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### Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Begin Again: The Forced Change of Cultural Practices for Educators in Rural Placements

By

NERISSA WALLACE  
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Educational Leadership

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

Approved:

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Darnel Degand

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Marcela Cuellar

Committee in Charge

2022

## **Dedication**

This dissertation project is dedicated to my great grandmother Willie Ruth Wallace and my grandfather Paul Claythorne Wallace who, while they were physically with me and long after they'd passed, guided me through.

## **Acknowledgments**

There are many thanks that I need to give. I want to begin by thanking my committee. Dr. Danny Martinez, thank you for believing in the execution of this project and helping me honor the language and the journey I set out to have. Dr. Darnel Degand, thank you for introducing me to new academia and pushing me to dismantle boxes. Dr. Marcela Cuellar, thank you for the excitement and authenticity you bring to every conversation; it kept me grounded in being sure I was doing the difficult but correct work.

I want to thank my cohort, COHORT 15; you will always have a special place in my heart and have all become a permanent part of my family. This experience with you all has been soul-changing, and I am a better person and educator for it.

I want to thank my cousin Dr. Matt Wallace for reminding me of our roots and for being the exact balance of criticism and love I needed throughout. Thank you to my family of origin for keeping me humble and taking my mind off the research when I needed the break. To my wife and children, thank you for your patience and love. I know I have been a student forever, and a day, I can promise you that vacations and beach days are coming. To my extended family and in-laws, thank you for showing up, being interested, and always being proud of me. It means more than you know.

To my friends and colleagues past and present, thank you for the coffee, coverage, and email or text reminders. To my participants, thank you for stepping up and highlighting injustices and being committed to the effort of correcting them. Our educational system needs more people like you, and I hope you continue to be held and protected with the same force you give our students.

And finally, to my students, you all have been the most outstanding teachers for everything.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Problem Statement

In August 2020, while the world was beginning to understand the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, a district in rural Northern California was confronted with practices that created an epidemic of discrimination for Black and Native American students. The investigation began because of the failure [to respond to complaints of discrimination and harassment, including the use of racial slurs against students of color.] Under these conditions, Black students were over 50% more likely to be suspended than white students for similar behavior. The Department of Justice identified a specific high school in which it was observed that black students were frequently called racial slurs by white students without intervention or adequate response from the school site or district overall. Students were frequently referred to Saturday School for infractions such as truancy instead of being provided opportunities for community service or social-emotional program interventions. When Saturday school, detentions or suspensions were deemed unsuccessful, students were referred to law enforcement which only reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline that has become a common practice in communities living on the margins of poverty. <sup>1</sup>

While some would ask, 'what is going on with those kids?' I want to focus on the systems and classroom spaces that create and perpetuate these disparities. Disapproving behavior is not endemic to Black and Native students alone. Some would label this population of students

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ellen Flannery, "The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Time to Shut it Down," National Education Association (NEA) News, published January 5, 2015, [school-prison-pipeline-time-shut-it-down](#).

as ‘at-risk,’ which educational researcher Richard Valencia acknowledges that term being “concentrated among pupils of color, from poverty households, single parent families, and immigrant populations, the at-risk inventory approach has the strong tendency to stereotype,”<sup>2</sup>and Levin continues that they are “only indicators of at-risk populations rather than definitions.”<sup>3</sup>

While this disparity can be seen nationally, this specific section of rural Northern California piques interest because it has three Native American reservations that feed into this particular district, this situation begs the question of what policy, curriculum, and school culture is promoted to have this discrepancy in discrimination response practices, in what could be one of the most diverse counties in rural Northern California?

Since the complaint surrounding disciplinary discrepancy was filed with the U.S. Department of Justice investigation in 2020 and the final report was disseminated, the district has responded by forcing educators to participate in mandatory professional development around Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to try to mitigate the practical concerns of the Department of Justice investigation. As an educator, I know as well as any other educator, that consistent disciplinary action, especially with law enforcement involvement, can exacerbate the situation and open the door to the school-to-prison pipeline instead of the door of opportunity that leads to the respected citizenry or higher education. Additionally, applying labels such as ‘defiant’ or ‘delinquent’ has proven a pattern that some would refer to as a self-fulfilling prophecy regarding California’s ‘drop-out,’ or more aptly labeled, ‘pushout’ population.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Valencia, *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Levin, “At-Risk Students in a Yuppie Age,” *Educational Policy* 4, (1992): 283-295.



This project aims to be a vessel that encapsulates the conversations around mandatory professional development and how it has helped or hindered teachers' perspectives in this process.

## **Introduction and Purpose Statement**

[https://youtu.be/Mbzqfdqnt\\_o](https://youtu.be/Mbzqfdqnt_o)

**Lyrics:** <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Magna-Carda/The-Root>

In Magna Carda's the Root<sup>4</sup>, the lyrics refer to the poverty that encloses whole communities and the perpetual behaviors created by impoverished areas. This song struggles with the understanding that educational changes could encourage societal change but hasn't because the education system, as it stands today, was not meant to create change for impoverished communities specifically. The lyric "and we ain't got educational systems to teach us, instead we see who we are not, and think they all beneath us, cuz he carry a heater and she got her college degree"; shows the imbalance of what is deemed successful in their community, carrying a gun, versus what is deemed successful within the classroom, having a college degree. Education is effectively an entirely different world; however, that does not remove the desire to attain something different from what others in more privileged communities also desire, as we see in the chorus line "trying to rise up and go to school for my truth." Education and success are accomplished in various ways, and the definition of both of those words has historically been developed and established by the dominant white culture. Similarly, the way that cultural accessibility to learning and curriculum has been selected cautiously to present the stories and

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<sup>4</sup> Magna Carda, "The Root," published to YouTube February 8, 2016, song, 3:34, [https://youtu.be/Mbzqfdqnt\\_o](https://youtu.be/Mbzqfdqnt_o)

perspectives that uplift white culture, “it is never understood from one perspective or one voice; but that it has been solely communicated in one voice and one perspective all of which promote erasure of culture and of opportunity.”<sup>5</sup> Magna Carta’s lyrics put to music what Jamila Lyiscott writes in *Black Appetite, White Food* as the “demand that Black and Brown students shed their magic at the threshold of schooling in order to be palatable to whiteness.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Joshua Lam spoke of the pattern of canonized literature and the emptiness of space as it pertains to the canonized literature that includes minority voices,

“If the canon of American literature has served mainly to exclude, silence, or erase the full chorus of literary practice, the many cross influences, the many independent discoveries, the many formative influences coming from the non-dominant culture, why would we, as Black people, adopt this form? Is the response to canon making more canon making?”<sup>7</sup>

Along this same line of thought, educational voices and experiences are mirrored through prisms that are created with intersections of the dominant culture. Many times when reading through educational literature, the studied community and accessibility to the studied community is decimated simply by levels of diction. That is not to say that members of marginalized communities are not more than capable of being part of the conversation, as proven by my writing of this dissertation project. However, I have always questioned why we use others’

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<sup>5</sup> Jamila Lyiscott, *Black Appetite, White Food: Issues of Race, Voice, and Justice Within and Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Jamila Lyiscott, *Black Appetite, White Food: Issues of Race, Voice, and Justice Within and Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Lam, “Beyond the Norton: Anthologizing Innovation in Contemporary Black Poetics,” review of *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America*, by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, eds., *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 1 (2016): 169–176, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.40.1.10>.

stories and then change the language as if the language that they used to tell their stories was not good enough at its inception. Cathy Park Hong, in an interview, spoke of the tradition of poetic expression beyond what is expressed on the page, especially in racialized written work, “this is only a fragment of this racialized conscious that cannot be spelled out-- because there is no vocabulary for it, because it’s always obfuscated by Western forms and systems of meaning”<sup>8</sup> Similar to the oral tradition of signifying, which is used most commonly by African Americans to create a hierarchical order and structure in a community by the standards of the community itself, instead of standards of the dominant culture. This continued practice of washing stories to fit mostly white spaces and perceived academic achievement dictates what, as Jamila Lyiscott says, is the trapping of black and brown bodies when it comes to the “narratives of what educational success, achievement, and brilliance must look like.”<sup>9</sup> It is “a narrative authored by white privilege and reinscribed by the norms and standards that we have yet to disrupt”<sup>10</sup> as Gregory Ulmer states in his essay *The Object of Post-Criticism*, “The death of a book is not the end of language, it continues.”<sup>11</sup>

So, in the spirit of disruption, but also to allow stories to be heard in the language they were told, my dissertation project follows a different pattern than most. I chose this format of spoken word poetry and its written companion to speak in the spaces between my students’ lived experiences, conversations, and the institutional expectations set on students and educators alike to fill our youth with the knowledge that no longer speaks to their current societal needs and

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<sup>8</sup> Johnathan P. Eburne & Cathy Park Hong, “Throwing Your Voice: An Interview with Cathy Park Hong,” *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0000>.

<sup>9</sup> Jamila Lyiscott, *Black Appetite. White Food: Issues of Race, Voice, and Justice Within and Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Jamila Lyiscott, *Black Appetite. White Food: Issues of Race, Voice, and Justice Within and Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Ulmer, “The Object of Post-Criticism,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 2002), 116.

interests. Specifically, my student population in rural Northern California contains students with the highest Adverse Childhood Experience scores and documented generational trauma<sup>12</sup>. Many of our educators may understand the community they are teaching and the community's needs, but the classrooms and curriculum they are expected to maintain do not reflect that understanding. This collection of spoken word poems will include my voice and the voices of educators grappling with the situation of a Department of Justice intervention and with hopes of using it as a learning opportunity to address the needs of students in our collective community. These conversations around mandatory professional development will highlight how it has helped or hindered teachers' perspectives in this process.

This first set of poems speaks to the situated space that surrounds the students and teachers in this work and their components of community:

**Title: Reserved Land**

**LISTEN HERE**

If you read about it,  
it's really quite scenic.

Just an hour above where decisions are made,  
things slow down a bit

There's that bit about being on the Feather River where gold is found  
Like it's at the end of a rainbow

---

<sup>12</sup> "A Hidden Crisis: Findings on Adverse Childhood Experiences in California," Center for Youth Wellness, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://centerforyouthwellness.org/wp-content/themes/cyw/build/img/building-a-movement/hidden-crisis.pdf>

The base of a majestic mountain  
Completely ignoring that  
our California gold rush  
Rushed a lot more than money in men's pockets  
Rushed our indigenous families from their homes  
Girls into adulthood  
And alcohol through veins  
Just enough to be the blame of any human destruction

It's historic though  
Where Ishi stumbled out of the brush like Mowgli  
And stopped being a person  
But became everyone's favorite man cub.

Our national poverty threshold is  
26,246<sup>13</sup>  
To have your nuclear family  
Without the dog  
Or a owning home

An hour above where decisions are made

The median income is

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<sup>13</sup>Census, U. (n.d.). *Poverty*. US Census. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty.html>

3 4 4 2 8

Where the word is that only 25.5% live below the poverty line

But we don't report the ones that live at the poverty line.

Like 8 1 8 2

Is a large enough gap to ignore the struggles

Like 8 1 8 2 is a large enough cushion

To break the fall of California's largest displacement

This wasn't the first time.

First the dam

Then the fire

Then the fire

Then the fire

Then the fire

And 8 1 8 2 can't buy you your safety or security

Or anything in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs<sup>14</sup>

Any of the needs to make one feel human again.

And then there is what happens when the sun goes down

And you don't want to be black or brown

---

<sup>14</sup>William G. Huit, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," last modified 2007,  
<http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/conation/maslow.html>.

Or caught outside the boundaries of reserved land.

Yo, it'd be nice if we didn't know that this was the plan all along

To only be safe in the four places that were given as a gift

From people who didn't own it.

That's the irony of this space.

### **Title: Survival Communities pt. 1**

#### **LISTEN HERE**

Let's start by

building communities where we are

sustained

instead of eradicated<sup>15</sup>

Let's start by understanding that if you really wanted to build a space where we were meant to

belong

it'd start by valuing our language

Our colloquialisms

Our gestures

And they wouldn't be lesser

or labeled as aggressive

---

<sup>15</sup> *Culturally Responsive Teaching | Teaching Diverse Learners*. (n.d.). Education Alliance-Brown University. Retrieved June 16, 2021, from <https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/teaching-diverse-learners/strategies-0/culturally-responsive-teaching-0>

We all have interactions and behaviors that we ascribe meaning to<sup>16</sup>

But

my students weren't meaning to

They just heard that onomatopoeia

And at home

it sounds a lot like hit the deck

They weren't trying to be defiant.

It's just...

for them trigger means something different

And they didn't understand your chuckle

Your slapstick is an adjective while theirs is a noun.

They don't laugh,

Not because your jokes aren't funny

It's just a different language.

My students have to speak survival.

And in our country it's become generational<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Reading: Symbolic Interactionist Theory | Sociology*. (n.d.). Lumen Learning. Retrieved June 16, 2021, from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/alamo-sociology/chapter/reading-symbolic-interactionist-theory/>

<sup>17</sup> Laura Klivans, "A Tale of Two Counties: Childhood Trauma and Health in California," Center for Health Journalism, last modified March 20, 2018, <https://centerforhealthjournalism.org/2018/03/17/tale-two-counties-childhood-trauma-and-health-california>.



They speak in whispers  
and keep their heads down because they know their dialects offend you.  
And it's hard to sustain two or more  
They go home and say 'nah I can't do this no more'  
And that's the end.

They've tried since the beginning to build a new self  
But years would end  
And so would their friends  
No matter which direction that they took.

You keep your head in a book  
Forget about making it home.

Or  
You stayed home alone  
Until the police would come rat-tat-tat on your door and say  
"son, have you ever seen a rap sheet before?"

I hear them come back and say  
"Man, my moms made me. She said she can't handle another kid in juvie"  
And that's the end.

My students speak survival

Their amygdala don't compute why Stacey and Michael have to share their 15 lollipops 17 ways so Jane can go to the fair and sell t-shirts for 75 cents a pop to help her dad draw a diagram of a car.<sup>18</sup>

Or if you don't want to go that far

Yeah the Dust Bowl was a feat, but nothing compared to these streets after the lights come on.

Come on!

Can you blame them?

My students speak survival.

They've tried to translate for years.

It's all a language barrier

Our job is to start taking the bricks down.

## **Research Questions**

My research questions for this dissertation project are:

- What was the language used surrounding behavioral challenges from teachers prior to mandatory Culturally Responsive Pedagogy training?

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<sup>18</sup> Buffie Longmire-Avital, "What's Their Capital? Applying a Community Cultural Wealth Model to UR," Center for Engaged Learning, last modified March 7, 2019, <https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/whats-their-capital-applying-a-community-cultural-wealth-model-to-ur/>.

- How do teachers mandated to implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy examine and adjust their disciplinary practices?
- For the teachers who made critical adjustments to their disciplinary practices; what actions mediated their shift?

In the use of the words *labeling practices*, I'm following the definition provided by Christine Bowditch in her research regarding high school disciplinary procedures and its production of 'dropouts'<sup>19</sup>. Her definition of dropouts lends itself to the labeling perspective<sup>20</sup> in criminology, which is formed by the framework of symbolic interactionist theory. The labeling perspective theorizes that those in positions of authority have the opportunity to define what they believe is defiant or deviant behavior. In turn, organizationally, workers, or in this case, also students', who have informal or negotiated understandings are situated where behavior is more heavily analyzed and inspires the creation of more stringent rules to discourage the behavior. Unfortunately, this leads to an over policed environment and adds to behaviors being overly defined or labeled as 'defiant' along with the individuals that most commonly exhibit that behavior.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy<sup>21</sup> is a theory of teaching that centers students' cultural strengths and promotes achievement and a sense of belonging alongside a student's understanding of their cultural place in the world. It demands analysis of organizations, policies

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<sup>19</sup> Christine Bowditch, "Getting Rid of Troublemakers: High School Disciplinary Procedures and the Production of Dropouts," *Social Problems* 40, no. 4 (November 1993): 493–509, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1993.40.4.03x0094p>.

<sup>20</sup> Ray C. Rist, "On Understanding the Process of Schooling: Contributions of Labeling Theory," in *Power and Ideology in Education*, ed. Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 292-305.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Lynch, "What is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?" *The Edvocate*, last modified September 24, 2018, <https://www.theedvocate.org/what-is-culturally-responsive-pedagogy/>.

and people for possible cultural and racial biases that can affect historically marginalized communities.

This next set of poems speaks to the labels of the student population that I work with in rural Northern California and their experiences with these labels as they navigate through their educational journey.

**Title: Monster**

**[LISTEN HERE](#)**

My vision started with MONSTER<sup>22</sup>

I remember sitting in my desk

and curls wafting around to frame my face

the same way the justice system tried to use bars to frame Harmon's life

I looked up to my teacher

She was a shade lighter than me

And her watery eyes told my newly recognized truth before I even had the chance to breathe.

This system wasn't made for us

---

<sup>22</sup> Walter Dean Myers, *Monster* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009)

The school to prison pipeline starts as early as pre-k  
And the institution feels no remorse about putting cuffs on a baby  
That's  
why I'll never have no baby

Especially a boy

Whose skin is more than a tan  
But not as dark as the abyss they'll try to push him into  
Because--

let's be real

then he really wouldn't have a chance.

The teachers would try to tell him about what makes a man  
Followed by the slide shows similar to what we saw in Tarzan  
The system is built to tame

To eliminate

To eradicate

The innocence of our boys

Because as men they are called MONSTERS

Do the reporters ask what was in their past?

Where are the teachers stepping up to share testimonies of character?

To say, we can connect with them if we try

Because anything less than an othering statement would be a lie

But I would at least applaud the attempt.

We keep calling them dropouts Like

there could be a pact between

15% Native<sup>23</sup>

14% Black

28% Foster

18% Homeless

11 Migrant

13 Differentlyabled

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<sup>23</sup> 2019-20 High School Graduation And Dropout Rates - Year 2020 (CA Dept Of Education). California Department of Education, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr20/yr20rel101.asp>. California dropout percentage by marginalized groupings.

10 Poor

Nah...

that kind of organization would require resources.

And let's be real--

we ain't got none.

Cultural labels

Educational fables

What if we finally brought to trial institutional strategic oppression?

Dressed it in an orange jumpsuit

And let a jury of its peers tweet their guilty verdict before ever acknowledging the possibility of an argument.

Would our classrooms still look the same?

Would we finally read about blame attached to anyone besides a person of color?

Would Hemingway become Baldwin?

Shakespeare become Shange?

Mozart match up to Tupac?

If our stories are really the same

why is it so uncomfortable when I bring up in a district meeting that this literature is changeable?

Rearrangeable?

Will encourage our kids to be untamable...

And all I get are blank stares

It hits different when the story's not yours.

"These texts are safer"

"We all know these ones better"

All I hear is pull tighter on that tether

How dare my students walk in and ask you to adjust?

To examine and replan

At least take a mental scan and see they aint vibin' your Galtonian<sup>24</sup> selections

"What's the next question?"

"Are we done yet?"

---

<sup>24</sup> "Francis Galton," Wikipedia, last modified June 24, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_Galton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Galton).



“Cuz we all got lives outside of here and ain't nothin' in these books gonna teach me more than what was inherited in my blood.”

And then they continue to get called thugs.

The Clintons taught us real well with them labels

But we're done now.

It's time to move beyond integrate to equate the importance of experience

To learn the streets as well as we learn the books

Our students deserve far more than a label

And now

Now that we've made it to the table

Our questions are the same

What's next?

**Title: Breathing Labels**

**[LISTEN HERE](#)**

You know when you're walking down the produce aisle

and all the fruits and veggies are in a bag

stamped in red with the letters that spell the word BAD.

It don't make sense, do it?

Every time one of them was plucked  
the farmer whispered the secrets to adversity before  
Putting them in their place  
And making them their label  
Still don't make sense do it?

You know when the soles to your new retro kicks  
Are held together with superglue but the website swears authenticity?

You start looking for what's real and just keep stumbling over labels  
Over tags that don't disconnect

Can't redirect

The yellow,

Red,

Blue,

Black brick road

That leads to the trash

Principal's office

Cops car

Juvenile Hall

Individual Cell

Prison

Pipeline

Don't make sense do it?

If only removing those labels were as easy as changing the produce bag at the grocery store

In seeing the potential past those red letters

If only we spent the same amount of time trying to see the perfection in our kids

That we spend in the produce aisle between the avocados

and the cantaloupes

I know I'm making light of it all

But it's because I know it's really that easy

My avocados come with narratives just like my kids do

We can hear the avocados but when it comes to the kids...

It don't make sense do it?

When I was younger we learned not to judge

A book by its cover

A rainbow by its brightness

A neighborhood by its houses

Or the Hood by its trees

Because there were still trees

They still let you breathe

And don't ask for anything in return

Except to let them be

Sometimes they grow in places and directions that are a nuisance

But it is our new sense to save the planet by whatever means necessary

So we work around,

Build a bridge,

Paint the sidewalk

To allow their roots to really dig in

The same way those labels really-- dig in

I keep waiting for the system to find a way around the people with those labels too

But the commitment is just not the same.

Even though my students are the things that breathe

And they ask for nothing in return

Except to let them be.

## Synthesis of Positionality

Jamila Lyisott in her spoken word poem “Broken English”<sup>25</sup> engages with the narrative that is created behind the word ‘articulate’. She creates the strong understanding that articulation is not only applicable to Anglo-accepted language, but there are also articulation standards in African American Standard English and within individual cultures and communities, all of which should be equally acceptable in society. There is often misrepresentation that blackness, in culture, language, and physicality, is synonymous with criminality as Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle express in their essay From ‘brute’ to ‘thug’: the demonization and criminalization of unarmed black male victims in America.<sup>26</sup> As seen by the investigation that began the inquiry for this dissertation project, the perception of blackness as a threat begins early and is visible in educational spaces that are meant to bring opportunity, but instead begin the formation of a school to prison pipeline by creating documentation of black, and other students of color, that is aggressively punitive and frequently involves law enforcement. The following spoken word addresses the inequity that follows the myths and stereotypes around blackness in education and society as a whole. This spoken word also serves as a portion of my positionality as a researcher and the patterns that I have been part of as well as observed.

**Title: Caged Bird *after* Maya Angelou**

**[LISTEN HERE](#)**

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<sup>25</sup>Jamila Lyiscott, “3 Ways to Speak English,” filmed February 2014 at TEDSalon NY2014, New York, NY, video, 4:16, [https://www.ted.com/talks/jamila\\_lyiscott\\_3\\_ways\\_to\\_speak\\_english?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/jamila_lyiscott_3_ways_to_speak_english?language=en).

<sup>26</sup>Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle, “From ‘Brute’ to ‘Thug:’ The Demonization and Criminalization of Unarmed Black Male Victims in America,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, no. 3-4 (2016): 350-366, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2015.1129256>.

Maya Angelou said

“The caged bird sings

With a fearful trill

Of things unknown

but longed for still

And his tune is heard

On the distant hill

For the caged bird

Sings of freedom”<sup>27</sup>

My people have long sung of freedom

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Wade in the Water

Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing

A Change is Gonna Come

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<sup>27</sup>Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird,” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>.

It's been a long time comin'<sup>28</sup>

And my liberation looks no different.

The aggressions have become micro

But that doesn't make them quieter

Ironically

They've only gotten deeper

But thank goodness my grandparents taught me to swim

No disrespect to Ms. Angelou but

the things we've longed for have never been unknown.

That's why our trill has only gotten louder

We've become fearless

As we've continued to be faceless

To a system that couldn't care less

If we can breathe

Eric Garner didn't have to say

'I can't breathe'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Sam Cooke, "A Change is Gonna Come," published to YouTube July 26, 2018, song, 3:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5zDRtEC0x0>.

<sup>29</sup>"I Can't Breathe," Wikipedia, last modified July 13, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_can%27t\\_breathe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_can%27t_breathe).

Neither did Elijah McClain

George Floyd

Or Manuel Ellis

But like I said

They couldn't care less

I know this is supposed to be about education

But it's also about the narration when you start whole peoples histories with

'Secondly'

And that's being generous

We are taught that bootstraps are the tools we need

But they are kept in the masters shelter under lock and key

And then there's the audacity to ask what's wrong with me

I keep trying to find my freedom.

A few doors have been opened

But the lights weren't turned on

And as a child I was told

It's always darkest before the dawn

Well I'm waiting for the days to start over



For the sun to rise

And all this educational equity policy to take off its disguise

And start

over

I'm asking the people with privilege to

Start

over

I'm telling the people with privilege

We are going to

Start

over

I'm helping to pave this path

Making damn sure I won't be the last

And in spite of all those 'inconveniences' in the past

My narration won't begin with secondly.

Through this work

I'm forcing us to reconsider what it really means

To start over.

As a student I was always surrounded by people, literature, music, movies that did not represent me. They represented an experience that I could never have in its entirety because the perspective was so different from anything that I had ever been exposed to, or a part of. I tried my best to assimilate into acceptable dress, language, and likes, but something always felt incomplete. There was still an open othering that could not be mistaken. My experience was just too different. No one else around me had to wake up and ask their mothers to straighten their hair 3 hours before the school day began. No one else had to drop the twang in their speech or colloquialisms that were commonplace at home so their teacher could understand what they were trying to say. As a black student I was taught within the classroom to be submissive to the culture that surrounded me, while at home I was told that I better be anything but submissive. It took years to understand that code-switching not only applied to my language, but to places, people, and behaviors as well. My first black teacher was in the 5th grade, and to this day, my number of black teachers is in the single digits. She was, and still is, a force of black excellence that I had never seen outside of my family in their professions. She was the person who opened the gate to my understanding of my identity in the classroom, and how my perspective was valuable because it was different from everyone else. Granted, had she not taught me the value in my blackness I would have faltered and fallen into the stereotypes that surrounded people who came from environments and circumstances that mirrored my own. I would undoubtedly become a student who be categorized as a disciplinary problem because of the way that I expressed myself and my needs in academic spaces.

Fast forward to my undergraduate education in yet another predominantly white institution, and I was met with another model of black excellence. Except this one had a twang, and used colloquialisms and did not mix words when it came to defending her merit and her

position as a proud black educated professional. While I had long decided that I wanted to become an educator, I held onto the notion that I had to code-switch to be successful. I felt that I had to hide the fact that I aligned experientially with stereotypes of black families in urban areas, specifically places like East Oakland. My family and I had made it out and I was successful, as deemed so by the dominant culture, and still had to hide myself. I began to question what allowed me to get to this stage in life, and the last place I wanted to give credit to, were the institutions that ostracized me for my true self. While the rose through concrete notion is romantic, it is not fertile land to grow, and so I knew it would be a disservice to myself to believe this could be a chance occurrence. I dove into education as an alternative education teacher, because while I was an advanced student, I could have easily been a 'push-out' as well. Their stories and backgrounds mirrored my own, and yet there was still a barrier somewhere that was closing doors of opportunities instead of opening them.

I realized through teaching, that building relationships, community within the classroom, and keeping space for students to express themselves culturally and individually was the most empowering and door opening practice that I adopted. I began to recognize that students who were labeled as 'trouble' or 'problems' were fighting to keep their own culture and expression within the classroom. So I began to look for research to improve that practice and try to incorporate the entire campus. My master's thesis elevated student voices; as they are the only ones that can give true voice and emotion to their own experiences. Their stories about teachers and classroom spaces where they felt comfortable and successful versus classroom spaces where they felt the exact opposite only further validated my belief of what were empowering teaching practices. When I went to speak to those teachers, they spoke of moments of transformation in their practices when it became less about the content of their courses, and more about the

identities of their students as emerging citizens in the community. Their desire was to make sure that students were well rounded, and adept in critical thinking and making positive life choices.

Conducting and engaging with all of my research participants finally put a name to the institutional and systemic adversity that I thought was entirely normal. The discussion around stereotype threat as well as the cultural mismatch that occurs in classrooms, in curriculum, and in teaching practices turned on a light and put succinct words to my entire educational experience. Additionally, hearing the experiences of my students and fellow colleagues further validated, unambiguously, how unromantic the ‘struggle for success’ story really is.

I was introduced to the idea of an alternative dissertation through the graphic novel Unflattening<sup>30</sup> as well as an introduction to the hip hop album dissertation by Dr. A.D. Carson<sup>31</sup>. While listening to Dr. Carson’s dissertation, another lightbulb came on and I became determined to embark on the journey of an alternative dissertation. Because my dissertation focuses on language and perception, I thought it would be fitting to write my dissertation in the language that I use colloquially to connect to my students. In teaching, I ensure that I speak in terms and cadence, and rhythm that mimic my student population outside of school walls. It’s important to me to make sure that my students are shown that their language is equally as valuable inside the classroom. Literature is created about my student population, but replaces their language, implying that their language isn’t as valuable. This is the same language that is judged and forcibly removed from the classrooms that I observe for this project. In the spirit of inclusivity and opening a space in this educational system to encourage cultural and individual identities through language, this seemed like the perfect opportunity and audience to begin to change those

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<sup>30</sup> Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> A.D. Carson, “Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions” (PhD diss., Clemson University, 2017).

negative perceptions about what academic language is and is not. I have learned to be unapologetic in my actions toward equity, and I know that this is only the beginning.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Literature Review**

The following sections are meant to situate the theories that I used in addressing this work. Each section is comprised of analysis of the applicable tenets of the theories used and further supported by sections of spoken word poetry that create the situational and cultural connection that has been used throughout this project.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)**

In 1976, Cazden and Leggett made four recommendations for educational policy to achieve a culturally responsive education. Their stated goal was:

“...education that will be more responsive to cultural differences among children.

Specifically, school systems are asked to consider cognitive and affective aspects of how different children learn so that appropriate teaching styles and learning environments can be provided that will maximize their educational achievement.”<sup>32</sup>

This study made it known that individual differences exist in how particular cultural groups learn. It simply suggested that there should be multiple ways of teaching children. The responsiveness came from offering an alternative explanation or assignment, not embracing and

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<sup>32</sup> Courtney B. Cazden and Ellen L. Leggett, “Culturally Responsive Education: A Response to LAU Remedies II,” U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare National Institute of Education, last modified December 1976, ED135241, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED135241>.

celebrating the cultures of individual students in the classroom. Students were still being categorized and assigned characteristics based on racial or ethnic identity.

In 1990, Dr. Ladson Billings introduced a pedagogical change. The change focused on seeing students as individuals and removing blame from learners and instead focusing on the pedagogical practices of the educator. The goal was to turn classrooms into spaces that encouraged and embraced students' assets that were brought into the classroom as opposed to pushing for assimilation of language, character and behavior. Dr. Ladson Billings identified 3 major domains for educators she deemed “thoughtful, inspiring, demanding, and critical”<sup>33</sup> Those domains were: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.<sup>34</sup> She defined academic success as the intellectual growth as a result of the classroom, cultural competence as the ability to encourage students to appreciate and celebrate their cultures and sociopolitical consciousness as the ability to connect learning to life outside of the classroom.<sup>35</sup> This interest and change in pedagogy came from Ladson Billings finding a lack of narrative when it came to African American students and academic excellence.

“By focusing on student learning and academic achievement versus classroom and behavior management, cultural competence versus cultural assimilation or eradication, and sociopolitical consciousness rather than school-based tasks that have no beyond-school application, I was able to see students take both responsibility for and deep interest in their education. This is the secret behind culturally relevant pedagogy: the

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<sup>33</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: AKA the Remix,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 74-84.

<sup>34</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: AKA the Remix,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 74-84.

<sup>35</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: AKA the Remix,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 74-84.

ability to link principles of learning with deep understanding of (and appreciation for) culture.”<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, Dr. Ladson Billings pedagogical theory has become more of a set of buzzwords than a continuous practice. In many contexts, culturally relevant pedagogy has been reduced to acknowledging ‘diverse’ holidays, and adding classroom texts about people of color, but not necessarily by people of color.<sup>37</sup> While I am sure this definitely was not the intention of Dr. Ladson Billings, nor the initial intention of many educators who engaged in this practice at its inception, a reflective cycle wasn’t introduced until an essay by Paris and Alim in their engagement with rebranding culturally relevant pedagogy to culturally sustaining pedagogy.<sup>38</sup> This rebranding came with the understanding that identity is complex and fluid, and so should our classroom practices. Culturally sustaining pedagogy also focused on multiple intersections of identities instead of one specific racial group. Another further layer was introduced by McCarty and Lee in their term of culturally revitalizing pedagogy, which focuses on the prevention of or reintroduction of disappearing languages. For McCarty and Lee, restoring and reclaiming cultures that have long been forced into extinction is an essential layer when discussing and directing diversity within classrooms.<sup>39</sup>

This work, while wanting to focus on culturally relevant pedagogy, has to begin with culturally responsive. Situationally, this study is placed within a district where many have

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<sup>36</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: AKA the Remix,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 74-84.

<sup>37</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: AKA the Remix,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 74-84.

<sup>38</sup> Django Paris, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2012): 93-97.

<sup>39</sup> Teresa L. McCarty and Tiffany S. Lee, “Critical Culturally Sustaining/ Revitalizing Pedagogy and Indigenous Education Sovereignty,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 101-124.

forgotten or never began the practice that includes the benefit of differentiated instruction and classroom management based on their student population, outside of the required differentiation given by special education requirements.

Warren posits that the core tenet of any of the culturally reflective practices should be empathy.<sup>40</sup> By operationalizing empathy, the efficacy of physical habits, tendencies and behavior changes a teachers disposition outside of acting on a ready-made theory. This study focuses on CRP and the outcomes for educators after professional development in a district that has been mandated to focus on disparate practices in educating and disciplining students of color. I strongly believe that in order for the mandated professional development to become a force of change, teachers must act from a space of empathy when engaging in this work, otherwise there is the potential for another fall into spaces of creating buzzwords and practices that do not reflect their initial purpose.

### **Title: Checkbox**

### **LISTEN HERE**

Mark Davis<sup>41</sup> defined empathetic concern as

“The tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for unfortunate others”<sup>42</sup>

Ignoring the fact that the others have to be unfortunate

First.

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<sup>40</sup> Chezare A. Warren, “Empathy, Teacher Dispositions, and Preparation for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2 (2018): 169-183.

<sup>41</sup> Mark H. Davis, *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

<sup>42</sup> Mark H. Davis, *Empathy: A Social Psychological Approach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).



We've already talked about beginning histories with  
Second.<sup>43</sup>

Third time's a charm

In understanding these practices are causing our systems to hemorrhage  
And buzzword Band-Aids don't fix arterial bleeds.

Starr Carter said to Chris

“But if you don't see color, you don't see me”<sup>44</sup>

And this is past invisibility.

Its questioning how we are meant to be

To exist

To persist

In a place that doesn't want us to define our own success

Where we are subliminally messaged to believe we are worth less

Which is why this all had to be considered in the first place.

But it wasn't even authentic then

Because to begin with a categorizing culture

Followed by the assumption of shared cognition<sup>45</sup>

Is still a damn dead end.

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<sup>43</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger Of A Single Story,” filmed 2009 at TEDGlobal Conference, video, 18:33, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)

<sup>44</sup> “The Hate U Give,” IMDb, movie trailer, 2:25, accessed February 28, 2019, [https://m.imdb.com/title/tt5580266/?ref =m\\_ttfcd\\_tt](https://m.imdb.com/title/tt5580266/?ref =m_ttfcd_tt).

<sup>45</sup> Courtney B. Cazden and Ellen L. Leggett, “Culturally Responsive Education: A Response to LAU Remedies II,” U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare National Institute of Education, last modified December 1976, ED135241, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED135241>.

Culture in classrooms is critically endangered

And while I see it being written about

I also see it being reduced

To sensitivity

Exclusivity

And comments like “But it's still not fair, because our white students will end up where?”

And sometimes I'm tempted to say that I don't care

But I know better.

I know that for these things to be successful.

The conversations have to appeal to the appetite of dominant spaces.

And the dominant faces have to maintain their smile

Otherwise

all this will get shot down

And turned into a checkbox

Instead of an action.

### **Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWwz3FsizyI><sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rhymefest, “Weaponized,” published to YouTube April 18, 2019, song, 2:19,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWwz3FsizyI>

Rhymefest in their song “Weaponized” begins with the lyrics

“burn the books, burn the books. You hate their history, erase their history, remove monuments, leave no trace of their existence. They say we are lucky just to make it out. I made it out now here we go again. I could see the sky open up, while I feel the doors closing in. They got you living on a timeline, with your body and your mind dying. I ain’t going out without a bang! Finna weaponize Einstein.”<sup>47</sup>

All the while the word “weaponized” is playing in the background. Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) as a theory draws on the recognition that marginalized communities encompass the ability to draw on resources and experiences that are frequently overlooked by a dominant culture narrative. In the song by Rhymefest, the image of attainment instantly followed by a feeling of being nullified and restricted expresses how a master narrative can negatively impact the growth and development of a student’s empowerment and understanding of their cultural identity belonging in that space.

Educational researcher, Tara Yosso in their article ‘*Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*’<sup>48</sup> explains that the community cultural wealth critical race theory approach invites:

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<sup>47</sup> Rhymefest, “Weaponized,” published to YouTube April 18, 2019, song, 2:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWwz3FsizyI>

<sup>48</sup> Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 69-91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>.

“Various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital. These forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom. This CRT approach to education involves a commitment to develop schools that acknowledge the multiple strengths of Communities of Color in order to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice.”<sup>49</sup>

Yosso pulls from the questions of scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Dolores Delgado Bernal who have questioned “whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted?”<sup>50</sup> Essentially this theory engages in the acknowledgment that if practices and theories can be oppressive, then there are practices and theories that can equally be liberating.

Liou speaks about community cultural wealth in its ability to dissuade deficit thinking and in turn remove hierarchies that create labels and give power to one group over another.<sup>51</sup> They continue that “deficit perspective draws from a place of deficiency”,<sup>52</sup> and the normalization of that thinking removes responsibility from the educator and places blame on the student. In reality, the distribution of knowledge is solely based on the teachers’ expressed expectations and choice in curriculum that will engage and encourage their students to think critically, both within and outside of the classroom.

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<sup>49</sup> Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 69-91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>.

<sup>50</sup> Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 69-91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel D. Liou, Antonio Nieves Martinez, and Erin Rotheram-Fuller, ““Don’t Give Up On Me’: Critical Mentoring Pedagogy for the Classroom Building Students’ Community Cultural Wealth,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 1 (2016): 104-129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2015.1017849>.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel D. Liou, Antonio Nieves Martinez, and Erin Rotheram-Fuller, ““Don’t Give Up On Me’: Critical Mentoring Pedagogy for the Classroom Building Students’ Community Cultural Wealth,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 1 (2016): 104-129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2015.1017849>.

The deficit perspective also allows for labels such as “at risk”, and underachievement to be born when students are not complying to systemic expectations. Labeling removes the necessary support for students to facilitate agency among themselves and on their individual campuses.

Jason Salisbury in his study, “It’ll make my brother’s education better than mine. We need that.”: Youth of Color Activating Their Community Cultural Wealth for Transformative Change, examines the ability of marginalized youth being the agent of change for equity centered justice practices. He emphasizes that if the space is given for conversations about equity to happen, the students will be able to lead the charge in that change on a school site, or even at a district level in terms of policy. “Furthermore, marginalized youth have demonstrated the ability to highlight, critique, and resist the oppressive hegemonic structures cunningly hidden within in school practices, policies, and structures”<sup>53</sup>As educators our responsibility to the student is to allow space for growth, both personally and educationally, however, like the song by Rhymefest, we show opportunity that is then restricted by policies put in place that do not acknowledge or support non-dominant narratives or culture.

**Title: You Think We Gonna Ask?**

**[LISTEN HERE](#)**

If we just let them speak

The past two decades have spent so much time silencing voices

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<sup>53</sup> Jason Salisbury (2020): “‘It’ll Make My Brother’s Education Better Than Mine. We Need That.’: Youth of Color Activating Their Community Cultural Wealth for Transformative Change,” *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, August 19, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2020.1797108>.

Encouraging the seen

not heard

And then we complain that they treat us with such disdain

But we can't allow them to frame what they say they need

Y'all want them to be on their knees

To beg and plead

For time on the mic

But justice has long been a fight that should not have had the luxury of time

We don't give them the credit they deserve

And yet we have the nerve to give praise to the minimum age politician

Who has preserved the morals of his office

But can't agree to preserve the lives from the 356 victims

In 180 school shootings

From 2009 to 2019

And all the years<sup>54</sup> we've seen

before that

It started in 1982

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<sup>54</sup> Christina Walker, Sam Petulla, Kenneth Fowler, Alberto Mier, Michelle Lou, Brandon Griggs, and Samira Jafari, "10 Years. 180 School Shootings. 356 Victims," CNN, accessed January 28, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/07/us/ten-years-of-school-shootings-trnd/>.

with Grandmaster Flash

and The Message.<sup>55</sup>

The beginning of the youth revolution.

Then 2Pac said

“We was askin, and now the people that was askin are dead or in jail,

So now what you think we gonna do? Ask?”<sup>56</sup>

We can only be thankful that the tell hasn’t been less peaceful

It’s that piece tho’

If we just let them speak

What if we could’ve prevented the 356 atrocities?

We have to trust that our kids know their needs.

### **Symbolic Interactionism (SIT)**

Herbert Blumer in his book Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method<sup>57</sup> defines

symbolic interactionism based on three premises:

“The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note

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<sup>55</sup> Rich Bunell, “‘The Message’- Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1982) Added to the National Registry: 2002,” Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/TheMessage.pdf>, accessed September 14, 2021

<sup>56</sup> Tupac Shakur, “1994 2PAC MTV Interview,” published to YouTube on August 2, 2018, video, 20:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNSRx14s7B4>.

<sup>57</sup> Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 62.

in his world-physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.”<sup>58</sup>

To simplify—our interpretations and reactions to interactions are based on our previous lived experiences with people, places, or things. This behavior can be attributed to all people, regardless of any single or intersectional identities. All of Blumer's definitions are seemingly generalizable and harmless until, as Dennis and Martin summarize, “those who are ‘labeled’...with the authoritative processes through which individuals are rendered subordinate through legally sanctioned and institutionally established procedures.”<sup>59</sup> Dennis and Martin show that in fact Blumer's definition is not meant to be inclusive. There is a distinct separation and understanding that there are those that are subordinate and meant to conform or they will face consequences. This idea is seen historically in situations such as the War on Crime by President Lyndon Johnson. While the idea was to control the rising crime rate to make a safer nation overall, the execution led to the stigmatization and over-policing of areas of poverty; specifically urban black communities. The presence of more law enforcement created the idea that there was

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<sup>58</sup> Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 62.

<sup>59</sup> Alex Dennis and Peter J. Martin, “Symbolic Interactionism and the Concept of Power,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 2 (2005): 191-213.



more crime than what was actually occurring. Even though these communities were being policed, the crime rate stayed relatively consistent throughout much of the 1960's.<sup>60</sup>

Consequently, Becker states “differences in the ability to make rules and apply them to other people are essentially power differentials.”<sup>61</sup> A dominant culture creating rules about language and behavior would definitely fall into a discrepancy in power. Additionally, if the dominant culture not only creates rules for social order, but also the systems in which everyone is educated, or has to earn a living, successful behavior can only be determined by their set ideals. Similarly, teachers or other educational professionals have power to define successful behavior for their students based on the ideology and lived experience of that specific teacher. The success or failure of a student is then essentially left to whether or not the student can assimilate enough to be perceived as successful by the educator in power. During fundamental years, those perceptions can easily become concrete definitions of how students later describe themselves. If a student was told they struggle with math by an authority figure such as a teacher, the student has the possibility to internalize that comment and continue the narrative throughout their education, effectively limiting themselves or building a barrier to embrace that specific subject. The same could happen if a teacher or authority figure were to make a comment about a student's positive or negative behaviors.

All of this is to say that students, like the rest of us, make meaning from their interactions, and those interactions change the perceptions of the world and themselves. When it comes to situations such as labeling or representation in the classroom, it's imperative that we are cautious in our curricular and disciplinary decisions, as it could easily become a foundational understanding for students' identities.

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<sup>60</sup> DuVernay, Ava., & Averick, Spencer. (2016, October 7). *13th* (S. Averick, Ed.) [Documentary; Film].

<sup>61</sup> Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963).

**Title: Ancestry.com**

**LISTEN HERE**

We make meaning from our experiences.

As a black woman

I can't pretend that those meanings and experiences begin with me

Ancestry.com said that my blood line arrived somewhere around 1725

With the Louisiana French Colonizers

I mean

Settlers

And then around 1750 my ancestors became Creole

We'll never know if it was by choice

But I know it lasted all the way to my grandmother

Who raised me—dark skinned

While she spent her youth passing.

Which passed the torch on to me

Building up hate for my curls and complexion

While dancing in white spaces hoping that money

And status

Would help me blend.

See my ancestry.com says that I'm 22% descended from Cameroon and Congo

And 21% descended from Nigeria

And I google the images and see my cheekbones and the curve of my eyes

How my nose has settled on my face.

But

My ancestry.com also says 18% from Scotland

10% England

And 22% Germanic Europe

I google those images and see

My education

The doorway I slid through because of choices made for my grandmother to pass.

To colonize

I mean

Settle

In places that she wouldn't ever have been allowed to go.

My meanings are compiled of appendices

Double lettered A-Z

And I'm sure I'm not the only one

Who has perceptions

Based from their cataloged history first

So why don't we take into account

That one size fits all

Isn't a tall glass of water for anyone

Even the people that created it.

Are we really that afraid to find something more refreshing?

### **Theories in Conversation**

The way that these theoretical frameworks communicate with each other is not linear, nor is it strictly cyclical. They interact in a constant ebb and flow to coalesce into an understanding around the foundation needed for a culturally responsive school culture. Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SIT) simply explores the humanizing characteristics that make us each individuals. We all make meaning of experiences and interactions, including those happenings that occur throughout our educational journey. Community Cultural Wealth Theory (CCW) explains that there is value in those experiences that we have as a collective and they hold capital, even if that has not been shown expressly in our classrooms. Marginalized students within the same communities are aptly prepared to adjust and interrupt oppressive acts within their institutions, but there is little room and less acceptance for that transition of viewpoint. Finally, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is the acknowledgement and celebration of different cultural narratives being used to create a rounded educational experience. There is never an end to any of these processes. People have many intersecting identities and all are multi-faceted. The choice to use these three frameworks in conversation with each other comes with the aspiration of continued growth in the system of education as a whole. Specifically with the educators that I've interviewed, the goal is to understand how they perceive elements of these frameworks in their own classrooms and practices.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Methods and Research Design**

Linguist Colin Baker states “identity is multiple, complex, context contingent, varied, overlapping, sometimes fragmented, and even contradictory across different contexts. Our identities constantly develop and change, across time and across situations. We are made and remade in our conversations across time, place and person.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, as an educator evolves, their ways of existing in a classroom space changes; whether it be different class periods, months of the year, or academic years altogether. Occasionally, their interactions change based on the student.

In this space of mandated cultural responsiveness training, professional development and conferences, my goal is to understand the changes, if any, that have occurred for the educators in this community as they navigate this mandate from the Department of Justice.

This is year two of five for the mandate from the Department of Justice, and many policies and curriculum changes have been made at a district level to accommodate the demand of addressing disparities between racialized disciplinary actions. However, it is up to individual sites and teachers to make sure that the policies are implemented on campus.

For the purposes of this project, our school district will go by the pseudonym Pacific Union High School District. This district is made of 1 adult school, 2 comprehensive high schools, 1 alternative education or continuation high school, and 1 community day school. Their independent study program serves all 3 high school sites. There are 3 Native American Reservations that feed into this district. The district covers 100 square miles of the most rural

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<sup>62</sup> Colin Baker, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (Multilingual Matters, 2011).

towns in the area. County demographics do not include the Native population that lives on the reservations. The district has a little more than 2,200 students with 73% living at or below the poverty line. 14.4% of the students have disabilities, 5.6% of the students are homeless, and 3.1% are English language learners. 49.6% of the students identified as white, 21.5% as Hispanic, 13% Asian, 9% Native American, and 4.4% African American. All other identified ethnicities were 1% or less.

As stated at the beginning of this manuscript, I chose to focus on this district because of a Department of Justice investigation that determined there were vast discrepancies in discipline when it came to African American and Native American students. While this disparity can be seen nationally, geographically, this specific section of rural Northern California piques interest because it has three Native American reservations that feed into this particular district. It begs the question of what policy, curriculum, and school culture is being promoted to have this discrepancy in discriminatory response practices, in what could be one of the most diverse counties in rural Northern California?

Through semi-structured focus group interviews of 8 teachers of the 12 volunteers, I asked teachers to reflect on past practices vs. current practices, their feelings on policy change, as well as how they are navigating through mandates to teach subjects that can be labeled as controversial in any education system. Teachers' participation was entirely voluntary, but they were pulled from teachers who have completed all of the responsive training the district has offered to date. The teachers came from different disciplines and school sites to ensure the diversity of responses. Not all teachers who volunteered were interviewed due to inability to participate during the coordinated sessions. The interviews took place over zoom, and were recorded for accuracy of transcripts. Transcripts were also read for thoroughness, and corrected

if necessary. Researcher memos were made after initial interviews with any additional thoughts being added after listening to the recording again.

Data analysis and member checks were shared in the next semi-structured interview and participant responses were also be recorded then. The table below gives participants pseudonyms, content areas and a range of years they have been employed in education as a whole. Specific years and courses taught were not given to protect the anonymity of participants.

The findings in this dissertation are based on classroom observations and at least one focus group interview for each participant. Some participants chose to participate in both focus groups and were welcome. The table below gives participants pseudonyms, content areas and a range of years they have been employed in education as a whole. Race, gender, specific years, courses taught, and other identifying characteristics are not given to maintain the commitment to protect the anonymity of participants. While the participants are raceless in the delivery of this data, I want to acknowledge that whiteness is not being naturalized as a standard. The data comes from people who have very different experiences with racialization and experiences with being members of dominant and non-dominant cultural groups.

## **Research Questions**

This study was driven by inquiry of whether mandated training about a topic as sensitive as cultural responsiveness would have a lasting impact on an area and district that has a long standing history of unjust disciplinary practices. Based in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Community Cultural Wealth and Symbolic Interactionist Theory, these research questions formed an observation matrix and focus group discussion questions that allowed educators to authentically respond to their lived experiences in this classroom and with the sudden policy

changes after a Department of Justice investigation and take over. Their experiences are at the center of these findings. These discussions and observations examine the practical and applicable outcome of unnatural institutional intervention. The research questions below guide this inquiry:

- What was the language used surrounding behavioral challenges from teachers prior to mandatory Culturally Responsive Pedagogy training?
- How do teachers mandated to implement Culturally Responsive Pedagogy examine and adjust their disciplinary practices?
- For the teachers who made critical adjustments to their disciplinary practices; what actions mediated their shift?

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Content Area</b>	<b>Range of Years in Education</b>
Vanessa	Counseling/Social Work	5-10
Lynn	Math	20+
Sarah	SPED	0-5
Anastasia	Math	0-5
Parker	Science	0-5
Verdugo	ELA	5-10



Rowan	Science	10-15
Greer	Science	0-5

This data consists of interviews, in class observations with field notes followed by researcher memos, and a system used by the district to keep track of students for purposes of attendance, enrollment, discipline, academics, and special programs. I also conducted member checks with participants and asking follow up questions for clarification when needed.

Interviews were essential to this process so teachers can express in their own words how they interacted with their students and engaged with classroom management and curriculum. Every teacher chose to focus on different aspects of incorporating the mandated CRP, and I wanted to give them the opportunity to speak to those pedagogical choices. During observations I looked for what teachers said they have implemented or changed about their disciplinary and instructional practices, as well as the language they use if/when discipline or instruction needs to change at the moment. The system data provided a written record of teachers' previous referrals and behavioral comments for students they had prior to the DOJ investigation and CRP mandate. All the above data points provided the triangulation needed for this project. Additionally, as seen in other parts of this project, there are sections of spoken word poetry that incorporates direct quotes from teachers' interviews as well as from observation notes.

This research is being approached phronetically<sup>63</sup>, as the questions and research ideas have been developed from previous conceptual knowledge of the school district, DOJ investigation and the mandated professional development. I used grounded theory as well as

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<sup>63</sup> Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

phenomenological coding. Which is to say, I focused intently on the lived experiences of these educators and their perceptions of those experiences, but also allowed those perspectives to create their own constructs and concepts in relation to the recorded data<sup>64</sup>. I feel it's only natural to let the work explore on its own and not be guided by any preconceived notions I may have as a researcher and practitioner in this space.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The sections that follow this are the common findings that arose from focus group discussions and observation memos. Additionally, supplemental data from LCAP community surveys and student referrals has been integrated to support primary data collection.

#### **Title: Intervention**

#### **LISTEN HERE**

The first known use of 'intervention' was in the 15th century<sup>65</sup>.

As in divine intervention.

A miraculous turn of events

A change beyond human grasp

It must've come from God.

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<sup>64</sup> John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> "Definition of *intervention*," Merriam-Webster, accessed date, March 7, 2022 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intervention>.

Or man pretending to be

But with no direction on how to use those interventions<sup>66</sup>

We had to figure that out ourselves<sup>67</sup>

There is no grounding philosophy

The roll out was weak<sup>68</sup>

some parents are understanding,<sup>69</sup>

but for the most part, they want harsher consequences.<sup>70</sup>

They get mad at us for not suspending for not doing<sup>71</sup>

in-school suspension,<sup>72</sup>

detention<sup>73</sup>

you're also trying to kind of bridge that gap

and educate the parents on,<sup>74</sup>

Yes.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Rowan, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>67</sup> Rowan, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>68</sup> Parker, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>69</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>70</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>71</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>72</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>73</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>74</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>75</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

But that didn't work.<sup>76</sup>

We went through the school system with a very black and white set of rules,<sup>77</sup>

That's your boundary?<sup>78</sup>

That's the line you want?<sup>79</sup>

Each student requires a different set of boundaries<sup>80</sup>

Appropriate to how that students functions in the world<sup>81</sup>

But when you're trying to elicit community in your classroom<sup>82</sup>

We were trying to put out fires with an eyedropper.<sup>83</sup>

You look around and you're like,<sup>84</sup>

This kid is drowning,<sup>85</sup>

And bringing others down with them.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>77</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>78</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>79</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>80</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>81</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>82</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>83</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>84</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>85</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>86</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

How do we save everyone  
or triage the situation?<sup>87</sup>

And I'd rather not kick kids off of campus.<sup>88</sup>

And it felt for a while there,<sup>89</sup>

For some teachers,<sup>90</sup>

The systems in place were abandoning them.<sup>91</sup>

And then we hear

“I really don't think these things are happening at my district”<sup>92</sup>

And I remember I just stared at him like,<sup>93</sup>

Then what are we doing?<sup>94</sup>

And I was questioning my role too?<sup>95</sup>

I'm so tired of hearing that the percentages are skewed.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>88</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>89</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>90</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>91</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>92</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>93</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>94</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>95</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>96</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

There's always a caveat whenever these interventions are discussed.<sup>97</sup>

So we don't really believe it.<sup>98</sup>

Just because you say it's not there,<sup>99</sup>

or you turn your face to the side so you can't see it,<sup>100</sup>

Doesn't mean it's not there.<sup>101</sup>

Can we just accept our faults and reflect and move forward?<sup>102</sup>

They don't want to talk about it.<sup>103</sup>

They don't want to think about it.<sup>104</sup>

They go, oh well, the percentage is small<sup>105</sup>

It's fine.<sup>106</sup>

No.<sup>107</sup>

If the percentage of black students at our school is less than 10%<sup>108</sup>

The percentage of black student getting disciplined at our school should be less than 10%<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>98</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>99</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>100</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>101</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>102</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>103</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>104</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>105</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>106</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>107</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>108</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>109</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

You'll be in the staff meetings and they're like<sup>110</sup>

Look what DOJ has done to us!<sup>111</sup>

Done to us?<sup>112</sup>

We are upset we got caught for our actions.<sup>113</sup>

We have this mentality of<sup>114</sup>

It's not our problem<sup>115</sup>

It's the DOJ's problem<sup>116</sup>

When in staff meetings there's still discussion and excitement over kids that are leaving our campus to go to alternative schools,

That they are finally gone<sup>117</sup>

That leads me to believe that no,<sup>118</sup>

It's not.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>111</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>112</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>113</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>114</sup> Verdugo, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>115</sup> Verdugo, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>116</sup> Verdugo, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>117</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>118</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>119</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

All of the participants have voluntarily completed a culturally and linguistically relevant training cohort modeled from Dr. Sharroky Hollie<sup>120</sup> that will need to be mandatorily completed district wide over the next 3 years. Dr. Sharroky Hollie delivers nationwide professional development to educators on the topic of cultural responsiveness. He was chosen by district leadership and the assigned monitor from the Department of Justice following the results of the district investigation. Dr. Hollie began this intervention by training coaches, administrators and teachers within the district, who ran binder studies with a chosen cohort of teacher to introduce protocols and other pedagogical strategies in order to produce a culturally responsive classroom. The interviews and classroom observations were completed in April and May as teachers were completing their final cohorted binder studies, or completing their first full year of classroom training and engagement with the pedagogical tools from this professional development.

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Content Area</b>	<b>Range of Years in Education</b>
Vanessa	Counseling/Social Work	5-10
Lynn	Math	20+
Sarah	SPED	0-5
Anastasia	Math	0-5
Parker	Science	0-5

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<sup>120</sup> “Meet Dr. Sharroky Hollie,” The Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning, <https://www.culturallyresponsive.org/about-dr-hollie>.



Verdugo	ELA	5-10
Rowan	Science	10-15
Greer	Science	0-5

The focus group interviews served as a cross cohort conversation about the realities of implementation of policies and practices that have been mandated by the DOJ since their investigation and take over. There is at least one educator from each of the 3 high schools in the union high school district. There are two comprehensive high schools and one alternative education/continuation high school. One comprehensive high school has a population of 300 more students than the other, and also offers a well established agriculture program that the other school does not have. Each of them had a distinct view on the activities outside of their classrooms when it comes to school culture and school community. Some participants discussed program implementation, school culture, and fidelity, while others discussed outside community influences and generational trauma around interactions with this specific district. The observations I completed were not interactive and served as a reflection of how each educator speaks about cultural relevance and how each educator engages in their own culturally relevant practices. All educators were observed for one class period of their choosing at their respective sites.

**Finding 1: Pros/Cons of Tiered Intervention and It’s Buzzwords**

The focus group began with questions that surrounded differences in disciplinary policy changes, curriculum, school culture, and teacher expectations prior to the pandemic and DOJ investigation and afterward. This discussion was led with responses to the second research

question in mind. Immediately the conversation began to be framed around the buzzword-  
'intervention'.

Greer began with "I would say intervention is a word that's used way more than I remember it ever being before an intervention also became like mean a bunch of different things. Instead of punishment, it was like, okay, how are you going to intervene?" Many of the educators agreed both verbally and in body language by nodding their heads or silently clapping. As stated in previous chapters, Warren<sup>121</sup> defined one of the core tenets of cultural responsiveness is the ability to operationalize empathy. Here we see Greer analyzing the use of the word intervention and understanding it to be synonymous with empathy towards students in situations that arise on campus or within classrooms. There were plenty of mixed feelings around the word intervention. Some noticed the powers of that word simply being common language as a way to read between the lines of behavioral situations and use newly added wellness centers on campus instead of directly writing a referral, which was past practice. Lynn commented about the change on her campus,

"Since the DOJ, I feel like there's a lot more emphasis on trying to bring in the wellness center as an intervention as a, like a midway point, as opposed to immediately sending kids up to the office. Um, kind of having a little more grace about where kids are coming from emotionally on any given day? Um, I don't feel like it's an officially stated policy, but it's sort of like reading between the lines on how things happen with the students that I've seen. That's what I noticed the biggest change."

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<sup>121</sup> Chezare A. Warren, "Empathy, Teacher Dispositions, and Preparation for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy," *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2 (2018): 169-183.

Here Lynn engages in the understanding of power differentials when it comes to discipline that were common practices prior to the DOJ investigation. Her analysis engages with Community Cultural Wealth framework as Salisbury<sup>122</sup> discussed youth being able to be their own agents of change if given the space and opportunity. Students sent to the wellness center are being given the opportunity to operate based on their human needs first, and then their academic needs. It allows time for students to de-escalate, use learned coping strategies, and regroup with support before continuing in the classroom. This practice is rarely highlighted in schools' practices, policies, and structures because it disrupts the hegemonic perspective of how schools should handle student disruption or situational trauma.

Parker, a science teacher on another campus in the district, added that his school's policy around intervention still begins in the classroom as a primary point of contact, and ensuring that the wellness center remain for the top tier of intervention before administration and disciplinary action;

“clear policy that evolved this year, um, where the intent is to make a multi-tiered process where teachers are asked to be, um, the, the proctor of the first and second step of this intervention tier system. And then to document each of those steps, whether it's having a conference with a student and then for sure, calling home and having a parental conversation. And then the third step being the intervention with the, uh, wellness center.”

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<sup>122</sup> Jason Salisbury (2020): “‘It’ll Make My Brother’s Education Better Than Mine. We Need That.’: Youth of Color Activating Their Community Cultural Wealth for Transformative Change,” *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, August 19, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2020.1797108>.

While the intervention sequence is different on Parker’s campus, the idea to allow space for the student to engage in self-guided restorative practices is the same. Parker’s school also engages parents in the communication process as a resource to provide wrap-around support for their students.

Vanessa, a district social worker, agreed that the tiered intervention development was a good start to interrupting disproportionate discipline, however, she quickly added that the policy presentation has created more confusion among parents and students because it was never clearly outlined as to why this change in policy was created.

“It's true that we have shifted really quick and with little direction too just because it's so new, like we're not hearing the words anymore in school suspension...it's just intervention, and just explaining it to the students and parents has been difficult.”

The consensus of this part of the discussion is that the wellness centers that have been introduced to campus have clearly been a positive introduction since the DOJ takeover. However, the services that are offered with the wellness centers such as connections with Social Workers are not being used appropriately and thus hinders the connections between students and those campus resources. Intervention is identified as a policy change, but the definition is not consistent nor is it practiced similarly on the campuses’. Some educators have used the interventions as guiding notes to help students. For example, Greer who co-teaches with Sarah for at least one period commented:

“We’ve both been very holistic in how we view our students and how we view the systems that are already present in the school system. I think that the biggest change is that we were making more internal notes to ourselves, like our first year on our own. Now we use the intervention like notes more as a way of communicating to other teachers, like where we are helping a student. I use those intervention notes to kind of guide me like, this is a problem a student is having in my class? Or is this like a campus wide problem? And so what I didn’t really put in there [before] is things that I think other teachers should know to help them make decisions about that student in their classroom. Not so much as a way of snitching, or maybe not even like necessarily documenting, as a, uh, disciplinary viewpoint so much as how can I inform other people? Um, so that way the student is being seen. So I don’t know, maybe that’s just, um, my philosophy of when it comes to behaviors, it’s, you know, behaviors don’t come out of nowhere. So therefore, you know, I’m going to document these behaviors so that way, if there’s other teachers that can read that and be like, oh that’s happening here [too]. And this is how this teacher is dealing with this and I’m seeing that behavior here. So that way, if it gets to tier two. Now we see like a whole arc of behavior and tier two can be a lot more effective in addressing the reasonings behind the behavior.”

Greer and Sarah’s use of intervention aligns with Blumer’s SIT<sup>123</sup>. Blumer’s synopsis of premises posits that meaning is made of behavior based on each person’s individual reactions to different experiences in their own lives. By documenting the behavior and separating it from the moment of interaction, creating a holistic viewpoint, allows both Sarah and Greer to be more

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<sup>123</sup>Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 62.

effective and engage in CRP when it comes to supporting the student based on the student's individual needs instead of the assumed meaning of the behavior based on the educators past lived experiences. Sarah and Greer are remaining empathetic, per CRP core tenet, instead of reactionary which in turn allows them to analyze a different pathway to intervention that is not punitive.

This next section will speak to the fidelity of interventions that are being practiced on campus. In this section the educators address the introduction of CRP to their campus and its execution, as well as how that has changed their interactions with documentation, discipline, and interactions with students, parents, and other educators on campus.

### **Finding 2: Fidelity and Community Buy-in**

This finding sought to answer the third research question and discussed the level of fidelity that teachers believe that their individual sites as well as district as a whole have committed to CRP and PBIS practices as mandated by the DOJ. Verdugo began the conversation by saying,

“I feel like we're getting like a toe in the water conversation all the time, but we're not getting a, let's dive deeper into what this looks like and how. Effectively, you know, like there's all these expectations that we've been told that we have to have now, but I'm just on a day-to-day basis. I don't have a clear idea of what those expectations are all the time. Um, and so I'm just trying to, like, I feel like I'm asking more questions that I am able to answer.”

Rowan followed up with obvious exasperation in her voice:

“The biggest fault with what has happened since the DOJ, in my opinion at my school, is that they've basically said, this is your new model, but then there was no, you know, specific guideline or direction on how to use that model effectively. We had to figure that out ourselves.”

While the educators in the classroom are being asked to go through training, the follow through of the implementation for tiered instruction and CRP practices and the clarity for the practical use of these trainings have not been accessible. As mentioned before, each of these educators took additional cohort model training on CRP that taught strategies for engagement, management, and growth of school culture, but they are still not confident that they are executing them correctly, or in a way that is entirely beneficial to their students. There are no real support systems that are ensuring that the district mandated change be enforced with any consistency between teachers, classrooms, or entire school campuses'. There is no way to build a sense of safe community if there are such severe deviations in foundational community agreed expectations.

Greer continued to summarize the tension between administration and educators on campus because of the lack of understanding and follow through,

“I know all of you have said like, it wasn't very clear to begin with, like, who is determining tier one, tier two, like when your students are swearing at you and you're like intervention, and then nothing happens. I can see why some people burned out really fast.”

There was a resounding “YES!” followed with affirmative head nods and sporadic ‘exactly!’. While this is a prime example of the moment to be reflexive about the interaction between student and teacher and the elements that may have precipitated that interaction, it becomes significantly more difficult with no follow through. The acknowledgement is not to excuse or place blame on either party, but to understand that the community culture that is expected for educators to build among students is not modeled within the district itself among professionals. Tara Yosso’s guiding question for the CCW framework is “whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted?”<sup>124</sup> With implementation of policies that affect the classrooms, it seems as though there is limited communication of all stakeholders at different levels of the district. Not only does the differentiation of power exist with students, but also with educators, which makes it difficult to create the community capital that this professional development is striving towards. The responsibility for change in interventions cannot only be led by the students, it has to be modeled and led by the educators.

After expressing frustration with follow through from administrative personnel, the conversation became redirected to individual buy-in of CRP and PBIS practices and what educators were seeing within their own classrooms or seeing in their colleagues' classrooms. Before this interview, I had done classroom observations of Verdugo, Lynn, Greer, and Sarah. As well as had a conversation with Vanessa after she conducted small group interventions around her campus. All five educators, from my perspective, are entirely bought into the importance of CRP. Their classrooms and office spaces were inviting and very much created a

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<sup>124</sup> Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 69-91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>.



space for students to engage in difficult conversations about possibly controversial topics. All the rooms were decorated with content specific curriculum posters, but also posters and pictures acknowledging gender and sexual orientation differences, learning differences, ethnic and racial differences, land acknowledgements, and even references to the geographical trauma that all students and educators lived through the past few years in the area. All of this was supported with resources that were accessible, and positioned in places that students would not feel vulnerable to take a pamphlet or sheet of paper. All educators gave time and space for the students to acclimate and settle, as well as bring up any concerns they may have. The routines of the classrooms and meeting spaces were clear. Approaches to content varied and welcomed differentiation introduced by students, whether they were visual notes, or project based. It created a mutual learning environment that clearly gave students the understanding that their agency matters in these spaces.

Verdugo expressed her main change since engaging her CRP,

“But the way that I talk to students, you know, like I’ve been able to get a little bit of different language to be able to start talking to them differently that produces, or that basically equals to less discipline problems, like big discipline problems.”

Liou strongly suggests “deficit perspective draws from a place of deficiency”.<sup>125</sup> Verdugo did not feel like she had the language previously to de-escalate or mediate possible disciplinary problems in her classroom. Being engaged in CRP and understanding the intersectional ties of

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<sup>125</sup> Daniel D. Liou, Antonio Nieves Martinez, and Erin Rotheram-Fuller, “‘Don’t Give Up On Me’: Critical Mentoring Pedagogy for the Classroom Building Students’ Community Cultural Wealth,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29, no. 1 (2016): 104-129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2015.1017849>.

each student that all play a role in how each student shows up in class, helped her to understand how to approach each student in the language and method that still maintains community while demanding a level of expectation academically, culturally, and socially as Ladson-Billings suggests.<sup>126</sup>

Sarah added that her change is in who she refers her students and parents to. More often than not, her referrals for students and parents are resources either outside of the school community, or other members of staff that she has deemed safe and have adjusted to also being culturally responsive;

“I have refined who I direct students to, um, on like, who is most beneficial in this type of situation. How I interact with parents and kind of like, this is another resource for you to contact. Um, I think I’ve even more so been referring students to Vanessa and having those types of conversations, um, and connecting students with, you know, there are other students on campus that I know, you know, do any of your friends know Vanessa? Do any of your friends do this? And kind of bridging that gap in that way.”

Sarah’s use of knowledge of pedagogical beliefs and practices of other staff members on campus aligns with CCW, in understanding the needs of her students and the community members who will most benefit her students instead of possibly instilling more harm.

Greer in agreement added in,

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<sup>126</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: AKA the Remix,” *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 74-84.

“And having a much more clear reasoning behind why do a lot of collaborative working and why I had student centered things and again, the protocols help, but it was really like, I was doing a lot of those things before, but as I said, like the why was way more important. And like, my frustration has been like those of us who have been in the cohorts have been those who were circling that level of teaching anyway. And. so I feel like there are islands of classrooms where students feel, you know, seen and heard, and it’s not a cultural revolution on campus. It’s like, you know, several territories on campus are the safe places to be, and then you hear about these very culturally unsafe places elsewhere. And it’s like, well, if this is what we’re going to do. If we’re building this culture or if we are doing this, you know, culturally relevant PBIS then why isn’t it a bigger priority that everyone HAS to do this, that THIS is our byword. That THIS is what we as a people are going to be known for.”

It’s clear that even though these educators have been happy to make the changes and adjustments that have been mandated, they still feel very isolated as a whole. The feeling of buy-in from the larger campus community is lacking and creates a different type of division than what was originally identified by the department of justice investigation. The idea of educators having to ‘protect’ their students from other educators on the same campus because of unchecked practices or behavior from staff, is not only traumatizing for students, but also traumatizing for the teachers who have embraced the understanding surrounding this needed change.

### **Finding 3: Approach to School Culture and Classroom Management**

The first part of the poem Survival Communities focused on the acceptance of meeting students and parents where they are. This second part focuses on the change in educators who are beginning to notice the generational trauma and beginning to understand that their approach to the community as an institution has not served the people that make up their community. While there are still some educators who believe that we as a school cannot do much if there is no desire for interaction on the parts of the parents, others understand that the parents are still healing from the trauma of the exact same spaces they are knowingly sending their children into.

#### **Title: Survival Communities pt. 2**

#### **[LISTEN HERE](#)**

How is it that those of us working our asses off to change

Do so in devoted silence?<sup>127</sup>

What recourse do I have when I know an injustice is being done to students in another classroom?<sup>128</sup>

Here's the thing

We are a collection of individuals

But what changes individuals into a unified system

Is leadership<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>128</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>129</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

But as soon as the DOJ is gone

The wellness centers will be gone.

All of these interventions

will be gone

That's how the district works.

This district in particular.<sup>130</sup>

I don't know that the community as a whole sees any of that<sup>131</sup>

Their kids go in,

They have a life there

The kids come out

But are we sure the parents know what's going on?<sup>132</sup>

They're not reachable

They won't respond

They won't come and be a part of anything you invite them to.

There's only so much you can do.<sup>133</sup>

It's a generational issue.

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<sup>130</sup> Vanessa, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>131</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>132</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>133</sup> Rowan, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

They've not had good experiences at school.

Right now we have this opportunity to say okay

So generationally

It's f-ed up

But how do we move forward now?

We have to change for these kids now.

We can't just look back and say that's the way it was.<sup>134</sup>

A lot of parents were burned by the exact same school their kids are going to.

There is an automatic defensiveness.

And I don't blame them.<sup>135</sup>

And in a community that is living on the margins already?

Parents have even less mental and emotional energy to give<sup>136</sup>

Because survival

is not easy.<sup>137</sup>

The remainder of this section will focus on the language that has been used by some of the educators in this district on the disciplinary records of “problem” students as deemed by the sheer number of interventions that a student had in the course of a semester both prior to and

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<sup>134</sup> Sarah, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>135</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>136</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

<sup>137</sup> Greer, Focus Group #1, April 24, 2022

after the DOJ investigation. Some of these students have as many as 70+ disciplinary comments and/or actions in the length of a school semester.

Before introducing the examples of these records, as an observer, researcher, and educator in this district, I will state that while I have seen significant shifts to try and change the disproportionate disciplinary actions of students, many educators and parents have pushed back because of lack of understanding as to why a less punitive approach has been chosen. There is a strong sense that students are going without consequences. This data will show a shift in language on disciplinary records that had been consistent throughout the beginning of the first semester of the school year where this data is being pulled from, but trends are reversing during this second semester of the school year that I am writing this project.

This first set of intervention comments references a student at one of the comprehensive sites and has been a student through the entirety of the DOJ investigation as well as virtual learning that was put in place due to COVID. The student did return to campus after COVID. The age and grade level of the student will remain anonymous, but this student is identified as an Asian female.

This first comment was made prior to one of my participants taking the cohort training mentioned previously in this project;

“Phoned home twice. No answer. Left Message. [Student] asking to go to bathroom during [class] and not returning. Privilege has been taken away because she is not returning to class.”

This note is detached from empathy and doesn't humanize the student or their struggles. Instead it is very procedural in nature which serves as proof of the lack of community that has been developed between student and teacher. After the cohort training the same teacher wrote this intervention,

“Have been working to try and establish a relationship with student. Was extremely disengaged and agitated regarding school. After reviewing intervention notes, am referring to school social worker.”

There is an obvious change in perception towards that student's behavior. The original intervention note is detached and does not take into account the state of the student, or environment, and simply chooses to discipline the student because of their actions instead of offering resources to understand the reasoning behind those actions which premeditates the punitive behavior that reinforces the school to prison pipeline philosophy. There is a humanization and removal of hierarchies in the second comment. The entire structure of the note shifts to highlight relationship building and empathizing which changes the response from punitive to a response that encourages the student to remain engaged with the support system that is offered on campus.

There have also been instances surrounding other students when participants have used interventions to explain the problem happening with students, but not use the opportunity to connect with the student or find appropriate resources to respond to the needs of the student. The following example references a student who identifies as a White male.



“[Student] got mad when a peer called him by his given name rather than his preferred name. He told the peer that he would break the Chromebook over his head. I asked him to step outside instead. Later I talked to [student] and explained that his peer didn’t know his preferred name and acting angry is not respectful. Lunch detention intervention scheduled”

In this example, the feelings of the student are not validated. Their expression of anger, while not verbalized appropriately, was just seen as an overreaction, and thus they are ‘punished’ because of the expression of an anger that the educator did not deem important enough to respond to that strongly. This ethnic population of students may not be considered in the DOJ investigation, but, there are many other identities for this student that do fall into a marginalized population that are not being supported on campus. By simply having a preferred name that is not respected in a classroom community, that creates an alienation from the other students that is entirely avoidable based on the set up and execution of classroom culture.

Lynn has stated that she introduced a connection time in each period to create and maintain that classroom culture,

“I am doing connection time every day. It’s something that I implemented directly as a result of that [training], that I did not think was going to be a big deal, but it has made a world of difference in my students’ willingness to talk about math after we’re done with the connection time and I will keep it forever and a day and argue for it being academically important, even though it just looks like something that, you know, why are

the kids talking about what they did over the weekend? Why are the kids talking about their favorite ice cream? As it turns out they talk more about math after.”<sup>138</sup>

Anastasia, a Math teacher as well, confirmed Lynn’s assessment about the importance of including life outside of class content being a measured change that has been positive.

“The schools are focused a lot on like academics and like behavior and stuff like that, but they don’t focus on the emotional part. And I was like bingo! That’s the missing part. It’s hard to, you know, just fly through that and not focus on it and just kind of like, put it under the rug. A lot of us don’t know how to emotionally regulate and therefore that keeps us from being present. And being there in the moment and getting the most out in the moment. I feel like if we can focus on that and make that a priority, that’s when we’re going to see a big fluff, you know, 30, 60, or 180 turn in our school system.”<sup>139</sup>

Some educators are making the changes they need to make in communication with their students, validating their student experiences, and using students' funds of knowledge and school resources to build a campus community that affirms and meets the needs of families where they are. Some educators have improved communication with students but the intervention and cultural responsiveness has not come full circle because there is still a separation due to hierarchy. There is still an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality when addressing issues that students confront on a daily basis. Continued efforts to bridge that gap will continue with further training,

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<sup>138</sup> Lynn, Focus Group #2, April 30, 2022

<sup>139</sup> Anastasia, Focus Group #2, April 30, 2022

but it will be up to the teachers to really lean in and apply strategies and reflect honestly when it comes to incorporating these practices with fidelity.

## **Summary and Analysis of Major Findings**

This section will examine the major findings of the project as a whole. This project aimed to analyze the conversations and adjustments to disciplinary practices from teachers after mandatory professional development was implemented after a Department of Justice investigation. I used Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Community Cultural Wealth, and Symbolic Interactionism frameworks to understand participants' stories. The interviews, classroom observations, and data collected from DataZone, all exemplified ways that the mandated professional development has been both a help and a hindrance to actual sustainable growth within this specific district. As modeled earlier in this dissertation project, there are also spoken word poems that include a portion of the story and share the findings in another voice that divests from the traditional format. With this book project I aimed to illuminate if mandates are an effective way of bringing about change in a space that has long struggled with practices that have further alienated marginalized communities.

Three major themes surfaced from the research for this dissertation project. The first theme came from the discussion from the first focus group interview. Many teachers spoke of the intervention tiers that were put in place when PBIS and CRP were put in place as a method to respond to students' behavioral problems that arise on campus. Many educators made the observation that intervention is used as a buzzword more than an action plan. There was a general expression of frustration that came from varied comments of lack of fidelity from leadership down to classrooms when it came to introducing the practices learned in the mandated

professional development. Many educators found it difficult to adjust their practices in major ways because they did not have the support from leadership that was expected with such a drastic change.

The second theme dove further into the community buy-in and fidelity that came with implementing PBIS and CRP. There was discussion of district leadership that did not believe that these changes were necessary, even though they were mandated after a thorough investigation by the Department of Justice. The tone and mindset from the district office spread to many educators on all campuses, and delayed self-enrollment in CRP cohorts as well as created division on each campus between educators who have made the transition and educators who have not made the transition. Participants reflected on times they have felt the need to protect students from other teachers because of the teacher still doing things “the old way”. Additionally, informing parents and students about the changes and reasoning behind becoming culturally responsive has led to more frustration from parents who are looking to schools to be the disciplinarians when it comes to unwanted behaviors. Teachers who are engaged in creating more equitable classrooms and school culture are feeling push back from the community and from their district leadership which is leaving them feeling stuck in the middle and burned out quickly.

The final theme addressed the approach to school culture and classroom management. This theme began with the poem ‘Survival Communities pt. 2’, that showed the recognition from educators that there is generational trauma when it comes to interacting with schools in this community. The examples in this section show the shift in language when discussing students who have multiple intervention comments in their student data folder. Prior to training, the comments show a disregard for the emotion of the student or lack of analysis behind the behavior

of the student. Punitive measures were more frequently taken, which would then cause greater disdain on both sides of the student and teacher relationship. After CRP and PBIS training, there was a deeper empathetic analysis and desire to provide resources to the student instead of seeing their behavior as an act of defiance that needed to be punished. However, there was also an example of an educator who had gone through the CRP and PBIS training, who made more detailed notes in student interventions, but did not change their approach to engaging with the student on the empathetic level that CRP deems necessary to be successful in full implementation.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Implications for Practice, Policy and Future Research**

As an educator in this district as well as a researcher, I am hesitant to report on the implications for practice and policy. This is year two of a five year program improvement. The downfall behind ignoring the recommended changes in practices would be further action taken by the Department of Justice. This district has no choice but to comply. However, I will acknowledge that being complicit does not mean changing practices at the root of the problem. The true outcome will reveal itself after the Department of Justice is removed from the situation. If there are not significant changes we run the risk of continuing the generational trauma inflicted by our local institutions, and having even less parental involvement than we currently are experiencing. The county has one of the highest Adverse Childhood Experiences Scores

(ACES)<sup>140</sup> in the state, and a community that has a constant growing contention when it comes to educational institutions will not alleviate that statistic if the graduation rate continues to drop because of the aforementioned generational trauma from these institutions.

Additionally, there will continue to be very few staff of color because of the lack of support that comes with building a community that encourages and uplifts cultural diversity beyond textbooks and government holidays. Which in turn means fewer points of connectivity for students of color.<sup>141</sup> It becomes a domino effect that continues to add to the statistics that were identified in the poem ‘Reserved Land’.

In terms of future research, mandated professional development like this calls for a longitudinal study that analyzes the district in all stages of program implementation. The educators at all levels of this district should continuously look at patterns of disciplinary methods and groups, as well as becoming more aware of, and intervene in, situations that can be classified as harassment towards marginalized student populations. For the purposes of generalizability, other educational institutions should begin addressing their own disparities by looking for the root of the problem. While I agree that is easier said than done, beginning with a training to address the disparity instead of a training to understand the reason for the disparity becomes a waste of resources as well as an open door of burnout for the educators on staff that want to dive deeper into a permanent solution and cultural change. Backwards analysis has proven to be helpful in understanding the reason for disparities. This is simply a snapshot of the first two stages, the outcome and hopeful growth of this district because of this intervention is the ultimate

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<sup>140</sup> “Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs),” National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, last modified April 2, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>.

<sup>141</sup> Carl Boisrond, “If Your Teacher Looks Like You, You May Do Better at School,” NPR ED, last modified September 29, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/09/29/552929074/if-your-teacher-looks-like-you-you-may-do-better-in-school>

goal that cannot be reported at this time. This project is the beginning of an understanding about cultural responsiveness and the most effective ways to encourage spaces to engage in this practice when the community as a whole may be hesitant or threatened by its introduction.

## **Limitations**

Limitations that were anticipated to arise in this study were participants being hesitant to reflect on their practices around large groups of their peers. I planned semi-structured focus group interviews because I want to recreate the conversations that could be had during professional development. I wanted these conversations to be as organic as possible, however, once something was recorded, there was the added pressure to perform or save oneself from saying something incriminating.

Another limitation to this study is my positionality as a practitioner. I am a fellow colleague to all of these participants, but I also serve as an culturally responsive academic coach for the district, and have had many of these teachers in my cohorts of reflection; which is a monthly practice of gathering and analyzing pedagogical strategies as well as behavioral concerns and interactions. In addition, I am the only African American female identifying teacher in the district, and many times, the only person of color in these meetings, as well as 1 of 10 teachers of color in a district of roughly 130 teachers. Speaking about culturally responsive practices, especially after a mandate from the Department of Justice, in predominantly white spaces, and having frank conversations about race and language, can make for awkward conversations to say the least.

The final poem of this dissertation project speaks to the desire to create a willingness for change, and the skepticism that comes with that change being dependent on the aesthetics of the

change agent. It's my hope that as a community we begin to recognize the cultural wealth that our students can offer and continue to create meaningful experiences and relationships that will begin to heal the institutional trauma that our educational system has done.

**Title: Does It Even Matter?**

**LISTEN HERE**

There is always the fear

That none of this will matter

That my voice will take out of context

The importance of this matter

That conversations will not come to the conclusion that

Black lives

Brown lives

Queer lives

Native lives

Matter.

But through this education system

I've learned that we are all made up of matter

And it cannot be created nor destroyed

But I'm hoping it's open to a conversation.



And that conversation is gonna ask  
Like the law of conservation  
That we lay out all our atoms  
And find a way to rearrange them

I'm not promoting erasure.

We need the same number  
and same kinds of atoms  
After the chemical change that were there before  
Maybe just a little bit more humble  
And open to a conversation.

But I know if we continue this way,  
we're headed for combustion.

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