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EXPLORING CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF ONE
EASTERN VIRGINIA HIGH SCHOOL

by

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ABSTRACT**EXPLORING CULTURALLY RELEVANT LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF ONE
EASTERN VIRGINIA HIGH SCHOOL**

Donna H. Weingand
Old Dominion University, 2017
Director: Dr. Jay Paredes Scribner

There is a need for equity in our schools—especially with respect to the impact of equity on student achievement—and it is important for educational leaders to not only identify issues of teachers’ cultural and ethnic biases in the classroom, but for educational leaders to feel comfortable tackling these issues in an effort to move toward a more socially just educational climate and culture. The purpose of this study was to not only identify how and to what extent culturally relevant instruction and leadership manifest in one Southeastern Virginia School, but also the ways that school leaders foster a culturally relevant learning environment. A single case study was chosen for this qualitative research study. There were five major findings as a result of this study. First, the data revealed that educators are shaped by their own personal background experiences, as well as have the ability to understand their students on a deep, personal basis. Further, teachers offer not only a strong instructional program built on collaboration and research-based practices; they also prioritize a “secondary” curriculum grounded in real-world application and personal development. Finally, students have access to a wide web of support offered by the faculty, staff, administration, and community. The results from this study suggest that culturally relevant teachers and administrators are empathetic and understanding of their students’ culture and needs, as well as prioritize educating the whole child by

offering not only a strong instructional program, but also real-world instruction and a deep level of support.

Acknowledgements

That I am writing this acknowledgement almost six years after beginning the journey of my doctorate is in itself an emotional experience. Certainly the process of the writing a dissertation is daunting; however, it would have been unmanageable without the love and support of my husband, Darryl. It may sound cliché, but without his encouragement, the dream of earning this degree would be just that – instead, it is a reality.

Throughout this process, my children, Noah, Meredith, and Gillian, have been my cheerleaders, constantly asking if I was done with my “paper,” and checking on me along the way. I missed far too many practices, games, and performances over the last few years, and I thank each of them for their love and encouragement throughout this journey.

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I would also like to say thank you to the members of my committee for guiding me through this process, especially my chair. Dr. Scribner, thank you immensely for your guidance, flexibility, encouragement, gentle reminders, and your “not-so-gentle” reminders. I couldn’t have chosen a chair that was a better fit. It was definitely a privilege to work with you, and I hope our professional relationship continues in the years to come.

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List of Abbreviations

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

International Baccalaureate (IB)

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Virginia High School (VHS)

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background

Schools in the United States are faced with a complex conundrum—responding to the needs of an ever-evolving, diverse student population, while also adhering to federal and state directives regarding standardized testing and accountability mandated by the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (formerly No Child Left Behind) legislature. The complex needs of today’s diverse student population must be met by teachers who are not only equipped with knowledge and relevant experience, but teachers who are able to meet the needs of diverse learners. Teacher education programs that include such knowledge, relevant experience, and emphasis on diversity are programs that foster multicultural awareness through coursework and classroom experiences. This type of education—“multicultural education”—as defined by Rao (2005) is a “systemic process involving politics, society, and education that is more than just a curriculum reform which includes content about ethnic groups, women, and other cultural groups” (p. 281). Multicultural education is such that the “new dimensions of complexity and practicality” of United States’ schools and society are considered, especially as social conditions and political circumstances change (Gay, 2004). In that respect, multicultural education truly is a social movement philosophy.

Certainly, times are changing—and rapidly so. The proportion of students from diverse cultural backgrounds has been on the rise (Rao, 2005; Garcia, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010). According to Garcia and colleagues (2010), at least one in five children, ages five to 17 in the United States has a foreign born parent, and most of them learn English as a second language. In fact, the population of children speaking a non-English

native language rose from 6% in 1979 to 14% in 1999; furthermore, many states (such as California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey) doubled their populations of children from non-English families from 1999-2000. The National Center for Educational Statistics in 1998 reported that 37% of students in United States public schools were from minority groups (Rao, 2005). Additionally, the percentage of students representing minority groups rose 33% at the turn of the century, and is projected to reach 40% by 2020 and 50% by 2035. Finally, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) reported that 44 percent of the total public school population consisted of racial/ ethnic minority students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Along with the changing demographics of United States' public schools comes a great deal of concern about their academic success, as the students representing minority ethnic groups tend to be from low-income homes and have parents who have little to no education (Garcia et al., 2010). These characteristics contribute to these students' difficulties in school, including: inadequate access to instructional time and materials, inadequate access to facilities, and most often have inadequate access to appropriately trained teachers. Moreover, these students' cultures, traditions, and languages can produce "anxieties, hostilities, prejudices, and racist behaviors among those who do not understand the newcomers and/ or who perceive them as threats to their safety and security" (Gay, 2004, p. 30). The diversity of school settings perpetuates a "restricted perspective," where school professionals tend to equate "difference" with "deficiency" (Dantley, 2002, p.334). Furthermore, as Dantley noted, the tendency among many Americans to cling to the myth of a "melting pot" of its people actually "decries a celebration of differences" and creates homogeneity and "sacrifices sensitivity to cultural

uniqueness” (p. 344).

That cultural sensitivity is a necessary characteristic of today’s classroom teacher is not a new concept; and certainly, it is indeed a necessary characteristic for today’s educational leaders. The literature on this subject is rich, and there is much research that supports the negative impact that a teacher’s cultural insensitivity has on student performance and achievement.

Data show that teacher biases, perceptions, and attitudes concerning minority students have a strong impact on student achievement (Reid & Knight, 2006; Lleras, 2008; O’Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009; Schneider, 2010; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Teacher biases and perceptions are highly vulnerable to racial and gender stereotypes (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Darity, Castellino, Tyson, Cobb, & McMillen, 2001). Reid & Knight (2006) assert that “many teachers judge students as acceptable or unacceptable according to a set of standards that conform to the historical White European ideal, including conceptions of knowledge and decorum; consider the dialects of American Blacks and Latinos as inferior to Standard English; and believe that specialized instructional techniques are for those students who do not do well in school—often those students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds” (p.19). Additionally, teachers tend to rate minority students as less-attached and engaged in their schoolwork (Lleras, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2010). Teachers also may harbor negative impressions of minority students’ behaviors, which may contribute to teachers’ use of inflexible and punitive classroom management and instructional strategies (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; O’Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009). If many teachers of minority students harbor negative and incorrect student perceptions and biases, minority students will not have the

encouragement they need to do well in coursework.

Several studies have been done regarding the impact of teachers' perceptions on minority students. A study by McKown and Weinstein (2008) utilizing data on 1872 students in 83 classrooms showed that in ethnically diverse classrooms where students reported high levels of differential treatment, the teachers' expectations of European American students were significantly higher than the teachers' expectations of African American and Latino students (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Another study of teachers' perceptions of minority students investigated the effects of teachers' perceptions on the standardized test performance of African American and European American students. The study, conducted by Oates (2003), used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, a nationally representative survey with student, parent, teacher, and other school staff components. Oates found that teachers' perceptions greatly affected students' performance on standardized tests as measured in reading, mathematics, history/citizenship/geography, and science. The results showed unfavorable teacher perceptions are consequential for the test performance of African American students, especially when their classroom work habits, behaviors, and future academic capabilities are judged by White teachers.

Certainly, the body of research supports the idea that teachers' biases, perceptions, and attitudes toward their students has quite an impact on their actual learning. This research sheds much light on the necessity of the school leader to not only support the idea that all children can learn, but the necessity to create a school climate and culture that supports cultural relevance and a culturally relevant and diverse instructional program. "Just as teachers must understand how culture operates daily in

the classroom, foster learning environments that value cultural and ethnic diversity, and understand how these environments inform student achievement, educational leaders must also gain this awareness to assist their teachers in establishing a school culture and climate that advances student learning and engagement through cultural affirmation and social support (Hosford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011, p. 596-597).

The National Policy Board for the Educational Administration's Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (2008) directly addresses the necessity of cultural relevance. The last three standards, which lay out the essential functions in the field, specifically address issues of "diverse community needs," promoting understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources," and the expectations that school leaders will "safeguard the values of democracy, equity, and diversity," promote social justice and ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling" (Hosford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011, p. 598). Absolutely, today's school leaders are expected to prioritize and maintain cultural relevance so that all students will learn.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

While the body of research conclusively supports the idea that teachers' cultural and ethnic sensitivity in the classroom has a great impact on student performance and achievement, there is little research concerning administrators' perceptions of the cultural and ethnic sensitivity of the teachers they lead. Further, there is a need for identifying the characteristics of educational leaders who employ culturally relevant leadership and foster a culturally-rich school culture and climate. "The problem embracing the American educational system is how to ensure that all students, especially the

racial/ethnic minority students, achieve” (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 67). To remedy this problem, investigating the notion of culturally relevant leadership and the characteristics of such leaders is crucial for students’ achievement.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research study is to investigate the ways in which educational leaders foster and support cultural relevance, as well as to investigate the ways that such cultural relevance fosters student learning. The data which result from this qualitative study will hopefully provide insight as to how teachers foster a culturally relevant learning environment, as well as how building administrators gauge and foster cultural sensitivity in teachers, as well as foster a culturally relevant school culture and climate.

This study seeks to answer these questions:

1. How and to what extent do culturally relevant instruction and leadership practices manifest in one comprehensive Virginia public high school?
2. Where it exists, how and in what ways do school leaders foster cultural and ethnic sensitivity and relevance (or not) in schools?

As a result of answering these questions, data will be gathered to guide schools in better preparing and developing teachers and school administrators as culturally relevant leaders who will exhibit the types of leadership behaviors necessary in reaching all students. Further, the data gathered will assist school leaders in recognizing what qualities are imperative of teachers working in diverse populations.

Justification for Study

Because issues of race and racism are still deeply ingrained within our society, they

are also by default ingrained in the public education—and when they are left untouched, they stand as excuses for the widening of educational disparities that persist within schools (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Educational leadership scholars contend that it is crucial for school leaders to review policies, practices, and organizational structures to remove any barriers that disadvantage students on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or any other characteristics (Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). School leaders, however, must be well-prepared in order to do this successfully. Mounting research suggests that culturally responsive educational leadership positively influences academic achievement. Therefore, leadership programs must offer strategies for recultivating individuals as leaders and teach future leaders ways to utilize social justice to affirm relationships with students from all backgrounds and ability levels (Kose, 2009).

There is a need for equity in our schools—especially with respect to the impact of equity on student achievement—and it is important for educational leaders to not only identify issues of teachers' cultural and ethnic biases in the classroom, but for educational leaders to feel comfortable tackling these issues in an effort to move toward a more socially just educational climate and culture. Utilizing qualitative methods based upon grounded theory, this study will investigate the perceptions of educational leaders concerning the cultural and ethnic sensitivity their teachers exercise in the classroom, as well as to investigate ways in which educational leaders promote a culturally relevant instructional program in an effort to address the needs of all students. Further, it is this researcher's hope that the data resulting from this

qualitative study will hopefully provide insight as to how building administrators gauge the cultural sensitivity of their teachers while fostering a culturally relevant school climate.

Brief Overview of Theoretical Framework

Certainly, as noted above, student achievement is influenced by the racial and cultural biases of classroom teachers. Further, teachers, and ultimately student achievement, are influenced by leaders who are culturally sensitive and employ culturally relevant pedagogy. When investigating the important issue of bias, it is crucial that the importance of cultural and racial sensitivity is in the foreground of research. Utilizing a critical lens to investigate the issue of cultural bias, such as Cultural Relevance Theory, provides a way to view the issue in a critical light so that change can happen.

In environments where educators are not aptly prepared to meet the unique needs of students who represent underserved racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, matters become less personal and more professional when complicated by the high-stakes accountability and prioritization of closing the achievement gap that grips our schools (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011). Further, the schools of today require greater attention to the philosophies, pedagogies, and perspectives of school leaders. “Because educational administrators at the school level are key to establishing and fostering the culture and climate of their schools, their epistemologies, attitudes, and assumptions concerning race and culture, [as well as] their implications for learning, must be an important part of the discourse concerning culturally relevant education” (p. 588-589). Such epistemologies, attitudes, and assumptions which foster a culturally rich school culture are pedagogically attached to Cultural Relevance Theory.

Cultural Relevance Pedagogy (or CRP) is defined as a pedagogy that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes [as well as] seeks to support students academically while affirming their cultural identity” (Ladson-Billings in Horsford et al., 2011, p. 590-591). CRP focuses on the importance of culture in schooling, and thus is a way for schools to acknowledge the home-community culture of the students; further, CRP, through sensitivity to cultural nuances, works to integrate students’ cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Because race must be considered in how CRP is enacted, the complexities of race in the United States must be explored (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Rollock (2012) asserts that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an “important theoretical framework that recognizes and seeks to expose and challenge the normality of racism in everyday life” (p. 520). Investigating the issue of teachers’ cultural and ethnic biases through the lens of critical race theory brings to light not only the importance of teachers’ ability to “teach” past their own biases, but also the importance of educational leaders’ perceptions of their teachers’ ability to do so. CRT then, is not so much a framework or theory, but a perspective—and is essentially a set of interrelated beliefs about the “significance of race/racism” and how it operates in society (Gillborn, 2006, p. 19). This perspective is that racism is deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and psychologically. Minority students are subjugated by the social and cultural conditions maintained by the status quo (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). In this way, schools in the United States often perpetuate the biases of others—even the biases of teachers. Certainly, some of these

conditions are contextual (as indicated by the literature); however, a terrible inequity exists if ways to challenge this status quo are studied and remediated. Failure to challenge the lens in which we see the world perpetuates the notion of meritocracy—that some individuals are entitled to a more rigorous curriculum—or better treatment—than others.

By definition, CRT is “a set of interrelated beliefs about the significance of race/racism and how it operates in contemporary western society, especially the US” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 19). The theory has its roots in US legal scholarship, where it grew as a “radical alternative” to dominant perspectives concerning race. CRT scholars were frustrated with the silence on racism, and wished to foreground issues of race. By 1995, connections between CRT and education were beginning to evolve, and a set of tenets or defining elements emerged. They are:

1. Racism is endemic, and therefore “normal,” not aberrant or rare;
2. Racism is deeply ingrained legally and culturally;
3. CRT crosses epistemological boundaries;
4. CRT is a critique of civil rights laws as fundamentally limited;
5. CRT is a critique of liberalism, and claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy are camouflages;
6. CRT is a call to context, in that it challenges ahistoricism and recognizes experiential knowledge of people of color.

A true attempt to research and remedy this serious issue must move past interest convergence—it must be intentional and target the issue at hand. The idea of a culturally relevant school culture and curriculum certainly targets this important issue. Thus, the

theory and praxis of CRP must include a critical analysis of race and racism. CRP, like CRT, recognizes the value of lived experiences by marginalized groups in understanding and making meaning of the world (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Importance of Study

Because of the need for equity in our schools—especially with respect to the impact of equity on student achievement—it is important for educational leaders to not only identify issues of teachers’ cultural and ethnic biases in the classroom, but for educational leaders to feel comfortable tackling these issues in an effort to move toward a more socially just educational climate and culture. Further, educational leaders need to embrace a culturally relevant approach to school leadership. Data from this study seeks to provide a model for doing so.

Overview of Methodology

According to Patton (2002), the primary purpose of research, especially fundamental or basic research, is to generate or test theory and contribute to knowledge for the sake of knowledge. This study of teachers’ and educational leaders’ perceptions of cultural or ethnic sensitivity using qualitative data lends itself well to this idea of fundamental research. Additionally, viewing such data through the lens of grounded theory is especially important to this study. Qualitative inquiry is especially powerful as a source of grounded theory (theory that is generated from fieldwork), in that the theory emerges from a researcher’s observations and interviews from the real world. This particular study will generate data that will help investigate just what teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions are of racial and cultural sensitivity in the classroom.

Hopefully, the patterns and themes that evolve via cyclical coding of data will work to “build theory” regarding this topic rather than test a particular theory (p. 127).

This particular study utilizes a single case study as a research design. The single case study is synonymous to a single experiment, and according to Yin (2014) there is substantial rationale for utilizing a single case study. The first rationale is choosing a “critical case” – one that is critical to a specific theory, with a specified set of clear circumstances within which propositions are believed to be true. Furthermore, the single case study can be rationalized because it can capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation, as well as because of the lessons the single case study can provide about the social processes related to some theoretical interest (Yin, 2014).

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the logic and power of purposeful sampling is derived from the emphasis on in-depth understanding, which in turn leads to information-rich cases. The site chosen for this single case study is a high school in a medium-sized school division in Southeastern Virginia in the United States. To maintain the confidentiality of the school and its staff, a pseudonym (Virginia High School) will be used for this high school throughout this study. The high school continues to meet both state and federal accreditation requirements, regardless of the significant population of minority and economically disadvantaged students. For this specific reason, this high school presents an opportunity to analyze the level of culturally relevant instruction and leadership.

Limitations

There are limitations to consider concerning this study. To begin, the researcher's own personal bias and sensitivity to the research topic might be considered a limitation, as might the researcher's presence during the data collection (interviews and observations). A qualitative study which utilizes interviewing for data collection may pose issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Finally, a small sample size and generalizability can be limiting.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

That student achievement is impacted by teachers' perceptions regarding cultural or ethnic bias is certainly not a new concept. In an age of accountability where national and state standards are working to build a system that prioritizes equity and student achievement, it is becoming increasingly important for educational leaders to not only recognize issues of teachers' cultural or ethnic biases in the classroom, but be well-equipped to handle them. Furthermore, it is imperative that educational leaders embrace the concept of culturally relevant leadership in leading their schools.

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature, which will aid in explaining the impact of teachers' cultural and ethnic biases on student achievement, as well as the importance of educational leaders' ability to handle such issues. Included in this review is research involving the use of Cultural Relevance Theory as a critical perspective and theoretical lens for research; research on students' and educational leaders' perceptions of race; and research on the role of the educational leader as it impacts teachers' cultural or ethnic biases. Ultimately, this review of literature will aid in developing a conceptual lens to understand a specific phenomenon in educational leadership. That phenomenon, in short, is the idea of culturally relevant leadership and its impact on both teachers and student achievement.

Student Achievement (or Lack Thereof)

Teacher Bias

Much research has been written concerning the academic failure of minority students; however, explanations for this failure have varied a great deal. Assuredly, though, the data show that teacher biases, perceptions, and attitudes concerning minority students have a strong impact on student achievement (Reid & Knight, 2006; Lleras, 2008; O'Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009; Schneider, 2010; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Teacher biases and perceptions are highly vulnerable to racial and gender stereotypes (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Darity, Castellino, Tyson, Cobb, & McMillen, 2001). Reid & Knight (2006) assert that “many teachers judge students as acceptable or unacceptable according to a set of standards that conform to the historical White European ideal, including conceptions of knowledge and decorum, consider the dialects of American Blacks and Latinos as inferior to Standard English, and believe that specialized instructional techniques are for those students who do not do well in school—often those students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds” (p.19). Additionally, teachers tend to rate minority students as less-attached and engaged in their schoolwork (Lleras, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2010). Teachers also may harbor negative impressions of minority students’ behaviors, which may contribute to teachers’ use of inflexible and punitive classroom management and instructional strategies (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; O'Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009). If many teachers of minority students harbor negative and incorrect student perceptions and biases, minority students will not have the encouragement they need to do well in coursework.

Several studies have been done regarding the impact of teachers' perceptions on minority students. A recent study by McKown and Weinstein (2008) utilizing data on 1872 students in 83 classrooms showed that in ethnically diverse classrooms where students reported high levels of differential treatment, the teachers' expectations of European American students were significantly higher than the teachers' expectations of African American and Latino students (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Another study of teachers' perceptions of minority students investigated the effects of teachers' perceptions on the standardized test performance of African American and European American students. The study, conducted by Oates (2003) used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, a nationally representative survey with student, parent, teacher, and other school staff components. Oates found that teachers' perceptions greatly affected students' performance on standardized tests as measured in reading, mathematics, history/citizenship/geography, and science. The results showed unfavorable teacher perceptions are consequential for the test performance of African American students, especially when their classroom work habits, behaviors, and future academic capabilities are judged by White teachers.

Indirectly, teachers' perspective and awareness can also have an impact on student achievement. Teachers must be aware of the stigma of "acting White," which can materialize for minority students who indicate that they often face peer pressure from peers who attach this stigma to their academic success (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005). "Acting White" refers to those minority students' who use language or ways of speaking; display attitudes, behaviors or preferences; or engage in activities considered to be white cultural norms" (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005). Anthropologists

Fordham and Ogbu originated the phrase “acting White” while studying peer effects on Black students (Darity, Castellino, Tyson, Cobb, & McMillen, 2001). During their study, they found that Black students “disidentified” with school achievement because of the fear of being described as acting white by their school peers. To avoid being accused of “acting White,” minority students will downplay or camouflage their ability using such strategies as being the class clown, being athletic, or doing just enough to get by (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005, p.585).

Moreover, minority students’ cultural authenticity is called into question if they are striving for high grades; therefore, minority students often feel the need to defend their cultural authenticity. This defense is often viewed as oppositional behavior (Darity, Castellino, Tyson, Cobb, & McMillen, 2001). This opposition may manifest itself as a refusal to conform to mainstream education and cultural dictates for fear of being seen as “acting White” (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). Because high school is such a crucial social time for students, fear of losing their cultural authenticity and credibility with their peers is significant enough to impact whether or not students take advantage of opportunities for rigorous coursework.

Teacher-Student Racial Incongruities

Incongruities in race and ethnicity between teachers and minority students contribute to student academic success, as well. According to the body of research, minority teachers hold a statistically significant influence on minority student outcomes (Pitts, 2007; Klopfenstein, 2004; Conger, Long, & Iatarola, 2009). Research by Meier and Stewart details three reasons to support this: minority teachers are better at educating minority students; minority teachers can serve as better role models; and minority

teachers can alleviate the negative consequences of grouping and tracking (Pitts, 2007). Additionally, classroom environments of minority teachers better replicate students' home environments, which helps create "cultural congruence" (Klopfenstein 2004, p. 119). Minority teachers tend to have higher expectations of minority students, as well as offer more praise than non-minority teachers (Klopfenstein, 2004; Conger, Long, & Iatarola, 2009). The dilemma for the teacher, then, becomes one of "negotiating the academic demands of the school while also demonstrating the cultural [awareness] and competence necessary for reaching students" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476).

Student achievement, then, is certainly influenced by the racial and cultural biases of classroom teachers. Further, teachers and ultimately student achievement are influenced by leaders who are culturally sensitive and employ culturally relevant pedagogy. When investigating the important issue of bias, it is crucial that the importance of cultural and racial sensitivity is in the foreground of research. Utilizing a critical lens to investigate the issue of cultural bias, such as Cultural Relevance Theory, provides a way to view the issue in a critical light so that change can happen.

Cultural Relevance Theory

In environments where educators are not aptly prepared to meet the unique needs of students who represent underserved racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, matters become less personal and more professional when complicated by the high-stakes accountability and prioritization of closing the achievement gap that grips our schools (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011). Further, the schools of today require greater attention to the philosophies, pedagogies, and perspectives of school leaders. "Because educational administrators at the school level are key to establishing and fostering the culture and

climate of their schools, their epistemologies, attitudes, and assumptions concerning race and culture, [as well as] their implications for learning, must be an important part of the discourse concerning culturally relevant education” (p. 588-589). Such epistemologies, attitudes, and assumptions which foster a culturally rich school culture are pedagogically attached to Cultural Relevance Theory.

Cultural Relevance Pedagogy (or CRP) is defined as a pedagogy that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes [as well as] seeks to support students academically while affirming their cultural identity” (Ladson-Billings in Horsford, et al, 2011, p. 590-591). CRP focuses on the importance of culture in schooling, and thus is a way for schools to acknowledge the home-community culture of the students; further, CRP, through sensitivity to cultural nuances, works to integrate students’ cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

“Culturally relevant pedagogy uses the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective” (DeCuir-Gunby, Taliaferro, & Greenfield, 2009, p. 186). Further, culturally relevant pedagogy pushes students toward social and cultural success by making a cultural connection to schools (p.186). According to Ladson-Billings (1995), there are three basic tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy: academic success; cultural competence; and critical consciousness. The first tenant, academic success, focuses on the idea that all children have the potential to be academically successful. The second tenant, cultural competence, operates under the assumption that

educators appreciate the cultural strengths of their students and implement instructional techniques that incorporate these ideas; in fact, “students’ culture should become the vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Finally, the third tenant, critical consciousness, goes beyond individual achievement and instead focuses on helping students see themselves as a part of a community that values education and values them as people.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Relevance and Critical Race Theory

Because race must be considered in how CRP is enacted, the complexities of race in the United States must be explored (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Rollock (2012) asserts that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an “important theoretical framework that recognizes and seeks to expose and challenge the normality of racism in everyday life” (p. 520). Investigating the issue of teachers’ cultural and ethnic biases through the lens of critical race theory brings to light not only the importance of teachers’ ability to “teach” past their own biases, but also the importance of educational leaders’ perceptions of their teachers’ ability to do so. CRT then, is not so much a framework or theory, but a perspective—and is essentially a set of interrelated beliefs about the “significance of race/racism” and how it operates in society (Gillborn, 2006, p. 19). This perspective is that racism is deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and psychologically. Minority students are subjugated by the social and cultural conditions maintained by the status quo (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). In this way, schools in the United States often perpetuate the biases of others—even the biases of teachers. Certainly, some of these conditions are contextual (as indicated by the literature); however, a terrible inequity

exists if ways to challenge this status quo are studied and remediated. Failure to challenge the lens in which we see the world perpetuates the notion of meritocracy—that some individuals are entitled to a more rigorous curriculum—or better treatment—than others.

By definition, CRT is “a set of interrelated beliefs about the significance of race/racism and how it operates in contemporary western society, especially the US” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 19). The theory has its roots in US legal scholarship, where it grew as a “radical alternative” to dominant perspectives concerning race. CRT scholars were frustrated with the silence on racism, and wished to foreground issues of race. By 1995, connections between CRT and education were beginning to evolve, and a set of tenets or defining elements emerged. They are:

1. Racism is endemic, and therefore “normal,” not aberrant or rare;
2. Racism is deeply ingrained legally and culturally;
3. CRT crosses epistemological boundaries;
4. CRT is a critique of civil rights laws as fundamentally limited;
5. CRT is a critique of liberalism, and claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy are camouflages;
6. CRT is a call to context, in that it challenges ahistoricism and recognizes experiential knowledge of people of color.

A true attempt to research and remedy this serious issue must move past interest convergence—it must be intentional and target the issue at hand. The idea of a culturally relevant school culture and curriculum certainly targets this important issue. Thus, the theory and praxis of CRP must include a critical analysis of race and racism. CRP, like

CRT, recognizes the value of lived experiences by marginalized groups in understanding and making meaning of the world (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Therefore, according to Ladson-Billings (1998), the “voice” of CRT provides a vehicle for communicating the experiences and realities of the oppressed in order to understand the complexities of racism—and educational leaders can certainly utilize the theory of CRT to communicate with teachers regarding issues of bias. As reflected in the literature, considering cultural relevance pedagogy, as well as considering the complexities of race via Critical Race Theory, is important when researching ways to meet the needs of today’s culturally diverse student population. The research presented above collectively asserts that student learning is impacted by the explicit and implicit biases of teachers; furthermore, the research asserts that bringing race to the foreground when doing research aids in illuminating the issue at hand. When considering the need for research with respect to educational leaders’ perceptions of teachers’ cultural and ethnic biases within the classroom, it is important to review the literature with respect to the ways in which students’ perceive the bias of their teachers, as well as to the ways in which teachers’ perceive the culture and ethnicity of their students with regards to achievement.

Teachers’ Perception of Race in the Context of the Classroom

That student achievement is directly impacted by teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward the students they teach is certainly not a new concept. Chang (2011) references the “Pygmalion Effect,” which is the idea that students tend to live up to what is expected of them, and tend to do better when treated as if they are capable of success

(p. 198). Therefore, students' perception is incredibly important when considering the ways in which teacher bias impacts student achievement.

The body of research overwhelmingly supports the idea that teachers' perceptions of and behaviors toward minority students are directed connected to their achievement. Further, the body of research shows just necessary a culturally relevant leadership perspective is. Tenenbaum and Ruck's (2007) meta-analyses of four studies examined whether teachers' expectations, referrals, positive and neutral speech, and negative speech differed toward ethnic minority students. The findings of their meta-analyses demonstrated that teachers' expectations and speech do vary according to students' ethnic backgrounds. The research of Woolfolk and Brooks (1985) further bolsters the idea of teachers' expectations and behavior toward minority students. They discuss the three major categories of behavior: proxemics (physical space and interpersonal distance), coverbal behavior (gestures, facial expressions, and eye gaze) and paralanguage (tone of voice and rate of speaking). The researchers found that teachers express these behaviors more positively with non-minority students than with minority students.

Certainly, teacher perception is a powerful entity when considering student performance; furthermore, when those perceptions are negative, student performance is significantly impacted. McKown and Weinstein (2008) reported that in ethnically diverse classrooms where students reported high levels of differential treatment, the teachers' expectations of European American students were significantly higher than the teachers' expectations of African American and Latino students (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009, p. 167). Further, another study of teachers' perceptions of minority students (Oates, 2003), investigated the effects of teachers' perceptions on the standardized test

performance of African American and European American students. The results showed unfavorable teacher perceptions are consequential for the test performance of African American students, especially when their classroom work habits, behaviors, and future academic capabilities are judged by White teachers.

Data shows that minority students are consistently rated as poorer classroom citizens than are white students. Downey and Pribesh (2004) researched the patterns concerning White and Black teachers' perceptions of Black students' misbehavior (oppositional culture). Their rationale was based upon the idea that most White teachers implement subtle discrimination against Black students because they tend to misinterpret Black students' cultural style. Furthermore, they relied on Ogbu's oppositional culture theory to emphasize that this causes strained relationships between White teachers and Black students. Their study addressed the possibility of this misinterpretation by estimating matching effects among kindergarteners (using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, 1988) and eighth graders (using the National Educational Longitudinal Study, 1988). Their findings showed that race continues to matter with respect to both the kindergarten and eighth grade groups, and that Black students are consistently rated as poorer classroom citizens than are white students.

Teachers' expectations of minority students ultimately impact the instructional and behavioral strategies they use in class. Bol and Berry (2005) assert that teachers' expectations and bias may play a role in the kinds of explanations and instructional practices. The researchers concluded that because Black students tend to score lower on mathematics achievement measures, the perception may be that Black students are not motivated or do not work as hard as their non-minority counterparts. Similarly, data

show that within schools, minority teachers have a stronger collective efficacy concerning minority students' academic abilities. According to Goddard and Skrla (2006), the study of efficacy beliefs is grounded in social cognitive theory, which addresses how humans as individuals and members of society exercise some level of control over their actions and futures. Specifically, the researchers wanted to know to what extent teachers' race/ethnicity, gender, and years of teaching experience influenced their collective efficacy beliefs, as well as to what extent there are differences among schools regarding collective efficacy with respect to the schools' socioeconomic composition. The results of the study supported that within schools, teachers of color had stronger collective efficacy beliefs than did their non-minority teacher-colleagues; and that between schools, socioeconomic composition did not have an impact on collective efficacy. Ultimately, these results support that the collective efficacy is directly related to teachers' efficacy and teachers' perceptions of their students' ability to learn.

Culturally Relevant Leadership Practices and Teacher Bias

After reviewing the literature concerning students and teachers' perceptions, expectations, and cultural and ethnic biases, it is strongly evident that student achievement is impacted by teachers' cultural and ethnic biases. How then are the educational leaders' perceptions of teachers' cultural and ethnic biases crucial in beginning to remedy this issue? The answer lies in the ability of educational leaders to embrace a theory of social justice and multicultural leadership. Furman (2012) asserts that multiple factors drive the concern for the need for social justice leadership, "including the growing diversity of school age populations, increasing awareness of achievement gaps across cultural groups, and insightful analyses of the deficit thinking

that pervades school policies and programs intended to address these gaps” (p. 192). Because of an increased federal accountability, the focus is now on social inequality; consequently, leaders are no longer able to dismiss such inequality.

It can be difficult to define social justice; however, despite its complexities, social justice focuses on the experiences of marginalized groups and inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes (Furman, 2012). It has been argued that social justice is one of the key notions providing a new way of thinking for all educational leaders; consequently, educational leaders not only must provide students with an academically rigorous environment, they must also prepare the “young to take their responsible place in and for the community” (Grogan & Andrews, 2002, p. 249). In this way, educational leaders are the “key lynchpins” between teacher development and school improvement (p. 249).

The issue of race is a “fundamental fault line” in the U.S., in that race continues to play a role in structuring and representing the world; consequently, race and ethnicity are central to how individuals define themselves (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, p.876). The work of educational leaders, then, is to investigate strategies and tools with which to tackle issues of bias as they surface, as well as to facilitate ways to address this “racial fault line.” Ospina and Foldy (2009) assert that leadership and power are inextricably intertwined, and that investigating this relationship can be useful for educational leaders. Specifically, they discuss the obstacles concerning race and ethnicity that constrain leadership, such as the presence of stereotypes and biases, aversive racism, educational leaders’ perceptions of race. For today’s educational leaders, understanding these obstacles is essential in enacting social justice leadership.

One way in which culturally relevant leaders tackle the issue of bias and encourage a more cultural perspective is by staying focused and enacting a strong vision and mission. Theoharis' (2007) study addressed ways in which educational leaders were enacting social justice within their schools, the resistance they face on a daily basis, and what strategies they utilize for enacting social justice in the light of the resistance they face. His research revealed that educational leaders enact their own resistance and employ social justice leadership by raising student achievement, improving school structures, recentering and enhancing staff capacity, and strengthening school culture and community. The strategies used by these educational leaders included shared decision making and "keeping their eyes on the prize," so as not to become frustrated with the hard work of employing social justice leadership. Further, such leaders shape the development of their schools' vision and mission. Through a strong vision and mission, principals foster a culture of shared norms, values, and dispositions, and therefore promote learning development for social justice (Kose, 2009).

Culturally competent leaders have high expectations for students and staff. Gardnier and Enomoto's (2006) research revealed that educational leaders had little to no preparation in the multicultural dimensions of leadership. However, the data also revealed that such leaders were able to create new meaning of diversity by employing the following strategies: high expectations for all students and staff; changing the cultural deficiency perspective within their schools; understanding through good communication; employing inclusive educational practices; providing early interventions to students; and being involved in their communities.

Recognizing "the powerful ways that race and racism shape and affect access to

equity and schooling and how they can impede efforts toward closing the achievement gap is extremely important for school leaders (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). Using CRT as a critical lens, Theoharis and Haddix (2011) analyzed six leaders who helped create more equitable schools while foregrounding issues of race. The principals in this study saw issues of race as paramount in their work, and each of these principals had done emotional and intellectual work around race and institutional racism. They each talked about issues of race with their staffs; each learned about race with their staffs; each infused race into their data informed leadership; and each connected with families of color (p. 1338). These leaders did not dismiss issues of race, rather, they “recognized the powerful ways that race and racism shape and affect access to equity in schooling and can impede efforts toward closing the achievement gap” (p. 1347). Additionally, the concept of transformational leadership, which is leadership that questions justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and offers the promise of a better life, plays a role in culturally relevant leadership practices (Shields, 2010). There is very much a need to challenge current practices and try new practices. According to Shields (2010), leaders should strive to see issues of bias and inequity as a challenge to be met, rather than as an overwhelming obstacle. Leaders need to acknowledge power—especially their own—and direct it toward students’ needs.

While the literature supports the importance of social justice leadership, and thus culturally relevant leadership, within education, as well as the importance of understanding the complexities of race in relation to education, there is little research with respect to educational leaders’ perceptions of teachers’ racial and cultural biases in the classroom. According to Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008), only recently has an

equity focus been prominent as a research focus in the area of educational leadership.

Thus, although indirectly, there is research which addresses diversity and equity as they relate to educational leadership.

Social Justice Preparation for Educational Leaders

Certainly, the literature concerning teachers' perceptions, expectations, and cultural and ethnic biases of their students does support that student achievement is impacted by teachers' cultural and ethnic biases. And further, the literature also supports educational leaders' role in remedying issues of inequity and social justice, as well. However, there is little research with respect to school leadership preparation as it relates to the way educational leaders handle the racial and cultural biases of the teachers they lead.

According to Rusch (2004), aspiring educational leaders may complete degrees and attain positions and still feel less than prepared when confronted to issues of race and gender within school communities. Through his own research, he determined that educational administration faculty members have limited knowledge about diversity and a "superficial understanding and interest in diversity issues" (p. 37).

Bustamante, Nelson, and Onwuegbuzie (2009) incorporated the use of Schoolwide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (SCCOC) as an instrument to determine how well a school responds to the needs of diverse groups. Because school leaders are often completely unaware of the cultural influences and inequities in their schools—and even their own biases—often a "status quo" of inequitable practices is maintained. Thus, this study focused on assessing the cultural climate of schools and on

the ways educational leaders handle these issues. The data collected revealed four themes: policy making was identified as an important driver in improving school-wide cultural competence; programs were viewed as instrumental in carrying out culturally competent practices; school culture and climate were seen as synonymous and were integrated elements; and numerous barriers were identified to developing schoolwide cultural competence. Ultimately, the data revealed that effective school leadership requires an understanding of school culture. Furthermore, educational leadership programs should encourage school leaders to develop the knowledge and skills to advocate for policies which support inclusive and culturally sensitive practices.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

The previous chapter reviewed the research literature related to the issues affecting student achievement and teachers' perception of race within the context of the classroom, but also literature related to the idea of Cultural Relevance Theory and culturally relevant leadership. This chapter describes the research design, procedures, and methods utilized to conduct this study. Further, this chapter discusses the value of qualitative research based upon grounded theory, as well as the significance of the case study in qualitative research. Finally, details concerning the sampling methods, data collection procedures, data analysis process, and study limitations.

Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory

According to Patton (2002), the primary purpose of research is to generate or test theory and contribute to knowledge for the sake of knowledge. In that respect, the proposed study of teachers' and administrators' perceptions of cultural sensitivity and relevance using qualitative data not only contributes to applied research based on theory, but also to practice. The assumption in qualitative method is that "reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds;" therefore, collecting data via conducting interviews and observations provides a way for the researcher to construct meaning regarding educational leaders perceptions of teachers' biases (Ajayi, 2010, p. 660). Furthermore, "qualitative methods can give the intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 19). Qualitative research method is the most appropriate method for this study, then, as it seeks to explore the meaning that teachers and educational leaders construct from their experiences and perspectives regarding teachers' racial and cultural biases in the

classroom.

Additionally, viewing such data through the lens of grounded theory is especially important to this study. Qualitative inquiry is especially powerful as a source of grounded theory (theory that is generated from fieldwork), in that the theory emerges from a researcher's observations and interviews out in the real world (Patton, 2002). Specifically, a grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents; it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This particular study therefore, was to investigate the ways in which educational leaders foster and support cultural relevance, as well as to investigate the ways that such cultural relevance fosters student learning.

Case Study as Qualitative Research Design

The case study, as defined by Yin (2014), is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context. The case study has distinct features, including relying on multiple sources of evidence, with data converging in a triangulating fashion, as well as benefiting from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. As a research method, the case study applies to many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and other, often complex, related phenomena. Whatever the field of interest, however, the case study approach satisfies the distinctive need to understand complex social phenomena – to focus on a "case" and "retain a holistic and real-world perspective" (Yin, 2014).

This particular study utilized a single case study as a research design. The single

case study is synonymous to a single experiment, and according to Yin (2014) there is substantial rationale for utilizing a single case study. The first rationale is choosing a “critical case” – one that is critical to a specific theory, with a specified set of clear circumstances within which propositions are believed to be true. Furthermore, the single case study can be rationalized because it can capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation, as well as because of the lessons the single case study can provide about the social processes related to some theoretical interest (Yin, 2014).

Because this study sought to answer research questions concerning *how* and to what extent culturally relevant instruction and leadership look like in one particular high school, as well as the ways school leaders foster cultural and ethnic sensitivity, this case study design, predicated by grounded theory, was the appropriate research design. Specifically, this single case study, grounded by the lens of cultural relevance, allowed the researcher to analyze the phenomena of culturally relevant leadership within a high school, as well as analyze how the teaching and learning are impacted by such leadership. Utilizing a single case study allowed the researcher to analyze the phenomenon of culturally relevant leadership bounded by a specific context, and thus taking a deep, critical look at the leadership’s influence throughout the building. To allow for this critical look, this study focused not only on the school’s educational leaders, but also on the school’s teacher leaders – specifically teachers in English and Mathematics and one graduation coach.

Methods

Participant Selection

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples selected

purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the logic and power of purposeful sampling is derived from the emphasis on in-depth understanding, which in turn leads to information-rich cases. The focus of this particular study was on the actual data collection and analysis than on the identification of participants; thus, the participants were selected upon recommendation from the administration at the single case study site. The participants included both teachers and administrators. The site chosen for this single case study was a high school located in a medium-sized school division in Southeastern Virginia in the United States. To maintain the confidentiality of the school and its staff, a pseudonym, Virginia High School (VHS) was used for this high school throughout this study. VHS continues to meet both state and federal accreditation requirements, regardless of the significant population of minority and economically disadvantaged students. For this specific reason, VHS presents an opportunity to analyze the level of culturally relevant leadership.

Virginia High School has a current enrollment of approximately 2,300 students in grades 9 through 12. The 2186 students represent the following ethnicities: American Indian/ Alaska Native (.002%); Asian (.03%); Black (57%); Hispanic (9%); White (30%); Native Hawaiian (.002%); and Multi-racial (.05%). The special education population at VHS is currently 22%, and the economically disadvantaged population is 52%. There are approximately 226 faculty and staff, to include 163 teachers, 26 paraprofessionals, seven guidance counselors, six ESL tutors, five assistant principals, and one principal.

Currently, VHS is not only the largest of the seven high schools in the division, but it is also holds the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students,

minority students, and students with disabilities of the high schools. What is unique about VHS, and ultimately the rationale for choosing this school as the case for research, is despite the high percentage of the students representing these groups, VHS does exceptionally well on state-mandated standardized assessments, scoring above 80% in all four content areas (English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies); further, VHS as maintains a graduation rate of 89%.

VHS offers a varied coursework to students in a variety of disciplines and formats, including offering many courses that are either online or broadcasted via “distance-learning” from another school in the division. Also important to note is that VHS houses an academy, an International Baccalaureate program (IB); 240 students comprise this “school within a school.” No IB teachers served as participants for this study, however.

Data Collection

The process for the Internal Review Board (IRB) for Old Dominion University was submitted, and the IRB noted the research study was not based on human subjects (Appendix A). The IRB request was made of the Office of the Vice President for Research, and the Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee determined that this study was exempt from IRB review according to federal regulations. Further, permission to conduct this study at the location of the identified case was granted by the Southeastern Virginia school division in which the high school was located (Appendix B).

This qualitative study involved several methods of data collection, including interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Again, to maintain

participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. Interviews were conducted with the principal and three assistant principals, as well as with six teacher leaders in both the English and Mathematics departments and one graduation coach. According to Yin (2014), interviews are solid sources of qualitative data because they not only focus directly on the case study topics, but they also offer insightful personal views, perceptions, and attitudes. Direct observations offer immediacy, and cover action in real time; furthermore, observations are contextual, and therefore cover the case's context (Yin). The data collection began in August 2015. In addition to conducting interviews, I conducted five observations – two each in the English and Mathematics departments, respectively, and one of the graduation coach. Finally, several documents were analyzed as part of the study, to include the school's Comprehensive Plan Report (Student Achievement Plan), Staff Development Plan, and Faculty Senate agendas. Because Yin (2014) offers that document analysis offers stability to qualitative research, in that documents can be reviewed repeatedly. Further, documents are specific, offering exact names, references, and details, as well as broad, covering long spans of time and many events/ settings.

Interview Protocol. The interview participants were presented with the interview protocols and consents prior to responding to ten open-ended questions concerning the cultural and ethnic sensitivity of the teachers and administrators in their buildings, as well as concerning the ways in which culturally relevant practices are a part of the school's culture (see Appendix AC Interview Protocol). Gaining entrée for these interviews was easily facilitated, as I have a professional relationship with the administration of VHS. The participants were emailed to request their participation in the interviews. Once they

responded, I emailed each of them again to set up the interview times and places. The interviews took place in private locations at VHS. The length of each interview varied between 40 and one hour and 20 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed later dates. Signed copies of interview protocols for each participant were collected and filed. The interviews with each participant were scheduled at times decided by both the participant and myself. While two interviews took place in August 2015 (summer), the others took place during the school year between October 2015 and December 2015.

The interview protocols for both teachers and administrators are attached (Appendix C), which include the consent form, the script, and the interview questions. The particular questions were designed with the idea of the phenomenon of cultural relevance in mind. To begin, the questions were written after careful thought as to how their views and perceptions might best be gleaned from specific questions. The questions were also worded in an open-ended fashion to allow for more in-depth responses, which also allows for follow-up, probing questions and explanations. Finally, the questions were purposefully written around potential themes, such as their perceptions of their own racial and cultural sensitivity, as well as ways in which teachers and educational leaders implement culturally relevant practices into their instruction.

Observation Protocol. Participants for classroom observations were chosen based upon the data collected in the interviews. The observations were scheduled ahead of time with the participants, and participants were presented with observation protocols ahead of time, as well. Each observation was 90 minutes in length, as a block of instructional time is 90 minutes at VHS. The observations were conducted between January 2016 and May 2016. During the observations, I utilized descriptive note-taking

to capture the teachers' words, body language, and actions. Additionally, I looked for specific data which support culturally relevant instructional and behavioral practices. Observations were scheduled with five of the participants via email. Once the data and time of the observation was confirmed, I sent a follow-up email the day prior the observation to confirm there were no conflicts. The observation protocol (Appendix D), is attached, which includes the location, subject, date, time, sensitizing concept, room layout, and room description. The observation protocol was specific to each classroom observation.

Document Request. A request for the documents for analysis noted above was made of the administration of Virginia High School, and was gathered via email and prepared for analysis. The document analysis was utilized to corroborate and augment the data collected via the interviews and classroom observations. Specifically, the documents were analyzed using the categories and subcategories discovered during the interviews and classroom observations.

Data Analysis

Each of the interviews began with questions concerning demographic information and educational experience. Table 1 displays the specific demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographics of Interview Participants.

Role	Ethnicity	Gender	Years of Experience	Highest Degree
Teacher 1	White	Female	27	Masters
Teacher 2	Hispanic	Female	7	Bachelors
Teacher 3	White	Female	17	Bachelors
Teacher 4	Philippine	Female	7	Bachelors
Teacher 5	White	Female	10	Masters
Teacher 6	White	Female	6	Bachelors
Assistant Principal	Black	Female	24	ABD
Principal	White	Male	37	ABD

Important to note is that every attempt was made to include both male and female teachers in this study; however, of those recommended by the administration, only female teachers agreed to participate in the study.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The process of listening to each interview multiple times, as well as reading the transcriptions and allowed for careful coding of data. A codebook was assembled, and a second researcher reviewed and validated the coding process I utilized. This particular coding process utilized both open and axial coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), open coding fractures the data and allows one to find some categories, their properties, and dimensional locations. Further, axial coding is a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new

ways after open coding, by making connections between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process of using both open and axial coding allowed me to “see” categories more clearly. During the coding process, I took dialectic notes regarding the themes and categories I came across, as well as my ideas about the emerging patterns. Selective coding was then used to finalize the patterns and the headings within Chapter 4.

Throughout the process, I drafted a chart by hand and filled in the codes, themes, categories, and evidence I collected. When coding and recording data, I read and reread the coded data and collapsed categories into one another, as well as removed some altogether as necessary. All data was reviewed until saturation was reached. Finally, I highlighted the passages that were reflective of the themes and categories I had previously identified. Certainly, by recording, transcribing, and analyzing the interview data for specific categories, themes, and ultimately patterns, open, axial, and selective coding were appropriate analysis methods.

During each observation, I utilized the observation protocol to focus on the sensitizing concept: Is culturally relevant instruction and classroom practices evident in this high school classroom setting? For each observation, I noted the room layout, described the room in detail, and took notes on the teachers’ words, actions, and body language. Additionally, I noted student-teacher exchanges that were of interest. After each interview, I typed up my observation notes and included my thoughts and analysis of the interview. Ultimately, the observations were conducted to corroborate the teachers’ responses in their scheduled interviews. Further, the documents utilized in document analysis for triangulation purposes were analyzed to corroborate and bolster both the participants’ scheduled interview responses and the teachers’ classroom observations. All

audio files, transcription files, observation notes, and documents for analysis were stored on a password-protected computer.

Trustworthiness

By nature, qualitative data often involves issues of reliability. To strengthen reliability, I utilized inter-coder reliability once the data-coding process has begun. A second researcher reviewed the categories that had identified based upon a sample of the data. The second researcher also reviewed the data for any discrepant data and/ or identified themes. Participants were also given the opportunity to review their transcribed responses. Finally, I utilized verbatim quotes and illustrative phrases in the data analysis and results.

Limitations

There were limitations to consider concerning this study. To begin, my own personal bias and sensitivity to the research topic might have been considered a limitation, as might my presence during the data collection. This qualitative study, which utilized interviewing for data collection, may have posed issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Finally, a small sample size and generalizability may have been considered limiting; however, the nature of the single case study naturally presents this limitation.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology used to conduct this qualitative single case study of one Southeastern Virginia high school. The participants were all teachers and administrators from the identified case. Also presented was information regarding the data collection and analysis process, as well as the limitations this study presents.

The following chapter, Chapter 4, contains the results of the analysis of data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Chapter Structure

Capturing the culturally relevant practices, whether they are instructional practices, behavioral management practices, or leadership practices, is not an easy task. This particular study was designed to look at the perceptions, practices, and behaviors of those teachers and educational leaders who are successful in reaching, teaching, and guiding a diverse group of students. This study provides insight into what mindset, practices, and behaviors foster a culturally relevant environment in which students can learn successfully. Ultimately, the following research questions were answered:

1. How and to what extent do culturally relevant instruction and leadership practices manifest in one comprehensive Virginia public high school?
2. Where it exists, how and in what ways do school leaders foster cultural relevance and ethnic sensitivity (or not) in schools?

This chapter provides an analysis of those findings from a single case study at one Eastern Virginia high school (referred to as Virginia High School in this study) that has a culturally rich demographic – and one that is high poverty and high minority, as well. Below, a short description of each of the participants is presented, followed by an analysis of the themes that surfaced as a result of the case study, to include: Personal Background Shapes the Culturally Relevant Educator; Culturally Relevant Educators have a deep understanding of students; Culturally Relevant Educators Prioritize a “Secondary” Curriculum; Culturally Relevant Educators Demonstrate Classroom Expertise; and Culturally Relevant Educators Offer a Web of Support. The subsections within each theme offer examples of the perceptions, practices, and behaviors of those

educators involved in the study.

Description of Participants

Both teachers and administrators were selected as participants for this study. The teachers were selected upon recommendation from the administration at the high school; specifically, the teachers were recommended because of their instructional success and positive relationships with students. Both the Principal and Assistant Principal for Instruction were selected to participate, as well. To protect the anonymity of not only the participants but also the specific school, the following pseudonyms were used for the participants: Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, Teacher 5, Teacher 6, Principal, and Assistant Principal.

Teacher 1. Teacher 1, a Caucasian female with 27 years of experience, began her career as a marketing teacher in the division, and seven years later decided to stay home and raise her family. While raising her family, she substituted in the division, as well as ran a daycare. She returned to teaching after a decade, and taught GED coursework and Employment Plus courses at Virginia High School (VHS). When the division phased out these programs in the high schools and went to a central model for GED education, she was offered the position as graduation coach. She is currently in this position.

Teacher 2. Teacher 2 is a Hispanic-Caucasian female with seven years of teaching experience. She actually graduated from VHS and was Salutatorian of her class, and came into teaching via an alternative track (provisional to professional license). She currently teaches English, primarily Grade 9, at VHS.

Teacher 3. Teacher 3 is a Caucasian female with 17 years of teaching experience, all at VHS. Like Teacher 1, she taught for a few years before deciding to stay home to

raise her daughter, and then returned to VHS. She has taught all levels of high school English, and currently teaches English 11 and Transition English, which is a course for cohorted students identified as “at-risk.”

Teacher 4. Teacher 4, a Philippine-Caucasian female, has seven years of teaching experience. She first taught at another area high school with a similar demographic to VHS, and then came to VHS five years ago. She is a Mathematics teacher who currently teaches Algebra II, Trigonometry, and IB Calculus.

Teacher 5. Teacher 5 is a Caucasian female with 10 years of teaching experience. She has taught in several school divisions in Virginia, and has been at VHS for four years. She teaches Mathematics and has taught all levels of math. She currently teaches Algebra in parts – Algebra Part A and Algebra Part B – for struggling math students.

Teacher 6. Teacher 6, a Caucasian female who also identifies as lesbian, shared that she has Native American, German, Irish, and English ancestors. She has 9 years’ teaching experience, and has been at VHS for the last five years. Previously, she was in another Virginia High School with a similar demographic to VHS. She teaches Mathematics, and currently teaches Algebra II and IB Theory of Knowledge.

Principal. The principal of VHS is a white male with 37 years of experience as an educator. He began his career in the division as a Social Studies teacher in an alternative school setting. After spending six years there, he transitioned to another high school, earning his administrative degree along the way. He was an assistant principal for ten years before becoming the principal of a middle school, and then eventually was promoted to principal of VHS. He is currently serving his eleventh year in that position.

Assistant Principal. The Assistant Principal identifies as a Black – Non-Hispanic female, and has 24 years of experience as an educator. She began her career in the division as a Social Studies teacher at another high school in the division, where she served for 12 years. She was an administrative assistant for a year, and served as the division’s Social Studies supervisor for five years. She has served as Assistant Principal at VHS for six years.

Findings and Discussion

Previous research has identified ways in which educators exercise cultural relevance; however, this study will identify the perceptions, practices, and behaviors of culturally relevant leaders in one Southeastern Virginia High School. The purpose of this chapter is to offer ways in which teachers and administrators alike can cultivate a culturally relevant experience for students and staff, and ultimately provide for student success. As aforementioned, each section identifies and discusses the major themes that surfaced as a result of this case study, highlighting the ways in which teachers provide a culturally relevant experience, and ultimately, the ways that administration supports them.

Personal Background Shapes the Culturally Relevant Educator

One of the themes that emerged when analyzing the data was the impact that an educator’s personal background has upon practice. All of the participants not only shared their unique stories and backgrounds, but they also discussed the importance of sharing their stories and personal experiences with their students. Many of the participants relayed that they had specific, shared experiences with their students; consequently, others had unique experiences that they felt gave them insight into their students’ lives

and equipped them to become teachers or administrators of a diverse student body. The following categories were identified within this theme: Education; Permanence versus Transience; and Family Culture.

Education

Importance of Education. Several of the participants detailed their specific family influence on their own lives, and ultimately, on their careers as educators. One interesting finding was that some of the educators came from families of educators. In some cases, this gave them a unique perspective – both positive and negative. One teacher stated that she always admired her teachers when she was in school because she saw how hard her grandmother, an English teacher in the Philippines, and her grandfather, a principal in the Philippines, worked each day. Further, she married into a family of teachers, so she continues to be influenced by fellow educators. Another shared that she had wanted to be a teacher since she was a child because of the influence of her grandfather, a professor at the university level. One participant shared the direct influence of her mother, a lifelong educator and Head Start teacher.

From an early age I learned to equate teaching with caring, loving, compassion, hard work, long hours, and attention to the whole student. I saw her grade papers and make phone calls and drop off supplies at their houses. She cooked them their first pancakes and braided their hair and showed them love. I know now that my mother was teaching me what a teacher actually looks like – she was planting the seed of what an educator is really supposed to do. Teaching is a familial connection, and sometimes, like family, teaching hurts (Assistant Principal).

Because of the influence of their family members who were also educators, these

participants had strong examples of what it means to be a teacher. Those positive (and sometimes negative) influences shaped them as individuals and as educators serving students each day.

Conversely, some of the participants relayed that their parents were not college educated, which resulted in a very different perspective, but one that has served them well. One participant shared that her parents were not college educated, and as a result couldn't help her much in school. Additionally, her parents didn't understand the process of applying to college, so she was left to navigate that process on her own.

Not that I didn't have great parents, but there are just some parts of going to school and getting an education that they weren't familiar with. They were successful in their own way without that, and I think that shaped me to a certain extent (Teacher 3).

She shared that she had to rely on her teachers a lot in school, and they taught her things beyond the classroom, like being self-reliant. She recognizes that many of her students are in the same situation that she was; they don't have anyone to help them navigate school. Thus, she works each day to help guide her students to become self-reliant.

Another teacher shared that her parents earned their living as small business owners and handcrafted and sold wooden jewelry. She stated that she saw how hard her parents had to work to make a life, and she knew at a young age that owning a small business wasn't for her. One participant, the principal, shared that his father attended a trade school, but ultimately his parents earned their living as farmers. Consequently, he worked on the farm at a young age and throughout his childhood. He, too, shared that he learned he wanted something different, and felt called to teaching because of his close

relationships with his own teachers.

Socioeconomics. Closely related to education, or a lack thereof, is the influence of socioeconomics. Several participants shared that they came from a low socioeconomic background; they experienced hunger and lack of resources frequently as children. They often relied upon the school to have certain needs met. One participant mentioned that as a child, he was constantly on the “edge of homelessness.” He stated that he didn’t grow up with much, and often the family was on the verge of losing everything.

I can relate to not having. I understand poverty and near-poverty. We were always on the edge of losing things – our home or our car. That’s a scary feeling. As a result, security is important to me. I understand how elusive security can be when you are poor, and many of my students are poor (Principal).

His experience in poverty motivated him to do something with his life. He shared that he was always willing to work because of his experiences, and this helped him make good choices, albeit sometimes he “lucked” into making good choices. As a result, he prioritizes teaching students to work hard and helps them make good choices in preparation for life after high school.

Permanence vs. Transience

The student population at VHS tends to be very transient; in other words, students are withdrawn and enrolled in the double digits each and every day. In analyzing the data, the participants had one of two experiences, both of which influenced their perspectives as educators at VHS. As students, they either experienced a major move, or they remain in their hometown to this day. Those participants who have remained local shared positive feedback about having done so. One teacher shared that she graduated

from VHS so she knows the school and the community well. This serves her well each day; sharing this fact with her students gives her a level of credibility that helps her build relationships with her students. She also shared that she is completely invested in VHS and cannot imagine teaching anywhere else. This experience allows her to connect with those students and their families who have lived in the VHS community for years.

On the other hand, several participants had major moves while they were young; consequently, this allows them to connect with and understand those students who are transient and new to VHS. One participant moved from the Philippines to California to Washington to Nevada – all during her school years. She shared that while she felt she handled the transition well, she also can identify with how it feels to be the “new kid” and the struggles that often come with that title. Another participant shared that as part of a military family, they moved quite a bit. When she started high school, she didn’t know anyone and relied heavily on a few teachers for comfort and direction. One participant, who moved from Chicago to Southeastern Virginia during junior high school, recounted what it was like to experience a move at such a pivotal age:

In Chicago, we had a paddle in the principal’s window, and here students used cuss words and nobody was getting a spanking. There was such a big difference, I felt like a fish out of water. I ate lunch by myself for two years and I didn’t have many friends. On the outside, no one would have known; but on the inside, I was scared. I totally understand how my students feel (Assistant Principal).

Understanding the transient population at such a personal level allows these educators to connect with and instruct their students in meaningful ways. Having the personal perspective of residing in one’s hometown or perhaps the experience of enduring several

moves during the school-aged years gives the teachers yet another way to connect and build relationships.

Family Culture

VHS is a culturally diverse school; consequently, there is not a great deal of ethnic diversity in the faculty and staff of VHS. Of interest, however, are the different levels of “culture” that each of the participants represent. In analyzing the data, the researcher noted that the participants are affected by different cultural factors, including divorce and blended family situations, varying ethnicities, and educational experiences.

Blended Families. Several participants shared her experiences growing up in a blended family situation. One teacher had a positive experience growing up between two households. She shared that her parents divorced when she was very young, and both parents remarried. Her mother and step-father have a son who has severe Cerebral Palsy, but who also just graduated from college with an engineering degree. She commented that having a brother with a significant disability gave her the first-hand experience of how IEPs work and what good they can do for students who have a disability. This has helped her a great deal in teaching students with disabilities; from her perspective, IEPs are positive. Further, her father married a black woman, and she has two biracial sisters.

I grew up asking them a lot of questions, and I felt comfortable doing that. There is always a lot of tension around race issues, and people are ignorant. I could just go home from school and ask them to explain something to me. For example, I learned a lot about the important role of hair in the Black culture, specifically weave (Teacher 6).

This understanding of culture on such an intimate level allows her to connect with her

students of color on a daily basis. Additionally, sharing that she has a brother with a disability and biracial sisters gives her a significant level of credibility with her students. She has a perspective that many White teachers do not.

Ethnicity. One participant shared that her Hispanic ethnicity has served her well working at VHS. She teaches many Hispanic students, and having familiarity of Hispanic norms and customs enables her to connect with those students in personal ways. She relayed that discussing the ways that they are the same, teacher and student, helps build a positive rapport. Contrarily, another participant, who is Philippine, stated that while she experienced the Philippine culture at home, she was never taught to speak the language. She shared that this helps her connect with students who have similar backgrounds; in other words, students who perhaps represent an ethnicity but don't entirely understand or appreciate their roots.

Another participant shared her experiences as a Black student and how that shapes who she is an educator and helps her connect to her students in many ways. She stated:

I often felt that I was judged by my appearance and the color I am when I was in school. Even when I went to college, and I went to a predominantly White college, I felt like I was judged. You know that old saying, "judging a book by its cover?" I was judged by my cover, except sometimes I was given this weird stamp of approval by people when they found out I was smart. I've experienced racism because of my name. I have a very ethnic name, so before people even meet me or see what I am all about, they've made a decision about me (Assistant Principal).

Because there is a high population of Black students at VHS, she has many opportunities

to connect with Black students by sharing her personal experiences as a Black student and woman.

Private vs. Public Education. Again, although an outlier, one participant had the unique experience of attending a private Parochial school as a young student, and then shifted to public school for junior high and high school. Not only was she aware of her “Blackness” in a predominantly White setting, she also learned the importance of “tough love” at a young age; and further, that it has a place in education.

It’s an interesting dichotomy – tough love and structure. Even though my hair was pulled and my hands were slapped and sometimes I was scared, I have the warmest, happiest memories of the nuns. They taught me to go to school, work hard, and be respectful always. You sit upright. You always pay attention. And I carried all of that to public school. I carry it with me now.

Her intimate knowledge of “tough love” and structure has enabled her to provide similar experiences for her students; moreover, her memories of such “tough love” are of teachers who cared a great deal for her, and she passes this along to the students she serves.

Culturally Relevant Educators Have a Deep Understanding of Students

Another theme that emerged while analyzing the data was the idea that each of the participants has a deep understanding of the students they work with each day. During our interviews, each of the participants shared an uncanny ability to “see” their students – what challenges they face; what makes them happy, angry, or frustrated; what they respond to; and what motivates them. Close examination of the data included a range of understanding of their students, to include: the impact of their home environment; their

limited perspective; and their lack of trust.

Impact of Home Environment

When asked to describe a VHS student, the participants shared willingly and with ease. Consistently, however, the participants commented and discussed the role the students' home environment played in their behavior and interactions. In analyzing the data, several factors were mentioned as affecting the students as a result of their home environment, including poverty and lack of parental support. According to the participants, the impact of these factors culminates in a great deal of anger in their students, as well as a high degree of attention-seeking behavior.

Poverty. The majority of students who attend VHS come from a low socioeconomic situation. Certainly, the students and their families are impacted by hunger and a general lack of resources. Many of the challenges the students face are attached to basic needs, resulting in barriers to learning. One participant commented that if students are hungry, then it doesn't matter what we teach them; they aren't ready to learn. In addition to hunger, the participants report that their students are faced with the stress of homelessness a great deal. Specifically, the participants discussed two types of homelessness: temporary homelessness and situational homelessness. One participant defined "temporary homelessness" as those situations where a family is between places of residence, either because they couldn't make rent and were evicted, or because they made a choice to leave a residence because they could no longer afford it. "Situational homeless," according to the principal, is much more complex.

Situational homelessness is where kids actually have a place they could go; however, it may be that the student was kicked out by a parent or guardian. Or

perhaps the student has to leave because the situation isn't safe...there's abuse.

Physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse...those sorts of things. Sometimes they have people who will take them in, but at a price. We have kids that are just...they're shipped around everywhere. All over the place. They come and go, and come and go. Come and go (Principal).

He shared that this issue of homelessness affects students in major ways, psychologically and otherwise, making learning near impossible. Not only are students faced with the reality that they have nowhere to live and no security, they are forced to decide whether or not to ask for help. According to the principal, more often than not, they will not ask for any assistance. Rather than come to school, they avoid school; thus, creating the issue of missing instruction and eventual truancy.

Lack of Parental Support. In addition to poverty, another challenge based upon home environment is a lack of parental support. One participant shared that she focuses on practicing patience each and every day because she knows that her students do not have much support at home. She relayed, however, that often that lack of support doesn't stem from lack of love or care from the parents; it may be because their parents have two jobs and aren't home. It may also be because there hasn't been effective discipline at school, and they've never been shown how to do something the right way. Another participant shared that the lack of support at home translates into challenges in the classroom, either because the parents are not in position to assist with homework, or do not have the technology to check grades online or access resources. Often, parents are not available to take phone calls, and therefore are not available to problem-solve with the teacher who calls with concerns.

Culture of Anger. An indirect challenge that stems from a student's home environment is anger. Several participants shared that their students display a great deal of anger each day. Certainly, children aren't "born" angry; their environment makes them angry.

Our students have a lot to be angry about. I have always said that "hurt people hurt people." I understand that anger is cyclical, and that for our kids, an education and a diploma is a way to break that cycle. It is a way out of the anger and the dysfunction that they experience each and every day (Teacher 1).

She shared that she focuses on motivation, because students must learn to be motivated to begin to escape anger. Another participant shared that her students are often angry, but she feels they have a lot to be angry about – they have been through horrible experiences. To help, she makes it a point to find out what they need that may be causing the anger, whether it is food, assistance with a project, or even a stress ball.

One student came to me and said, "I need a squeeze ball because I am about to snap on my teacher." I didn't have a stress ball, but I hunted around until I found one and gave it to her. Her teachers reported to me that she was using the squeeze ball, and she was not only using it, she was holding it high in the air so others could see her squeeze it. That turned into a cue for the class to settle down and be quiet, because the noise was triggering her anger (Assistant Principal).

Like the other participants, she too, shared that she feels the students' anger stems from not having their basic needs met. She stated it is crucial that she works to find out what the students need to assist them, and anger has the potential to significantly impact the instruction happening in the classroom.

Still another participant shared a story concerning a very angry student that she taught the year prior. She shared that he had been in not one, but two, house fires. He was very angry and had burns on his skin. He cursed constantly, yet she chose not to address the cursing as a discipline issue; instead, she used it as a vehicle to understand his anger. She relayed that all students have a story, and it is important to try and understand each of their stories to teach them effectively and personally.

Attention-Seeking Behavior. Closely related to anger is the issue of the students exhibiting attention-seeking behavior. According to the participants, their students are often confrontational, passive aggressive, loud, combative, and physical. One participant shared that the students often make inappropriate comments – sometimes under their breath, sometimes out loud – because they like the attention they receive from their peers. She stated that while sometimes they have a “wall” up, they also are often inappropriately open with what they share. The students are loud, which is cultural, one participant explains. She stated that their “loudness” comes from competing against the television at home in the evenings, or from competing for attention from several siblings.

Because their students seek out opportunities to misbehave or get attention, they participants shared that they are very careful about which behaviors they choose to address and give attention to. For example, one participant shared that she had a student who was intentionally tardy to class, and would use that as an opportunity to disrupt the class upon entrance, especially when he was asked to get a tardy pass. She commented that rather than create a situation where the student “had the floor,” she just let him in tardy and kept teaching; after a few days, the student was no longer tardy and entered the class without incident.

Limited Perspective of the World

Several participants reported that their students have a limited perspective of the world they live in, and this often has a significant impact on their learning. One participant shared that her students have a very limited world view outside of their neighborhood. She stated that students are often unable to discuss issues or understand references to places or events that stem beyond VHS or their own community. Another participant shared that because of this limited perspective and understanding of the world, she often has to break down things into terms they can understand, especially with respect to teaching literature.

When I teach the Odyssey, we talk about the monsters, the Cyclops and the Sirens, and I ask them to think about all of the Cyclops and Sirens they have had to face. I have to say, “Guys, you understand this. You’ve lived this every single day. You’re on this journey, and you’ve probably had more obstacles than children who live in other parts of this city.” Helping them understand things outside of their own backyard helps them understand and achieve at higher levels (Teacher 3).

Another teacher recounted discovering quickly as a new teacher that her students’ limited world view influenced their ability to understand an example she made in class, as well as participate in casual conversation. She shared that a large number of her students have never been to the beach and have never seen the ocean. Many have never been to the zoo or even across the water to another city by way of a bridge. When discussing Thanksgiving plans with her students, she discovered that they do not go anywhere outside of their community to visit family, and one student didn’t realize that

Arkansas was a state. Certainly, recognizing this limited perspective is crucial to the teachers at VHS, and they have a deep understanding of their students' perspective in relation to their life experiences.

Trust (or Lack Thereof)

According to the participants in this study, the students at VHS display a constant lack of trust. One participant stated that her students have a "perpetual barrier," and they do not readily trust her actions or believe what she says. Her students have been hurt often and usually by people they love and care about; therefore, in her opinion, it is understandable that they would not be initially trusting. To try and develop a sense of trust, she shared that she wants her students to know she is a human being, and believes that coming across as impenetrable is not the way to go.

I make sure they know I have feelings. They need to know that I've had my feelings hurt before. They need to know that the people I love have let me down before, too. Sometimes I'm not successful in earning their trust. But often I am, and it's an amazing thing (Teacher 5).

Another participant shared that the students come to school each day with heavy baggage. Some are yelled at while they are home, or perhaps by the teacher they have the block prior. Additionally, they come from spaces where they are treated poorly, are talked to with sarcasm and passive-aggressiveness. Hence, they are not trustworthy. She believes the best way to build trust is to trust them, and make sure they know they are trusted.

Still another participant shared that she believes the students' overall lack of trust stems from not having any self-value or any value placed upon the work they produce.

Our students do not consistently hear at a young age that someone is proud of them. They do not take compliments well and do not readily believe that they have done a good job at a task. They aren't hearing "It's important that you succeed. You are smart. You can do it." When I was growing up, everything I ever did hit the refrigerator. I do that for my own children. Call me an over-celebrator. I don't care. It's important (Assistant Principal).

Because students do not hear often that they are valuable and that the work they produce has value, they are hesitant to trust a teacher who praises their potential. This barrier that exists is difficult to knock down, and poses a challenge for teachers at VHS; however, they recognize this and understand the types of environments their students are coming from.

Closely related to their lack of trust is the students' overall lack of trust in the institution of education. For many, school is the place where they are either unsuccessful instructionally or the place where they are disciplined for their behavior. Because their general lack of trust is a challenge in building relationships, it often manifests in a lack of trust in the school. According to the principal, because their family isn't trustworthy or dependable, and because they are hesitant to trust the school, the students find another "family." As a result, gang activity is very prevalent at VHS, and the administration must keep a constant pulse on what is going on in the community.

Gangs are how the weak survive in the neighborhood. The weak kids join gangs. It's a pyramid scheme. It's like Amway. Kick money up to somebody at the top who is using you, and they never realize it. And if they do, they can't escape or get away from it. One of the most important things we do is keep our kids away

from gangs. We try to, anyway (Principal).

Assuredly, the students' lack of trust, whether it be in their families or in the school, poses a real challenge for the educators at VHS; however, their understanding of this challenge helps them better serve their students.

Culturally Relevant Educators Prioritize a “Secondary” Curriculum

Another theme that emerged while analyzing the data was the idea that each of the participants prioritizes a “secondary” curriculum; they believe that students need so much more than the “three R’s of instruction,” and benefit a great deal from a curriculum based upon life lessons. Each of the participants expressed the importance of incorporating such lessons into their daily instruction, and shared that the primary curriculum often has to take the back seat in the classroom as they help students deal with personal issues and struggles. Close examination of the data included several topics of such secondary instruction, such as: life lessons; self-efficacy; time management; and goal-setting.

Life Lessons

Sharing Life Experiences. One important topic of instruction for the participants was the idea that sharing life experiences allows them an venue for teaching the importance of post-high school topics, such as self-advocacy, employment decisions, budgeting, etc. For example, one participant openly teaches her students that they must learn to rely on themselves to make decisions. As a result, she has a “no excuses” policy in her classroom. She shared that her students typically have various excuses when they do not turn in an assignment, miss a deadline, etc.; however, it is her goal to teach them to self-advocate and ask for assistance when they run into difficulty. She tells them, “If you need something, you need to know two things: HOW to ask and WHO to ask. There

is no shame in asking for help.”

Several participants also place importance on sharing personal experience with regard to the workplace. One participant shared that she talks with her students about her career path; she left teaching to pursue other opportunities, but ultimately returned because teaching was a career that helped her support her family. She discusses with them how medical insurance works, and why paying your mortgage on time is so important. Ultimately, she makes the connection that a high school diploma allows her to take care of herself and her family. Another teacher asserted that her students benefit from knowing the struggles she faced in getting to college and staying in college. She shares with them that it was difficult for her to work and take classes, but she did it because she wanted to have a job where she could support herself.

One particular participant discussed her belief in being open with her students about sensitive topics. For example, she shares openly with her students that her husband, a now retired teacher and successful football coach at VHS, struggled most of his life with anxiety and depression. She uses him as an example of someone who has many of the same struggles they do, yet he always sought support and ensured he had worked hard at his job. Too often, the students from VHS make excuses for their current situations of struggle and poverty; however, the educators sharing true life experiences with students helps them see that they can be successful and take care of themselves one day.

Appropriate Behaviors. Another important life lesson that the participants shared involved teaching students the importance of appropriate behavior. One participant shared that she spends a great deal of time addressing inappropriate behaviors

and teaching and modeling what is appropriate for school and the community.

I find myself blown away by their behaviors. They are very physical – constantly pushing, shoving, poking each other. They are very much about being in each other's personal space. I try to teach them that in the real world, you can't do that. You can't go to work and poke and prod people and expect that you'll have a job the next day. In the real world, when you touch people, it's called assault.

Anytime you touch someone and it is unwanted, that's assault (Teacher 3).

Another participant shared that she understands that often the inappropriate behavior stems from their need to push boundaries; and often, this need to push boundaries is the result of something going on outside of school.

I'm very patient with my kids. I tell them, "We deal with our problems in-house. I'm not writing a referral because you decide you can't follow the rules." I try to learn their personalities, because it helps me see through the behavior and I can get to the root of what is going on (Teacher 5).

She went on to say that identifying the root of the behavior helps her problem-solve and discuss with the student how they might have handled a situation better or more appropriately. She stated, "It's not a one-size-fits-most around here, I need to find out what each of them needs and then I go from there."

The principal shared that he, too, agrees that students often push boundaries, but that boundaries are important in their learning how to act out in the real world. For example, he states that they have strict rules regarding dress code and electronics at VHS. He shared it is important that students know how to dress appropriately in the workplace and in the community, so emphasis is put on appropriate dress at school. Further, while

he embraces technology wholeheartedly, he feels that technology causes a lot of problems for his students; it either allows them to disengage in instruction, or it creates drama with respect to social media. He regulates their cell phone to the classroom and as regulated by the teachers. He shares with the students that their future employer won't allow them to have their cell phone out while they work, and they need to practice and prepare for this while they are in school.

Respect for Authority. Closely related to appropriate behavior is the need for students to show respect for authority. Many of the students at VHS come from situations at home where respect for authority is not taught – whether it be respect for the adults in the home, or respect for adults outside the home. One participant shared that for the most parts, the students at VHS understand that when you do something wrong, there is a consequence.

At the end of the day, when you leave high school and go out into the real world, you have the cops to answer to. You have rules you have to abide by. I'm aware that it is very clear in some areas of our country that authority corrupts, and our students are very in tune to that. But I need them to have a respect for law enforcement, and I try to teach them that not all police are bad and that they work hard each day to ensure our safety (Teacher 6).

She also shared that it can be a difficult balance when working with her students – balancing patience and understanding with rules and consequences. She stated that she helps them a lot because many of them literally have nothing at all, but the real world isn't always helpful, and they need to learn how to follow the rules and ask for assistance from the right people.

Time Management. Another life lesson that the participants shared is crucial for their students is the idea of time management. One teacher stated:

One of the most important things I teach them is how to manage their time. In some cultures, timeliness is not important. In the real world, though, it's super important. You have something due, it needs to be on time, like your rent or your phone bill. If these things are late, there are real consequences, like you get kicked out or can't use your phone. You can't be late to work, or you'll be fired (Teacher 6).

Another participant shared that working with students on setting due dates and holding them to the due dates with consequences for late work is probably one of the most difficult lessons they have to learn. She relayed that in many of their homes, there is not emphasis placed on timeliness or getting things done – no sense of urgency whatsoever. She feels it is important for students to learn that in life, there are specific due dates to adhere to, and being on time is of the utmost importance.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a topic that is prioritized as part of the secondary curriculum at VHS. Several of the participants shared that the students at VHS don't have a strong work ethic that seems to stem from years of being unsuccessful and struggling in school. It is often difficult to change this mindset in high school students, but one way that works is to set high standards and reinforce to the students a can-do attitude. One participant shared that when her students complain that an assignment is "too hard," she often tells them they are completing an assignment that she gives to her honors and IB students.

You should see the look of astonishment on their faces when they hear they are

completing an honors assignment. I tell them, “I believe that you can do this work because you are smart and you impress me every day by your comments and insight.” They sit a little taller and hold their shoulders a little higher and work a little harder. I can’t always convince them, but most of the time, it works (Teacher 3).

Another participant shared that self-efficacy can be a “game-changer” for her students. She related a story from her own personal experience; she had a professor who encouraged her to pursue education as a major, even when she doubted herself. She now focuses on encouraging students, especially those who do not seem to realize their own talent. She stated, “It is our job to give them opportunities, to encourage them. And the reward is we get to watch them thrive.”

This idea is further reinforced by yet another participant, who feels it is her job as an educator to let students know that they are smart and that they can overcome any situation if they believe in themselves. She wants to build in them “grit,” which also happens to be their school theme. “GRIT,” at VHS, stands for growth, resilience, integrity, and tenacity. This theme is incorporated into everything they do – announcements, bulletin boards, posters, celebrations, the yearbook, etc. The teachers talk about “grit” in the classrooms, as evidenced in the interviews and observations, and the students are using the vocabulary. According to the participants, the students are slowly buying in to this idea of “grit” and ultimately, of self-efficacy.

Goal-Setting

Finally, another important topic covered by the secondary curriculum at VHS is the idea that goal-setting is key to success in life after school. Several participants

discussed that they actively teach students to set goals – both short-term goals and long-term goals. They shared; however, that goal-setting is often a difficult task for their students, as they face so many day-to-day challenges, such as consistent housing, lack of food, babysitting younger siblings, and working to contribute to house-hold finances, just to name a few. Because of their many challenges, which often cause them to feel overwhelmed at the thought of setting a goal, graduation is where teachers most often focus their students.

I'm realistic about their goals, and I talk to them openly about that. Graduation has to be the goal, so we talk about their specific challenges to graduation and we talk about how to get around those. We make checklists of each thing they need to do in order to graduate. Other goals can be filtered in, like getting a driver's license or a job, but graduation comes first. The diploma is a key to their future (Teacher 1).

Culturally Relevant Educators Demonstrate Classroom Expertise

While analyzing data, another important theme became evident – all of the participants deliver instruction that is relevant, research-based, and collaborative. In their interviews and observations, each of the participants expressed and demonstrated the ways in which they deliver instruction tailored to the needs of their students. Close examination of the data from this study revealed several categories related to their instructional support, to include: relevant instruction; research-based instruction; collaborative planning and support of instruction; and administrative support of instruction.

Relevant Instruction

One commonality among the participants that emerged when analyzing the data was their ability to make learning relevant for their students. Each stated the importance of making learning relevant as a way to make connections with their students, including the use of current events, humor, and incentives.

Current events. One participant shared that she has found that there is an explicit connection between what her students are going through outside of school and their performance in school. They are often shaped and influenced by the events in their local community, as well as in the nation. Several participants shared that their students are influenced by the gang activity in their neighborhoods, and they often want to discuss and share their frustration, anger, and sadness regarding this activity. Teachers try to connect what they are teaching to local events to allow an avenue for discussion and learning at a deeper level. One participant shared that teaching *Romeo and Juliet* always makes for relevant learning, as her students can relate to families who are at war with one another.

Another teacher shared that she assigns a weekly current event activity, where students select one current event from the news to write about and then share with the class. While some students choose to focus on their own interests, such as sports, others choose to focus on events that affect them in a major way, such as the Ferguson riots in Missouri. She shared that she can gauge what is going on with her students and what is affecting them by assessing the events they choose to write about and share.

Additionally, she shared that this assignment helps them strengthen their limited world-view, and helps them with perspective.

Humor. Several of the participants utilize humor in the classroom in order to make learning relevant. One participant stated that humor is a great way to ease tension, build relationships, and encourage students to “plug into” the learning. She likes to incorporate internet memes into her instruction; students love them and there are so many out there applicable to English and other subjects. Another participant likes to use jokes each day to open each class.

So many of my students have a bad day every day because their days do not begin well at home. I think school should be a place they can have a better day. I love humor, but not sarcasm. Sarcasm serves no positive purpose. Instead, I like to use humor to teach, to connect, and to heal. I tell a joke every day in class, and my students look forward to these. They are silly jokes, but the students are quick to remind me if I have forgotten to tell my joke of the day (Teacher 4).

In addition to her “joke of the day,” she likes to incorporate several techniques that the students find funny, such as special handshakes, chants, and songs. She relayed that she learned many of these from attending Marcia Tate training (Marcia Tate is an educator who offers training to teachers on instructional strategies), and they help her make connections through camaraderie and laughter.

Incentives. Another way to make learning relevant is to incentivize instruction. Several of the participants noted that they offer incentives as a way to create buy-in for students; additionally, they try to offer incentives that are tailored to the needs of their students. One participant noted that many of her incentives are offered to help students improve their attendance. Because attendance is such a hurdle for many of the students at VHS, incentives help get them to school, which ultimately encourages better attendance

habits. For example, she offers the students incentives that reinforce what they need instructionally, such as school supplies like binders, paper, pens and pencils, gym bags, and locks. Incentives such as food and drink help a great deal, too. The students are aware of their own needs, and according to one participant, they prefer to earn such items rather than “take a handout.”

Research-Based Practices

All of the participants shared that research-based instructional and classroom management strategies are important to them. They recognize that they teach a difficult and often hard-to-reach student body that brings many challenges with them to the classroom. In turn, they accept the challenge to find out what works best for their students to ensure their success in the classroom.

Classroom community. Perhaps the strongest instructional strength of the participants as evidenced via observations and interviews is their ability to create a classroom community conducive to authentic learning. One participant organizes her classroom into small “families,” or groups of four or five students, which promoted collaborative thinking. She shared that families should treat each other with respect and love, and look out for one another; this is the positive classroom community that she wants for her students. During an observation of her classroom, it was evident that she using the language of “family” and the students buy into the language of family, as well. She said to her class, “Turn to your brothers and sisters and say ‘You’re a genius family!’” The students then did as she asked; further, when getting a difficult concept, one student said, “I love my family!” She shared that this concept of “family” teaches them to advocate for themselves while also depending on one another for support,

whether or it be a math problem, homework, or a personal problem. This idea of “family” and community was easily seen via the classroom observations of the participants. In response to the teachers’ instruction, the students were notably comfortable asking questions, were conversational, and were eager to share.

Another teacher organizes her classroom similarly, which promotes collaborative, small group instruction. An observation of her room revealed that rather than the traditional classroom desks and chairs, she has various kitchen tables and chairs in her room. Additionally, each kitchen table is covered with white board material, which provides writing space for the students.

I found these either on Craig’s List or the side of the road, and some are pretty old. When I grew up, I did my homework at the kitchen table. It was relaxing, comfortable, and less stressful. I could have someone sit there with me and help if I needed it. This is what I want for my students. Having students sit together at kitchen tables helps combat math anxiety. The calmer they are, the more ready they are to learn (Teacher 6).

Further, she shared that many students don’t have a calm, quiet place to go home to after school to do the homework; in fact, some don’t even have a kitchen table. She wants her classroom to be calm; she wants her classroom to feel calm.

In addition to the kitchen tables, the participant also has a couch and comfortable chair, and both of these are strategically placed at the front of the classroom near the instructor and the SMART Board. She states that having this alternative seating not only encourages them to sit up front near instruction, but it also encourages them to be on time. She stated, “If you want the comfy couch, you gotta be the first one in class...not

loitering in the hallway.” And finally, mixed in with the chairs at the tables are several yoga balls, which some students like to sit on during class. After doing some research, she read that the yoga balls help students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; sitting while concentrating on balance allows students to focus.

Instructional techniques. Several of the participants discussed and modeled how they choose to structure their 90-minute blocks of instructional time. Certainly, the participants all shared they begin their classes with warm-up activities and end with closure activities. They shared that these are essential to promoting engagement and good behavior management in the classroom. They also shared, however, the importance of keeping their students, most of who struggle a great deal, engaged in instruction. One particular strategy evident not only in the interviews, but also in classroom observations, was the use of kinesthetic activities. One participant shared, “The busier they are, the more active they are, the less distractions there are, the less opportunity to get off task.”

I want them moving. I don’t want to spend my time at the board while they stare at my back and glaze over; I want to spend my time with them, talking to them, helping them with the math. I want them up and moving – gallery walks, around-the-world activities, station activities. As a learner, I don’t sit well. They don’t either, I find (Teacher 6).

Another teacher shared that she likes for her students to have a “buddy,” and to stay with that buddy for the class period. She stated, “I tell the kids, ‘When you move, you take your buddy with you. You help each other out.’” When her particular class was observed, the students participated in many engaging, kinesthetic activities, including a card-sort activity, and at the end of the block after the lesson, a gallery walk with their buddy.

Students also reviewed their quizzes that had been returned with a buddy.

Collaborative Planning and Support

All of the participants discussed the collaborative instructional nature of the staff at VHS. Specifically, they discussed the desire that most teachers have to work together to provide the best instruction to their students. When analyzing the data, the teachers noted several ways in which teachers collaborate for instructional purposes, including meeting actively in Professional Learning Communities; participating in co-teaching; and planning intervention for students who may be in need of additional support.

Professional Learning Communities. The idea of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) is not a new one; in fact, schools across the nation have been touting the benefits of PLCs for almost a decade. According to Richard DuFour, a Professional Learning Community is a group of educators who meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve their teaching skills, and ultimately, the academic performance of their students. Those participating in a true PLC must buy into four “big ideas:” ensuring that all students learn; a culture of collaboration; a focus on results; and hard work and commitment (DuFour, 2004). The participants at VHS shared that there is a true culture of collaboration among the staff, and that they feel that most staff members truly buy into the idea of the PLC.

One participant, who began her teaching career in another school division before coming to VHS, stated that she brought the philosophy of the PLC with her to VHS. She shared that the division was just getting started with PLCs, so she was a true cheerleader for the implementation of these important groups.

I believe we need to share instructional goals, have common expectations, and

even share a common syllabus. PLCs make all of us stronger. If there is a weak teacher in the PLC, it is the responsibility of the PLC to help that teacher be better and stronger. Over the years I have learned some amazing things from my colleagues in our collaborative meetings and share sessions (Teacher 5).

Another participant shared that she looks forward to the time she has with her PLC, even though that time is limited. She asserted that the overall high school schedule makes it difficult for everyone in the PLC to have common planning time, but that email works great for collaboration. Still another participant shared that they spend time working on collaborative goals for instruction, as well as different common assessments. She stated, “Work smarter, not harder. Working together helps us and the kids.”

Co-teaching. Because there is a high percentage of Students with Disabilities at VHS, there is a thriving inclusion program. The Assistant Principal shared that it can be difficult to offer inclusion for every course, but the partnerships that do exist most always work well for the benefit of the students. One participant shared that she understands that co-teaching offers a challenge administratively, and that it can be difficult to create perfect partnerships. She shared, however, that the teachers she has worked with over the years are willing to try and make the partnerships work, because that is what is best for the students.

I’ve always been a proponent of co-teaching, and I need my co-teacher with me every step of the way. We are partners. It’s not “you do the paperwork and take attendance while I teach.” We BOTH teach. If I had it my way, I’d have a co-teacher for every class, and I’d keep the same co-teacher with me all day. Our kids deserve that (Teacher 3).

Another participant shared that co-teaching is essential for most students, whether they have a disability or not. She stated that everyone benefits from having two teachers in the room, especially because the students bring so many challenges with them. She asserted, “Some days, I really feel that they need more than just one person can give. But we press on.”

Intervention. Closely related to the concepts of collaborative planning and co-teaching to meet students’ needs is the idea of offering intervention to those students who need the extra help. Certainly, VHS has a strong remediation program before and after school, as well as a pull-out model during instructional time, as evidenced by the school improvement plan; however, the participants discussed the impact of the interventions they offer to students above and beyond the organized model. Several of the participants discussed the idea that they can’t have a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching at VHS. Many of the students are on different levels, and tailoring instruction and offering intervention so they are successful is non-negotiable. One participant shared that it is crucial that she consider individual student needs every day.

I think the biggest failure of the United States educational system is our non-holistic view of students. They come here to learn, each in their own way, and we have a tendency to force-feed the mandated curriculum, and we don’t have time to worry about anything else. That doesn’t work here. I have no choice but to consider individual needs and figure out what interventions each may need in order to find success (Teacher 2).

The participants shared that they are willing to provide whatever the students may need instructionally, whether it is extra time to complete assignments, a quiet place to take an

assessment, or even reading questions out loud and allowing a verbal response versus a written one. Figuring out what works is a challenge, but once they know, they can really meet students' instructional needs.

Administrative Support

Several of the teachers shared that they feel there is administrative support for instruction at VHS; additionally, the administrators shared the ways they believe they offer support to teachers. The teachers noted several ways in which the administration supports their instructional efforts, including support for Professional Learning Communities, intentional scheduling, and valuable training.

Support for collaboration. Several participants shared that the administration supports their need for collaboration, as well as the work they do in their Professional Learning Communities. Not only do administrators often attend department meetings and PLC meetings, as evidenced by the school improvement plan and the Faculty Senate meeting minutes, they look for creative ways to provide time for teachers to collaborate. One teacher shared that time is provided on traditional workdays and staff development days for PLCs to connect and work together. Another teacher shared that the administration often highlights the work that is being done in PLCs at faculty meetings; this makes the teachers feel valued for their collaborative work. She shared that she feels encouraged by the administrative staff, and appreciates the climate of trust, which allows them to make instructional decisions for their students. She stated that the administration promotes a “whatever they need; whatever works” philosophy.

The administration at VHS also assembles a Faculty Congress, which is a group of educators from VHS who serve as spokesmen and liaisons between the administration

and the varying departments. One teacher shared that she enjoys being a part of the Faculty Congress because she has an “administrative ear to bend” with specific concerns from the classroom and beyond. Both the principal and the assistant principal mentioned their work with PLCs and the Faculty Congress. Both indicated that the collaborative nature of the VHS staff makes a huge impact on the learning outcomes for their students. According to the assistant principal, the students’ performance on common assessments (created within PLCs) has helped increase the students’ overall performance in the classroom and on state assessments. The principal shared the value of the Faculty Congress:

Every department has a person. They come in and we talk about anything – instructional or otherwise. Sometimes we discuss discipline, and sometimes they tell me the hotspots of the school – like where the kids are loitering, where the potential trouble is. As a result, I shift things around, reassign security, etc. Having the group helps me be better, helps the school be better.

Scheduling. Another way that instructional support is given at VHS is through the master schedule. The assistant principal shared that one of the biggest challenges with respect to instruction is student transportation. Most all students at VHS ride the bus, as the students do not have access to personal transportation. According to the assistant principal, school transportation, however, is not consistent due to lack of qualified drivers, broken-down busses, and drivers making double and triple routes. Inevitably, the majority of students are late on a daily basis. The principal shared that this heavily influences instruction, because the students who need the most are missing critical instructional minutes. To help combat this problem, the administration makes

every effort to schedule core content courses during the second, third, and fourth blocks of the day. Electives and other such courses are scheduled during the first block, where there won't be such an instructional impact for the students.

Another way the administration lends instructional support to the teachers is by hand-scheduling as many students as possible. One teacher shared that she appreciates that as a mathematics teacher, she almost always can keep her students all year long. At VHS, the majority of students take math in "parts" for both Algebra and Geometry – Part A in the fall semester and Part B in the spring. The assistant principal shared that they take the time to hand schedule the math students in Algebra I and Geometry "in parts" so they can keep the same teacher. She explains that this helps with continuity of instruction and relationships. Additionally it allows teachers to take true ownership of the students' performance on standardized assessments. A math teacher concluded that she doesn't have to waste critical instructional time at the semester change getting to know new students and figure out where their instructional "holes" are; she already knows.

Purposeful Training. Another idea that resonated was that of training; the teacher participants shared that they appreciate the training they receive with respect to instruction. Further, the administrators stated that they try to give authentic and useful training to teachers, and prefer not to "over train" their teachers. Close review of VHS's staff development plan noted that the instructional training fell into one of three areas: enhanced PLC training, goal-setting training, and common assessment training. The participants reinforced these trainings; they shared that the training they attend is purposeful and relevant, because it typically supports the processes they have been working on building. Training related to the specific issues of homelessness, foster care

students, and the like is also offered, which all indirectly affect instruction at VHS.

One teacher noted that one meaningful training opportunity included covering different interventions that teachers could offer to students. One particular strategy was a “roster analysis” to determine students in need of intervention. The teachers were given copies of their class rosters, as well as green, yellow, and pink highlighters. The teachers identified (highlighted) students who were proficient (green); those who they had some concern for (yellow); and those who they very concerned about (pink). For those students who were highlighted yellow and pink, teachers worked in their PLC groups to identify specific instructional interventions and strategies they might use to support the students, thus creating an instructional plan. One teacher noted that committing the plan to paper helped her be intentional with her instructional support.

Another strategy was offered to promote positive relationships with students and their parents and guardians. This particular intervention involved emailing parents positive messages. The assistant principal discussed this, as well:

I asked the teachers in the training – we were in the computer lab – to email three parents a positive message right then and there. Several teachers received return emails while we were sitting in the meeting. After, teachers reported that in some cases student behavior improved and positive connections were made with parents. The ripple effect is so powerful. How we treat people, it goes a long way. It’s crucial to what we do each and every day.

Culturally Relevant Educators Offer a Web of Support

One final theme that emerged from this study involves the concept support. The teachers, staff, and administrative team at VHS are supportive of students’ needs,

certainly. In fact, the web of support that is offered by not only the teachers and administration, but also the community, is broad and full. Important to note is that the support is reciprocal in nature; the teachers support the students, and the administrators support the students and the teachers. Three specific categories related to support surfaced during data analysis: teacher support; administrative support; and community support.

Teacher Support

The teachers at VHS offer support in many ways and in many contexts; however, they share many characteristics that demonstrate their supportive natures, as evidenced by their own words and actions, as well as their administrators' comments. When discussing his teachers, the principal concluded, "You can teach anywhere, but here they have to be special. Teaching here is a mission." When asked what characteristics they felt they possessed that enabled them to support the students of VHS, the teachers gave a range of answers: flexible, positive, empathetic, nurturing, encouraging, understanding, and compassionate. One particular teacher shared that she believed she is a "promoter." She shared that her students don't always have someone in "their corner," and she believes it is her job to play that role. And certainly, the data presented in the earlier sections of this chapter reveal not only the teachers' deep level of understanding of their students, but also the importance they place upon instructional support. I found, however, that the teachers offer a level of familial support that is unique, as well as serve as mentors for the students at VHS.

Familial Support: Many participants shared that the students of VHS do not have the family support that is crucial to success in school; however, they do understand that

the lack of support is not always from lack of trying on the parents' part. While some students have absent parents for unfortunate reasons, many of the students have parents who are working several jobs to make ends meet, which make them unavailable for help with homework at home or to attend an after-school conference. The teachers at VHS serve in that parental, familial role willingly. One teacher shared her thoughts:

My kids don't have much parental support, not because their parents don't care about them or love them, but because their parents have two or three jobs. If I had two or three jobs and couldn't help my daughter with homework or sign her permission slip to watch a movie in class, I'd want her teachers to help me by helping her. It takes all of us, I think, and we have to be each other's family (Teacher 3).

Another teacher shared that she recognizes that her colleagues serve as family to the students at VHS:

Whatever these kids need, the teachers are there to give it. Doesn't matter if it is soap, toothpaste, or deodorant, or a pep talk before a big game, or high-five over a good grade – they give them that. They all do a really good job of being the family that many of our kids just don't have (Teacher 2).

My observations of several of the teachers showcased the teachers' familial tendencies. For example, a mathematics teacher greeted her students one by one at the door, and checked in with each one personally. She asked questions such as, "How was your night? Did you sleep okay last night? What did you have for dinner? How was practice? How was the English quiz?" Each of the questions was personalized to each student, and demonstrated a unique level of personalization and intimate knowledge of their lives –

much like a parent would. Another teacher, during her lesson, walked around and slipped a pack of crackers on the desks of two students who had their heads down. She said quietly to each of them, “I’ll bet you skipped breakfast again. Here’s some brain food.” This serves as another example of how the teachers function as pseudo-parents for their students.

Cultural Support. The teachers in this study were complimentary of their colleagues, and several spoke specifically about the compassion and supportive nature of the teachers and administration in the building, as well as their ability to provide “cultural support.” One teacher shared that the faculty is always “hyper-aware” of the different situations the students are involved in. She stated, “The teachers constantly ask, ‘What can we do? What can we do?’” Another teacher shared that the teachers who have been at VHS for a while understand the diverse learning and cultural needs of the students and they instinctively know how to support them. She stated:

Culture isn’t just about race. Culture is about poverty. Culture is about how you were raised. It’s about whether or not your parent is an enabler, even if they can’t help it. Culture isn’t about if a kid is an African-American, he or she must be in a gang. We know our students, and when we know them, we can give them what they need (Teacher 4).

One teacher shared that the administration intentionally matches students to specific teachers; they figure out what the students need, and pair them with a teacher who has that skill set. Another shared a similar sentiment, and stated, “ Admin knows that the teachers have the backs of the kids, and they know that we will do whatever it takes, inside and outside the classroom, to support the kids.”

While the data resulting from this case study has been consistently positive regarding culturally relevant teacher and administrative support, several of the participants commented on a handful of teachers who may not have what it takes to offer support to VHS students. One teacher shared that there are a few teachers who students just don't connect with. She stated:

Rigidity and inflexibility don't work well with our population. Some are very tight-fisted, and it just doesn't work. The kids won't respond. They shut down Teacher 2).

Another teacher shared the few teachers who do struggle, do so because they just can't understand or empathize with the culture of VHS students. She stated that these teachers are stuck in their own ways and don't have an open mind, therefore they struggle in the classroom. She shared, "It's funny; the kids can tell you exactly who they are, too." This fact is reinforced well by another teacher's comment:

VHS is unique, in that the demographic is unlike any of the other high schools in our division. The teachers that last – the ones that have been here 5, 10, 15, 20 plus years, they are the heart and soul of VHS. They know the kids and they love the kids. The ones who can't do either, they leave. That's how it goes (Teacher 6).

Administrative Support

Assuredly, the teachers support the students in myriad ways at VHS; however, the support the administrative team gives bolsters their support system. The power of the administrative support at VHS was captured via the interview process, as all participants shared the many ways in which the administrative team supports the students and staff at

VHS.

Compassion. Collectively, the teachers felt that the administrative team's greatest strength was the support they give through compassion and kindness. For example, one teacher shared:

I don't know who put this team together, but I pray they never leave. I mean all of them, every single one of them, without exception, is so kind, compassionate, and giving and the expectation is so high, yet they take into account each of their stories (Teacher 1).

Several other teachers shared the same sentiment. One shared that the administrators routinely give food and clothing to the students; and more importantly, they really listen to the students and work with them based on their individual needs. Further, another participant stated that they are all fortunate to have an administrative team who wants to be at VHS every day and who understands the students and where they come from so well. According to one participant:

The administrators here understand that the students have stories, but they also understand the staff has stories, too. They know the kids really well, and they know us, too, which means everyone gets what they need (Teacher 3).

Perhaps the most powerful teacher statements about compassion and support, however, were about the principal of VHS. The participants collectively feel that their principal makes a difference daily in the lives of the students. One participant shared her sentiments regarding the principal:

I can't imagine a world without him at VHS. He's just so personable and giving, and he talks to the kids. He makes himself known. The kids know him and know

they can depend on him and I think this is really important because the kids need to see a presence above their teachers (Teacher 2).

Another teacher made this powerful statement:

He is the most amazing man I have ever met, in terms of administrators. He is fantastic, and there are always rumors that he will get a job downtown, but he always comes back. If he ever left, it would be a completely different place around here, because he is the moral. He is the “okay, I know you got a hard job, but we gotta do it – so let’s go!” guy (Teacher 6).

Assuredly, the students and teachers value the support they feel from the principal and the entire administrative team.

Trust. In addition to the support they feel each day, the teachers also commented on the level of trust that exists between the administrators and the teachers. One teacher shared how much she appreciates that the general consensus among the staff is that there is professional trust and that the administrative team always has their backs. According to another teacher, the administration “trusts her judgement” in any situation, whether she be making decisions about instruction or student behavior. Still another shared her perspective on trust:

The administration here is so supportive and so awesome. They let us try new things, and they trust us to make decisions that we think are best for our students.

Yeah, they trust us, and that goes a long way.

Unquestionably, the high level of trust that exists between the teachers and the administrative team encourages the spirit of collaboration and risk-taking that exists at VHS.

Security. Another critical way the administrative team provides support is by providing safety and security to the staff and students of VHS. According to the teachers, the administration places a huge emphasis on security for many reasons. They know that a large number of their students participate in gang activity; additionally, because there are more than 2400 students in the school, they must ensure that they maintain order at all times. Several of the participants talked about the intuitiveness of the administrative staff at VHS, and shared how that quality helps ensure safety. One teacher shared that she has learned to be intuitive, too, by simply watching them problem-solve and reflect in a particular situation. She discussed that the administration is always watching and they are vigilant about keeping an eye out for gang activity the students bring with them from the neighborhoods.

Another teacher discussed how visible the administration is, and how that contributes the safety of the students. She shared that the administrators at VHS are visible and involved, and that the principal is always in the halls and in every lunch every single day. She stated, “Sometimes I’ll be teaching, and he’ll pop his head in and say, ‘Did you hear what she just said? Listen to her.’” Another participant shared that the visibility of the administrative team is how they keep a handle on potential security issues within the building.

They always have their ears to the ground, so they know what is going on in the school and in the neighborhoods. They have a pulse on what is going on in the communities that feed the school. When something is going on, we have quick morning meetings so they can tell us what trouble is brewing so we can have awareness, too (Teacher 5).

Several of the teachers mentioned these morning meetings; some teachers referred to them as “stand-up faculty meetings.” They are short, concise meetings where the sole purpose is quick dissemination of information regarding issues of students’ behavior and school safety.

Another way the administration ensures safety is by restructuring the way that students are dismissed at VHS. On certain days where they feel students’ safety is compromised, they dismiss the building slowly, one hallway at a time. In essence, the students are dismissed in small groups so they get to their busses safely. The teachers shared a few examples of times when a special dismissal is called: a major fight in school that resulted in restless student behavior; a rumor (or proven) of gang activity that had made its way into school; an issue in the community, such as a shooting. Assuredly, the administration prioritizes safety and lends support through these specific practices.

Community Support

One final layer that adds to the huge web of support at VHS is the support that the community provides to the students of VHS. The administration believes that reaching out to the community for support is one of their most important roles, because students cannot be academically successful if their personal needs are not being met. The principal shared his vision for community support:

I want to put out school at the center of the community. I want us to be the place that changes the lives of kids. I want a one-stop place for my kids and their families to have their needs met – a tree of services, if you will.

The administration and staff at VHS have found numerous ways to enlist community support to offer just that – a tree of services.

Faculty Donations. While VHS receives donations from various organizations and businesses, the faculty and staff are the source of many resources for the students at VHS. From food to school supplies to prom dresses, the faculty members bring in items for the students. Several teachers shared that each week they bring in items, such as food, drinks, school supplies, prizes, etc. Additionally, they support students who may be homeless and living in hotels or cars. One teacher discussed how the staff has an area in the main office where faculty members drop off book bags and other school supplies, toiletries, clothing, and coats to help students in need.

The assistant principal shared that they have created a food pantry in the main office, as well as a clothing area. When students express need (or when teachers sense a need), students are directed to the main office for either food or clothing. For those students who need food, the food items are bagged up and sent home with the students. She stated that sometimes the students need to visit the clothing area because of a dress code violation, but she shared that most of the time they come with a specific request: shirts, pants, shoes, and coats.

Community Partnerships. In addition to the food, clothing items, and school supplies donated daily by the faculty at VHS, the principal shared that the administrators have linked arms with several community businesses and organizations. Together, they have formed a group called the VHS Community Collaboration, which is a group that focuses on enlisting ways to support VHS students and their families. This group, consisting of the administrative team, several teachers, and various community partners, meets about four times a year. As a group, they have brought many services to the students of VHS. Both the principal and one of the teachers, who also serves as the

graduation coach, discussed the many supports this group has been able to provide.

The principal shared that the Deputy Sheriff's department sends sheriffs to VHS once a week to serve as mentors and tutors. He shared that they have been especially influential with the Hispanic population at VHS, who are also English Language Learners. He shared that there are several Hispanic sheriffs who can really assist the Hispanic students with their studies and with any personal or family issues. They usually bring pizza, too, which the students like. The local police department visits VHS monthly, and they offer several instructional programs that students can attend. One teacher shared that the students enjoy the programs, which include topics such as special operations, social media etiquette, information on felonies and misdemeanors, and gang awareness. Additionally, the Director of Human Services for the city is a member of this group, and she has visited VHS and provided mental health awareness and support for the students and their families. Finally, there are several churches that support and mentor the students of VHS. For example, the local Mormon Church has a women's group that comes to VHS to offer tutoring and mentoring. According to the principal, the church groups never expect anything in return, except to give the students a positive learning experience and to let them know there are folks out there who care.

One of the most successful events facilitated by the VHS Community Collaboration is the Resource Day that took place in the fall. The group helped coordinate several organizations who donated resources to the students and their families. The principal shared that while they didn't have as many families as they would like, they know that they were able to give those who attended a valuable experience. There were several organizations who participated, including the Department of Motor Vehicles, the

Health Department, and a local hair dresser. The Department of Motor Vehicles assisted the students with official identification cards, as well as provided several computers for them to take their assessment to obtain their Learner's Permit. The Health Department vaccinated students and their family members for flu, as well as for Tetanus, Diphtheria, and Pertussis. The local hairdresser donated haircuts to families, as well. The principal shared that this type of event, the Resource Day, was a part of his vision for the "tree of services" that he wants so desperately for his students and their families.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to capture not only to capture the ways that culturally relevant instruction and leadership looks like in one Southeastern Virginia high school, but to also capture the ways that school leaders foster such practices. This study included eight interviews and five classroom observations, as well as analysis of school documents which support instruction. Most certainly, the teachers and administrators at Virginia High School demonstrate and support culturally relevant instructional and leadership practices.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION OF STUDY

The previous chapter, Chapter 4, presented the findings from this qualitative study. This chapter offers a summary and conclusions drawn from those findings.

Following is a summary of the problem and methodology, as well as discussion and analysis of the findings and implications for practice and research.

Summary of the Problem

While the body of research conclusively supports the idea that teachers' cultural and ethnic sensitivity in the classroom has a great impact on student performance and achievement, there is little research concerning teachers' and administrators' perceptions of cultural and ethnic sensitivity and instructional practice. Further, there is a need for identifying the characteristics of educational leaders who employ culturally relevant leadership and foster a culturally-rich school culture and climate. According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper, "the problem embracing the American educational system is how to ensure that all students, especially the racial/ethnic minority students," achieve academic success (2011, p. 66). To remedy this problem, investigating the notion of culturally relevant instructional and leadership practices is crucial for contemporary students' achievement.

Methodology

This study was conducted using the lens of the theoretical concept of Culturally Relevant Leadership. Using qualitative methods and a single case study model for research, interviews were conducted with not only teachers, but also administrators, at one Southeastern Virginia high school. Further, classroom observations were conducted and several documents were analyzed to corroborate and bolster the data from the

interviews. The research process took nine months (August 2015 to May 2016). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded; the observation notes were typed up and reviewed; and document analysis was utilized to triangulate the research methods for this study.

Discussion

This qualitative study was framed with two questions in mind:

1. How and to what extent does culturally relevant instruction and leadership manifest itself in one comprehensive Virginia public high school?
2. Where it exists, how and in what ways do school leaders foster cultural and ethnic sensitivity and relevance (or not) in schools?

Consequently, there were five major findings/ themes that surfaced as a result of analyzing the data collected via interviews, observations, and document analysis:

Personal Background Shapes the Culturally Relevant Educator; Culturally Relevant Educators have a deep understanding of students; Culturally Relevant Educators Prioritize a “Secondary” Curriculum; Culturally Relevant Educators Demonstrate Classroom Expertise; and Culturally Relevant Educators Offer a Web of Support. These findings all lend support in answering the questions above.

Review of Major Findings

Personal Background Shapes the Culturally Relevant Educator. This qualitative study, a single case study of one Southeastern Virginia High School, investigated how and to what extent culturally relevant instruction and leadership manifested itself, as well as the ways school leaders’ fostered cultural sensitivity in their schools. Five major findings/themes surfaced through careful data analysis. The first

finding revealed that each of the participant's personal backgrounds shaped who they are as an educator. Some of the participants were shaped by having family members who were educators and therefore served as positive role models; others were shaped because their own parents lacked education, and they learned that education was their way out of current situation of poverty. Several participants were influenced by experiencing a transient upbringing, where they were always "the new kid in school," much like the students they now teach. Both teachers and administrators shared that they were shaped and influenced by their own family culture, such as being part of a blended family or experiencing racism and judgement as a student.

Culturally Relevant Educators Have a Deep of Understanding of Students.

The second major finding concluded that the teachers and administrators who were a part of this study had a deep level of understanding for the students they teach. They related and empathized with them on many levels, including their home environment of poverty, lack of consistent parental support, and culture of anger. They understand the students' need to display inappropriate behaviors, as well as their limited perspective of the world beyond their own neighborhoods. They understand their inability to trust the adults they interact with in school; however, they rejoiced in their ability to make connections and build trust with their students on a daily basis.

Culturally Relevant Educators Prioritize of a "Secondary" Curriculum. A

third finding, prioritizing a "secondary" curriculum, demonstrated the participants' belief that education goes far beyond reading, writing, and mathematics instruction; they often prioritize personal needs and life skills in the classroom. Whether using their own personal experiences to teach life lessons and appropriate behaviors, or teaching respect

for authority, time management, time management or goal-setting, the teachers are committed to giving students what they need. Further, teaching self-efficacy to ensure future success is one of their highest priorities.

Culturally Relevant Educators Demonstrate Instructional Expertise.

Instructional expertise in the classroom, another finding, determined that the teachers in the study all deliver instruction that is relevant, research-based, and collaborative in nature. Several participants included that they use current events as a way to offer relevant instruction for their students. Other instructional techniques involve the use of humor as a vehicle for instruction, as well as offering incentives to help with buy-in. Further, the teachers place importance on building classroom community, and focus a great deal on collaborative learning experiences for the students. Finally, the teachers all shared their need to offer personalized instruction to students in the form of instructional and behavioral interventions. Important to note is that the administrators involved in this study recognized and discussed the teachers' ability to offer relevant and research-based instructional strategies to students at VHS, as well as placed importance on the training they plan for the teachers. Specifically, the administrators discussed the value of training geared toward strengthening the PLCs they have in place, as well as on common assessment practices.

Culturally Relevant Educators Offer a Web of Support. One last finding involves the idea of a wide web of support made available to students at VHS. Not only does the faculty at VHS work to ensure their students have access to the items they may need, including clothing, food, and school supplies, but they also support the students with emotional needs, as well. For example, the teachers in the study discussed the role

they play as “family” to students; consequently, the administrative team does, as well, and they work hard to ensure students aren’t adopting other “family” that comes in the form of a gang. The administration offers support in numerous ways, including serving as compassionate leaders who exercise flexibility when necessary while also holding students accountable. Further, they place a great deal of importance on school safety, and have many practices in place to keep students safe and faculty informed of potential situations each day. Finally, the community offers a system of support to students via different partnerships between the school and community groups, business, and local churches.

Assuredly, the major findings/ themes identified as a result of this study bolster the idea that not only does culturally relevant instruction and leadership manifest itself at VHS, the educational leaders work daily to foster a culture of collaboration and support for students each day. Because the study was approached and conducted with Cultural Relevance Theory as a theoretical lens, it is important to revisit the three major tenets of Cultural Relevance Theory, as well as frame the major findings of this study by those tenets.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and the Data

To review, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, or CRP, refers to “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17-18). According to Ladson- Billings, there are three basic tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: academic success; cultural competence; and critical consciousness. The first tenant, academic success, focuses on the idea that all children have the potential to be

academically successful. The second, cultural competence, operates under the assumption that educators appreciate the cultural strengths of their students and implement instructional techniques that incorporate these ideas; in fact, “students’ culture should become the vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Finally, the third tenant, critical consciousness, goes beyond individual achievement and instead focuses on helping students see themselves as a part of a community that values education and values them as people. Coincidentally, the findings noted above correlate with the three tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Academic Success. The first tenant operates focuses on the idea that all children have the potential to be academically successful; consequently, the findings reflect this belief. When educators lack faith in their students’ ability to achieve, teachers tend to have low expectations of their students (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). At VHS, however, the participants all demonstrated a strong belief that their students have the potential to be successful, as evidenced by their words and actions. To begin, both the teachers and administrators involved in this study touted a “whatever it takes” mindset with respect to students’ instructional success. The teachers made no assumptions about whether or not students could learn, but rather approached their students with the assumption they would all find success at their own pace. For example, the teachers involved in this study all shared the importance of offering a relevant instructional experience for their students. They shared ways that they make learning relevant by using strategies that allow them to make personal connections with their students. According to Villegas and Lucas (2007), the most important role of the culturally relevant teacher is to support “students’ learning by helping them build bridges between what they already know...and what they need to

learn about it” (p. 2). Examples of such strategies included utilizing current events to bridge learning from their own world and the classroom, as well as incentivizing learning in different ways.

Further, the teachers ensured the instructional success of their students by using research-based instructional and management strategies, as well as specific interventions for students in need. Teachers relayed that they make good use of the 90 minutes of instructional time they have each day, and are sure to include the types of activities that students respond best to, such as kinesthetic and hands-on activities. Additionally, collaborative learning is at the heart of their instructional pedagogy, and teachers discussed the many ways they incorporate learning partners and collaborative activities in their classrooms. Activities such as those mentioned above (kinesthetic, hands-on, and collaborative activities) were evident in the classroom observations of these teachers. As stated by Scheurich and Skrla (2003), when educators provide caring, respectful, appreciative, high quality instruction for children, they respond. This is most certainly the case at VHS.

Administrative support of such practices was evident in the findings, as well. Not only does the administration at VHS support instruction by encouraging and supporting PLCs and department collaboration, but they also undergird instructional support through strategic scheduling of core content classes and hand-scheduling students with intention. The administrators involved in this study discussed the importance they place on the instructional needs of the students, as well as the trust they place in their teachers to make solid decisions about the instruction they employ. Conclusively, while the teachers are key factors in student success at VHS (as indicated above), it is also the work of the

principal and other school leaders to share responsibilities and ensure that the school is an equitable place for learning (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Cultural Competence. The second tenet, cultural competence, operates under the assumption that educators appreciate the cultural strengths of their students and families, and implement instructional techniques that incorporate these ideas. According to Sosa and Bhathena (2017), culturally responsive practices require knowing the students and families that the school serves, and that the teachers and school leadership see them as resources, not problems. The findings from this qualitative study reflect the idea of cultural competence, specifically with the participants' prioritization of a "secondary" curriculum. The participants certainly understand the culture of their students, as evidenced by both the interview responses and the classroom observations. Not only did the teachers and administrators discuss their deep level of understanding (and sometimes personal experience) with the culture of poverty, but they also hold a deep understanding of the general family culture of their students. In order to develop sociocultural consciousness, teachers need to look "beyond their students and their families" at the inequalities that exist, as well as be aware of the role that schools can play in perpetuating and challenging inequalities (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). In other words, the teachers at VHS work to understand the culture of their students and families in an effort to offer curriculum that enhances their lives and breaks down the walls of inequity.

Specifically, the teachers and administrators discussed the lack of parental support, culture of anger, and the attention-seeking behaviors of their students. They prioritize teaching students the appropriate ways to handle their feelings and behaviors,

as well as give them valuable instruction in the areas of self-efficacy and goal-setting.

The teachers also discussed that they share their own life experiences with their students as a means for making connections and giving them real-world examples. Further, the teachers place importance on teaching appropriate behaviors, respect for authority, and time management – all skills that will serve them well in the world after high school. The administration at VHS employs trust in the teachers, and gives them the freedom to prioritize these important life skills. They understand that their jobs are more than just teaching reading, writing, and mathematics; they are preparing their students for life after they leave high school, and ultimately, their community.

Critical Consciousness. Finally, the third tenant, critical consciousness, goes beyond individual achievement and instead focuses on helping students see themselves as a part of a community that values education and values them as people. To say that the teachers and administrators at VHS employ and teach critical consciousness is an understatement. Several of the participants discussed the challenge they face in working with their students with respect to the value that is placed upon education. The idea that education is important and necessary is not part of VHS's students' family culture. Specially, students are not typically from families who place value on attending school, graduating, or on the work they produce as students. This creates yet another issue – a lack of trust in the school. Students are not readily told that the work they produce has value; thus, the students are slow to trust their teachers and administrators when they are affirmed inside and outside of the classroom. The teachers and administrators discussed the idea that relationships are formed and trust is built slowly with students, as they work to show them the value of coming to school, learning, and producing work they can be

proud of. According to the research, teachers need to be aware of their students' perceptions of the value of school knowledge (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). The teachers at VHS certainly have this awareness and work to build the trust needed to strengthen the value they place on what the school has to offer.

Further, the web of support that the teachers, administrators, and community work to create for the students at VHS creates a critical consciousness in a special way. With their support, students have access to resources to assist them, whether they need food, clothing, or other resources, such as immunizations, personal identification cards, or mental health assistance. Additionally, such a web of support gives the students an excellent example of the good that can come from helping others, thus making them value community as a whole. It is the teachers' and administrators' hope that the students will become a positive influence within and for their community once they leave VHS.

Assuredly, CRP focuses on the importance of culture in schooling, and thus is a way for schools to acknowledge the home-community culture of their students. Further, CRP, through sensitivity to cultural nuances, works to integrate students' cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Further, as culturally relevant leaders, school administrators must embrace a theory of cultural relevance, and ultimately, of social justice, to ensure that students are involved in meaningful learning, as well as to ensure that teachers have the support they need to deliver such instruction. The themes that surfaced through data analysis of this qualitative study substantiate the importance of culturally relevant instruction and leadership.

The 2006 study conducted by Gardnier and Enomoto revealed that educational

leaders were able to create new meaning out of diversity by employing specific strategies, such as: having high expectations for all staff members; changing the cultural deficiency perspective within their schools; employing inclusive educational practices; providing early interventions to students; and being involved in their students' communities.

Certainly, the administrators at VHS provide evidence of all of these strategies that support a culturally relevant environment for students. Whether ensuring that they are hiring the right people for the students that they serve; facilitating training for teachers on employing instructional and behavioral interventions for students; or working to build positive community partnerships, the administration at VHS is working to ensure their students have a culturally rich and relevant experience.

Conclusions

The findings from this qualitative study certainly bolster the idea that VHS supports a culturally relevant environment where teachers and administrators alike are empathetic and understanding of their students' needs, and deliver an instructional model that serves the whole child. Additionally, the five themes that surfaced among the data from this case study support the three tenets of Cultural Relevance Pedagogy, as outlined above. Within those themes, however, are several big ideas that not only support the tenets of Cultural Relevance Pedagogy, but also connect the themes which evolved during this study.

To begin, it is evident that *relationships are the lynchpins in student success*. All of the participants in this study discussed the strength and importance of relationships. Teachers who work with diverse populations should be culturally competent, sensitive, responsive, and effective at teaching and building relationships with students, and

ultimately, their families (Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016). Certainly, the teachers all referenced the strategies they explicitly and implicitly use to build strong relationships with their students. They also discussed the ways in which they build relationships with one another as colleagues, working collaboratively in PLCs to ensure the success of their students. Further, the teachers discussed the relationships they share with their administrative team; they commented on the trust that exists between the administration and the teaching staff, and the value they feel as educators who are trusted to make the best possible decisions for their students each and every day. Finally, the relationship that the administration has worked to build in the form of community partnerships with local businesses, churches, and organizations is truly admirable. Villegas and Lucas (2007) conclude that culturally responsive educators see themselves as part of a community of educators working together to make school more equitable for all of their students. The strong relationships that exist between students, teachers, administration, and the community are ultimately what ensure the success of the students at VHS.

Another big idea is *the “secondary” curriculum in the classroom is often more important than the primary curriculum*. The teachers at Virginia High School all discussed at length the importance they place on real-world instruction beyond the classroom. Because they understand the culture of their students, and because they understand the inequity that exists for their students with respect to socioeconomics, race and ethnicity, and in resources, they prioritize such lessons. They understand that primary instruction, such as content instruction, often has to take a back-seat to the much more important issues of social skills, appropriate behaviors, and personal needs. Content knowledge will come when the students are in a position to learn such lessons.

The whole child takes priority at VHS, and the leadership supports the teachers' decisions to prioritize a necessary "secondary" curriculum.

Finally, it is evident that *to be culturally relevant is to be supportive – and not just supportive in an instructional way, but supportive in every way*. The teachers and staff at VHS support students in so many ways: instructionally, personally, and behaviorally. Further, the community supports students and their families beyond the classroom. To understand students, understand their culture, empathize with their challenges, and tackle their needs takes a lot of support. Not only do the teachers understand this and work towards this every day, the education leaders in the building do, as well. Whether they are supporting instruction through a relationship of trust; supporting professional development by planning purposeful and meaningful training; supporting the "secondary" curriculum that is crucial to student success; or, supporting their personal needs through partnership with the community, the administrators at Virginia High School offer support in innumerable ways.

Implications for Practice

Without question, the need for culturally relevant instructional practices, and ultimately culturally relevant leadership, is crucial in the diverse schools of today. We know that schools in our country are faced with a complex conundrum—responding to the needs of an ever-evolving, diverse student population, while also adhering to federal and state directives regarding standardized testing and accountability mandated by the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (formerly No Child Left Behind) legislature. The complex needs of today's diverse student population must be met by teachers who are not only equipped with knowledge and relevant experience, but

teachers who are able to meet the needs of diverse learners. Further, today's school leaders must have the leadership skills to not only meet students' needs, but also to support and lead the teachers they serve each day.

This study suggests that culturally diverse schools are best served by those teachers and administrators who possess a certain skill set – one that boasts culturally relevant and student-centered practices. Assuredly, the teachers and administrators who participated in this study demonstrated similar characteristics; that is, they all had an uncanny ability to reach and teach students as shaped by their own personal experiences. Some participants shared similar socioeconomics and familial backgrounds with their students, while others related to the transient nature of the population. Regardless of the personal connection, teachers and administrators both allow their personal experiences to help them make lasting connections, and ultimately build trust and lasting relationships, with the students they teach.

A major implication for practice is the importance that educational leaders should place on hiring culturally relevant teachers. Though searching for textbook “culturally relevant” teacher might be a challenge, today's school administrators might take the characteristics listed above into consideration when hiring teaching staff for a diverse school. After all, hiring teachers is one of the most important tasks of school administrators. As the data in this study reveal, school leaders should look for those candidates who prioritize the whole child over standardized test prep, as well as for those candidates who believe in a personal connection and who want to build relationships with students.

Closely related to the idea that one's personal background shapes who they are as

educators, it is equally important for teachers and administrators alike to understand their students on a deep level. Teachers must take into consideration that students are impacted by their environmental factors, such as poverty and lack of parental support, as well as by their own limited perspective of the world they live in. It is crucial that teachers deeply understand the context of their students' lives so that they make wise and intentional instructional decisions for their students. It is just as crucial, therefore, that school leaders do the same. Likewise, it is equally important for school leaders to not only seek out those candidates who see the importance of a personal connection and true understanding of their students, but to foster a staff climate that encourages a deep understanding of students' cultures. Conclusively, fostering a deep perspective on students' culture and its relevance in the classroom enables teachers to construct learning environments that is not formulaic, but one that is "nuanced and robust" (Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016). School administrators can assist by giving teachers the freedom to work outside the mandated curriculum in order to include those types of lessons that are conducive to learning about students' culture and lives outside of school.

Perhaps one of the most important implications of this research for educators today is the idea that in culturally diverse schools where students bring many personal challenges each day, it is imperative that they prioritize a "secondary" curriculum. Certainly, students need to learn the core content, and they need a well-rounded high school experience to prepare them for the workplace, college, and beyond. It is equally important, however, for students to understand how to function in the real world; thus, lessons on appropriate behavior, respecting authority, time management, self-efficacy, and the like, are most necessary. And not only is it necessary for teachers to prioritize

such instruction, it is imperative that school leaders support it, as noted above. For example, those lessons and activities that allow teachers to teach life lessons and encourage real-world connection not only allow teachers and students to build the relationships necessary to foster authentic learning, but they foster a school culture that places importance on one's life outside of, and ultimately after, high school.

The data presented here, as a result of this study confirm that solid instruction is key in student success – and not just mediocre instruction. According to Dyce and Owusu-Ansah (2016), “culturally relevant teaching is a lens through which teachers can maximize culture in order to increase educational success for all students, especially those from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds” (p. 333). Additionally, instruction grounded in research-based practices and instruction that is relevant has a huge impact on student achievement. Further, teachers must be collaborative and work closely in PLCs and with teaching partners and co-teachers to make intentional instructional decisions regarding their students' needs. Today's school leaders must support such initiatives regarding collaborative instruction. As this study shows, the effort that school leaders put on ensuring that teachers have time to work collaboratively, as well as the effort that is put into quality training for teachers regarding instruction, is of the utmost importance. For example, the school leaders at VHS ensure that teachers are supported in their PLCs, as well as in their co-teaching partnerships. Further, emphasis on quality instructional training, such as instructional intervention strategies specific to the students at VHS, is another way that school leaders can support a culture of instruction.

Finally, it is imperative that educators understand the importance of a comprehensive web of support within a culturally diverse school. Not only do students

need the instructional and behavioral support of their teachers, but they also need the support of the school and the surrounding community to meet their unique personal needs. Whether they need school supplies, food, clothing, a haircut, or mental health support, schools must be prepared to step up to the plate. It is essential that school leaders not only cultivate this high level of support from their faculty and staff, but they must work to build positive partnerships with the businesses, churches, and organizations in their own communities. As several participants noted, “it takes a village.” It is essential that school leaders hold tight to this philosophy. Certainly, working to build partnerships with local businesses and organizations can be a challenge for school leaders; doing so takes time and patience. As evidenced by this study; however, doing so is well worth the effort.

Implications for Research

A review of the research indicated that diverse schools are best served by culturally relevant teachers and school leaders who employ practices grounded by the three tenets of CRP. Further, the research indicated that there is growing evidence that principals play a significant role in developing and school initiatives, and that to be successful, school leaders must work with and through others to create positive, engaging school climates (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2012). Previous studies have revealed that culturally relevant educators possess specific qualities. For example, the work of Villegas and Lucas (2002; 2007) revealed six “salient qualities” of culturally relevant educators, to include: understanding how learners construct knowledge; learning about students’ lives; being socioculturally conscious; holding affirming views about diversity; using appropriate instructional strategies; and advocating for all students. Similarly, the

work of Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) asserted that there are specific characteristics that comprise a conceptual framework of cultural relevance, to include: identity and achievement; equity and excellence; developmental appropriateness; teaching the whole child; and student-teacher relationships.

Assuredly, this study exposed similar characteristics of both culturally relevant teachers and school leaders; however, the data from this study supports the idea that there are additional characteristics to consider. The notion that culturally relevant teachers and leaders, as noted by this case study of one Southeastern Virginia high school, are not only shaped by the context of their own lives, but also maintain a deep understanding of the lives of the students they serve, is an important one. Further, while other studies have found that culturally relevant educators are instructionally strong; this study revealed that such educators prioritize a secondary curriculum. The importance of community support is crucial, as well, as evidenced by a review of the research, as well as by the data of this study.

Despite the value, relevance, and affirmation of this study's findings, there is still work to be done in the area of culturally relevant instruction and leadership practices. To begin, this case study might be broadened to include not only more participants, but also to include departments other than English and Math. Including departments such as Science, Social Studies, Career and Technical Education, Foreign Language, and the like might bring to light other insights regarding culturally relevant instructional practices, as well as the ways that administrators support them. Further, future research might include a comparative case, such as another high school in the same division or neighboring division. Such a study might capture the different ways that culturally relevant instruction

and leadership practices are evident in another setting, and perhaps even address areas where cultural relevance is not present.

While this study did reveal ways in which culturally relevant school leaders support instruction, student behavior, and personal needs; it is important to note that this research could be augmented by focusing specifically on the culturally relevant (or not) leadership practices in schools. Today's school leaders must be prepared for supporting schools that are culturally diverse, and identifying the specific leadership skills needed in such schools would be beneficial to future administrators who may be in leadership programs, as well as to current practitioners who desire professional development in this area.

Conclusion

Incontestably, the data from this single case study in a Southeastern Virginia high school uncovered valuable ways that culturally relevant instruction and leadership manifests in schools. Culturally relevant educators are shaped by the context of their own lives, and they also have a deep understanding of the context of their students' lives. Further, they place importance on not only strong instruction in the classroom, but also on a "secondary" curriculum which prepares students for the outside world. Finally, a web of support, built by teachers, administrators, and the community, is essential for students' success in a culturally diverse setting.

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Chesapeake Public Schools
School Administration Building
312 Cedar Road
Chesapeake, Virginia 23322

December 9, 2014

Donna Weingand
1861 Sunsprite Loop
Chesapeake, VA 23323

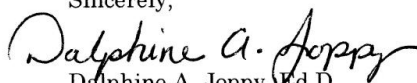
Dear Mrs. Weingand:

Your request to conduct research for your doctoral dissertation on *Culturally Relevant Leadership in High School: Towards a Grounded Theory* at Old Dominion University is approved. The approval is granted with the understanding that the following conditions will apply:

- ☐ Participation of administrators and/or teachers is strictly voluntary.
- ☐ Parent permission must be obtained for student participation.
- ☐ Names of individuals, school names or the name of the school division cannot be used in the reporting of the results of your findings without prior permission from the Department of Staff Development (Research Approval), Chesapeake Public Schools.
- ☐ All copies, distribution, retrieval of materials and arrangement of interviews/collections will be your responsibility.
- ☐ Questions/procedures must be limited to those detailed in your prospectus.

You may use this letter as a cover letter when contacting administrators. Should you have further questions, please feel free to contact me at 547-0914.

Sincerely,


Daphne A. Joppy, Ed.D.
Director of Staff Development
(Research Approval)

**OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH****Physical Address**

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Norfolk, Virginia 23508

Mailing Address

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Phone (757) 683-3460
Fax (757) 683-5902

DATE: May 22, 2015

TO: Jay Scribner, PhD

FROM: Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee

PROJECT TITLE: [692871-1] Culturally Relevant Leadership in High School: A Single Case Study

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE:

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 6.1 and 6.4

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Ed Gomez at 757-683-6309 or egomez@odu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee's records.

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Study Description

While studying at Old Dominion University, I have developed an interest in culturally relevant leadership practices, teachers' cultural and ethnic sensitivity in the classroom, and the ways in which culturally relevant instruction meets the needs of all students.

While much research has been done regarding the importance of teachers exercising cultural and ethnic sensitivity in the classroom, there still exists the need in exploring ways in which school administrators' leadership practices influence teachers.

As a student in a doctoral program in Educational Leadership, I have learned myriad ways to gather data. I know and value the importance of interviewing as a source of data.

Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you and for helping me gather data through the interviewing process. Certainly, the valuable data that will result from our interview will prove to be useful in completing my research study.

Mrs. Donna Weingand, M.A.; Ed.S.

dwein002@odu.edu

757-618-3795

Consent Form

I am giving consent to be interviewed by Donna H. Weingand on _____ . The interview regarding culturally relevant leadership practices, teachers' cultural and ethnic sensitivity in the classroom, and the ways in which culturally relevant instruction meets the needs of all students, was in fulfillment of Donna Weingand's doctoral research at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.

I understand that Donna H. Weingand will record and will retain the audio file of our interview. I understand that she will use the data from the interview for her dissertation, and that the information I provide will be kept confidential and that my identity will be kept anonymous. I understand that I may ask to read a copy of the data which results from this interview.

Signature

Date

Opening Script:

Hello. My name is Donna Weingand, and I am a student in a doctoral program at Old Dominion University in the field of Educational Leadership. While studying at Old Dominion University, I have developed an interest in culturally relevant leadership practices, teachers' cultural and ethnic sensitivity in the classroom, and the ways in which culturally relevant instruction meets the needs of all students. While much research has been done regarding the importance of teachers exercising cultural and ethnic sensitivity in the classroom, there still exists the need in exploring ways in which school administrators' leadership practices influence teachers. Certainly, the valuable data that will result from our interview will prove to be useful to me in my research regarding this topic.

I have given you a copy of my study description and the consent form for participating in this interview. Are there any questions that I can answer for you at this time?

May I please have permission to record our interview today? I will retain the audio files for this interview, and I will be the only person who listens to them for transcribing purposes only.

Thank you, again, for participating in my research and in this interview. We will now begin.

Interview Questions

1. What culture/ ethnicity do you identify with: White, Hispanic American, Hispanic, African American, Asian American, other?
2. How many years of experience do you have in education? What specific grades and subjects have you taught?
3. How has your personal background shaped your view of yourself as a teacher (e.g., cultural background, professional background, etc.)?
4. What do you feel are the most pressing needs – learning and otherwise - of your students (e.g., learning needs, behavioral needs, personal needs, etc.)?
5. How do you draw upon your own personal and professional experiences to help you meet the learning needs of your students? What are some examples?
6. How do you draw upon your personal and professional experiences to help you meet the behavioral and personal needs of your students? What are some examples?
7. Describe for me how other teachers in your building understand the students' culture and needs. Specifically, is there a range of understanding of their learning needs? Please provide any examples you might have.
8. Is there a range of understanding of their behavioral needs? Specifically, is there a range of understanding of their behavioral needs? Please provide any examples you might have.
9. In what ways are the administrators in your building sensitive to the students and their needs?
10. In what ways are teachers trained (either pre-service or via staff development) in the area of responding to students' learning, behavioral, and personal needs? Please share some specific examples.

APPENDIX D

Observation Protocol

Location: Virginia High School

Subjects: Teacher, Teacher Assistants, students

Date:

Time:

Sensitizing Concept: *Is culturally relevant instruction and classroom management evident in the high school classroom setting?*

I will be observing a high school class in hopes of seeing evidence of culturally relevant instruction in the lesson. I will concentrate on the teacher's instruction, but would like to include the physical setting of the room, classroom management, as well as any instruction offered by the teacher's assistants.

Room Layout:

Room Description: