the past about their abilities and potential (Gay, 2010; T. C. Howard, 2010; Ladson Billings, 2009; Milner, 2011, 2013). Building positive relationships with justice-involved students can have a transformative impact on their attitudes and behaviors toward school engagement, ultimately helping them to achieve success both in the classroom and beyond. However, before teachers can be effective with this population they must recognize and be aware of the barriers that can interfere with their ability to connect and engage with this population – the goal of this study.

Relationships Barriers

Discrimination

When teachers discriminate against students of color who are gang-involved and have a criminal background, they hinder the development of positive relationships and hinder classroom engagement. It is crucial for teachers to acknowledge any discriminatory attitudes they may hold and treat students of color who are serious offenders with the same respect and support as their peers. Recognizing this can lead to stronger relationships with these students and support their success in the classroom, regardless of their background or past behavior.

Discrimination can manifest in various ways, whether through deliberate actions or unconscious biases (Staats, 2016), and it can significantly impact the relationships between teachers and students of color who are serious offenders. Discrimination involves the unfair or differential treatment of individuals based on their affiliation with a specific group, such as race,

gender, or ethnicity (Reskin, 2012). While criminal status isn't explicitly covered in the legal definition, it can be extended to encompass gang involvement and criminal history.

This study aims to identify what students articulate as their needs to ensure they do not experience discrimination, allowing them to establish connections with their teachers and have an equal opportunity for success in the classroom.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes, particularly when they are inaccurate or unfairly negative, can have a detrimental impact on the relationships between teachers and justice-involved students of color with criminal backgrounds (Heitzeg, 2009). Stereotypes encompass widely-held beliefs and assumptions about specific groups of people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or gender (Heitzeg, 2009). These stereotypes can also be extended to students who are involved in gangs and have criminal histories.

When teachers hold negative stereotypes about students in the system, it can lead to biased perceptions of their behavior, lowered expectations for their academic success, and a breakdown of trust between the teacher and the student (Heitzeg, 2009). Such stereotyping fosters a hostile and unsupportive learning environment, making it more challenging for the student to connect with their teacher and attain academic and personal success. Furthermore, negative stereotypes may prompt students to behave in ways that confirm these biases (Heitzeg, 2009).

By treating students of color who are serious offenders as individuals with unique experiences and abilities, teachers can foster stronger relationships and offer the support necessary for student success. Additionally, teachers can cultivate a classroom culture based on mutual respect and understanding. This study will explore what students express as their needs to

feel they are not being stereotyped, enabling them to connect with their teacher and feel capable of meeting the classroom's demands.

Implicit Bias

In a similar vein, implicit bias can play a substantial role in the dynamics between teachers and students of color who are serious offenders. Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that individuals hold about certain groups, and these biases can influence how teachers perceive and interact with their students (Staats, 2016). Notable studies (Irby, 2018; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019) have indicated that implicit biases may lead to teachers perceiving students of color as more threatening or dangerous, even when their behavior mirrors that of their white counterparts. This bias can result in more severe disciplinary measures and punishments, with lasting negative consequences for the teacher-student relationship and the student's academic and personal life.

Students who have committed serious offenses may encounter a breakdown of trust and a lack of adequate support from their teachers due to these biases, further complicating their efforts to change their behavior and attain academic success. It is imperative for teachers to be cognizant of these biases and their potential interference in connecting with their students. By recognizing and actively addressing implicit biases, teachers can foster stronger relationships with their students of color, including those who have made serious mistakes. This study will explore indications of how students might be experiencing bias that hinders their ability to establish a relationship with their teacher.

Deficit Mindset

Regrettably, many teachers harbor a deficit-oriented perspective and maintain low expectations for students of color and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds,

which can detrimentally affect their academic performance (Avery & Walker, 1993; T. C. Howard, 2010; J. J. Irvine & York, 1993). Milner (2013) observes that students of color are often measured against a standard or another group, typically white students or the mainstream culture, implicitly suggesting that students of color are academically and intellectually inferior. When teachers adopt a deficit mindset, they use mainstream cultural norms as the foundation for their interactions with students of color, disregarding these students' cultural knowledge, communication styles, and ways of understanding (T. C. Howard, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999).

As a result, this can lead to strained relationships and low expectations for students of color who have not assimilated into mainstream cultural norms, resulting in ineffective relationship practices founded on unwarranted assumptions regarding race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status (T. C. Howard, 2010).

Perceptions that students of color lack a cultural identity, come from a poverty-stricken background that hampers academic success, or are affiliated with gangs and have a criminal record due to their disinterest in academic achievement or uninvolved parents are examples of deficit-based explanations for their underachievement (T. C. Howard, 2010; Ogbu, 1987; Steele, 1997; Suzuki & Valencia, 1997). The adoption or unconscious adherence to a deficit mindset can influence the teacher-student relationship, potentially causing students of color to develop feelings of inadequacy and diminished confidence in their abilities. This, in turn, can lead to disengagement, lower academic achievement, and reduced motivation for learning. Furthermore, it may perpetuate systemic inequalities and reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized students, particularly those in the juvenile justice system.

If not recognized and challenged, discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes, implicit biases and a deficit mindset can hinder the development of positive relationships between teachers and

students of color who are serious offenders and can prevent the creation of a learning environment that is inclusive and equitable. Although these factors are widely recognized, the specific ways in which justice-involved students perceive their interactions with teachers remain unclear.

Relationship Facilitators

Access to qualified teachers plays an important role in enhancing the educational achievements of students of color (Darling Hammond, 2007; T. C. Howard, 2010). To cater to the diverse needs of all students in the classroom, teachers must employ practices and educational experiences that are relevant and responsive to students' backgrounds, cultural experiences, and the sociocultural context in which they live and learn (Gay, 2010; T. C. Howard, 2010; Ladson Billings, 2009; Milner, 2011, 2013). However, before students engage in the classroom, students need to feel connected to their teachers and understood.

Show You Care

Care is a multifaceted concept that involves showing empathy, concern, and attention toward someone's physical, emotional, and psychological needs (Sapiro, & Ward, 2020). In the context of relationships between teachers and students of color, particularly those who are serious offenders, care can play a critical role in fostering positive interactions and promoting growth (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016). When teachers demonstrate care towards their students, they communicate a sense of respect and validation that can be particularly impactful for students who have experienced trauma or marginalization (Sapiro, & Ward, 2020). This is especially relevant for students of color who are serious offenders, and who may have faced disproportionate disciplinary actions or negative stereotypes due to their race or criminal history.

By providing care, with cultural sensitivity, teachers can create a safe and supportive environment where students feel valued and understood. This approach of care can help to build trust and encourage students to engage in the learning process, develop positive social skills, and build self-esteem (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016). Additionally, teachers who demonstrate care can serve as positive role models, demonstrating positive behaviors and attitudes that can be especially impactful for students who may lack positive role models in their lives. Studies (T. C. Howard, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999; Morrison et al., 2008) have shown the positive impact that caring in a relationship has in students' lives. For example, Milner & Tenore's (2010) study highlights how one middle-school science teacher working in a poor community connects with his students:

One thing I try to let kids know this year is that I really do care about them, you know, whenever I see them. You know, I love you. I want to see you play basketball. I want graduation invitations. You know, that's not going to happen though, if you don't straighten up in class.

Teachers who care stress the importance of building rapport, talking directly to students outside of class, and using their names. Also checking in with students and asking them how they're doing and not bringing up past misdeeds. Furthermore, when students feel secure, valued, and cared for, they are more inclined to excel academically and emotionally.

Empathy

In the juvenile justice context, empathy can be a powerful tool for building understanding and trust. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of others (McMahon, & Pederson, 2020). When teachers demonstrate empathy towards their students,

they are able to better understand the unique challenges and experiences that these students have faced (McMahon, & Pederson, 2020). Empathy can help to build rapport and foster a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, where students feel seen, heard, and validated. For students of color who are serious offenders, in particular, empathy can be especially impactful. By demonstrating empathy, teachers can break down barriers and create a space where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. In addition to building stronger relationships, empathy can also help teachers to identify and address the underlying causes of negative behavior. Rather than simply punishing or reprimanding students for their actions, teachers can dig deeper and explore the root causes of these behaviors. This understanding can lead to more effective culturally responsive interventions that address underlying issues and promote positive change.

Empathy can be an important first step toward cultural competence. Having cultural competence may be critical for teachers to effectively work with students of color who are serious offenders in the juvenile justice system.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is the ability to understand, appreciate, and effectively interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Cross, 2013). Teachers who demonstrate cultural competence are able to recognize and respond to the unique cultural norms, values, and experiences of their students (Vilson, 2015). This cultural competence can help build trust and foster a more inclusive and respectful learning environment where students feel valued and understood. Students of color who are serious offenders may have faced discrimination or stereotyping due to their race, ethnicity, culture or criminal history and may have struggled to feel accepted or valued in traditional educational settings. By demonstrating cultural

competence, teachers can create a more welcoming and supportive environment where these students feel seen, heard, and respected.

When teachers implement monocultural and traditional euro-centric approaches in their interactions with students, they fail to connect and engage students of color (Lou Fuller, 1992; Milner, 2011, 2013). Cultural competence begins with relationship building (Milner & Tenore, 2010). When teachers recognize students' identities, culture, and language it enhances relationships and opportunities for success (Banks, 2001; Gay, 2010; Milner, 2010). In the context of relationships between teachers and students of color who are serious offenders, particularly those who ascribe to gang culture, cultural competence is a critical factor in building positive and effective relationships. Teachers who possess cultural competence can play a critical role in breaking down barriers and connecting with students and engaging them in their learning.

Culturally competent teachers challenge negative perceptions and encourage cultural competence by shifting away from a deficit-based mindset (Ladson-Billings in 1995b; Gay's 2000; Howard et al., 2017). In addition to building stronger relationships, cultural competence can also lead to more effective teaching and learning outcomes (Vilson, 2015). Teachers who are culturally competent are able to design curricula and instructional strategies that are more relevant and meaningful to their students' cultural backgrounds and experiences (Ladson-Billings 1995b; Gay 2000; Morrison, et al., 2008; Howard, et al., 2017). When teachers make educational tasks relevant and meaningful they promote greater student engagement and academic achievement, as well as a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures and perspectives.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) has been recognized as a promising framework to enhance learning opportunities for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Morrison et al.,

2008; Howard et al., 2017). Studies have shown that teachers who establish positive relationships with their students and incorporate student experiences, backgrounds, and community cultures in their teaching practices improve learning opportunities and academic outcomes (Morrison et al., 2008; Howard et al., 2017). Research demonstrates the effectiveness of culturally relevant practices in diverse community classrooms across various grade levels and academic subjects (Morrison et al., 2008; Howard et al., 2017). However, limited research has been conducted on the use of culturally relevant practices with teachers and students in correctional settings.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In 1990, Ladson-Billings aimed to shift the blame for academic deficiencies away from students of color and placed it on the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Her work influenced educators to be culturally relevant and to integrate their students' strengths into their curriculum and daily practices in urban classrooms. This shift eventually led to the coining of the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings in 1995b). According to Ladson-Billings, for teachers to be culturally relevant, they must meet four criteria: collective empowerment, academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. However, for these tenets to be achieved, a trusting and caring relationship with students must be established (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Irvine (2010) expressed comparable qualities of culturally relevant teachers and emphasized the significance of developing a deep understanding of students, fostering a caring relationship, and incorporating lessons derived from their real-life experiences.

After the development of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), two other approaches or models emerged, namely Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) by Geneva Gay in 2000 and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) by Django Parris in 2012.

Gay's (2000) work indicates a shift in the focus of CRP from solely acknowledging and accepting students' cultures to actively responding to their cultural knowledge, experiences, and frames of reference. The CRT approach by Geneva Gay aims to enhance learning relevance and significance for students of color by utilizing their strengths. The CRT approach acknowledges the cultural strengths and tools that students bring to the classroom, and teachers incorporate their cultural knowledge, past experiences, and frames of reference. This approach emphasizes responsive teaching, prioritizing students' backgrounds, and providing them with opportunities to contribute to the learning process.

The Cultural Sustainable Pedagogy (CSP) approach (Parris, 2012) expands on the CRT model by aiming to maintain cultural practices within communities of color in educational settings. The CSP approach values and sustains the cultural and linguistic practices of the community while also providing opportunities to access the dominant culture. CSP educators hold themselves accountable to the community and engage in ongoing communication to understand what they want to see and sustain in the school. They also connect the curriculum to students' cultural and linguistic histories, placing their experiences at the core of classroom learning.

CRP and CRT share very similar goals, and the terms "relevant" and "responsive" are often used interchangeably. Likewise, Paris' (2012) Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy shares comparable objectives with Ladson-Billings and Gay's work, but also extends these efforts to promote equity across various racial and ethnic communities. The approach highlights the significance of including students, families, and communities in educational decision-making processes and holding educators accountable to guarantee equal access and opportunities for all. All three approaches share an asset-based perspective towards students, families, and

communities and positive relations permeate the interactions with students, families, and community.

This study will use the Culturally Relevant Pedagogies (CRP) lens as it is considered the foundational step for educators to establish cultural responsiveness and work towards a culturally sustaining pedagogy, in which families and communities play an active role in the school system. In addition, the term CRP is prevalent in the literature and will aid in addressing the research questions in this study. Unlike the Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy framework, which emphasizes the direct involvement of students' home communities, this study will examine how students of color who are serious offenders in the juvenile justice system perceive their direct interactions and experiences with their teachers. Due to a history of trauma, lack of trust in authority figures, cultural and linguistic differences, and negative past experiences with the education system, building positive relationships with students of color who are serious offenders in the juvenile justice system is essential.

CRP Teachers

Effective teacher practices are particularly crucial for improving academic achievement for students in juvenile correctional schools (Mathur & Schoenfeld, 2010). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy requires teachers to be deliberate about accessing their students' cultural knowledge and infusing it into their practice and interactions with students, particularly when their cultural background differs from that of their students (Sleeter, 2008). For instance, T.C. Howard (2001) investigated the perceptions of African American students regarding the practices of four teachers who were deemed culturally responsive, and who were able to incorporate their students' assets into their practice and interactions with students. Howard discovered that students felt more engaged and motivated to learn when their teachers established caring

relationships with them, fostered a sense of community and family in the classroom, and made learning enjoyable and entertaining.

In another study, Milner (2011) conducted a 19-month study in an urban school to investigate the ways in which a White male science teacher developed cultural competence to teach effectively in a predominantly African American school. The study explored the teacher's successes and challenges in building cultural competence and what contributed to his effectiveness. Like T. C. Howard (2001), Milner (2011) found that the teacher's success relied on building and maintaining meaningful and authentic relationships with students. For example, the teacher implemented restorative practices, allowing students to correct issues instead of punishing them for undesirable behavior or noncompliance with school rules. He also personalized his teaching approach and did not give up on his students, meeting them where they were and applying a standard for success. The teacher showed his care for his students by engaging in friendly conversations with them, asking personal questions, and going above and beyond, like showing up at a student's basketball games and playing one-on-one with the student. The teacher recognized the racial differences but refused to use a color-blind approach in his practice. Instead, he understood how his Whiteness was perceived by his students and worked to change negative perceptions by recognizing his students' identities and developing a belief system that teaching is a family and communal affair. He shared personal narratives with his students and encouraged them to do the same, demonstrating that he valued them beyond their roles as students. The teacher's efforts helped him build cultural competence and establish positive relationships.

In another key study, Morrison, Robbins, & Rose (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 45 studies on CRP that were conducted in classrooms between 1995 and 2008. The purpose was to

examine how CRP was implemented in classrooms. In their analysis, they used Ladson-Billings' three tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy, which are high expectations, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, to code specific teacher actions found in the articles. They also created subcategories for each tenet to provide educators with concrete examples of what CRP looks like in actual classrooms, which promotes an educational approach that is socially just. This key meta-analysis will be further described at length below.

Besides finding how successful teachers of CRP utilized explicit instruction techniques such as modeling, scaffolding, and clarifying to guide their students through the curriculum, Morrison et al. found CRP teachers helped their students to build self-efficacy by emphasizing and leveraging their strengths and creating flexible schedules that allowed students to access their support throughout the day. Teachers who practiced CRP demonstrated a strong commitment to ensuring that all their students succeeded academically. They also fostered nurturing and cooperative classroom environments. Teachers intervened to encourage and support students in feeling a sense of belonging and physical and emotional safety. Also, culturally relevant teachers supported the development of positive ethnic and cultural identities among their students. The study emphasized that academic success should not require students to relinquish their cultural identities. Teachers modified the curriculum to better reflect students' funds of knowledge, building relationships between the school and students' homes, and connected school learning to students' identities to make it more relevant to them. By integrating students' identities and cultures into their interactions and in the classroom, teachers promoted cultural competence that benefited both themselves and their students.

The authors of this meta-analysis stressed that teachers need to learn about students' culture and establish personal relationships with them in order to build on their funds of

knowledge. Culturally relevant teachers spent time each day interacting with many students on non-academic matters, engaging in social games, making home visits, and encouraging children to write stories about themselves. By doing so, teachers gained knowledge about their students' lived experiences and worked to build bridges between these funds of knowledge and what they were expected to learn.

In addition, Morrison et al. in their meta-analysis emphasized the importance of culturally relevant teachers in recognizing and validating students' identities based on their language background. Teachers allowed students to use their home languages as a tool for learning and self-expression. The teachers acknowledged non-standard English dialects and non-English languages as legitimate forms of communication. The teachers in these studies were observed to frequently work on bridging the gap between students' home discourse and interaction patterns and their school learning. Interaction patterns were described as various elements such as the style of speaking, the back and forth of discussion, frequency of speaking, use of humor, movement during interactions, and periods of silence or simultaneous speaking. The study found that culturally relevant teachers facilitated interactions that were meaningful and relevant to their students' home cultures. Additionally, these teachers used humor that their students could appreciate.

The authors of the meta-analysis recognized that individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds possess distinct home interaction patterns and implicit values, which are often carried into the classroom and shape their behavior in that environment. This means that individuals from cultures that tend to value cooperation over competition are more likely to feel comfortable and succeed in a cooperative classroom environment. The meta-analysis emphasizes that culturally relevant teachers need to build relationships with their students and possess

knowledge about their students' culture and experiences to leverage their prior knowledge and experiences, creating optimal learning opportunities in the classroom.

An additional study brings these insights to bear on justice-involved youth. To underscore the importance, for specific contexts, of relationships and cultural competent, Ewing, Bronwyn, Sarra, Grace, Priddle, & Chelsey (2019) conducted a study in an Australian youth detention center that involved 120 high school students. The student population was diverse. It included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Maori students, and Anglo-Celtic Australian students. The teaching team was also diverse, consisting of teachers from different cultural backgrounds such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Samoan, Fijian Indian, Hong Kong Chinese, Ghanaian, and Anglo-Celtic Australian. The researchers conducted mathematics diagnostic tasks before and after the teaching cycles and also conducted focus group interviews with the students. Both students and teachers completed efficacy surveys. Despite the diversity of the teachers and students, the study revealed that teachers encountered challenges in incorporating culturally responsive pedagogies in their teaching, especially in integrating Indigenous perspectives due to a lack of knowledge and confidence. The study accentuated the significance of considering students' cultural backgrounds and experiences and incorporating this understanding to establish connections and engage students in their learning, irrespective of the learning environment.

Ladson-Billings (2014) acknowledged that culture encompasses more than just race and ethnicity; it includes age, gender, language, and beliefs. This inclusion is important when thinking about the population who are in juvenile correctional settings. In her reflection, she proposed that CRP be remixed to incorporate CSP (Paris, 2012) to ensure that consistently marginalized students become subjects in the learning process and not just objects (Ladson-

Billings, 2014). Students become the center of the classroom and their voices become part of the decision-making in the classroom. Integrating CSP into CRP, it equips teachers with the skills necessary to revitalize their practices and prevent the "death" of classroom practices that may adversely affect students of color. As described by Ladson-Billings (2014),

...the academic death of students is made evident in the disengagement, academic failure, dropout suspension, and expulsion that have become an all too familiar part of schooling in urban schools. Academic death leaves more young people unemployed, underemployed, and unemployable in our cities and neighborhoods, and vulnerable to the criminal justice system. Furthermore, this vicious cycle often continues with the children they will parent. If we hope to disrupt this cycle, our pedagogies must evolve to address the complexities of social inequalities. (p. 77)

Ladson-Billings emphasizes the need for CRP as a means of providing new strategies to meet the needs of students and ensure positive life outcomes. She stresses that CRP goes beyond superficial efforts such as adding diverse books or decorations to the classroom. Research emphasizes the importance of relationships and understanding their students' backgrounds and experiences (Gay, 2010). As Ladson-Billings (2009) emphasizes, effective teaching necessitates that teachers thoroughly know their students, enabling them to make informed choices regarding what and how to effectively engage with their students. This emphasis on understanding students becomes even more crucial when working with justice-involved individuals.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) theoretical framework, with the works of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2000) serving as references. Teachers who embrace CRP are relevant and responsive to students' backgrounds,

experiences, culture and language. The relationship component that infuses the core tenets of CRP, will be extrapolated to investigate the key teacher relationship practices that students perceive to benefit them to connect with their teacher and engage in classroom activities. Based on the literature review, teachers who show care, empathy and cultural competence are more likely to establish a positive relationship with students of color. The barriers that can interfere with establishing a positive relationship are discrimination, stereotypes, implicit bias, and a deficit-mind set. Teachers who are able to connect with justice-involved students who are serious offenders are likely to engender trust and a sense of safety, which can boost student engagement and a willingness to take academic risks and improve academic outcomes.

Conclusion

The literature review aimed to investigate the culturally relevant pedagogy theoretical framework, specifically the tenet of relationship, and its application specifically to students of color who are serious offenders. The goal was to explore empirical studies that address relationship practices that are effective with students of color in the juvenile justice system. While there is an abundance of existing CRP studies in regular community school settings, especially in urban schools that cater to students of color, there is limited evidence concerning justice-involved students. In addition, with the re-envisioning of the juvenile justice system, and the trend to incarcerate fewer youth with minor offences, educators need to know how to build relationships with the most serious offenders to help them engage and succeed in school and beyond.

To influence justice-involved youth who are serious offenders, teachers must understand the factors that influence their behavior to connect with others and how to engage them in the classroom. To acquire this knowledge, it is crucial to directly listen to the voices and experiences

of students to gain insight into what culturally relevant relationship practices work with this population. Additionally, it is imperative for teachers to comprehend the underlying issues that may have contributed to the youth's involvement in the justice system, such as trauma, poverty, or systemic injustice, and the potential lack of equal opportunities and resources they may have experienced (Duke, 2020; Martin & Collie, 2019; Bergquist, Schmidt & Thomas, 2022). By recognizing the strengths and positive attributes of justice-involved youth, teachers can play an essential role in transforming their lives to reach their full potential.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

The aim of this study was to gather valuable information on effective culturally relevant relationship practices that promote positive relations and engagement in the classroom with justice-involved students of color who are serious offenders. To achieve this end, the research questions were formulated as follows:

(1) What culturally relevant relationship practices do students say influence a positive connection with their teacher and why?

(2) How does the nature of the student-to-teacher relationship, according to students, influence students' motivation to engage in classroom activities?

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative research design because it aimed to focus on comprehending the process, meaning, and understanding the perceptions of Justice-involved students while utilizing the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, following the approach outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2017). By delving into the experiences of students in a correctional institution, this qualitative approach yielded valuable insights into the identification of culturally relevant relationship practices that either effectively

or ineffectively bridged the gap between teachers and justice-involved students. Moreover, by incorporating the voices, backgrounds, and experiences of students of color with serious criminal backgrounds, this qualitative study captured distinct responses that emerged throughout the process of learning and understanding, as discussed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Creswell and Creswell (2017).

On the contrary, an experimental approach was unsuitable for this study since it did not involve testing the effects of an intervention on a specific variable. Additionally, although a survey could have been beneficial, the district had already conducted a comprehensive survey, the Children Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), with a sample size of 103 students. While this survey provided valuable data, it lacked the depth required to understand the "what" and "why" behind each student's responses. The research interview questions provided in Attachment E added depth to the survey responses, facilitating the collection of information about participants' emotions, thoughts, intentions, and behaviors, in line with the approach outlined by Patton (2014), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Creswell and Creswell (2017). The semi-structured approach allowed the interviewer to pose both open-ended and closed-ended questions and delve deeper to extract more detailed responses from the participants.

Utilizing a qualitative research design was the most appropriate choice to achieve the core aim of gaining a thorough grasp of students' perspectives and identifying culturally relevant relationship practices that impact teacher-student relationships and engagement in classroom activities.

Methods

Site Selection

The method of purposeful sampling, as outlined by Maxwell (2013), was utilized to choose both the research site and the participants. This method entailed the intentional selection of the particular location and individuals to gather information that aligns with the research questions and objectives.

The chosen school for this study was Barry J. Nidorf School, located within the Los Angeles County juvenile justice system. This system is one of the largest and most diverse in the United States, and has a significant population of youth from communities of color. As is typical of correctional institutions, in addition to the school that provides educational services, other agencies such as the Department of Probation, the Department of Mental Health, and Health Services are present within the correctional facility, offering non-academic services such as safety and security, mental health services, and medical services to the youth. The secured setting and school have only male youth who have committed violations and other serious offenses. No female youth are present in either the juvenile facility or school. This site was selected as it is the main site where most students identified as serious offenders are housed and it was the target population for this study.

Population Sample

The target population for this study was twelve high school participants, African-American and Latinx students, eighteen years old or older. These were students who had committed serious crimes (homicide, armed robbery, sexual assault, etc.) and who had been in the juvenile justice system for at least six months or longer. Some youth had been transferred from the state juvenile justice system and had been in the system for a longer time. This group who had been in the system for a significant time provided insightful accounts of their experiences with their teachers.

In order to secure a sample that accurately represented the population, a set of criteria was applied for participant selection, including the following: (a) a minimum enrollment duration of six months in school, (b) the voluntary participation of African-American and Latinx students, and (c) individuals who were eighteen years of age or older. These requirements were crucial because the goal was to gain insight into the experiences of the target population with their teachers. By selecting students who had been in school for at least six months, students had a sufficient level of familiarity with their teacher to share their experiences accurately. Additionally, the decision to interview participants who were eighteen years old and older was based on the practicality of gaining access to them and collecting data. On the other hand, conducting interviews with underage students in a juvenile detention setting was not feasible due to the necessity of filing a petition with the court and securing approval for the inclusion of each minor in the study, in addition to obtaining parental consent.

Furthermore, there were numerous benefits to conducting interviews with students aged eighteen and older when compared to their younger counterparts. Firstly, older students exhibited maturity and the ability to offer thoughtful and in-depth responses, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the data and insights. Secondly, they had accumulated more life experiences in school and possessed a broader perspective, facilitating a more comprehensive comprehension of the research subject. Additionally, older students in this context demonstrated unique robust communication and articulation skills, enabling them to convey their thoughts and opinions during the interviews. Lastly, interviewing adult students alleviated the need for court approval and parental consent, simplifying the ethical and logistical aspects of the study.

Characteristics of school and classes taught

The students in this context are expected to attend school daily for three-hundred minutes and are required to take high school grade level courses. Forty percent (40%) of the school population have special education services. Some students are in self-contained classrooms, meaning one teacher provides instruction in all subjects; but most are in dyads, meaning they have two teachers, one teacher covers English language arts and social studies courses and the other teacher covers mathematics and the sciences. The number of students in a classroom fluctuates and on average can have between four to eight students.

Data Collection

The key collection method was semi-structured interviews with twelve students. The development of the semi-structured interview questions was guided by, and expanded on, by an existing school climate survey conducted by the district on December 2022. Students were presented with open-ended questions like, “How do you describe a trusting and caring relationship with a teacher?” By posing relevant interview questions, the study aimed to pinpoint essential themes related to teacher actions, practices, and approaches. The interviews were recorded and brief notes were taken to record keywords and important quotes, in case of technical difficulties. Participants were given the opportunity to review the information for accuracy.

The existing survey, the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), is a modular, anonymous assessment used with students age 10 (grade 5) and above and it is part of a national survey. One category in the survey is the caring relationships scale used by the California Education Department (CDE). This category was used for this study. For a full description of CHKS and the partial results of the survey, specifically the areas that guided the interview questions, see Appendix A.

The CHKS survey results at the site provided valuable information about students' perceptions in their interactions with teachers (Amrein-Beardsley & Geiger 2022) within the juvenile justice system, but are based on numerical tabulations. As noted, the survey study included one hundred-three participants. It consisted of twenty-four percent (24%) Black or African American (non-Hispanic), sixty-four percent (64%) Hispanic or Latinx, six percent (6%) Multiracial (non-Hispanic), and six percent (6%) Something else (non-Hispanic), see Appendix A.

The CHKS encompasses thirteen core modules, but for the development of this study, the scales related to Caring Relationships (CR) and School Connectedness (SC) were the only ones examined. Furthermore, the interview process concentrated on just one question from each of these scales, with the aim of delving deeper into students' responses pertaining to these relationship-related aspects. The specific question regarding Caring Relationships that underwent further examination was: "There is a teacher or some other adult from my school... who really cares about me." Among the students, fifty-eight percent (58%) responded with "Not at all true" or "A little true." Additionally, the question related to School Connectedness that was explored further was: "I feel close to people at/from my school." In response to this question, forty-one percent (41%) of the students chose "Strongly disagree" or "Disagree," while another thirty percent (30%) selected "Neither disagree nor agree." Only twenty-eight percent (28%) chose "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" in response to this question.

The survey findings suggest that a significant portion of incarcerated students do not feel a sense of connection with their teacher(s), as depicted in Appendix B.

Although the survey results showed that a problem exists, they do not identify the *what?* and the *why?* of students feeling disconnected from their teachers. Many incarcerated students

who responded to the questions do not perceive having a caring teacher or feel connected to someone in the school.

The proposed study aimed to explore deeper into their responses to identify what students perceive to be a caring relationship and the actions or approaches teachers engage in that make them feel close (or not) to them and why. For example, Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Jackson (2016) conducted a study, using a culturally relevant care lens, on a mentoring program for high school students attending non-traditional school settings. They discovered, from delving deeper into students' perspectives, that mutual trust, maintaining high expectations, and demonstrating care were important factors for them and contributed to their school achievement. Although this study was not conducted in a juvenile detention facility with serious offenders, it shows the impact of using interviews to probe deeper to find what students perceive to be meaningful for them to connect with others and achieve.

Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews were transcribed and coded using an online platform, following the guidelines of Creswell and Creswell (2017). The transcripts were scrutinized to discern patterns, categories, and themes, as suggested by Maxwell (2013), to bring clarity to the information. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, commencing with becoming familiar with the content of the responses by carefully reading and re-reading it. During this process, key information was identified that was relevant to the research questions, and initial codes were assigned to the information. Subsequently, patterns were identified, and themes emerged from the data by grouping codes that were related to similar concepts or ideas. The data was routinely reviewed, and themes were refined to ensure their accuracy in reflecting the data and relevancy to the research questions. To encapsulate the essence of each theme, a

definition and name were attributed to it. Finally, the themes that emerged from the data were presented with the inclusion of quotes to illustrate each one. These findings were instrumental in shedding light on aspects crucial for enhancing teacher-student relationships, which, in turn, can foster academic engagement and yield improved outcomes. The unbiased analysis of the data was important, contributing to the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

Trustworthiness & Credibility

To enhance the study's trustworthiness and credibility, the information acquired through research was cross-referenced with real-world observations, aligning with Maxwell's (2013) recommendations. This approach allows the phenomenon under investigation to potentially challenge or contradict the research findings, thereby serving as a mechanism to detect inaccuracies and ensure that the research is grounded in solid evidence rather than mere theoretical assumptions.

Several methods were employed to address potential research bias. The use of rich data involved a comprehensive analysis of the existing school climate survey and the verbatim documentation of participants' responses to validate or challenge any biases. This detailed examination enabled the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the student perspective, as advocated by Maxwell (2013). Furthermore, member checks were conducted to gather feedback from study participants, ensuring that their views were accurately interpreted and any misconceptions or biases were identified and rectified, as suggested by Maxwell (2013). Triangulation was also employed to compare findings in the literature with participants' perspectives, thereby validating or challenging viewpoints regarding effective culturally relevant relationship methods and practices. Lastly, peer review was integrated into every stage of the research process, with critical and experienced peers who are knowledgeable in the area of

research evaluating methods, data collection, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions to identify and rectify any potential researcher bias. This rigorous approach contributed to the study's overall trustworthiness and credibility.

Access

The researcher for this study had physical access to the site and the students as a result of being employed by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) since 2016. The focus has centered on serving justice-involved students within the juvenile justice system. Over the course of employment with LACOE, the researcher has assumed various roles, including working as a school psychologist, assistant principal, and currently, a school principal. The researcher has cultivated strong working relationships with the LACOE leadership and school staff. These colleagues are well aware of the researcher's commitment to advocating for the best interests of the students.

However, being employed by LACOE did not automatically give permission to proceed with the study. A research proposal detailing the study was submitted to the school district and it underwent scrutiny by a research committee headed by the Chief Educational Officer of the school district and it received approval from the Superintendent. It granted permission for both, site access and the utilization of students as research participants.

Ethical Considerations

Potential Risks

Although the research study posed minimal risks, as with any research study, there are always potential risks associated with participation (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, some of the risks that were anticipated included discomfort or anxiety related to discussing sensitive topics, such as experiences with their

teachers or relationships with authority figures. Additionally, the risk that participants may feel pressured or unduly influenced to participate due to the power dynamics involved in the principal-student relationship (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, these risks did not appear to have an effect on the students who participated in the study. The research study was conducted in a confidential and non-judgmental manner, with a focus on creating a safe and supportive space for students.

Prior to participating in the study, participants were fully informed of their rights and the nature of their involvement. They were provided with the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw their participation at any time without consequences. Furthermore, steps were taken to minimize the potential for coercion or undue influence, such as conveying that participation was entirely voluntary and emphasizing that there were no negative consequences for non-participation.

Principal Involvement Benefits

In my role as both, the school principal and the primary researcher, there were several advantages in conducting this research study with justice-involved students under my authority. Being a familiar and trusted figure to most students, I was able to establish rapport with them more easily than if it was another individual conducting the research who weren't acquainted with them. This allowed me to create a comfortable space in which the students felt at ease sharing their honest perspectives, experiences, and opinions. This was especially important for justice-involved students, many of whom may have previously encountered trauma or negative interactions with authority figures when disclosing their experiences to individuals they do not know or trust. By participating in the research, justice-involved students had the opportunity to express their viewpoints and contribute to the improvement of teacher practices and other

support systems, benefiting both themselves and their peers. Furthermore, the students' involvement in the study conveyed a message that their voices and experiences hold significance and are taken seriously. This recognition positively impacted their sense of belonging and engagement within the school community.

Overall, the study was conducted with the utmost respect for the dignity and well-being of the students, with careful attention paid to minimizing potential risks and following the ethical conduct of research (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, my role and engagement in the research yielded valuable insights into the effective culturally relevant relationship practices that connect and engage justice-involved students, particularly those who have committed serious offenses.

Participation Voluntary, Confidentiality and Privacy

Participation by students was voluntary, and, to the extent possible, every effort was made to ensure confidentiality. The privacy of students was safeguarded, and the researcher conducted the interviews in an area where the conversations could not be overheard by others. Identifiable data such as name, date of birth, grade, and school name were not collected and were not included in the research study. In addition, individual responses to the interview questions were not associated with any identifiable information. All verbal responses, notes, and recordings were secured, and the data will be disposed of when the study is completed. Moreover, potential participants who were recruited, but declined to participate in the research, were not known to the Principal Investigator.

The necessary precautions were implemented to minimize harm and protect the participants. The precautions included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and privacy, providing participants with the option to withdraw from the study at any point, and

utilizing a sensitive and non-intrusive approach during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, participants were informed about any potential risks associated with participation in the study. These measures were intended to protect the rights and welfare of the participants throughout the research process. While the scope of the research did not present any inherent risks to the participants, the University of California Los Angeles Institutional Review Board (IRB) deemed it necessary for a third-party intermediary to handle the participant recruitment part of the process. This decision was made to mitigate any potential perceptions of coercion or undue influence, which could arise from the researcher investigator's role as the school principal.

Recruitment

As the school principal and the principal investigator (PI) for this research study, in order for the student participants not to feel pressured or unduly influenced to participate in the study, a third-party intermediary conducted the recruitment efforts for potential participants. The intermediary was not part of the school site. The intermediary was provided with a list of all eligible students with their assigned classrooms. This information was retrieved from the student information system of the school which included date of birth, race or ethnicity, and the date the student entered the school. After verifying eligibility, the intermediary contacted teachers by email to coordinate suitable times to pull students out of the classroom to discuss the study with them. The intermediary met with students face-to-face individually to introduce the research study. Please refer to Appendix C for the recruitment script.

During the meeting, students were given the choice to give or withhold verbal consent or take the information consent form with them if they needed more time to review and decide (See Appendix D). A window of twenty-four hours was provided for their response. They were to

provide their verbal consent to the intermediary or the primary researcher. All the participants in the study gave their verbal decisions to the intermediary on the same day they met, except one participant who gave his consent the following day to the primary researcher. The written consent was waived and approved by the University of California Los Angeles Internal Review Board (IRB) as participants in this context may be reluctant or unwilling to sign a written informed consent form. Also, the research is minimal risk and does not involve any procedures for which written consent is normally required outside the research setting (e.g., in everyday life written consent is not needed for minimal risk surveys, non-invasive health measurements, etc.) (45 CFR 46.117). In addition, the intermediary did not share the list of potential participants who were recruited, but declined participation in the research, with the primary researcher.

Once verbal consent had been obtained from each participant, the primary researcher scheduled the interviews, with the specific date, time, and the interview location. Participants were given in-person notification and reminders regarding the scheduled meeting. To ensure minimal disruption to the primary instructional programs in the morning, the interviews were conducted during the afternoon. Each interview, which included a review of the interview protocol, typically lasted between 30 to 40 minutes. As a token of appreciation for their time and participation, participants were provided with a lunch meal valued at no more than fifteen dollars (\$15). The meal was provided at a later date when all the interviews were completed. Please refer to Appendix E for the interview protocol and questions.

Limitations

The research's primary aim was to investigate the viewpoints of students regarding the methods and strategies employed by teachers to establish positive connections with students of color who are serious offenders. The study population and the site's distinctive nature and the use

of qualitative research methods led to an acknowledgment of its limited generalizability. Due to constraints in terms of resources and time, the research was exclusively conducted at a specific location with a small sample size, comprising twelve male students of African-American and Latinx backgrounds. Although this sample size lacks statistical significance, it did yield valuable insights into students' perspectives on effective relationship-building practices with justice-involved peers. Additionally, the study's findings may be limited by self-selection bias, as only students who agreed to participate were included in the study, potentially biasing the results towards either the most positive or the most disgruntled individuals.

Furthermore, this research excluded younger serious offenders under the age of eighteen, who may hold distinct perspectives, experiences, and opinions compared to their older, more mature counterparts. Additionally, the absence of female participants in the study is another limitation, as their perspectives within this context might differ significantly. Moreover, individual-specific factors, such as family background and support, academic levels, and mental health history, were not considered. It is possible that students who come from an intact and strong family support system might express different responses compared to those without such support. Similarly, students with strong academic skills might respond differently than academically challenged students.

Lastly, another limitation pertains to the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite transitioning out of the pandemic, its effects could still influence how participants responded to the questions. Students' education was disrupted for more than two years. During that time students received virtual instruction or portfolio packets to do in the living units, and they had minimal physical contact with teachers.

While this research study offers valuable insights into understanding students within this particular context, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. As such, its findings should not be generalized to other demographic groups or settings.

Conclusion

Previous research concerning marginalized students involved in the juvenile justice system has often concentrated on unfavorable results, rather than offering insights on how to enhance their academic success and overall outcomes (Ladson-Billings 1995b; Morrison et al., 2008; Howard et al., 2017). The primary aim of this study was to contribute to the existing knowledge by examining, from the perspective of justice-involved students, culturally relevant relationship practices and methods that can cultivate positive connections, potentially leading to increased engagement, academic achievement, and better outcomes. The research employed qualitative methodologies, consisting of one-on-one interviews with African-American and Latinx students with significant criminal histories located in a correctional environment. It applied the framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995b; Gay 2000), with a specific emphasis on culturally relevant relationships, to analyze and interpret the data gathered.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, before presenting the findings, an overview of the significance and purpose of the research will be presented. This will be followed by an examination of the research questions. Subsequently, a summary of the methods employed, delineating the process of site and participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Then, a reiteration of the

study's trustworthiness, credibility, and limitations. Finally, we will present the findings for both research questions one and two.

Significance of the Study

The study addresses a critical issue concerning justice-involved youth, who are serious offenders incarcerated for such crimes as homicide, burglary, assault, and sexual assault, and are disproportionately represented by youth of color (Sickmund et al., 2022). The severity of their offenses poses considerable challenges for teachers attempting to build meaningful connections with these students. Existing literature provides limited guidance on best practices for working with youth of color who are serious offenders and on effective teacher strategies for nurturing relationships with this population and engaging students in the classroom.

Most previous research has primarily focused on aspects such as teaching instruction outcomes (Flores, 2012; Leone et al., 2002), recidivism rates (Flores, 2016), the influence of teacher mentorship relationships on the behavior of incarcerated youth (Voisin et al., 2005), initiatives aimed at reducing re-offending and preventing recidivism (Duwe, 2017), and the difficulties associated with teaching in detention facilities (Stevens, 2015). In an effort to fill this void in the literature, this research extensively explored the viewpoints and life experiences of students of color with significant criminal backgrounds. The primary objective was to gain valuable insights into which teacher practices effectively facilitate the establishment of meaningful relationships and what factors motivate justice-involved students to actively engage in the classroom.

Statement of Purpose

This study aimed to discern students' perspectives regarding the factors that hinder or support the implementation of culturally relevant relationship practices. The objective was to

bridge the cultural gaps between Juvenile Justice teachers and students of color who are identified as serious offenders, with the ultimate aim of motivating them to actively participate in classroom tasks. The findings of this research could hold substantial implications for teacher approaches when working with justice-involved students, a group often confronted with formidable obstacles in connecting with their teachers, engaging in classroom activities, and achieving academic success. Moreover, the study's outcomes may contribute to the broader aspiration of advancing equity and inclusivity within the juvenile justice education system. This is achieved by underscoring the significance of culturally relevant relationship practices in fostering positive teacher-student interactions and promoting classroom engagement in this specific context.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the research are:

- (1) What culturally relevant relationship practices do students say influence a positive connection with their teacher and why?
- (2) How does the nature of the student-to-teacher relationship, according to students, influence students' motivation to engage in classroom activities?

The primary purpose of the first research question was to pinpoint culturally relevant relationship practices recognized by students as instrumental in fostering a positive rapport with their teachers. The intention was to gain insight into students' perspectives on how teachers can cultivate constructive relationships with justice-involved students of color who are serious offenders within the juvenile justice system.

Regarding the second research question, its purpose was to explore students' insights into how the relationship between students and teachers affects the students' motivation to engage in

classroom activities. Many students within the system have experienced disengagement and disenfranchisement from the educational system, often compounded by the severity of their offenses and a sense of diminished hope. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to grasp how students perceive their learning experiences to establish more meaningful connections and reignite the enthusiasm for learning within this population. This understanding becomes even more critical in light of the growing trend of only incarcerating the most serious offenders. Thus, the objective was to comprehend, from the student's perspective, the culturally relevant relationship strategies that teachers employ (or don't) to foster connections and motivate students to actively engage in their learning.

Methods used

This study used a qualitative research design to delve into the experiences of students within a correctional institution, the qualitative approach yielded valuable insights, enabling the identification of culturally relevant relationship practices that either proved effective or ineffective in bridging the gap between teachers and justice-involved students. Furthermore, through the inclusion of the backgrounds, personal narratives, and experiences of students of color with significant criminal histories, this qualitative study captured unique responses that emerged during the learning and understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Site used for the study

The process of purposeful sampling, as outlined by Maxwell (2013), was employed to meticulously select the research site and participants. This method involved the deliberate selection of a specific location and individuals to gather information that directly pertained to the study's research questions and objectives.

The chosen site for this study was Barry J. Nidorf School, situated within the Los Angeles County juvenile justice system. This system ranks among the largest and most diverse juvenile justice system in the United States, serving a substantial population of youth from diverse communities. The secure setting and school exclusively accommodate male youth who have committed violations and other serious offenses. This site serves as the primary location where a significant portion of students identified as serious offenders are housed, which is the target population for this study.

Participants for the study

The target population for this study was twelve high school participants, African-American and Latinx students, eighteen years old or older. These were students who had committed serious crimes (homicide, armed robbery, sexual assault, etc.). To ensure a representative sample, a set of criteria to select participants was used, including (a) enrollment in school for at least six months, (b) voluntary participation from Latinx or African-American students, and (c) students who were eighteen years or older. School records were obtained to identify race/ethnicity, date of birth, and date of school entry. These requirements were crucial because the goal was to gain insight into the experiences of the target population with their teachers.

Recruitment of participants

As the school principal and the principal investigator (PI) for this research study, in order for the student participants not to feel pressured or unduly influenced to participate in the study, a third-party intermediary undertook the initial recruitment efforts for potential participants. The intermediary was not part of the school site. The intermediary was provided with a list of all eligible students with their assigned classrooms. The intermediary contacted teachers by email to

coordinate suitable times to pull students out of the classroom to discuss the research with them. The intermediary met with students face-to-face individually. During the meeting, students were given the choice to provide or withhold verbal consent or take the consent form with them if they needed more time to decide. A window of twenty-four hours was provided to give their response. All the participants in the study gave their verbal decisions to the intermediary on the same day, except one participant who gave his consent the following day to the primary researcher. Additionally, the list of students who did not consent was not shared with the primary researcher.

Data collection procedures

The key collection method used was semi-structured interviews with twelve students. The development of the semi-structured interview questions was guided by, and expanded on, by an existing school climate survey conducted by the district on December 2022. The interviews were conducted individually face-to-face. Students were asked open-ended questions such as, “How do you describe a trusting and caring relationship with a teacher?” Through the use of relevant interview questions, it became feasible to pinpoint teaching methods and strategies that have the potential to enhance the teacher-student relationship and fostering academic engagement. The sessions were audio recorded and brief notes were taken during the interview to record keywords and important quotes, in case of technical difficulties. Participants were provided with the opportunity to review the information for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The study utilized a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as a framework to examine students' viewpoints, with a focus on culturally relevant relationships. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and coded using an online program, following the guidelines of Creswell and Creswell (2017). The transcripts were read and analyzed to identify patterns,

categories, and themes, as suggested by Maxwell (2013), in order to make sense of the information. Data was organized and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, which included, becoming familiar with the content of the responses by carefully reading and re-reading it. During this process, key information was identified relevant to the research questions and assigned initial codes to them. Subsequently, the information was scrutinized for patterns and themes in the data by grouping codes that appear to be related to similar concepts or ideas. In this stage, the data was reviewed and the themes were refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data and the research questions. To capture the essence of each theme, a name and definition were given.

Trustworthiness and credibility of the study

To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, real-world observations were used to cross-reference the research findings, aligning with Maxwell's (2013) recommendations. This method allowed for potential challenges or contradictions to emerge, ensuring that the research was firmly grounded in actual evidence rather than relying solely on theoretical assumptions.

To mitigate potential research biases, several measures were implemented. Rich data analysis involved a comprehensive examination of the existing school climate survey and participants' verbatim responses to validate or challenge any biases, offering a deeper understanding of the student perspective, as recommended by Maxwell (2013). Additionally, participant checks were conducted to gather participant feedback, ensuring accurate interpretation of their views and identifying and rectifying any misconceptions or biases, as per Maxwell's (2013) guidance. Furthermore, triangulation was employed to compare the research findings with existing literature and participants' perspectives, thus validating or challenging

viewpoints on effective culturally relevant relationship methods and practices. Lastly, peer review was an integral part of the research process, with knowledgeable peers critically assessing methods, data collection, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions to identify and rectify any potential researcher bias. This comprehensive approach strengthened the overall trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

Limitations of the study

This research primarily aimed to investigate justice-involved students' perspectives on the strategies employed by teachers to establish positive connections and engage them in the classroom. The study was conducted at a specific location with a small sample size, consisting of twelve male students, eighteen and older, from African-American and Latinx backgrounds. The exclusion of younger serious offenders under eighteen years old is a limitation, as their perspectives may differ significantly from their older counterparts. Additionally, the absence of female participants is another constraint, as their experiences within this context could be markedly different. Moreover, self-selection bias is another potential limitation, as only students who agreed to participate were included, which could bias the results toward either the most positive or the most disgruntled individuals. The study also did not account for individual-specific factors like family background, academic proficiency, and mental health history, which could have influenced the responses. For instance, students from stable and supportive family backgrounds might respond differently than those without such support, and academically proficient students may have distinct perspectives from academically challenged ones. Lastly, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic might have influenced participants' responses, given the disruption to their education during the pandemic.

While this research provides valuable insights into understanding students in this specific context, it's vital to acknowledge its limitations. As such, the findings should not be generalized to other demographic groups or settings.

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative research study aimed at answering the research question: "What culturally relevant relationship practices do students say influence a positive connection with their teacher(s) and why?" In exploring this question, I sought to gain insight into the ways in which culturally relevant relationship practices impact teacher-student relationships and why they are considered vital for establishing and nurturing positive connections between students who are serious offenders serving time with their teachers. The analysis drew upon the rich data gathered from interviews with students who shared their lived experiences, anecdotes, and perspectives. The following results on the themes that emerged from the data are reported below using quotes and examples to illustrate each theme.

Results

Communicating Care

The study delved into the experiences and perspectives of students who identified as serious offenders attending school within a juvenile justice facility. They shared their encounters and what they expect of teachers who exemplify care in their relationship practices. A key finding was the significant role that care plays in connecting students to their teachers. Several practices emerged from the interviews that support the role of care from the perspective of the students, including patience, physical presence, time on task, alternative explanations, and empathy.

Maintaining patience

During the interviews, a prominent practice that came to the forefront was the significance of patience within teacher-student relationships. Five out of the twelve students highlighted the vital role of patience. This sentiment was passionately conveyed by Marcus, who expressed, “I don't know, but for real, for real, patient, patience. Yeah, patience. It is going to take patience for the knuckleheads, for sure.” Marcus further emphasized, “Your job is not to go out of your way to make a smart comment to a kid when the kid says some smart shit to you.” Furthermore, Carson contributed by stating, “If a student is sitting right there messing up, they can't get mad with them. They have to be patient with them, and don't make the kid feel stupid.”

Students consistently expressed their gratitude for teachers who displayed significant patience when confronting challenging situations with students. For example, Oscar offered advice, saying, “you keep ignoring it, pay no mind, eventually they gonna say, fuck it, it didn't work. The more you pay attention, the more they are going to do it. They want attention. So watch out for shit like that, and when you do come across that shit, just keep on pushing. Keep on pushing.” Additionally, students facing academic challenges appreciated this patience, as Antwone described, “Getting disrespected. Really, that's the main one. Getting disrespected and still trying to teach.” Oscar also proposed, “Just help that person in general, and to not give up on somebody because everybody has their own way of learning. Everybody takes time, different pace in education.”

This patience emerged as a fundamental element of care, as it allowed students the time and space needed to deal with personal issues or grasp academic concepts without feeling rushed or pressured. Furthermore, this aspect of patience is closely intertwined with the concept of being physically present for students.

Keeping a physical presence

Another crucial aspect of care is the physical presence of the teacher. When teachers are physically present and available for students, students perceive this as a sign of care. Six of twelve students expressed the importance of teachers being physically present for them, which went beyond mere proximity and denoted the act of teachers being physically and emotionally available for them. For example, Marcus passionately stated, “A lot of kids don’t have a good support system. So just knowing that your teacher or your TA is there for you every time you get a packet or worksheet in your hand and they just, they’re automatically like, alright let me know if you need help or I’m going to help you with this. Like even if they probably don’t need help, just stay there just in case. Like little shit like that. That’s like showing me that you care, showing me that you support me.” The emotional sentiment was articulated by Sergio, who stated, “When they ask us, are we doing our work, are we alright? Are we having a good day? How are you feeling?” Similarly, Lonnie stated, “Walk into the classroom and tell them how they are doing. Talk about the weekend, what did you do? It’s little small stuff. What do you like to eat? Where do you like to go in the house? What do you like to do on your free time? Little stuff that starts conversation.” Furthermore, Pedro stated, “I think having them [teachers] is like having consistency. Like building a relationship. And like they care for us and push some of us to do our work. That we get more comfortable with them. It’s not like we have a teacher come here once in a while, you know, it’s uncomfortable, to be honest.” This availability seems to foster a sense of trust and reassurance, as underscored by Carson who stated, “Work with us, showing me that it’s not easy to do this work, but I’m still going to be here for you to help you.”

In sum, physical presence is important for students in this context. It sends a powerful message of care and commitment reinforcing the bonds between teachers and students. Much

like the connection between patience and physical presence, the concept of being physically present is intricately linked with the idea of spending time on task with students.

Time on task

Another essential facet of care pertains to the time on task that teachers allocate to providing substantial effort in aiding students within the classroom setting. The significance of teacher commitment and the dedicated allocation of additional time for assignments was emphasized by 11 out of the 12 students. Carmelo succinctly articulated this commitment by saying, “Taking the extra mile to help you,” and Carson described the commitment of one of his teachers as, “she shouldn't be coming to work right now and she is still coming to work to make sure we get the attention that we need. The actual one-on-one attention that we need.” Sergio appreciated the time the teacher invested in him stating, “He took the time to sit next to me. Like explained to me the whole project. Like this is how you do it. I was like, alright, he's really helping me out. He's giving me work and expect me to do it without help.”

Students also value the time on task provided by teachers because it assists them in addressing various behavioral challenges they may encounter. For instance, Antwone elaborated, “They want me to focus on my work and don't get distracted by peers. So they're telling, sit down or don't go outside or just focus, get your work done and then take your break.” Marcus shared, “Some people are shy to ask for help, some people feel like if they raise their hand to answer a question, they gonna feel dumb. I say more so like that being hands-on with my teachers. For me it was cool.”

Students in this context expect teachers to dedicate time on tasks with them, going beyond merely assigning work. As Shawn articulated, “Try to engage with us. Don't just sit there and like give us work.” Lonnie shared a similar sentiment, “Probably not just coming in class,

like, oh, here's paper like just do it. Actually, interact and intervene with us. Engage with us.” Likewise, Carson passionately emphasized the importance of investing time on tasks with students in this context, stating, “If they looked at us as students, they would actually sit right there and help us. Do you need one-on-one? Do you need this? Do you need that? Do you feel better working on the computer or should I print your work out? Actually, take some initiative into doing something with the kids.”

Investing time on task with students clearly shows students that teachers care. While the time spent on the task is undeniably important, how teachers convey explanations to students also plays a substantial role in shaping student perceptions of their caring nature.

Provide alternative explanations

The theme of care underscores the significance of alternative explanations, highlighting the importance of adaptable teaching methods. Among the 12 students, 6 stressed the value of being able to convey academic concepts in a manner that resonates with students. As an illustration, Carmelo articulated this concept by declaring, “Actually help with the work and break down things and trying to find other ways to explain it better and not just try to stick with just one way. They go out their way to break things down, so to speak, you know type of stuff.” In another scenario, Oscar enthusiastically shared their perspective, remarking, “He had a real good sense of humor. He didn't take nothing personal. He was having like a tough time warming up to us and he just started being like cool. He didn't take no offenses. He was real funny about his lessons. He taught in a different way. He taught more young where we could understand and actually want to engage and want to learn about it. Like that was real cool.” Similarly, Lonnie emphasized the importance of adapting teaching methods, stating, “Understand that certain kids

work a certain way, and then being open to bending your ways that you're used to. Working to be flexible to be able to work with the kid.”

When teachers offer alternative explanations tailored to diverse learning styles and individual needs, they underscore their dedication to student understanding and active participation. Charlie elaborated, “He broke it down and gave me an understanding where I was able to understand it. He made it like, he wasn’t talking at me, he was talking to me.” In addition, Pedro pointed out, “helping them out in all types of ways. Whatever you know they could do, whatever you can do to help them.” Furthermore, Carmelo stated, “They really just helped me. Like I said once again, math plays a big part in your life. So I feel like the way that he showed it to me, giving me examples like financial algebra and stuff that plays a big part in your life, like taxes.”

By offering a range of perspectives and instructional approaches, teachers demonstrate care by acknowledging that each student's learning journey is unique. It signifies a willingness to meet students where they are in their educational development, and students perceive this as a clear indicator of genuine care. Being able to provide alternative explanations was important for students to feel cared for but also understood.

Show empathy

Empathy emerged as a fundamental component of care within the teacher-student relationship. 7 out of 12 students underscored the significance of empathy in demonstrating care. Charlie vividly describes the empathy he felt, stating, “My special teachers, they show us that they care. Don't see us like a paycheck. They motivate us to learn. They help us get a better understanding and they show empathy towards us. They put themselves in our shoes in order for them to understand our situation and the circumstances of our everyday lives. So, I feel that they

established trust between us sometimes. Showing empathy and understanding us.” Antwone emphasized the need for teachers to have, “Experience, like just knowing how to understand a broken heart or someone that is feeling down. That’s the main thing.” In addition, Yarrell recommended that teachers should, “Probably like ask me if I was alright or something. Even though I probably say yeah and I wouldn’t want to talk about it, but probably just like ask her [teacher] to be more, like just come over and try to help or like see what’s up or something.”

Students in this context perceive caring teachers as connecting with their students on a deeper level, and recognizing their challenges. Sergio noted, “They could just tell them, I’m here to do my job. I’m not here to make it harder for you. I know it’s really hard here. If you need any help, my help is right here.” Marcus illustrated a detailed scenario demonstrating a teacher’s empathy, saying, “That person [the student] may have went through something with his other teacher, feeling some type of way, comes here, now you’re [the teacher] overwhelming him. Now, he’s so overwhelmed to the point where people [students] there deal with being overwhelmed in different ways. In my race, [the student] might cuss you out. They might do anything, but in this particular situation, student cuss teacher out. The teacher did not cuss back, but had something smart to say back. Instead of thinking like, well, he may just have had a bad session or a bad period with his last teacher. So let him sit out on this one. But we’re going to talk about this after class and let him know that he needs to get this done and that done before next week. Like giving them that chance.”

Other students confirmed the importance of empathy. Charlie further emphasized the importance of empathy, stating, “They place themselves in our shoes. They know if we are having a bad day. They don’t have to always push us and like they understand us. Like not today, we can work on it tomorrow. They give us that space.” Pedro shared the importance of empathy

within this context, saying, “So I'm pretty sure that's why they really don't try to put a lot of pressure on us because they know that we're going through a lot in here and it's not easy to be doing time. It's not easy.” Students who are serious offenders recognize empathetic teachers as more understanding and compassionate. This quality of empathy stands as a cornerstone of care, underpinning strong teacher-student connections.

The findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of care within the teacher-student relationship in this context. Students who are serious offenders consistently emphasized through their experiences and perspectives the significance of patience, physical presence, time on task, alternative explanations, and empathy as integral components of care. Care represents a primary finding in response to the research question. Alongside care, humanity characterizes the underlying perspective of the teachers who care.

Importance of Humanity

To further shed light to the research question "What culturally relevant relationship practices do students say influence a positive connection with their teacher(s) and why?" The study further explored the experiences and perspectives of justice-involved students identified as serious offenders attending school within a juvenile justice facility. They shared their encounters and what they expect of teachers who exemplify humanity in their relationship practices. A key finding was the significant role that humanity plays in connecting students to their teachers. Several practices emerged from the interviews that support the role of humanity from the perspective of the students, including respect, relatedness, tolerance, and sensitivity.

Practice respect

During the interviews, one prominent practice that emerged from the concept of humanity was the significance of respect within teacher-student relationships. In this context,

Respect involves treating students with dignity and acknowledging their humanity. Eight out of the twelve students emphasized the vital role of respect in their interactions with teachers.

Shawn, for instance, described it as a reciprocal concept, saying, "Respect hood is like. I know it's, get respect, you get respect back. Keep it neutral. That's how we look at it. Like how you treat me, I'll treat you. If you treat us well, we'll treat ya'll well, but if you treat us like shit, we'll treat you like shit." Similarly, Sergio and Oscar concisely stated, "basically just treat them like human beings, not incarcerated," and "Respect, you know. That we are humans. Just respect and they come across," respectively. Sergio elaborated on this by sharing a personal experience, saying, "My math teacher. He treats me well. He doesn't treat me like I'm an inmate. He treats me like I'm a human being." Antwone explained what respect looks like to him, noting, "I think telling me in a respectful way, here is your work and stuff like that, and how they explain something in a nice way not in a fucking mean way." On the other hand, some students, like Pedro, highlighted what disrespect looks like, stating, "Maybe they're going to be speaking in a loud voice and an angry tone, like that's something. That's the biggest thing right there. And how they respond back to you. That's one of the biggest things how they respond back." Charlie clarified by stating, "It's not like what they say, it's how they say it. It's a certain way how you talk to people." Pedro shared how the lack of respect negatively impacts the relationship, noting, "In a disrespectful way. Like in a voice that's not fine. That's something that will definitely, we will have a bad relationship and that will not motivate us to do our work. And maybe we'll just say you know F-off and we wouldn't want to do it."

Based on the perspectives of students who are serious offenders, respect plays a significant role in the concept of humanity and it influences the overall quality of the

relationships that are formed between students and teachers. Being able to connect with students is important.

Show that you can relate

Another vital aspect of humanity pertains to the connection a teacher establishes with their students. Building relatedness with this particular population involves forming bonds, trust, or emotional connections with students who are serious offenders. When teachers succeed in establishing a rapport with their students, it imparts a sense of being treated as human being. Out of the 12 students interviewed, 8 expressed the significance of this relatedness in the teacher-student relationship. For instance, Marcus articulated, "most of the teachers that I had didn't come from the background that I came from. So, we can't really relate on that level." Carmelo, pointed out, "some people have come from some environments I came from so they understand me. Then, there's some people that come here that don't know nothing about the environment that I come from." Shawn highlighted the challenges when a teacher can't relate, saying, "So for them, for some teachers it'd be harder to adjust to us. They got to get used to how we do things. You feel me? For some teachers it's easy though. Like some teacher they already know what to expect. They adjust easier. But I say for the most part it's like probably like 50/50. Some adjust easier, some of them adjust harder because they are not used to it."

When asked to describe a teacher who can relate, Lonnie and Sergio mentioned, "Like growing up like in struggle type of stuff, rough neighborhoods. Like little stuff like that. They can have more understanding with you that you can relate more," and "Probably someone that has been in the ghetto. That understand how it is," respectively. Carson underscored the importance of teachers who have firsthand experience with this population, stating, "Hire someone that comes from a continuation school. That know how to deal with kids like this.

Everybody in this mother fucker came from a continuation school, and I could guarantee you that they went to a continuation school or never went to school at all." Regarding what teachers can do, Antwone and Oscar shared their perspectives, "By talking, relating to one another, talking about certain situations, getting to know each other really," and "Ask us about backgrounds. You don't have to say where you live, but you could say where you came from. Your struggles because that's, I think, we all have in common. If you came from a struggle we did too. That's why we are in this situation. So, I think that's one thing that we could connect, sharing backgrounds and then it starts from there," respectively. Shawn suggested if he was principal, "I'll probably give them like a story to try to help them understand more because just telling them to relate to us is one thing, but if you give them something you had to relate to us, they'll probably understand more." Carson, referring to this specific population, emphasized, "It's about being a good teacher and having experience."

In summary, the ability to relate to this population is crucial for students in this context. It conveys a strong message of humanity and dedication, further strengthening the bonds between teachers and students. Additionally, as a result of the ability to relate to this unique population, teachers' displaying tolerance is seen as equally important for this group.

Relatedness breeds tolerance

A fundamental aspect of humanity relates to the concept of tolerance. In the context of this specific population, tolerance involves acknowledging and respecting differences, be they of a cultural or personal nature, and maintaining an open-minded approach when confronted with opposing views or practices. The significance of teacher tolerance was underscored by 5 of the 12 students. Marcus stressed the importance of understanding the unique environment, stating, "Realize that you're not working in a regular school. You're working in a jail where in eight

times out of ten, you're working with kids who are either murderers or attempted murderers or aggravated assault. All of them, harsh crimes. You feel me? Assault with a deadly weapon and all that type of shit. You gotta realize that you're not working in a regular school." However, Marcus emphasized the need to continue to teach them as their background has nothing to do with teachers by stating, "Honestly, all of that hard-core shit don't even come from school. That don't got nothing to do with y'all. So, if anything, y'all really just be teaching them to be professional, because I know a lot of teachers may get tired of the back talk or the disrespectful comments. So, I would say just teach them how to be professional." Oscar described tolerance as the ability not to take it personally, stating, "Like when you're [student] stressed out like from court and they see you like tripping and they [teacher] don't take it personal. They don't get scared. They come back and they still keep just simply talking to us like humans." Furthermore, Oscar highlighted the importance of teachers not reacting to every action students make, stating, "When they don't flinch at every little movement that we do, when we raise our voice, or we are mad about something and they don't show that they're not scared, and stuff like that makes us feel like, OK, cool, not everybody thinks we're monsters. When we are treated like a monster, that's how we act. We act like what we are treated like." Antwone elaborated on the importance of tolerance by mentioning how some teachers may become frustrated when faced with students' challenging behavior, stating, "I can see that some teachers get frustrated when a student thinks they're tough because the student will mouth off to them, and here you can't really do nothing as you would be able to in the streets. So it's like you just got to suck it up and ignore it." Furthermore, Antwone emphasized that it takes time to develop a relationship with this population by saying, "It's not just easy off the bat, but as we build chemistry, then it will be easier to understand." Oscar discussed the necessity for teachers to be tolerant of differing

viewpoints, asserting, “Just because we don't agree with certain things, you shouldn't belittle somebody because of their belief. We all have open minds and we should be able to express how we feel about things openly and honestly. Instead, just because I don't agree with you doesn't mean I'm better than you or you're better than me. We just believe and think different, and we just got to adjust and get used to it.”

Tolerance with students in this context is a clear indicator of respect and recognition of their humanity. While tolerance is undeniably important, being sensitive to students' circumstances is what shapes student perceptions of teachers' human nature.

Show sensitivity

The theme of humanity emphasizes the importance of sensitivity, highlighting the value of paying close attention to students' needs and experiences. It involves demonstrating compassion and understanding when addressing students' struggles and challenges. Out of the 12 students, 5 emphasized the significance of teachers being sensitive to students' individual circumstances. For instance, Oscar when referring to forging a relationship with their teacher, expressed, “Hell nah cause I feel like they not really used to or accustomed to dealing with kids like us, high-risk, high-needs.” Sergio noted, “Sometimes it's easy based on like they understand, but sometimes some people be like he's an inmate, he's done bad stuff and shit like that.” Oscar conveyed what teachers can do to be more sensitive stating, “like understanding where we come from cause we might come from two different places. Maybe where they're from that doesn't happen. Got to accept the fact that not every city and every place we come from is the same.”

In contrast, Lonnie emphasized the power of having simple conversations, stating, “Just talking to me, simple conversation. Like they can't judge a book by its cover. Not every kid grew up in a bad area. Not every kid like you can't be like oh because such and such like he sure had a

bad background. You just never know. It's really all about conversation.” Moreover, Yarrell highlights the role of sensitivity in preventing a situation with students from worsening, expressing, “Some kids don't want to be helped. Some like to do it on their own, and when they keep trying to help, you probably make somebody mad.” Through the demonstration of sensitivity, teachers communicate their acknowledgment of the students in this context as human beings. Being able to exhibit sensitivity is essential for students to perceive teachers as humane and it contributes to the teacher-student relationship.

In summary, the study underscores the central role of humanity, encompassing respect, relatedness, tolerance, and sensitivity, in connecting justice-involved students in this context with their teachers. These practices are crucial for recognizing students as human beings, strengthening bonds, and fostering positive teacher-student relationships in a challenging educational environment.

In conclusion, this section aimed to answer the research question, "What culturally relevant relationship practices do students say influence a positive connection with their teacher(s) and why?" The study highlighted that care and humanity, encompassing various practices and qualities, are essential for fostering strong teacher-student relationships with serious offenders within a juvenile justice facility. These findings shed light on how educators can effectively connect with students who are serious offenders and positively influence their educational experiences.

Under the overarching theme of care, five essential sub-themes emerged. First and foremost, "Patience" emerged as a foundational element of care, with students appreciating teachers who displayed patience, especially when dealing with student's challenging situations or academic difficulties. Furthermore, the "Physical Presence" of teachers, both emotionally and

physically, was crucial for students, as it conveyed a sense of support and care. Additionally, students valued teachers who invested extra time and effort, "Time on Task," in helping them with assignments, providing one-on-one attention, and going beyond merely assigning work. Moreover, teachers who offered alternative explanations and adapted their teaching methods to students' individual needs were seen as caring and understanding. Last but not least, "Empathy" played a fundamental role in care, as students appreciated teachers who could relate to their challenges, put themselves in their shoes, and who displayed compassion.

On the other hand, within the overarching theme of "Humanity," four essential sub-themes emerged. "Respect" was central to humanity, involving treating students with dignity and acknowledging their humanity. Students expected teachers to treat them as human beings and not just as criminals. "Relatedness" involved forming bonds, trust, and emotional connections with students. Teachers who could relate to the students' backgrounds and experiences were seen as more understanding and where a human connection can be formed. "Tolerance" assumed a significant role in this context, with students underscoring the necessity for teachers not to take things personally and to grasp the unique environment and challenges they faced. This sub-theme encompassed respecting differences and refraining from making judgments. Finally, "Sensitivity" has been intricately linked to humanity, emphasizing the significance of paying close attention to students' needs, experiences, and circumstances. This involved demonstrating compassion and understanding regarding their struggles and challenges. Teachers who engaged in straightforward conversations and exhibited sensitivity were invariably perceived as more empathetic.

Collectively, these insights underscore the critical role of both care and humanity in nurturing and establishing a positive relationship with students identified as serious offenders

within a juvenile justice setting. These findings are a guiding light for teachers committed to effectively connecting with serious offender students and enhancing their educational journeys. What follows are findings that concern students' perceptions of how those behaviors affect their motivation to learn.

Motivation

This section presents the outcomes of this qualitative research study's second research question: "How does the nature of the student-to-teacher relationship, according to students, influence students' motivation to engage in classroom activities?" By exploring this question, the objective was to gain a better understanding of how the teacher-student relationship influences the meaningful engagement of students in academic tasks within this specific context. The analysis leveraged extensive data collected through individual interviews, wherein justice-involved students, particularly those classified as serious offenders, candidly shared their experiences, anecdotes, and viewpoints.

The students shared their perspectives and expressed their expectations regarding the actions teachers should engage in their relationship practices to motivate active participation in classroom activities. Within this context, motivation plays a pivotal role in driving student engagement in the learning process. Notably, the practices that emerged from these interviews as contributors to motivation encompass reward, inclusiveness, and engagement.

Reward as key practice

Reward emerged as a significant practice within the teacher-student relationships, particularly in the context of motivating students to engage actively in classroom activities. Reward here encompasses the act of providing incentives or benefits to encourage student

participation, offering both tangible and intangible incentives to motivate students as a means to encourage continuous effort and dedication in the classroom.

Out of the 12 students, 9 highlighted the pivotal role played by rewards. This sentiment was fervently expressed by Marcus, who emphasized that, "As far as rewards, I feel like in jail, rewards is the biggest, the biggest thing. Jail is a lot of negatives in jail. So, for somebody to be doing good and it's not being recognized, it makes them not want to do good no more, like literally." Oscar highlighted the positive impact of incentives, stating, "food brings people together and food makes people happy. And I think that's one thing that should be practiced more because honestly is like nobody wants to cut grass for free, nobody wants to come and work for free. We all come because we're gaining something, and I feel like incentives should be used like that to motivate people to come to school and learn."

Other students, such as Pedro and Oscar, echoed the importance of rewards to motivate their engagement in classroom activities, stating, "give them snacks, give them certificates, give them rewards, something," and "you know like when there's like a contest to win stuff or stuff like that, it motivates us," respectively. Charlie suggested innovative approaches like, "Do pop quizzes and whoever wins a pop quiz gets snacks at the end or play music for them while they are doing a test or something." Shawn emphasized the positive impact of snacks, stating, "Bring us some snacks for sure. That is going to help us connect. That's on tops."

Lonnie recounted a personal experience with a teacher, sharing, "They told me, start doing work, start interacting with people. I got you at the end of the week. We'll make a system where you'll probably get one or two bags of chips. That motivated me to work." Charlie recommended providing opportunities such as, "Try to get them out, get them out because we are always inside. So, only in class, we feel caged up even more. So like do rec or walk around."

Moreover, Sergio proposed making learning more enjoyable, "Like putting on movies and stuff like that. We like to watch shit," and "They could put some music so we don't have to be bored in class, like while we're doing our work they can play some music for us like appropriate music." Marcus proposed more frequent breaks, "at least be like a 5-minute break, 10-minute break from doing all the work and then get back on the boom, and then take another little break and get back on it."

Reward, through the use of various incentives, stands as a crucial element in the teacher-student relationship to motivate students within this unique context. These practices play a key role to motivate students to actively participate in classroom activities.

Being inclusive

Being inclusive is another key component of motivation. Within this context, being inclusive means actively involving students in decision-making processes and curriculum development, providing opportunities for students to express their opinions, ideas, and concerns, and ensuring that their perspectives and feedback play a central role in shaping their educational experience. Eight out of twelve students stressed the significance of being included in the teacher-student relationship to boost classroom motivation. For instance, Marcus recommended asking students about their interests and goals, saying, "Ask them what they want to do? What's your point of coming to school? What do you want to do with yourself?" Oscar further emphasized this by suggesting, "Let's ask the kids what they want to learn about. Like man what do you want to learn about today? Let's drive some ideas for the week and then boom go from there." Similarly, if Charlie was the teacher he would, "I'll ask what do you like to learn, what do you like to learn? Get a better understanding from everybody and then try to do one curriculum where it best fits everyone."

Additionally, including student voice is important because, as Pedro pointed out, "They teach stuff that we don't really want to learn about. They should really ask us, you know, what we want to learn about. They should give something we want to learn about." Students want to learn about relevant topics that connect with their lives. As Oscar mentioned, "If it benefits me or anybody else in a way, we're going to do it. If it's going to give us education, we learned something from that, we'll do it."

Moreover, Carson highlighted the importance of including real-world issues, asking, "Like explain to us what's going on in the actual real world. Most of these kids in here don't know what the fuck to do if they are lucky to get out of here. Mostly why niggas leave crying, I don't want to leave yet, I'm not ready. They leave and come right back to the County or something else." Also, they want to stay informed about current events, as mentioned by Uriel, "Try to learn about things that are happening today. Like present situations, present things, because, I mean honestly, I mean learning about things in the past about why things happen is good, but we should also be knowing about the present because at the end of the day, we're here doing time and we're kind of closed from the outside world." Furthermore, Lonnie and Pedro expressed a desire for hands-on projects and fun activities, "Different things, projects or we all come together and make stuff," and "We need more projects. We need more fun activities," respectively.

In summary, being inclusive in the teacher-student relationship is vital for motivating students in this context. Teachers should listen to students' preferences and align the curriculum with topics that are meaningful and relevant to them to motivate them to do classwork.

Rewarding students and incorporating their voices serve as powerful practices for motivating

students in the classroom, yet it is important to recognize that engagement, manifested through the teacher's words and actions, plays a critical and parallel role in motivating students.

Engage students

To further shed light on what influences and motivates students who are serious offenders, the study further explored their experiences and perspectives. Engagement plays a significant role in connecting students to their teacher which in turn increases their motivation and engagement in the classroom. Several sub-themes emerged from the interviews that support the role of engagement from the perspective of the students, which include connecting, pushing, inspiring, and energizing.

Connecting with students before asking for work

During the interviews, a prominent practice that emerged as crucial is the concept of connection. In this context, "connect" refers to the act of establishing a meaningful connection with students to prompt a genuine desire to engage in academic tasks. Eight out of the twelve students highlighted the vital role of teachers being able to connect with them as they instruct. Lonnie emphasized the significance of this connection, stating, "Focus on having a connection with the kids before you try and make them do work." Charlie described the connection with his teacher as a mutual understanding, in the context of academic work, saying, "It was like I don't look at him as my mentor or my dad, it was just like we understand. You understand me, I try to understand you." Carson explained the impact of a strong connection on their motivation, saying, "If the level is high, I will be very motivated to do work. I respect that teacher and their boundaries."

However, when the connection during work is absent, Carson further noted, "I'm not going to do work. I'm just going to sit there and bull shit, and throw paper airplanes around the

classroom." Yarrell elaborated on the negative consequences of a lack of connection with the teacher, over work, saying, "When I had negative with a teacher, I wouldn't really want to be in a classroom. So either I wouldn't come to school or when I would come to school, I would try to be like outside or I wouldn't do my work. I'd just be in the classroom, just like reading or something. Sometimes I'll do my work, but I wouldn't want to ask for help if I didn't know something." Similarly, Pedro expressed a similar sentiment, stating, "I wouldn't do work. I wouldn't like to be in there and I wouldn't like to participate in all activities. I felt uncomfortable." Furthermore, the importance of connecting with students becomes evident when there are changes in teachers, as expressed by Yarrell, "we be switching teachers a lot. Like it'd be a lot of subs and we don't have a teacher that's just there. That could probably be like difficult having to get to know somebody every other day."

A strong connection within the teacher-student relationship is essential to motivate students in this context to actively engage in their classroom activities. If this connection is not established, their motivation to participate in the classroom may be significantly impacted.

The practice of pushing students

Throughout the interviews, a prominent practice that stood out was the importance of "pushing" within the teacher-student relationship. In this context, "pushing" refers to the act of pushing students to engage in classroom activities by providing support, positive feedback, and motivation to nurture their self-confidence, drive, and belief in their abilities. It empowers students to pursue their goals and aspirations by reinforcing the notion that personal growth and success are attainable. Nine out of the twelve emphasized the vital role of teachers pushing them. Antwone expressed this sentiment by stating, "It's that chemistry built with that teacher. So when they tell you keep going and they don't want you to fall off, that's motivation." Antwone

further elaborated on this notion, noting, "Cause when I don't want to do nothing, they keep pushing me, keep pushing me to do my work." Similarly, Pedro mentioned, "they really push, they really push us to get our high school diploma, and they really want us to do it, or to better ourselves." Moreover, this sentiment was echoed by Shawn, who explained, "It's like some of them are really pushing, like for the ones who are close to graduating, like me, they're really pushing me to hurry and do my work. Not hurry, but make sure I get it done. So I know they really want me to be done with it. So, they be motivating me to do my work."

Different teachers employ various methods to push students. For example, Marcus mentioned the significance of encouraging words, such as, "You got this. You can do it. Make it sound easy. Make everything sound easy like a baby can do this." Lonnie and Charlie described how teachers push and influence them, "The teacher puts it in your head like you want to graduate. They do it to get it done. Finish this! That's motivation right there," and "Like, come on you got this, you got this, you got this. Everybody else is doing it. You're the only one, you just want to be unique. You just want to be special. Why is everybody else doing it but you can't do it? You're smart, you're very smart. He talked to me. He talked to me. He changed my thinking. He changed my mind."

Moreover, Sergio pointed out to simple phrases that teachers use to push that can have a significant impact, like, "you're doing a good job. Keep it going." Push also means, according to Yarrell, having conversations such as, "The ones that are not working, I try to have one-on-one talk. Like little talk. Like what's going on, you're going to need certain things from this schoolwork. You can use it when you're out." For Carmelo the importance of push in the relationship means, "Even if I'm incarcerated, somebody still wants me to get a proper education."

Within this context of academic work, students highly value and expect teachers to push them in the teacher-student relationship to engage them in the classroom and encourage them to complete their tasks. Besides pushing them to engage and get work done, students appreciate it when they are talk to and inspired to get them engaged.

The practice of inspiring

Another significant aspect that emerged from the interviews is "inspire" within the context of the student-teacher relationship. In this context, "inspire" refers to teachers serving as a source of motivation and acting as role models who encourage students to strive for personal growth and achievement. They achieve this by setting an example and eliciting a desire in students to engage in school and to connect it to their lives. Seven of the twelve students highlighted the importance of being inspired. For instance, Charlie expressed the inspirational impact that teachers can have by stating, "You got potential, you can be something. So, I felt like that was the motivation I needed. Telling me that I can, when other people tell me I can't. So, it's like, damn like you really see something in me type of shit." Marcus conveyed a similar sentiment, noting, "The motivation for sure like teachers just pointing out how intelligent you are, and you can do good, like you can be somewhere. I know I was smart but they make me feel way smarter than what I am, for sure."

Oscar shared an experience where his teacher's success inspired him, stating, "he went to college to become a teacher, but he's also successful in investments and business, and that kind of motivated me to, because I didn't know anything about money. I didn't know nothing about stock markets, he kind of told me about it. So now, I read books about financial literacy and things like that." Antwone emphasized how inspiring teachers made him feel, stating, "They made me feel important, and that I can actually do it. So that was motivation to me." Sergio was

inspired because, "she tells me like keep doing your work, like you're working for something, like you're working for your diploma. You'll be proud when you're done with it, and when you get your diploma, you'll be proud of yourself."

Moreover, students appreciate the personalized inspiration from teachers, as highlighted by Pedro and Yarrell, "Like what jobs pay, like to get better pay when we get out here. Have a good job for ourselves. Better ourselves and not be struggling," and "You're gonna need this work for when you get older. Like you don't want to have kids, and then your kids be asking you questions, and you don't know. And like you will need your high school diploma for a lot of jobs or a lot of things that you want to do. I see that," respectively. "Inspire" plays a powerful role in the student-teacher connection to engage students in this context in the classroom. Student not only want to be inspired in the classroom, they want to be energized.

The practice of energizing students

An equally important aspect of fostering engagement within the teacher-student relationship involves the ability to "energize" students and the classroom environment. In this context, serving this population, "energize" signifies teachers displaying authentic passion and enthusiasm in their interactions with students and in the classroom, particularly concerning the specific tasks, ideas, or goals they want students to learn. According to student responses, this projects a contagious energy that motivates and engages them in the classroom.

The significance of teacher energy was underscored by 4 out of the 12 students. Carmelo emphasized the importance of a teacher's energy and its impact on students' engagement in the classroom, stating, "I mean it's not really off the words for me. It's off the energy. You know, I'm good at reading energy, and I'm gonna feel like if you care or not. So, if I feel like you don't care, I'm not going to care." This student further elaborated on how a teacher's attitude, including

the simple gesture of saying good morning affects the energy in the classroom, "Just off the attitude. Like the way when you walk in they [teachers] don't say good morning. I know people [students], how hard-core you think you are or whatever, someone doesn't tell you good morning or they [teachers] don't show like an uplifting attitude, you're not gonna feel uplifted. Everybody wants to hear good morning and feel uplifted. So if teacher is not showing that, I'm just coming here, I'm not going to do no work, I'm just going to sit right here. Just do whatever, and if you're talking to me, I'm going to ignore you, that's just me."

Other students confirmed this view. Oscar intensely and adamantly expressed the importance of energy in the teacher-student connection to engage them, demanding to, "show some type of enthusiasm that you want to be there or show some type of like being engaged, like engaging with us." Oscar further criticized teachers who do not show this energy and its impact, expressing himself in an agitated manner, "Just the way the teacher is. They don't want to be here. We don't want to be here. Like fucking no enthusiasm whatsoever. Like, I'm [teacher] just trying to get through the day. You could even hear it in their voice, like, 'alright today,' man like nobody wants to hear this shit. Like, shut up. Like you hear me?" Moreover, Oscar explained how the absence of teacher energy can affect their motivation, saying, "It's like, oh, here's these papers that are printed out already, here do it. There's no motivation because they just had it like that. They didn't give no effort to try to teach us." Marcus described the role of the teacher is to energize as, "Feeling low and your teacher being there and telling you that you're intelligent." Some students perceive energy as a critical element in the teacher-student relationship, as it significantly influences them to engage actively in the classroom.

To conclude, this section of the study aimed to address the research question, "How does the nature of the student-to-teacher relationship, according to students, influence students' "

motivation to engage in classroom activities?” Under the overarching theme of Motivation, three essential sub-themes emerged: rewards, inclusivity, and engagement, all of which significantly contribute to stimulating student participation in classroom activities. Beginning with the sub-theme of "rewards," it is evident that students' responses underscore the significance of incentives in motivating their classroom participation. Both tangible and intangible rewards prove to be influential in encouraging their enthusiastic engagement in academic tasks. In parallel, "inclusivity" emerges as another essential component, as it ensures that the curriculum aligns with students' interests and needs. This is achieved by actively involving students in decision-making processes and curriculum development, thereby granting them a voice in shaping their educational experiences. Furthermore, "engagement" stands as a motivator for students, fostering their active involvement within the classroom. The key practices associated with engagement include “connecting,” establishing meaningful connections with students; “pushing,” persistently challenging them to reach their full potential; “inspiring,” helping them to strive for academic and personal growth; and “energizing,” infusing the interactions and the classroom environment with enthusiasm.

In the following chapter, we will discuss the implications of these findings, drawing conclusions about how teachers can incorporate the themes into their teaching practices to strengthen relationships and impact student learning and well-being.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Introduction

It is not easy work

Working with justice-involved youth who are serious offenders presents distinct challenges that set it apart from traditional educational contexts. In this environment, the

implications of teacher-student relationships take on a heightened significance, given the unique circumstances of confinement, restrictions, and an atmosphere often characterized by hopelessness. While culturally relevant practices are universally beneficial, they become essential in this specialized setting where the teacher-student relationship is under extreme pressure.

In traditional educational settings, culturally relevant practices aim to bridge cultural gaps and enhance the overall learning experience for diverse student populations. These practices foster inclusivity, respect, and understanding, recognizing the diverse backgrounds and perspectives within a classroom. However, when working with justice-involved youth who are serious offenders, these practices become crucial for maintaining a meaningful connection and positive engagement.

The confined setting and inherent restrictions in juvenile justice facilities exacerbate the challenges faced by both teachers and students. The atmosphere of despair and limited autonomy can strain relationships, making it imperative for teachers to leverage culturally relevant practices. In this context, these practices go beyond merely acknowledging cultural diversity; they become a means of establishing a humanizing connection with students who may be grappling with feelings of isolation, anger, and hopelessness.

Culturally relevant practices in this setting involve tailoring educational approaches to recognize and address the unique backgrounds, experiences, and traumas of justice-involved youth. Teachers must go beyond the standard curriculum to incorporate elements that resonate with the cultural identities of these students. This not only enhances the relevance of the educational content but also communicates a profound understanding of their individual struggles.

Moreover, in an environment where relationships between teachers and students are strained due to external pressures, culturally relevant practices serve as a conduit for rebuilding trust. By acknowledging and respecting the cultural context of each student, teachers can create a supportive and empathetic space, fostering an atmosphere conducive to learning and personal growth.

In addition to the challenges posed by the confined setting, restrictions, and hopelessness, the ultimate goal of working with justice-involved youth who are serious offenders is rehabilitation. Culturally relevant practices play a pivotal role in the rehabilitation process, recognizing that these students often come from diverse backgrounds with unique needs. The application of culturally relevant practices becomes an integral part of the comprehensive approach toward rehabilitating this population, aiming not only to provide academic instruction but also to address the underlying factors contributing to their involvement in the justice system. By fostering a culturally sensitive and inclusive educational environment, teachers contribute to the rehabilitation journey, offering opportunities for personal growth, self-reflection, and the development of essential life skills that are crucial for successful reintegration into society.

In essence, the implications of working with justice-involved youth who are serious offenders underscore the critical need for culturally relevant practices. These practices not only uphold the principles of diversity and inclusivity but also become indispensable tools for teachers striving to establish meaningful connections in an environment filled with challenges, restrictions, and a sense of hopelessness.

We are not monsters

Students who are serious offenders desire the same treatment from their teachers as typical students. Establishing a connection through care and humane approaches is crucial in

conveying that they are viewed as students rather than monsters. The significance of respectful and empathetic approaches cannot be overstated for this particular group. The concept of reciprocal respect suggests that by showing respect, teachers can foster a mutual respect with this population. Conversely, disrespect can lead to reciprocated disrespect. Due to their backgrounds and sensitivity to perception, these students expect teachers to initiate respect, even if the students initially behave disrespectfully. This means that, regardless of the students' behavior, teachers must exhibit respect.

Although students might believe that respect is reciprocal, the responsibility lies with the teacher, irrespective of the student's behavior. Students perceive teachers who maintain respect, even in the face of disrespect, as recognizing them beyond surface actions, viewing them as deserving of respect and humane treatment. This fosters a sense that teachers understand their challenges. Teachers are able to put themselves in their situation.

Students who are serious offenders perceive empathetic teachers as understanding and supportive, irrespective of their circumstances or behavior. Empathetic teachers refrain from reacting negatively and avoid pressuring students when they are not in the right mind-set or emotional state. Teachers who use a positive approach offer support or allow students to have their space to recover when having challenging days. Empathetic teachers empathize with students, understanding their mind-set and emotional states. Approaching students in a supportive manner conveys understanding and care.

While respect and empathy are crucial in all student interactions, this population presents unique challenges for teachers. Teachers must possess effective tools to work with this group. Interacting with these students demands considerable restraint from teachers, who must respond in ways that demonstrate respect and empathy. When teachers convey respect and empathy, it

indicates an understanding of the students' unique circumstances, expresses care, and affirms their humanity – critical elements for this population. Establishing respect and empathy in the teacher-student relationship reduces the likelihood of students feeling dehumanized or perceived as monsters.

Brief Recap of the Research Problem, Gap, Purpose and Objectives

It is evident that despite extensive efforts at the national, state, and local levels to reduce the youth population within the juvenile justice system, the majority of those currently incarcerated are serious offenders (Sickmund et al., 2022). This group often comprises youth involved in violent crimes such as homicide, burglary, assault, and sexual assault, with an overrepresentation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system. Many justice-involved students grapple with disengagement, school disciplinary issues, and academic failure (Sickmund et al., 2015), leading to poorer outcomes compared to their non-justice-involved peers. Long-term challenges, including academic difficulties, disciplinary issues, and recidivism, contribute to social, economic, and educational hardships (Scott et al., 2002; Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020).

Teachers, faced with the complexities of these students' situations (Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020), encounter unique challenges in establishing connections. To foster meaningful relationships and success, understanding students' culture and employing culturally relevant relationship practices becomes crucial (Wilson, 2015; Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Flores & Barahona-Lopez, 2020). Building connections is the initial step toward creating opportunities for success, regardless of the context.

The scarcity of literature on best practices for working with serious offender students of color underscored the need to capture insights directly from justice-involved students who are

serious offenders. Neglecting their perspectives can perpetuate systemic inequities, hindering progress toward a fairer educational system within the juvenile justice system. Although evidence emphasizes the significance of forming relationships with marginalized youth (Roffey, 2012; Agyekum, 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019), research on effective teacher methods for connecting with serious offenders with an extended history within the system is limited. This research aimed to fill this gap by exploring the perceptions and experiences of justice-involved students of color with serious criminal backgrounds. Specifically, it sought to identify culturally relevant relationship practices that effectively establish connections between teachers and students, and through this connection engage them more meaningfully in the classroom to improve their outcomes.

The research examined how justice-involved students of color, serious offenders, perceive effective methods for building connections with their teachers and actively engaging in the classroom to improve academic outcomes. It aimed to identify the practical strategies teachers employ, from the students' standpoint, to establish connections and foster engagement. The study recognized the unique subculture formed by students experiencing incarceration within the system, highlighting the need for culturally competent and relevant relationship practices. Positive relationships with caring adults, particularly those who share similar cultural backgrounds and experiences (Cross, 2013), play a crucial role in helping youth of color feel supported, valued, and motivated to succeed (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016).

The study was significant as it attempted to understand students' perspectives on factors hindering or supporting culturally relevant relationship practices, bridging the cultural relationship gap between teachers and students of color who are serious offenders. The findings carry substantial implications for teacher approaches in working with justice-involved students,

addressing notable barriers these students face in connecting with teachers, participating in class, and achieving academic success. Moreover, the findings contribute to advancing equity and inclusion in the juvenile justice education system, emphasizing the significance of culturally relevant relationship practices in fostering positive teacher-student bonds and encouraging classroom engagement in this population.

Conceptual Framework Statement

Additionally, the research conceptual framework drew inspiration from the culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) theoretical framework, with reference to the works of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2000), placing a particular emphasis on culturally relevant relationships.

Overview of Research Design

To achieve this objective, a qualitative research design was employed to delve into the research inquiries (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach proved fitting for exploring the perspectives and experiences of justice-involved students concerning their teacher-student relationships and the culturally appropriate practices that foster positive connections and classroom engagement.

Overview of Methods, Data Collection and Analysis

The research unfolded within a singular setting, Barry J. Nidorf School, situated within the Los Angeles County juvenile justice system. This site was chosen due to its significance as the primary facility housing most identified students categorized as serious offenders. The primary data collection method centered on twelve semi-structured interviews conducted with high school participants, explicitly focusing on African-American and Latinx students aged eighteen or older. Thematic analysis techniques were employed to organize and analyze the data. The critical information relevant to the research questions was identified and assigned initial

codes. The data revealed patterns and themes and each theme received a name and definition capturing its essence.

Overview of Research Questions

Two fundamental questions guided the research. The primary objective of the first research question was to pinpoint relationship practices perceived by students as culturally relevant in establishing positive connections with their teachers. The second research question aimed to investigate how the student-teacher relationship influences students' motivation to engage in classroom activities, particularly considering that many students in the system have experienced disengagement from the education system and may lack hope due to their serious offenses. Understanding how justice-involved students perceive their learning becomes critical for teachers seeking to reconnect with and inspire this population. The goal was to comprehend, from the students' viewpoint, the culturally relevant relationship methods that either assist or impede their connection with teachers and their motivation to participate in classroom activities.

What follows is a comprehensive exploration of the study's outcomes, beginning with a succinct Summary of Findings. Subsequently, we discuss the Implications of these findings, examining their broader significance and practical applications. The chapter further addresses the impact of the study on the existing body of knowledge within the field. Additionally, we acknowledge and evaluate the limitations encountered during the research process, offering insights into the boundaries and potential biases. Looking forward, avenues for future research is presented that stem from the current study's findings. Finally, the chapter culminates in a conclusive reflection with the overarching conclusion, synthesizing the key findings and contributions throughout this research endeavor.

Summary of Findings

Despite abundant evidence supporting relationship-building with marginalized youth (Roffey, 2012; Agyekum, 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019), there is limited research focusing on effective teacher practices for establishing connections and engaging with serious offenders who are currently or will be serving time.

In exploring the first research question, two overarching themes emerged, revealing diverse practices and attributes. The study underscored the critical significance of care and humanity in fostering strong teacher-student relationships among serious offenders in a juvenile justice setting. These findings offer valuable insights into how teachers can effectively connect with justice-involved students who are serious offenders, positively impacting their educational journeys. In exploring the second research question. The key theme that surfaced was motivation, indicating its pivotal role in influencing student engagement in classroom activities.

Show genuine care to connect

Under the overarching theme of care, five essential sub-themes emerged, each providing nuanced insights into the elements that students deemed important to connect with them and create a supportive and nurturing classroom environment. Students emphasized the significance of patience in this context, particularly when students exhibit challenging academic and behavior needs. This was expressed by Uriel, “Just help that person in general, and to not give up on somebody because everybody has their own way of learning. Everybody takes time, different pace in education.” Students in this context expect teachers to demonstrate unwavering patience. As Marcus, one of the students, put it, “I don't know, but for real, for real, patient, patience. Yeah, patience. It is going to take patience for the knuckleheads, for sure.” Teachers exhibiting patience contribute to students' sense of being cared for and supported. This fosters a stronger connection between teachers and students.

The theme of the physical presence of teachers falls under the broader theme of care. According to students, it goes beyond mere proximity, emphasizing the significance of emotional availability. Teachers who not only share the same physical space but also demonstrate emotional engagement resonate positively with students, cultivating a sense of connection and being cared for. For instance, Carson expressed, “Work with us, showing me that it's not easy to do this work, but I'm still going to be here for you to help you.” Sergio noted, “When they ask us, are we doing our work, are we alright? Are we having a good day? How are you feeling?” Physical presence holds importance for students. They seek assurance that you'll be available for both academic and emotional support when needed.

Within the care theme, another sub-theme involves teachers' commitment to supporting students within the classroom, demonstrated through the teacher's active involvement and time on task with the students. The emphasis on time on task highlights the value students place on teachers who engage with them during the learning process, demonstrating a sincere dedication to their academic growth. Pedro stressed the importance of teachers' time on task involvement as a demonstration of care, stating, “By helping us more with our work. Be there next to us and helping us understand whatever the task is about.” Carson echoed this sentiment, saying, “If they looked at us as students, they would actually sit right there and help us. Do you need one-on-one? Do you need this? Do you need that?” Given that many serious offenders face academic challenges, the act of teachers spending time helping them with their classwork contributes significantly to their sense of being cared for.

Moreover, the commitment to student understanding was demonstrated by teachers who offered alternative explanations and adjusted their teaching methods to meet individual student needs. This sub-theme underscores the significance of personalized approaches, catering to

diverse learning styles and abilities and ensuring a comprehensive grasp of the material.

Antwone highlighted this by stating, “She [the teacher] used different metaphors to explain it in my head. Like to get me to understand the lesson. So, that showed me that she really cared cause she really wanted me to get it right or teacher wanted me to make it.” Carmelo echoed this sentiment, expressing, “Actually help with the work and break down things and trying to find other ways to explain it better and not just try to stick with just one way. They [teachers] go out their way to break things down, so to speak.” Given that many students who are serious offenders have educational gaps and a significant number have learning disabilities, teachers who show care in this context make a deliberate effort to provide alternative explanations, ensuring students comprehend what is expected of them.

Finally, empathy played a pivotal role within the care theme, as students highly valued teachers who could empathize with their challenges and exhibit compassion. Teachers who demonstrate genuine understanding and empathy cultivate a supportive environment where students feel acknowledged and empowered to navigate both academic and personal obstacles. According to Charlie, “They [teachers] place themselves in our shoes. They know if we are having a bad day. They don't have to always push us and like they understand us.” Sergio shared a similar sentiment, stating, “They [teachers] could just tell them, I'm here to do my job. I'm not here to make it harder for you. I know it's really hard here. If you need any help, my help is right here.” In this context, students perceive teacher empathy as a crucial practice for establishing a connection and comprehending their circumstances. When teachers exhibit empathy, students feel cared for and understood. Empathy help teachers better understand the unique challenges and experiences that these students have faced (McMahon, & Pederson, 2020).

The care sub-themes collectively provide a detailed framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of care within the teacher-student interactions, offering actionable insights for teachers aiming to connect with students and create a positive and nurturing learning environment. The findings are consistent with studies showing the critical role that care plays in fostering positive relationships and promoting growth when acts of empathy, concern, and attention toward someone's physical, emotional, and psychological needs are demonstrated (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz & Jackson, 2016; Sapiro, & Ward, 2020).

Treat as humans to connect

The second theme, which further shed light to the first research question, humanity, comprises several integral sub-themes that students identified as crucial in their interactions with teachers. These sub-themes include respect, relatedness, tolerance, and sensitivity, each providing nuanced insights into the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship.

In this setting, respect entails treating students with dignity and acknowledging their shared humanity. According to the viewpoints of students who are serious offenders, respect holds significant importance within the concept of humanity and profoundly shapes the overall quality of relationships established between students and teachers. Sergio articulated his perspective on respect, stating, “Respect hood is like... get respect, you get respect back. Keep it neutral. That's how we look at it. Like how you treat me, I'll treat you. If you treat us well, we'll treat ya'll well, but if you treat us like shit, we'll treat you like shit.” Yarrell offered a suggestion, advising, “don't try to treat them different. Everybody is human. Treat everybody with respect. You'll get the same, most of the time.” Based on the perspectives of students who are serious offenders, respect plays a significant role in their lives and it influences the overall quality of the relationships that are formed between students and teachers.

The sub-theme of relatedness underscores the importance of teachers establishing personal connections with students, especially through shared experiences. Educators who go beyond traditional roles and build connections based on shared backgrounds, interests, or experiences are highly valued by students. This contributes to a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding. Lonnie emphasized the significance of teachers having a similar background, stating, “Like growing up like in struggle type of stuff, rough neighborhoods. Like little stuff like that. They can have more understanding with you that you can relate more.” Teachers who cannot relate to this population may struggle to connect with and understand them. To fill this gap, Uriel suggested, “Ask us about backgrounds... Your struggles because that's, I think, we all have in common. If you came from a struggle we did too... So, I think that's one thing that we could connect, sharing backgrounds and then it starts from there.” The teachers’ capacity to relate to this particular population holds immense importance for students in this context. It sends a strong message of humanity and dedication, further strengthening the bonds between teachers and students.

Tolerance within the context of teacher-student relationships entails acknowledging and respecting differences. Teachers demonstrate tolerance by effectively working with students facing challenges in meeting the traditional standards and adhering to social norms. As Marcus pointed out, “Realize that you're not working in a regular school. You're working in a jail where in eight times out of ten, you're working with kids who are either murderers or attempted murderers or aggravated assault. All of them, harsh crimes... Assault with a deadly weapon and all that type of shit. You gotta realize that you're not working in a regular school.” Working in this unique educational setting, demands teachers to be tolerant. Students appreciate teachers when they maintain composure and refrain from reacting negatively to diverse behaviors. Oscar

emphasized the importance as not reacting as, "...they see you [student] like tripping and they [teachers] don't take it personal. They don't get scared. They come back and they still keep just simply talking to us like humans." In this environment, tolerance is important to establish connections with students. Tolerance conveys an acknowledgment of their background and their humanity despite their behaviors. This approach contributes to fostering a positive classroom atmosphere where differences are acknowledged and teachers meet students where they are to foster a sense of acceptance.

In this context, sensitivity refers to teachers closely observing and responding to the specific needs and circumstances of their students. Students underscored the significance of teachers being attuned to both their academic and personal challenges. According to Sergio, sensitive teachers can connect because, "...they understand, but sometimes some people be like he's an inmate, he's done bad stuff and shit like that." Sensitive teachers can establish connections with students who are serious offenders because they comprehend the complexities of individual situations, despite preconceived judgments related to their past actions. Uriel, expressed that teachers need to be sensitive because, "Got to accept the fact that not every city and every place we come from is the same." Cultural Sensitivity emphasizes the role of teachers creating an empathetic and supportive environment for students who are serious offenders by being aware of and responsive to the unique needs of each student.

In sum, the research highlights the pivotal significance of humanity, which includes elements such as respect, relatedness, tolerance, and sensitivity. These aspects are instrumental in establishing connections between justice-involved students and their teachers in this particular context. Recognizing students as individuals, these practices play a crucial role in strengthening bonds and cultivating positive teacher-student relationships within the educational setting.

Motivation is key to engage students

To answer the second research question, motivation emerged as a crucial factor influencing students' active involvement in the learning process. Noteworthy, are the practices identified as contributors to motivation, which include the aspects of reward, inclusiveness, and engagement.

In examining the theme of reward, the implementation of incentives emerged as a potent strategy to inspire active participation among justice-involved students in classroom activities. This recognition underscores the effectiveness of acknowledging and rewarding their efforts within the educational environment. Marcus emphasized the significance of rewards, stating, "In jail, rewards are the biggest thing... So, for someone to be doing well and not have it recognized, it demotivates them from continuing to perform positively." Oscar highlighted the positive impact of incentives, expressing, "Food brings people together and makes people happy... We all come because we're gaining something, and I believe incentives should be utilized to motivate people to attend school and learn." In this distinctive context, the use of various incentives as a form of reward plays a pivotal role in the teacher-student relationship, serving as a crucial element to motivate students who are serious offenders and foster active participation in classroom activities.

When examining inclusiveness, the focus is on the pivotal involvement of students in the decision-making process. This not only empowers them but also ensures that the curriculum is customized to resonate with their individual interests, fostering a sense of relevance and engagement. Charlie expressed the importance of inclusivity in teaching, stating, "I'll ask what do you like to learn, what do you like to learn? Get a better understanding from everybody and then try to do one curriculum where it best fits everyone." Moreover, incorporating students'

voices is crucial, as highlighted by Pedro, "They teach stuff that we don't really want to learn about...They should give something we want to learn about." In the teacher-student relationship within this context, being inclusive is vital for motivating students. Teachers need to pay attention to students' preferences and align the curriculum with topics that hold meaning and relevance to them, thereby motivating them to engage in classwork.

Engagement plays a significant role in connecting students to their teacher which in turn increases their motivation and engagement in the classroom. Several sub-themes emerged that support the role of engagement from the perspective of the students, which include connecting, pushing, inspiring, and energizing.

A critical practice that is valued by students is the concept of connection, involving the establishment of meaningful bonds with students to cultivate a genuine desire for academic engagement. Lonnie stressed its significance, stating, "Focus on having a connection with the kids before you try and make them do work." Carson highlighted the impact of a strong connection on motivation, expressing, "If the level is high, I will be very motivated to do work. I respect that teacher and their boundaries." A robust connection in the teacher-student relationship is essential for motivating students in this context; without it, their enthusiasm for classroom participation may be significantly affected.

Another notable practice is the importance of "pushing" within the teacher-student relationship. This involves motivating students by providing support, positive feedback, and encouragement to nurture their self-confidence, drive, and belief in their abilities. Antwone emphasized the chemistry built through this approach, stating, "it's that chemistry built with that teacher. So when they tell you keep going and they don't want you to fall off, that's motivation." Pedro echoed this sentiment, noting, "they really push, they really push us to get our high school

diploma, and they really want us to do it, or to better ourselves." Students highly value teachers who push them not only to engage in the classroom but also to complete tasks. Besides pushing them to engage and get work done, students appreciate it when they are talk to and inspired to get them engaged.

Inspiring students is another significant practice, where teachers serve as motivational sources and role models, encouraging students to strive for personal growth and achievement. Charlie highlighted the inspirational impact, stating, "You got potential, you can be something. So I felt like that was the motivation I needed. Telling me that I can, when other people tell me I can't. So, it's like, damn like you really see something in me type of shit." Marcus expressed a similar view, noting, "... pointing out how intelligent you are, and you can do good, like you can be somewhere. I know I was smart but they make me feel way smarter than what I am, for sure." The practice of inspiring plays a powerful role in the student-teacher connection, motivating students in this context to actively engage in the classroom.

Equally important is the practice of "energizing" students and the classroom environment. Energizing signifies teachers displaying authentic passion and enthusiasm in their interactions with students, particularly concerning specific tasks, ideas, or goals. According to students, this projects a contagious energy that motivates and engages them in the classroom. Carmelo emphasized the importance of a teacher's energy, stating, "I mean it's not really off the words for me. It's off the energy. You know, I'm good at reading energy, and I'm gonna feel like if you care or not. So, if I feel like you don't care, I'm not going to care." Other students shared similar views. Oscar demanded teachers to "show some type of enthusiasm that you want to be there or show some type of like being engaged, like engaging with us." Energizing is a critical element in

the teacher-student relationship, as it significantly influences them to engage actively in the classroom.

In summary, the level of connection in the teacher-student relationship significantly influences student motivation in this context. The three essential sub-themes of motivation - rewards, inclusivity, and engagement - contribute significantly to stimulating student participation in classroom activities and maximizing their potential. Rewards through incentives motivate students to engage enthusiastically in academic tasks. Inclusivity ensures alignment with students' interests by actively involving them in the decision-making process and curriculum development. Furthermore, engagement serves as a motivator for students, with key practices including connecting, pushing, inspiring, and energizing.

In conclusion, the study's findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of care and humanity within the teacher-student relationship, emphasizing the importance of patience, physical presence, time on task, alternative explanations, empathy, respect, relatedness, tolerance, and sensitivity. Moreover, motivation is a crucial factor, with practices such as reward, inclusiveness, and engagement playing key roles in influencing student motivation and engagement in the classroom. These insights provide valuable guidance for teachers seeking to connect with serious offenders and enhance their educational experiences.

Chapter 5: Implications

Amidst the ongoing efforts to reimagine the juvenile justice system (Pavelka & Thomas, 2019), it remains crucial to recognize both the intricacies of the youth's needs and the challenges teachers face in facilitating the education and success of justice-involved students. Students who are serious offenders and who will be doing time will require effective practices to address their unique needs. But first, a connection must be established between the teacher and student.

Implications for Teachers

In light of research findings, teachers must carefully consider several implications when working with justice-involved youth who are serious offenders. Reflection on teaching practices, as well as identification of barriers hindering an understanding of students and the effective use of culturally relevant approaches, is crucial. The cultural diversity among serious offenders introduces a myriad of challenges to the classroom, demanding thoughtful consideration from educators. To bridge the gap between teachers and these students, a continuous assessment of practices and student needs is essential. The absence of a connection should prompt teachers to refrain from assuming deficiencies in the student but rather to evaluate the impact of their methods. Adaptive approaches that yield positive results should be retained, while ineffective strategies should be reconsidered.

Teachers need to embrace the role of change agents, viewing challenges presented by students as opportunities to implement impactful approaches and strategies for connection. Responses to students' challenges, such as negative attitudes, require thoughtful consideration, as these interactions determine whether a trusting and empathetic relationship can be established. Reflectivity and a commitment to evaluating effectiveness with serious offenders are paramount. Culturally relevant practices, emphasizing care, humanity, and motivation, are pivotal tools perceived as pertinent by students in this population.

Moreover, teachers must be cognizant of potential factors hindering engagement and connection in this unique context. The reluctance to adopt culturally relevant practices, comfort with traditional methods, and a deficit mindset pose significant obstacles. Understanding the educational needs of students within this specific context is essential, dispelling any notion that

these students are a hopeless cause. Implicit biases and depersonalized perceptions, such as viewing students as "inmates" or "monsters," can impede caring and humane interactions.

Cultural competence is fundamental, as teachers must relate to and connect with students. The lack of cultural competence acts as a barrier to forming meaningful connections. Teachers need to reflect on potential barriers like traditional methods, deficit mindsets, implicit biases, and cultural competence gaps that may impede the adoption of effective practices for this population.

Teachers must consider practices that facilitate the teacher-student connection, emphasizing the importance of patience in dealing with the unique challenges posed by serious offenders. Demonstrating resilience, accepting feedback without personalization, and consistently providing support are key elements. Physical and emotional presence in the classroom goes beyond proximity, requiring meaningful interactions that convey genuine concern and care. Allocating dedicated time for interactions, offering one-on-one attention, and engaging in hands-on activities enrich the learning experience and demonstrate a sincere commitment to education. Recognizing diverse learning styles and adapting approaches accordingly fosters inclusivity.

Lastly, empathetic teachers actively seek to understand and relate to the challenges faced by serious offenders. This involves placing themselves in the students' situation, asking about their well-being, and being present to offer support. Displaying compassion and acknowledging the difficulties encountered by justice-involved students can significantly strengthen the teacher-student connection, fostering an environment where students feel cared for and understood.

Implications for School Administrators

Based on the research findings and support teachers will need, school administrators play a pivotal role in facilitating positive interactions between teachers and justice-involved youth

who are serious offenders. To address the distinctive challenges within this population, administrators can focus on providing professional development for teachers, implementing supportive school policies and initiatives, fostering student inclusion in decision-making processes, and consistently reinforcing practices rooted in care, humanity, and motivation.

Professional development is a cornerstone for teachers to effectively work with serious offenders, encompassing practices of care, humanity, and motivation. Administrators can arrange training sessions featuring external experts, as well as experienced administrators and teachers from within the school community, recognized for their caring, humanistic, and motivating approaches. This approach equips teachers with the knowledge and confidence to employ practices such as patience, being physically and emotionally present, dedicating meaningful time to tasks, offering alternative explanations, and demonstrating empathy.

Administrators can also reinforce these practices by employing checklists during classroom walkthroughs to observe teachers in action, and constructive feedback based on the checklist can further support teachers in applying these practices effectively. Additionally, administrators can create self-reflection checklists for teachers to assess their implementation of these practices independently.

Moreover, school policies can be created to emphasize creating a positive climate founded on respect and tolerance. Promoting restorative justice and conflict resolution practices can help teachers and students address differences in a constructive manner. Respect, relatedness, tolerance, and sensitivity are crucial elements that administrators need to emphasize in professional development and policies. Acknowledging the humanity of serious offenders is vital, and administrators must communicate how teachers can approach and interact with this

population. Supporting teachers in relating to students fosters connections and understanding, promoting tolerance of students' behaviors and attitudes.

Professional development can also focus on understanding strategies to motivate students in this context. Recognizing the impact of rewards, inclusivity, and engagement on student motivation is essential. Inclusive decision-making processes enhance student engagement, aligning classroom activities with their interests and preferences. Policies should highlight the importance of respectful and empathetic interactions, treating justice-involved students with dignity, and fostering reciprocal relationships.

Administrators need to cultivate a supportive school environment, acknowledging and rewarding teachers who go beyond traditional responsibilities to build meaningful connections with students. Recognizing the significance of teachers being both physically and emotionally present reinforces a culture where teachers feel supported in adopting effective practices for this unique population.

Implications for District Administrators

Based on the findings, the implications involve ensuring appropriate resource allocation, allowing for curricular flexibility, implementing collaboration initiatives, employing evaluation metrics, and reinforcing policy advocacy. District administrators need to allocate sufficient resources for professional development programs addressing the distinctive challenges of teaching in a juvenile justice setting, and providing ongoing support for teachers to implement effective strategies. This might mean having weekly or at least monthly professional development or trainings that address best practices to connect with students who are serious offenders and ways to motivate them to engage in school. Furthermore, there should be an allowance for flexible curricular approaches that take into account the interests and needs of

students who are serious offenders. Specifically, this might take the form of including justice-involved students who are serious offenders to be part of the development of the curriculum and selecting topics and books that are relevant to them. Encouraging curriculum development that integrates real-world issues and aligns with students' backgrounds is crucial.

Moreover, it is essential to facilitate collaboration among teachers, administrators, and relevant stakeholders to enhance the overall educational experience for students in the juvenile justice setting. This collaborative effort aims to foster a supportive community within the juvenile justice facility, addressing the multifaceted needs of justice-involved students. Additionally, developing evaluation metrics to assess the implementation of care-focused practices, such as time on task with students, and motivational strategies in the classroom is vital. These metrics should be utilized to measure the effectiveness of teacher practices and to inform ongoing improvement efforts.

Finally, there is a need to advocate for policies at the district and state levels that recognize the distinct and unique needs of students who are serious offenders. The focus should be on creating an educational environment that prioritizes care, humanity, and motivation for this specific student population.

Impact of the Study

This study has made significant contributions to the limited body of research on serious offenders, enriching the existing literature in several key ways. First, by focusing on justice-involved students, it addresses a notable gap in the research, providing valuable insights into a population that has been underrepresented. Moreover, this study extends the theoretical model of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), specifically emphasizing culturally relevant relationships with this population. By applying and expanding CRP in this context, it not only enhances the

theoretical framework but also offers practical implications for educators seeking to establish meaningful connections with this unique student population.

Teachers working with serious offenders in a school within the juvenile justice facility is challenging. As one student emphasized the unique environment, “Realize that you're not working in a regular school. You're working in a jail...” and with a population, “...who are either murderers or attempted murderers or aggravated assault. All of them, harsh crimes.” However, student stressed the need to continue to teach them as their background has nothing to do with teachers. Besides their criminal background, students bring a myriad of challenges to the school setting, including educational gaps and challenges, gang involvement, mental health issues, and hopelessness. These complexities make it particularly challenging for teachers, especially without the necessary knowledge and tools to connect and influence this population. Teachers need to, as one student pointed out, “...know how to deal with kids like this. Everybody in this mother fucker came from a continuation school, and I could guarantee you that they went to a continuation school or never went to school at all.” Building and maintaining relationships with this population becomes difficult and established connections are under constant pressure due to various factors.

By focusing the study on students' perspectives, valuable insights were gained to comprehend effective approaches for this population. While many of these insights hold relevance in traditional school settings, their significance escalates in this particular context due to the heightened intensity and pressures encountered by teachers in a juvenile justice setting. Teachers consistently grapple with students exhibiting challenging behaviors or emotional disturbances, necessitating the maintenance of a safe and supportive learning environment amidst disruptive behaviors. Additionally, teachers must be attuned to students' educational gaps and

learning difficulties, and adapting their methods to address their diverse learning needs. Furthermore, a need for trauma-informed approaches may be needed, given that some students may have experienced trauma, requiring teachers to approach students with sensitivity and understanding. Moreover, teachers in this setting contend with heightened security measures, presenting an ongoing challenge of striking a balance between ensuring safety and fostering a nurturing educational environment.

The combination of these factors contributes to the distinctive intensity and pressures experienced in this educational setting compared to traditional school environments. The study's findings offer justice-involved teachers working with serious offenders the effective cultural practices that can support the teacher-student relationship and influence students' motivation to engage in the classroom, potentially alleviating the intensity and pressures inherent in this environment.

Teachers can leverage the insights from the study to adapt and refine their practices. With an enhanced knowledge base, teachers are better prepared to respond with the most effective approaches and strategies to connect and engage with justice-involved students who are serious offenders. With a deeper understanding, teachers may choose to adopt more culturally relevant practices in their interactions, such as exercising patience when students are having a rough day. This response communicates care for students' well-being, a significant departure from a punitive approach.

Additionally, teachers can tailor their strategies based on the specific needs highlighted in the study such as recognizing the importance of including student voices in decision-making about the curriculum. This inclusive approach is likely to motivate students to engage with lessons and activities they had a role in deciding. This newfound knowledge may prompt

teachers to implement targeted approaches that align with the unique needs and experiences of this specific student population, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

In essence, the study's findings have the potential to transform how teachers respond to the challenges and needs posed by justice-involved students who are serious offenders, encouraging a shift towards more informed, sensitive and effective practices.

Limitations

The primary focus of the research was to examine students' perspectives on teachers' approaches to building connections with students of color who are serious offenders. Due to resource and time constraints, the study was conducted at a specific location with a small sample size of twelve male students from African-American and Latinx backgrounds, limiting its generalizability. Although the sample size lacks statistical significance, the in-depth interviews provided valuable insights into effective relationship-building with justice-involved students who are serious offenders. However, potential self-selection bias and exclusions of younger offenders, female participants, and individual-specific factors are limitations. Additionally, the study acknowledges the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants' responses, emphasizing the disruption in education for over two years where students had minimal contact with their teachers. While the research provides valuable insights within its context, its findings should not be broadly applied to other demographic groups or settings due to the acknowledged limitations.

Future Research

While the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), particularly its focus on culturally relevant relationships, effectively guided the exploration to answer the research questions in this study, subsequent research on justice-involved students who are serious offenders has the

potential to broaden the current study's findings, contributing to an enhanced understanding of this population and their relationships through the application of CRP.

Researchers can introduce additional questions or refine the existing ones to delve further into the perspectives and experiences of students. For example, additional questions or probes may focus on investigating how family dynamics, the seriousness of their offense, gang involvement and academic challenges influence their beliefs and perceptions, particularly in connection with their teachers. These factors may influence students' perceptions of relationships and factors motivating their involvement in the classroom. A more focused approach would enhance our understanding of the varied factors influencing the experiences of justice-involved students.

Additionally, researchers could consider narrowing the participant pool exclusively to serious offenders who maintain positive relationships with their teachers. This approach would facilitate an in-depth exploration of how culturally relevant relationships contribute to positive outcomes.

Moreover, efforts to involve participants below the age of 18 is important to account for their unique perspectives and needs. Likewise, including the viewpoints of female students is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of how they perceive teacher-student relationships and the factors that drive their participation in classroom activities within this context.

By taking these considerations into account, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by serious offenders.

Conclusion

The trajectory of this research study was influenced by a state school climate survey that was administered to justice-involved students within the specific school setting where the research was conducted. The survey results raised concerns about student perceptions related to caring relationships and school connectedness. A significant percentage of students expressed not feeling cared for by a teacher or some other adult in the school and they did not feel close to people in the school. While the school climate results highlighted these troubling findings, it did not explain the “what” and “why” behind the students’ responses.

Hence, the primary goal of this study was to delve into the perceptions of students identified as serious offenders, exploring what establishes a connection with their teacher and how this relationship influences their motivation to engage in the classroom. By prioritizing their voices and listening to their perspectives and experiences, a treasure trove was discovered that holds the potential to enhance teacher practices and elevate student achievement and outcomes.

In this research, the voices of twelve justice-involved students, of African-American and Latinx background, particularly those deemed serious offenders, provided culturally relevant insights into the complex dynamics of the teacher-student relationship within the juvenile justice context. By giving importance to the voices of these students’ perspectives and stories, culturally relevant approaches were identified to address the cultural gap between teachers and justice-involved students of color with serious offences. This qualitative research study revealed the essential significance of care, humanity, and motivation in cultivating meaningful teacher-student connections and engagement within the classroom. These overarching themes encapsulate critical practices that are culturally relevant and responsive for this population. They provide teachers with a framework to understand students and engage effectively with them in the classroom.

By gaining insight from the perspectives and narratives of serious offenders, teachers can cultivate a genuine commitment to support students and empathize with their circumstances. Understanding the challenges these students face contributes to creating a more supportive and caring classroom. For these students, care entails being treated with patience during academic challenges and rough days, where teachers demonstrate understanding and support, allowing students to work at their own pace and allowing them their space to recompose themselves.

Linked with patience is the significance of teachers being both physically and emotionally present in the classroom. Students desire teachers to check-in with them, inquire about their well-being, and remain readily available to address academic and emotional needs. Additionally, students emphasize the importance of teachers being committed and spending quality time actively working with them. This dedicated time on task helps keep students focused and engaged, supporting their behavior.

Moreover, students feel cared for when teachers use alternative ways to explain concepts, breaking them down, making them relevant, and providing different examples for better understanding. By including students' voices of students, this study helped understand the perspectives of serious offenders, enabling teachers to offer personalized support. This tailored approach can address specific needs and challenges, leading to better outcomes for these students.

Furthermore, students perceive caring teachers as empathic, able to put themselves in their shoes and understand their experiences. Empathetic teachers engage in conversation with students to check on their well-being and offer support. These culturally relevant caring practices communicate to students that they are seen as individuals, not as inmates or criminals, deserving of teachers' time, attention and care.

In a similar vein humanizing acts, such as treating students with respect, relating to them, demonstrating tolerance, and being sensitive to their circumstances, are crucial. Students from difficult cultural backgrounds find value in teachers who understand their worldview, this leads teachers to adopt culturally relevant and responsive practices.

Reciprocal respect is significant for this population, where students emphasize the importance of being treated as they would like to be treated. The tone and manner of communication significantly influence their perception of respect, with loud or angry tones and rude responses being deemed as disrespectful. When teachers establish respect, even with differing backgrounds, understanding and relating to this population becomes possible.

When teachers are able to relate and understand this population, it enhances their tolerance for students' behavior. Students value teachers who are able to tolerate and work with them even when they misbehave or are disrespectful. Students perceive tolerant teachers as not taking things personally and showing resilience by continuing to teach and engage with them. Students perceive teachers who are tolerant as being sensitive to their circumstances. Sensitive teachers show compassion and they understand students' backgrounds and experiences as well as their struggles and challenges. Teachers who are sensitive are able to read students' behavior and prevent situations from escalating.

From the students' perspective, these culturally relevant humanizing practices send the message that they are perceived as individuals, deserving respect and compassion, not as monsters. Collectively, serious offenders perceive caring and humanizing practices as vital to foster a genuine connection between teachers and students.

Building a positive connection with teachers is seen as a prerequisite for student motivation in the classroom. When students feel a strong connection, they are more willing to

engage in activities. Conversely, a shaky or absent connection diminishes motivation. While the connection is crucial, students have identified specific teacher practices that influence their motivation in the classroom.

Insights from the students' perspectives reveal that motivation involves rewards, inclusivity and engaging teachers. Incentives including snacks, food, recreation time, videos, music, and breaks are considered powerful strategies to influence students. Additionally, students want their voices included in decision-making, to express their opinions, ideas, and concerns. They want to learn content that is relevant and meaningful.

Teachers who engage, connect, inspire, and energize students are valued, especially considering the educational gaps and challenges serious offender students bring to class. Students appreciate teacher who push them, praise them, encourage them, and acknowledge their abilities. Inspiration also comes from teachers who help students see themselves as successful in the future.

The energy the teacher brings into the classroom plays a crucial role in motivating students. Students are motivated when teachers show passion and enthusiasm in their interactions and teaching. Teachers who are perceived as passionate and enthusiastic inspire engagement, while a lack of enthusiasm may deter motivation. The motivational practices of reward, inclusivity, and engagement, as emphasized by students, are key to influencing motivation and engagement in the classroom.

Many serious offender students, have experienced disengagement and hopelessness in the educational system. Including their voices of serious offenders in this study was critical to capture their perspective on effective culturally relevant teacher practices. Including their voices

was critical to capture their perspectives of the effective culturally relevant teacher practices that foster positive relationships and influence student motivation,

Prioritizing care, humanity, and motivation in the interactions and in the classroom environment, provides teachers with tools to re-engage and instill hope to students who are serious offenders. This contribution is significant in creating a more just and inclusive educational environment, affirming the belief that every student deserves an education that nurtures their potential and supports their journey toward a brighter future, irrespective of their background, experiences and context.

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45 Code of Federal Regulations 46.117 Documentation of Informed Consent. Last updated, October 11, 2023.

APPENDIX A

California Healthy Kids Survey Link <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/at/chks.asp>

Barry J. Nidorf School	
SURVEY SAMPLE	
Survey Sample Size for Core Module	
Student Sample Size	#
Target sample	130
Final number	103
Response Rate	79%

Barry J. Nidorf School	
Race or Ethnicity	%
Black or African American non-Hispanic	24
Hispanic or Latinx	64
Multiracial, non-Hispanic	6
Something else, non-Hispanic	6

APPENDIX B

Caring Relationships & School Connectedness Data

Caring Relationships Scale Questions		
There is a teacher or some other adult from my school...		
who really cares about me.		
	%	Combo %
Not at all true	29	58
A little true	29	
Pretty much true	28	41
Very much true	13	
who notices when I'm not there		
	%	Combo %
Not at all true	21	45
A little true	24	
Pretty much true	35	54
Very much true	19	
who listens to me when I have something to say.		
	%	Combo %
Not at all true	22	45
A little true	23	
Pretty much true	28	55
Very much true	27	
Caring adults in school Average reporting "Pretty much true" or "Very much true"	50	

School Connectedness Scale Questions		
I feel close to people at/from this school.		
	%	Combo %
Strongly disagree	30	41
Disagree	11	
Neither disagree nor agree	30	30
Agree	23	
Strongly agree	7	
I am happy with/to be at this school.		
	%	Combo %
Strongly disagree	32	53
Disagree	21	
Neither disagree nor agree	18	29
Agree	21	
Strongly agree	8	
I feel like I am part of this school.		
	%	Combo %
Strongly disagree	27	41
Disagree	14	
Neither disagree nor agree	34	25
Agree	20	
Strongly agree	5	
The Teachers at this school treat students fairly/The teachers treat students fairly.		
	%	Combo %
Strongly disagree	17	28
Disagree	11	
Neither disagree nor agree	27	45
Agree	33	
Strongly agree	12	
I feel safe in my school.		
	%	Combo %
Strongly disagree	15	25
Disagree	10	
Neither disagree nor agree	19	56
Agree	33	
Strongly agree	23	
School Connectedness Average reporting "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"	37	

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Script

Hey [**STUDENT NAME**] how are you doing? I'm Dr. Moss, and I work for LACOE. I wanted to talk with you about a research project your School Principal, Mr. Carranza, is working on. You know how Mr. Carranza is in charge of the school, right? Well, he's studying at UCLA and he is the one leading this research. It's like he has two important jobs, making things run here and finding out cool stuff through the research.

I know you might be wondering why we're talking instead of Mr. Carranza. Well, we want to make sure you don't feel like you have to do something just because he's the school principal. That is why he asked me to talk to you. We want you to decide what's best for you. Whether you want to be part of his research study or not, that's totally up to you. Your choice and how you feel about it really matter.

So, what's this research about? Mr. Carranza wants to know what you think about the ways teachers connect with students of color like you in this place. He's curious about your thoughts on how teachers connect and motivate students to learn.

Here's how it works: He'll chat with you in a one-on-one interview. Mr. Carranza will ask you questions about how you see your relationships with your teachers and how those connections help you do better in class. This is a chance for you to share your thoughts and help teachers understand how to be even better at their jobs here. This is all about research.

You know what's awesome? This won't be risky for you in any way. You can totally choose if you want to join in or not. If there's a question you don't want to answer, you don't have to. And guess what? If you start the interview and change your mind, it's totally fine to stop, no problem at all.

And don't worry about your privacy. Anything you say will stay just between you and Mr. Carranza. He won't share stuff like your name, when you were born, or where you go to school. Oh, and just so you know, being part of this study doesn't have anything to do with the school or where you are right now. Your choice to take part or not won't change anything about your status at Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall.

If you're up for it, Mr. Carranza will figure out a good time to talk one-on-one in a separate room. He'll record the interview and jot down some notes to remember what you said. It won't take more than 30 to 40 minutes. After the interview, he might want to check in with you again to double-check that he got everything you said correctly.

Oh, and here's a token of appreciation: to thank you for your time, Mr. Carranza will treat you to a meal that's worth up to fifteen dollars (\$15). He'll make sure it's something you'll enjoy.

If you want to know more or have questions, just ask. If you decide you're in, review the form (**provide a copy**) and let me know your decision. And hey, if you need more time to decide,

that's totally fine. Take the form with you, take your time, and I'll come back tomorrow to hear what you decide. You can also let Mr. Carranza know if you're up for it.

We really appreciate you considering to be part of this research, and it's awesome that you're taking time to think about it.

APPENDIX D

Consent to Participate

University of California, Los Angeles

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Exploring The Effective Culturally Relevant Relationship-Building Practices to Bridge the Cultural Divide between Teachers and Justice-Involved Students of Color with Serious Offence Backgrounds

INTRODUCTION

Ruben Carranza, M.A., from the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies - Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles is conducting a research study and it is supervised by Dr. Diane Durkin. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you met the criteria which included (1) enrollment in school for at least six months, (2) Latinx or African-American student, and (3) eighteen years or older. Your perspective is important to understand teacher-student relationships in this setting. Your participation in this research is voluntary.

Dr. Moss will be the one to meet with students and discuss the research study instead of Mr. Carranza. This way, students who are taking part in the research won't feel any pressure or unnecessary influence to join.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT A RESEARCH STUDY?

- *Someone will explain this research study to you.*
- *Whether or not you take part is up to you.*
- *You can choose not to take part.*
- *You can agree to take part and later change your mind.*
- *Your decision will not be held against you.*
- *You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.*

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

This study wants to find out what students think about the things that make it easier or harder for teachers and students to build positive relationships. The goal is to understand how teachers can work better with students of color who are in this setting. We want to figure out how teachers can connect with students and make them feel more interested in learning in class. The results of this study could help teachers in this setting work more effectively with students. They could learn better ways to help you connect with them and get more into your schoolwork.

HOW LONG WILL THE RESEARCH LAST AND WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?

- *Student participation will take a total of about 60 minutes, which includes 30 to 40 minutes of interview time, and about 20 - 30 minutes post-interview check-in to verify what you said in the interview was correctly understood.*

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- *Meet one-on-one with the researcher in a classroom setting.*
- *Answer a series of questions asked by the researcher. A total of 12 questions will be asked. Six questions have to do with trusting and caring relationships, and six questions are related to relationships and motivation in the classroom. Your responses may require follow-up (e.g. what do you mean) and probing (e.g., tell me more about it) questions by the researcher to clearly understand your responses.*
- *The interview will be recorded and you will be able to review, edit and erase the tapes/recordings.*

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IF I PARTICIPATE?

- *There are no anticipated risks or discomforts.*

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?

- *You will not directly benefit from your participation in the research.*
- *The results of the research may help teachers who work with students in this type of setting. Sometimes, students who have been through tough times find it hard to connect with teachers, join in-class activities, and do well in school. The results of this study could help make things more fair and ensure everyone feels included, especially in this type of setting. It could show that when teachers and students understand each other better, it can help everyone do better in school.*

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

- *The researcher will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.*

Use of personal information that can identify you:

- *No personal information that can identify you will be collected or stored.*

How information about you will be stored:

- *The information we collect will be electronically stored and secured.*

People and agencies that will have access to your information:

- *Only the Principal Investigator and his supervisor will have access to your information.*

How long information from the study will be kept:

- *Information collected will be maintained until the research is completed and the study is published.*

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- *Your data, including de-identified data may be kept for use in future research.*

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?

- *You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.*

WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

- *If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the principal researcher or his supervisor. Please contact: Ruben Carranza at 818-367-5941 or Dr. Diane Durkin 310-206-0558*

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- *You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.*
- *Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.*
- *You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.*

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

ATTACHMENT E

Interview Protocol and Questions

INTRODUCTION:

Hey [Student Name], I really appreciate your willingness to take part in this research. Dr. Moss had a conversation with you about the research study on my behalf. Our main goal was to ensure that you didn't experience any pressure or unnecessary influence from me when deciding whether to be involved in this research.

We appreciate your time and thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. We hope to learn more about what teachers can do to improve teacher-student relationships and improve students' engagement in the classroom. We will collect your responses and opinions about this subject to inform us how we can improve what teachers do in the classroom. There is no right or wrong answer to your responses to the interview questions. The only rule I'm going to ask for us to agree on is to not use teacher's names during the interview, can we agree to it?

The interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes. We will record the interview session to ensure we capture all the information you share with us. You can share whatever you believe is important to understand your experiences in your interactions with teacher(s) within the classroom. Also, if you prefer not to, you do not have to answer a question.

To ensure your confidentiality, your name, and any other personal information will not be included in any document that will be shared with others. Also, any information and opinions you share during the interview will not be associated with your name. Confidentiality is very important to us and we will not connect your responses to any personal identification. Your voice, opinions, and comments matter to us and we will respect the information you share.

The information collected in the interview will be transcribed, analyzed, and included in an Educational Leadership Program dissertation paper. Again, your personal information will remain confidential, and nothing you share here will be connected to your name.

Do you have any questions before we start recording the interview session?

STUDENT QUESTIONS

OPENING: To start, how long have you been in this setting? What is your favorite food?

START: I will begin with the first question.

Questions for "What culturally relevant relationship practices do incarcerated students say influence a positive connection with their teacher(s) and why?"

1. How do you describe a trusting and caring relationship with a teacher? What do teachers say or do that communicate trust and show they care about you?

2. Tell me about an experience you had with a teacher who you really liked? What made it special for you? What did you think or feel about the teacher?
3. Do you think where you come from and who you are makes it easy to have a positive relationship with your teachers? Why or why not?
4. What are some challenges teachers face when trying to have a positive relationship with students who are doing time? Students who think they are tough, hard-core?
5. How did the trusting and caring relationship with your teacher motivate you to do your best in class and to be a better person? What did the teacher say or do?
6. If you were the school principal, how would you improve the training for teachers to build trusting and caring relationships with students? Students who think they are tough, hard-core?

Questions for "How does the nature of the student-to-teacher relationship, according to students, influence students' motivation to engage in classroom activities?"

1. How do you define "motivation" in the classroom? What motivates you to do work in class?
2. Can you think of a time when a positive relationship with a teacher motivated you to participate and do class activities? How did the teacher make you think or feel?
3. How does the level of connection with a teacher motivate you to do classroom activities? Share an experience when the level of connection was high? Low?
4. Share an example of how a negative relationship with a teacher affected your motivation in class? What did they say or do? How did the teacher make you think or feel?
5. What do you think teachers can say and do to improve student motivation to do work in class?
6. If you were the school principal, how would you support teachers to relate to and motivate students to do class work? What would you tell teachers to do and say to students? Students who think they are tough, hard-core?

Ending: Is there anything else you would like to share that would help us improve how teachers connect with students and engage them in the classroom?

Conclusion: Thank you for your time and for providing important information that will help us improve what we do.