Will it change their reflection? A culturally responsive reaction to literacy failures

Idalis J. Williams
Rowan University, iwilliams@wtsd.org

Let us know how access to this document benefits you - share your thoughts on our feedback form.

Follow this and additional works at: https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd

Part of the Elementary Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended Citation
Williams, Idalis J., "Will it change their reflection? A culturally responsive reaction to literacy failures" (2016). Theses and Dissertations. 572.
https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/572

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works. For more information, please contact LibraryTheses@rowan.edu.
Dedications

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my husband Christopher B. Kizee Jr. for being my supporter and best friend. Aajanay and Arianna, they are reasons I reach for the stars. My angel above whom inspired me to become a teacher. Brittney Regan for supporting all my ambitious ideas and keeping me sane and last but not least my mother Nancy Rojas who always believed in my dreams.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the amazing group of ladies of my Master’s of Arts in Reading cohort, for the unbreakable bond we share. A special thank you to Dr. Stephanie Abraham, my thesis advisor for her guidance and support. Thank you Patrick Davidson, my schools principal, for supporting me in my venture to pursue my Master’s degree and conduct my research study. I would like to thank a special co-teacher, Jessica Mark for her unconditional support. Thank you to my students who inspire me and allow me to live my dream each day as their teacher. I would also like to acknowledge a special educator who taught me just how much a teacher can inspire and impact your life, thank you Mrs. Smith.
Abstract

Idalis J Williams
WILL IT CHANGE THEIR REFLECTION? A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE REACTION TO LITERACY FAILURES
2015-2016
Dr. Stephanie Abraham, Ph.D.
Master of Arts in Reading Education

This teacher research study was conducted in a second grade classroom. The teacher set out to find out: What happens when students who are faced with repeated literacy failures receive culturally responsive instruction in place of basic skills instruction? Children that struggle with reading often receive basic skills support as a form of intervention; yet still struggle in reading and other areas of literacy. Students often develop a negative identity of themselves as a reader and this leads to diminish and sometimes a lack of self-efficacy. The students in this study are at risk for falling below grade level in reading. Many of the students that have received basic skills are from varied household incomes and diverse racial backgrounds. The participants of the study are a group of five students in second grade. They met with their classroom teacher three times a week for 40 minutes of small group literacy instruction over the period of three weeks. Instructional methods include literature circles, reading aloud, and multicultural literature. All instructional methods are considered to be Culturally Responsive in nature. Student work samples and dialogue from student-led discussion are included within the data analysis. The results of the study indicate that by providing students with Culturally Responsive instruction can increase student engagement and motivation.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................... viii

List of Tables .................................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1: Scope of the Study ........................................................................................................ 1

  Story of the Question .................................................................................................................... 3

  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................................. 5

  Statement of the Research Question .......................................................................................... 6

  Organization of Thesis ............................................................................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Review of Literature .................................................................................................... 8

  Defining Culturally Responsive Teaching/ Instruction ............................................................. 9

  Using Culturally Responsive Instruction in the Classroom ...................................................... 10

  Literature Circles ..................................................................................................................... 11

  Findings from Empirical Studies of CRT ................................................................................... 12

  Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching ................................................................. 15

  Exposing Deficit Based Thinking and Cultural Basis ............................................................... 15

  Empowering Children: High Expectations .............................................................................. 16

  Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 18

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology ........................................................................... 20

  Procedure of the Study ............................................................................................................. 21

  Data Sources ............................................................................................................................ 26

  Data Analysis ........................................................................................................................... 27
Table of Contents (Continued)

Context..............................................................................................................................................27
Community.........................................................................................................................................28
School ...............................................................................................................................................28
Classroom .........................................................................................................................................28
Students............................................................................................................................................29

Chapter 4: Data Analysis ...............................................................................................................31
Defining Culture ...............................................................................................................................31
Connecting With Characters ..........................................................................................................37
A True Story ...................................................................................................................................41
Celebration ......................................................................................................................................46

Chapter 5: Summary .......................................................................................................................50
Conclusions .....................................................................................................................................51
Limitations .......................................................................................................................................52
Implications in the Field ...............................................................................................................53

References.........................................................................................................................................55
### List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.</td>
<td>Pablo and his family.</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.</td>
<td>Empanadas de calabazo.</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.</td>
<td>Jessica’s Venn diagram.</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.</td>
<td>A photograph of Luisa.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.</td>
<td>A sample of reading responses written on sticky notes from students.</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6.</td>
<td>Jessica’s Letter to Luisa.</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.</td>
<td>International Day Celebration.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8.</td>
<td>All Hands.</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1. Student Baseline Data</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2. Student Interview Questions</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3. Schedule of Instruction</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1
Scope of the Study

Despite the fact that I am considered a new teacher, I have never allowed that to
deter me from setting out to make an impact both in my classroom and within my school.
During my first year of teaching I became very active within the school community.
Right away I began to notice there were gaps in the curriculum that I wanted to help fill. I
joined several school committees including the Language Arts committee and the school
Intervention and Referral Services committee. It became evident early on to me that the
district overall was lacking both a strong balanced literacy program and there were gaps
in areas of literacy interventions. I entered the district during a period of change. New
administrators were assigned new curriculums to supervise and different programs were
being piloted in all the grade levels. Many teachers were feeling overwhelmed with all
the change and push to implement the new programs. Perhaps it was the excitement of
being a first year teacher that I thought I could make a difference, but I had a strong
desire to be a part of the change and share my love of literacy with my grade level and
other teachers in my school!

One area that I became very concerned about was the list of text selections
included on the second grade-pacing guide. I began to wonder if the other committee
members and teachers knew the benefits of including multicultural literacy into
classroom instruction. The text selections were not varied and most shocking was that
there was no diversity outside of the one or two books listed on the curriculum for Black
History month. Another concerning factor was that there was a lack of authentic
multicultural text available in classroom libraries or the school library overall. Without
emphasis on embedding diversity into the curriculum there was no push for culture to be embedded into the curriculum or instruction.

Fast forward to the start of my third year teaching, many of the growing pains of the district have started to settle and many grade levels have shifted to a balanced literacy program. One area that has been overlooked year after year was the basic skills program. It was clear there were several students falling through the cracks and not receiving effective literacy interventions beyond the first grade. The first grade students that were identified as at risk in the area of reading received Reading Recovery; however, when they left first grade there was no additional support outside of aid support in the classroom for students that were flagged for basic skills. To make matters worse there were faults in the identification of basic skills students all together. There was a limited amount of classroom-based interventions and a high amount of referrals and classifications to the Child Study Team. Initially, there was not a plan in place to develop a Response to Intervention Program. I met with administrators shared my concerns and together with the other members of the School Leadership Committee we began the groundwork for a Response to Intervention program in the school. We knew it would not be something that would unfold right away, but we were thankful to have the ear of administrators who were willing to listen.

At this point in my teaching career I was at the tail end of my Master’s in Reading program and contemplating what I wanted to conduct my research study about. I started to think about the students in my classroom. Our district shifted to cluster grouping based on reading levels. As the second grade inclusion classroom I had a large cluster of students reading below grade level. This school year more than ever demonstrated our
lack of support for at risk readers, and it was more prevalent this year than ever. It was those combining factors that led me to select this as an area of focus for my teacher research study. As I reflected about what was missing from our curriculum I kept coming back to the lack of culturally responsive interventions and instruction within our school district. The element of culture was absent from all areas. I wondered if including it in my small group literacy instruction would make and impact on my struggling readers.

The likelihood of culturally responsive teaching to occur in a district that does not place an emphasis on culture is not high. In order for this to happen there must be a change in both the pedagogy of teachers, as well as the curriculum. One way to start the transition within a district is to emphasize and highlight the positive aspects of incorporating culturally responsive instruction and practice.

**Story of the Question**

I never read a book about a child like myself in school. I was never exposed to diversity through literacy, even though the elementary school I attended had a very diverse student population. Many of the characters in my favorite books included little girls with blond hair and pretty blue eyes. I had bright red hair with a freckled face, and a very Hispanic name. My father was African-American, and my mother was Puerto Rican. Many teachers are unaware of the negative implications that exist due to a lack of cultural responsive pedagogy. There were times I wished my puffs of curly hair would look just like theirs. As a teacher, I have always been sensitive to the way in which students identify themselves. Maybe it was because of my experiences as a mixed child in school. I never wanted a child to feel the pressure I once felt to choose an identity for school that was unnatural, or based upon an idea of what the average student should behave like. As
a child, I remember filling in the demographic bubbles on standardized test. I always skipped them because I never knew which one I should fill in. Going to school as a biracial child I never felt quite accepted by my teacher. I can remember her saying to me, “Just hurry up and pick a bubble, but you can only pick one!” Vivid memories of feeling pressure to choose my cultural identity in a school setting left an impact on me as a child. My teacher did not care about the person I was individually; she didn’t take the time to make me feel accepted or celebrate my uniqueness.

However, it wasn’t until the summer of my clinical practice of my Master’s in reading seminar that I had an epiphany about the expanded definition of culture. I consider myself an advocate for multicultural education; a teacher that embraces the diversity of her students and welcomes their uniqueness, but what I was lacking all this time is the understanding that culture is much more then just race, customs, and beliefs. Culture includes the every aspect of the individual.

During clinical practice I was able to get to know the cultural identity of a student struggling in reading. After meeting him I took inventory of the normal things teachers consider when getting a new student. I did my assessments and developed a profile based on his areas of weakness. He was a fifth grade, African-American boy, and he wasn’t exactly thrilled to be spending his summer in the reading clinic. Through my cultural responsive pedagogy, I was able to provide my student with explicit instruction that increased student engagement and retention of strategies. I did this by accounting for his areas of interest and what he valued. Rather then focusing on the skills he showed weakness in, I focused on his areas of strength and tailored my instruction in response to his unique cultural identity. One of the most effective lessons I had with him was
centered on his expertise about Ninja Turtles. I created an engaging character traits exercise by tapping into one of his passions. I introduced him to characters that had real life challenges that he could relate to. As we read about characters that he could relate to, he became motivated, and he was able to find success and celebrate his accomplishments.

**Statement of the Problem**

One of the greatest downfalls when it comes to providing help to struggling students is that a heavy focus is placed on the skills that students lack, rather than building upon the areas of strength. Basic skills instruction often does not account for the individuality of the students; it is a one-size fits all solution that does not provide students with the tools and strategies needed to move forward. Within my school district there are a high amount of basic skills referrals from classroom teachers. Basic skills aids are placed into classrooms and provide students with “support” during reading and writing. The aids do not receive any intervention-based training on how to provide the basic skills support, in fact there is not a specific basic skills curriculum that they provide.

The children are becoming frustrated and they are giving up on something that they should find joy in. Reading should not always be a daunting and laborious task. If students are not provided with the individualized interventions they need to grow in areas of weakness, then the achievement gap will continue to expand. This cycle of literacy failures will continue unless the intervention takes account for the unique characteristics of the individual readers. Culturally Responsive instruction allows for exactly that to occur.
Statement of Research Question

Combining culturally responsive teaching with opportunities to explore multicultural literacy offers students a chance to practice reading strategies and build comprehension skills in the most effective way. For many students this was the first time they were exposed to the concept of culture within the classroom. The students were encouraged to engage in discussions and share their voice and opinions. In turn their responses allowed me as their teacher to see the areas of instruction that I need to adjust to meet the needs of the students. I was able to do this by reflecting on my teaching practice.

Throughout this study I focused on the following question: What happens when students who are faced with repeated literacy failures receive culturally responsive instruction in place of basic skills instruction? I also focused on student engagement and motivation in terms of self-efficacy and the affect that repeated literacy failures has on a child. The students selected for the study have reached differing levels of frustration and come from diverse backgrounds both ethnically and economically.

Organization of Thesis

In Chapter two a review of the literature surrounding culturally responsive instruction and teaching provides an expanded definition of culture, along with the necessary attributes of pedagogy that teachers today must possess in order to meet the needs of today’s diverse group of learners. Chapter three provides a context for the design of the study. In Chapter four the data is analyzed and presented in a narrative format. There are also work samples and accounts of student discussion. In conclusion, Chapter
five depicts the findings, implications, and limitations for teaching based upon the findings of the study.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Literacy instruction is an art. A popular quote from Paulo Freire (1970) emphasized just that, “Being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is make it possible for the students to become themselves” (p.180). As educators across the world set out to provide children with literacy instruction, often, and unintentionally teachers are not making it possible for students to “become themselves” as Freire (1970, p. 180), stated. Rather, despite the rise in the diversity of the student population, and the mix of cultures that come to school, the students are not receiving instruction that is responsive to their needs and uniqueness. Students today are faced with challenges on a daily basis. Reading is one area that impacts all other subject areas. A struggling reader does not pick up a book to read for enjoyment or pleasure, rather after facing repeated literacy failures students that struggle in reading often have a low self-efficacy and are not responsive to basic skills instruction or interventions that do no account for their individuality.

This chapter defines Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), pedagogy, and classroom practices. It also describes the benefits of using CRT in the classroom and as a literacy intervention. The characteristics of CRT are highlighted in this chapter include: research based effective practice; implications for exposing deficit based thinking, and holding high expectations by empowering all learners. The research included in this chapter offers an expanded definition of the CRT practices found effective in the case studies of empirical research and teacher research. This multidimensional approach to providing literacy instruction seeks to close achievement gaps and provide students with
instruction that accounts for their individual cultural identify. This chapter also depicts
the limitations of the current basic skills instructional approaches that students that are
faced with literacy struggles receive.

**Defining Culturally Responsive Teaching/Instruction**

Only a consciously devised, continuous program that teaches skills and develops
vocabulary in the context of real experiences provides rigorous instruction,
connects new frameworks that children bring to school, and assumes that the
children are brilliant and capable- and teachers accordingly. (Delpit, 2012, p. 58)

CRT is not a one size fits all solution, but rather a part of education reform.

During an era of reform for multicultural education and civil rights an emphasis was
placed on ensuring that students and families were provided with equal academic
opportunities for success (Vavrus, 2008). The classroom has come a long way since
Brown vs. BOE, but as our schools become more diversified, our teaching practice must
evolve. Delpit (2012) challenged educators to consider what children do know rather than
focusing on what low-income children of color do not know. This requires districts to
take a reflective look at their instruction and curriculum rather than judging students and
their families by placing blame at home for areas of deficiency rather than at school. As a
result of this judgment, diverse students are more likely to be put into basic skills
programs that do not meet their literacy needs and some are labeled with learning
disabilities prior to receiving the proper instruction.

Engagement and motivation are two areas that are negatively impacted when
students are not provided with instruction that is designed to build upon areas of strength
rather than weakness (Vavrus, 2008). The average teacher may not feel that schools today
are implementing teaching practices that are intentionally unresponsive to the individual needs of the diverse student population; however, this is still happening in today's classrooms. Educating teachers about this issue is key. Cultural bias and race are often taboo topics that educators do not feel comfortable discussing their opinions about. When reflecting on internalized opinions about these topics teachers can develop a more authentic Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. One very important consideration is that even in school districts that are homogenous and lack a high population of diversity this still needs to be considered. It is important to realize that the definition of culture has expanded and evolved to include a student's individual discourse.

**Using Culturally Responsive Instruction in the Classroom**

Using CRT in the classroom can be a natural extension of good teaching practice for those that have their student's best interest in mind. The practices that are most effective are those that allow students to find success. Teachers are required to have an open mind and actively participate in an authentic attempt to get to know the students in the classroom. There are varieties of teaching practices that promote best classroom practice in an effort to provide opportunities of success for all cultures of students (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Some of the practices include modeling the metacognitive aspect of reading, using a workshop model that includes scaffolding, gradual release of responsibility, high interest texts, and cultural identity. There are other social learning perspectives that include literacy centers, literature circles, and shared writing. Students that struggle in reading and writing can benefit from authentic multicultural literature. Au discussed, “The use of literature that accurately depicts the experiences of diverse groups may improve the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds by increasing
their motivation to read” (2011, p. 44). The conscious decision to include these texts also impacts the curricular approach because it encourages critical thinking. Students are able to interact with the text in a transactional way (Shealey, 2007).

**Literature Circles**

A critical component of balanced literacy instruction for all students, especially those who struggle with comprehension, are literacy circles. This concept of students responding and interacting with a text is on that extended from Rosenblatt’s reader’s response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978). Rosenblatt’s theory was centered on the transaction that occurred between what the reader brought to the table and their perception about the text. Rosenblatt felt that the meaning did not lie in the pages of the text, but rather in the transaction that occurred between the reader and the words on the pages. Every reader that reads a text has his or her own reaction to the text. When readers dialog about their reaction to a text the participants of the discussion interact and share their responses. The dialogue and communication between students based on their response to reading, is a key part of the process of conducting literacy circles. A typical literacy circle involves a small group of students that have read, or are reading the same text that are gathering together and engaging in a in depth discussion about a text (Schlick, 2001). Literacy circles are highly student centered and much less teacher directed. In a CRT environment students will be willing to share their personal connections that relate to their unique cultural identity. Teachers often tend to lead the classroom discussion with a question answer format, but in a literature circle the goal is for the discussion to be student centered. Sharing the metacognitive process is necessary to explicitly teach
comprehension, but the literacy circles can provide a perfect opportunity for activating background knowledge and schema, as students engage in a discussion.

Findings from Empirical Studies of CRT

In a qualitative research study grounded in the theoretical and conceptual framework of socio-cultural language and literacy acquisition, Shealy (2007) posed the question: What elements of culturally responsive teaching are exemplified by effective reading teachers? The study took place at King Elementary School with a group of second and third grade teachers selected by the school principal and reading specialist. The teachers were observed during reading instruction. Using a rubric during observation the author of the study was able to examine components of teaching and teacher–student interactions. After analyzing data from observations, interviews, and work samples, it was found that the most successful instructional methods included: literacy centers, direct instruction, guided reading, and modeling. The teachers in the study reported that explicit instruction and a balanced literacy program played an essential role in the success of students. The teachers embodied the following traits consistent with that of CRT: caring, high expectations, understanding the role of communication and language in learning, and sensitivity to student learning (Shealey, 2007). The findings of the study determined that research-based culturally responsive reading instruction strategies, the role of race, culture, and language area all components of effective reading instruction. In conclusion, Shealey addressed the area of cultural competence, the principles of multicultural education, and stresses how important it is for teacher education programs to adopt this into practice.
CRT extends the zone of proximal development (ZPD), or the standard definition of differentiated instruction (DI). Many teachers feel they are meeting the needs of the diverse student population by saying that they differentiated their instruction on a regular basis, but that is no longer meeting the need of the student population. A case study (2009) focused on pedagogical aspects of CRT took place at two elementary schools in California. The two schools were selected due to recognizable efforts in reaching high levels of academic achievement for ELL students and closing the achievement gap. These schools demonstrate that even areas of high poverty can succeed. The teachers that participated in the case study found it highly effective to implement CRI into all aspects of literacy instruction. The recommendations of the study conclude that best teaching practices account of all the individual learners of the classroom without discounting student ability based on outside factors like poverty (Santamaria, 2009).

In an article, Griner and Stewart (2012) discussed the findings of their mixed-method study that addresses the achievement gap through CRT practices. This study stemmed from an effort to develop explicit examples and tools for best practice that could be utilized by schools to take a reflective stance on CRT practices. The study participants included community members and stakeholders such as parents to contribute their input. Their research led to the development of a practical tool to encourage teachers and stakeholders to engage in reflective, culturally responsive practices (Griner & Stewart, 2012). The tool is designed to have a dual purpose that includes both the guidance for ways to increase effective instruction and serve as a fluid document that promotes a way of thinking and a means of practice. Teachers were also included in the study as they examined professional development and reflected upon how the questions made them
consider their own teaching practice. In their conclusion they stressed the importance of schools and communities placing a priority on developing and enacting a culturally responsive pedagogy (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Griner and Stewart stress the importance of realizing that this is something that will take time to successfully develop over time. The word long-term commitment is used to describe this act of removing the issues of social justice in education and dismantle the inequitable structures and belief cycles that contribute to issues like the achievement gap and disproportionality (Griner & Stewart, 2012).

Many school districts attempt to provide struggling readers with interventions or supplemental instruction revolving around the lack of basic skills. This looks different in every school. In my district it includes the use of basic skills support staff. The following study examines the effectiveness of interventions that are opposing to some of the foundational practices of CRT. In a study (Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, & Francis, 2006) focused on intensive interventions, 27 students with severe reading difficulties, some of them with disabilities, received a 16-week intervention package that focused on fluency and decoding. A total of 14 of the students included in the study have previously demonstrated an unsuccessful response to previous interventions. The findings of the study varied. Students who received 2 hours a day of decoding interventions demonstrated growth in varied abilities. One limitation of the study is that although the intervention is explicit, it is not individualized to the students needs; rather it is a one size fits all program that students are placed in for a large portion of the school day. Explicitly teaching decoding skills for 2 hours daily in isolation is pulling the students out of other areas of instruction. The students are missing information that critical for their success as
readers. This type of intervention may show data that represents progress; however, another limitation is that the study did not account for the student’s ability to retain and hold onto the decoding and fluency skills that they practiced during the intervention.

**Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

The characteristics of CRT should be embedded into the classroom culture and the philosophy of the school district. Creating an environment where children feel welcomed to be themselves and feel safe to learn and grow. Coaching and opportunities for training are needed for all teachers. Schools must incorporate motivating activities that allow children choice and prompt their ownership of literacy, including creating a literacy rich environment, and creating a balance between teacher directed and child centered instruction (Au, 2000). Finding this balance will not occur overnight, but keeping a reflective practice will provide teachers with opportunities to continue to improve their teaching practice.

**Exposing Deficit Based Thinking and Cultural Bias**

Deficit-based thinking in education is dangerous because it allows educators to place the blame for lack of student success on outside factors such as family life, income level, or racial background. Educators who possess this frame of mind often do not feel like there is a solution that the school or curriculum can provide to increase success for the students. With this frame of mind, the problem is never addressed within the classroom and the margin of success continues to decrease (Delpit, 2012). Possessing the attitudes: “I don’t see color in my classroom or I see them all the same,” is also not a good practice for educators. Teachers that don’t see color are not seeing the children in their classroom as the individuals they are (Delpit, 2006). In order for educators to truly
be culturally responsive they must first take a reflective stance. Educators that set out to expand their cultural competence in relation to their own dispositions, knowledge base, and performance skills will be able to provide effective instruction for all learners (Vavrus, 2008).

**Empowering Children: High Expectations**

As students grow older and continue to struggle in areas of literacy the opportunity to reach the students and provide them with an effective intervention begins to become more complex. A gap or divide is created and students are becoming frustrated as it continues to widen. The U.S. Department of Education National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that although reading scores increased for both Hispanic and White students on a national level the achievement gap did not change (Rahman, Hemphill, & Vanneman, 2011). The white students had higher average assessments scores in all areas (NAEP 2011). Au (2011) provides explanations for the achievement gap, including: cultural differences, discrimination, inferior education, linguistic differences, and rationales for schooling. The teachers that don’t account for the cultural differences of students or allow stereotypical ideas to impact the way they teach are a hindrance to student growth. They represent cases in which students in a classroom could not flourish to their full potential.

McKinley (2010) wrote a book about a study dedicated to providing minority students with Culturally Responsive Instruction and closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. The study included the practices of 31 teachers and their administration over a period of 20 months in Seattle Public School District. The data sources included surveys, interviews, and observations. McKinley coined the term...
“Proving the Possible” (PTP) to describe the educators because they held high expectations for their students to perform based on quality instructional practices that are Culturally Responsive in nature (McKinley, 2010). The teachers that participated in the study genuinely believed in their ability to make a difference in student learning outcomes. They also placed a high value on student self-efficacy. McKinley found that the PTP educators supported their students in the area of self-efficacy by gradually transferring the responsibility of learning to the students (2010). In addition the teachers provided their students with regular feedback and celebrated their accomplishments. Although this study was focused on CRT and improving the achievement of Black students, the concepts can be applied to students from all backgrounds that struggle in the area of literacy.

Developing sensitivity to learning styles is essential in attempt to close the achievement gap and a basic quality of good teaching. This should not be confused with lowering expectations or standards, but rather a realization that all students learn in different ways. Students require varied instructional approaches, especially in reading instruction. Therefore, regardless of what outside factors impact the children in our classroom, instruction should be individualized to their specific areas of need. In a study (Connor McDonald et al., 2009) centered on finding the most effective reading instruction and literacy development, it was reported that 60% of children, including minorities and those living in poverty, have below proficient reading skills (Connor McDonald, et al., 2009). The study specified that although outside factors such as home life and parenting have an impact on literacy development, the most important factor, by far, is classroom instruction (Connor McDonald, et al., 2009). One of the reasons listed
that accounts for why children experience literacy failures is attributed to the amount and specific kind of literacy instruction that students receive in the early grades. The study measured the effects of individualized literacy instruction of first grade students in 10 high-moderate poverty schools over the fall, winter, and spring (Connor McDonald, et al., 2009). The conclusion suggested that students that received individualized instruction saw growth in their literacy skills and had higher literacy outcomes. They found that a child’s literacy and language skills, which were classified as “Child Characteristic x Instruction interactions,” should be individualized, personalized, and differentiated based on the entering skill levels of the child (Connor McDonald, et al., 2009). Another key component of the study was that the teachers that were observed to have the highest impact on their student’s literacy development used assessment to guide their instruction; this is refereed to as the “heart of individualizing instruction” (Connor McDonald, et al., 2009, p. 94).

Conclusion

The literature surrounding CRT offers valuable implications for changes in pre-service teacher programs to prepare educators for the diverse student population that exist today. At the same time this body of research speaks to the need for professional development in this area for current teachers. This study will add to the body of teacher research that aims see what happens when an attempt to implement the most effective instructional strategies in response to struggling students from diverse backgrounds. CRT is an attempt to actively engage all students, increase motivation, and overall build upon the essential skills students need to possess to be successful readers.
Keeping in mind that teachers are humans and we possess our own cultural identity. At times, this identity can be drastically different then that of the student population we teach. Recognizing this is part of the reflective components of CRT. We owe it to the children to look within and take a CRT stance to our everyday instruction.
Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

The framework of this study is consistent with qualitative research. For teachers, engaging in teacher research means studying our natural setting: the classroom. The teacher research seeks to find the answers to genuine questions that are truly relevant to the practice of the profession (Power & Miller, 2012). Teacher research allows educators to take a subjective in-depth look at their practice by conducting research in their classrooms with their students. Teachers who take a reflective approach to instruction find this methodology to be a natural extension of good teaching practice (Power & Miller, 2012). This paradigm of research requires the teacher to observe, question, and analyze the data collected throughout the duration of the study. In turn, teachers can use the insight gained to impact their classroom practice, as well as share their research with the community (Cochran-Smith & Susan, 2009).

As a teacher researcher, the study took place in my second grade classroom. Data was collected from multiple sources, primarily my observations and documentation of student dialogue over a three-week period. This study focused on incorporating cultural diversity and culturally responsive interventions in place of basic skills instruction. I collected data through a teacher research journal three times a week after each session. The student interviews, observation notes, teacher reflections, and student work samples provided an array of data sources. I also gathered information from student files to develop an in-depth literacy profile and highlight areas of strength and weakness.
The purpose of this research study was to investigate how five students in a second grade classroom responded to culturally responsive reading instruction and the impact such instruction has on student engagement and motivation.

**Procedure of Study**

Prior to the start of the study baseline data was collected and analyzed. Data was pulled from student files. This included their reading background and any documented reading interventions that students may have received the previous year. A reading inventory was collected to determine the reading level, fluency, and comprehension levels of each student. Informal observations were also conducted of students reading in the natural setting of the classroom. Areas of focus for the observation included the types of books students selected, the amount of time students read independently and the independent levels of book selections. Students also participated in an interview about reading practices and their reflection of themselves as a reader. I determined the student’s opinions about areas of strength and weakness about their own reading. Table 1 summarizes the findings from the baseline data, as well as highlights important characteristics about the students participating in the study. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.
## Table 1

### Student Baseline Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name &amp; Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race / Ethnicity</th>
<th>Interview Question Notes</th>
<th>Reading Notes</th>
<th>Free or Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Colombian and Italian</td>
<td>Jessica says that even though she reads all the time she doesn’t get better. Reading out loud makes her stomach hurt and she hates it.</td>
<td>Received Reading Recovery in first grade. Attempts to read with expression. Struggles with decoding and comprehension.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittney</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American and White</td>
<td>Brittney was shy during her interview. She did say she wants to read chapter books, but it’s probably impossible.</td>
<td>Brittney is a basic skills student. Her reading is impacted by her speech. She frustrates quickly and struggles with fluency and comprehension.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Amber said she doesn’t have any books at home she is interested in reading. She stated that she doesn’t like to read boring baby books.</td>
<td>Amber received Reading Recovery in first grade. She is a second year basic skills student. She struggles with decoding, comprehension, and fluency.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Victor was hesitant to share in his interview. He was very brief in his answers and stated that he rather play video games then read a book.</td>
<td>Victor received Reading Recovery and is a basic skills student. He struggles with fluency and decoding. He has a high auditory comprehension.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Italian and Hispanic</td>
<td>Joey said he only reads when he is at his mom’s house and sometimes he is too busy to read.</td>
<td>Joey is a basic skills student he has retained many reading strategies and can decode words. He struggles with comprehension.</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The five students are at risk for falling below grade level in reading, comprehension and fluency. Many of the students that have received basic skills are from varied household incomes and diverse racial backgrounds. Many times, student interest is not incorporated into reading interventions and the students are not motivated to overcome their challenges and little progress is made. After facing repeated failures this group of students is starting to develop a negative perception of reading overall.

Based upon student interviews this group of students is less likely to read for pleasure outside of school. They have gaps in their comprehension and understanding of a text. If continued this impact of not receiving an effective reading intervention will continue to affect other subject areas in addition to math and science, which a currently being impacted. Therefore it is vital that these students be given an opportunity to receive a progressive intervention not specifically based on a program, but individualized and responsive to their needs.

Monitoring the effect of this intervention will lead to a better understanding of how culturally responsive education impacts students with low self-efficacy and literacy difficulties. In this teacher inquiry, I focused on a group of five students who I taught three times a week for forty minutes of literacy interventions using culturally responsive literacy instruction.

The study took place over the course of three weeks starting in November 2015 and ending in December 2015. Prior to the first full week of the study one to one student interviews took place. The interviews were purposefully done in a very informal conversation style. Each interview took approximately twenty minutes and were conducted in our classroom. Table 2 lists the student interview questions. Valuable
information was obtained from the student interview questions that I administered prior to the first small group session. The results of the interviews helped me shape and plan my lessons. One trend that was observed in each of the five student responses is that there was a lack of confidence in reading. The idea of getting better at reading didn’t seem like an achievable goal, for some it was more frustrating than enjoyable. Ironically, they knew many of the basic skills terms like decoding or fluency. It was clear they knew many of the names of the decoding strategies, but they lacked the ability to apply them independently to solve words and enjoy a book. They could identify their own greatest areas of weakness, this demonstrated how aware and in some cases frustrated the second grade students were. Throughout this study my goal was to make reading an interactive, enjoyable, and relatable activity for all students involved.

Table 2

*Student Interview Questions*

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Do you feel like you are a good reader?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Is reading fun?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Do you like to read at home or on the weekends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What are your favorite kinds of books to read?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What else do you like to do for fun?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>What is the hardest part about reading?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Did anyone ever try to help you with reading?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Do you always understand what you read after you read it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What is your favorite subject in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>What is one thing you would like to get better at in reading?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first small group session was all about getting a sense of what a good reader from student perspective. The students worked together to brainstorm qualities of what makes someone a good reader. Many of their responses that were documented had to do with physical qualities and what the reader sounds like when he or she reads rather than specific reading qualities that good readers have. I reflected upon this in my teacher journal, as it is not the initial response I anticipated from the students, ironically they all seemed to be on the same page. This offered insight into their perspective of what a good reader is and why or how this perception of a good reader is “better” then they are. The students engaged in a discussion of which there was some disagreement, but great dialogue. I documented what I observed and let them discuss this before I offered prompts to gain insight about what good reading behaviors they needed to explicitly learn about in order to change their perspective. The data is further analyzed in Chapter 4 including narratives and dialogue between the students throughout the sessions. The table below provides a sequence of the small group lessons, text selections and summaries, as well as reading strategies incorporated into the lessons.
Table 3

Schedule of Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small Group Sessions</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Reading &amp; Comprehension focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 1-3</td>
<td><strong>Jalapeño Bagels</strong> by Natasha Wing</td>
<td>Introduction of Culture &amp; Activate Background Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jalapeno Bagels is a book about a biracial</td>
<td>Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>boy named Pablo who has a Jewish father</td>
<td>Building Schema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Mexican mother. The family owns a</td>
<td>Compare and contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bakery and Pablo must decide what culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he wants to celebrate on International</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day at school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 4-6</td>
<td><strong>Luisa Loves Soccer</strong> (non-fiction)</td>
<td>Compare and Contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Source: News ELA</td>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This article is about an 11-year-old</td>
<td>Character Traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mexican girl named Luisa who travels a</td>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>long distance to play soccer.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 7-9</td>
<td><strong>A Chair for My Mother</strong> by Vera B</td>
<td>Story Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>Sequence of Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In this story a young girl and her family</td>
<td>Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>work to save money for a special chair</td>
<td>Character Traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the lost everything in a house fire.</td>
<td>Inference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Sources

Multiple sources of data consistent with qualitative research techniques were used throughout the course of the study. Background information about each student was collected in order to gain an in-depth picture of each student individually. The areas of focus included SES factors, reading level, previous interventions, and student self-efficacy. During the study, I documented my findings in my research journal three times a week. I recorded both general group observations, as well as student specific observations on a regular basis. I also reflected on my own behavior during the lessons and any insight I gained as a response to the research study. I also monitored student self-
efficacy and motivation with frequent one to one conferencing. This also helped build a more in-depth rapport with the students and allowed them to feel comfortable to share their honest feelings about reading and areas that caused frustration.

Over the course of the student various work samples and student artifacts were gathered to create portfolios. The students had an active role in the construction of the portfolios. Students also tracked their own progress and reflected on their reading in their own reading response journals. This also helped me assess student response to the interventions.

**Data Analysis**

The data collected was analyzed in combination with my reflections and observations in my teacher journal to determine the effectiveness of culturally responsive literacy interventions in place of basic skills instructions. Student engagement, motivation, and their response to the variance in interventions was closely observed and analyzed. The work samples also provide evidence of the effectiveness of the culturally responsive instruction. In chapter four, the data is analyzed and shared through narratives that recount the highlights of the study. Pages from the books are also included to serve as a visual for the premise of the dialogue that is shared.

**Context**

The study took place at a small school in New Jersey. The context of the community is detailed below including the population and other factors about the town. The context of the school, classroom environment, and students is also highlighted below.
Community

The Census (2010) reported the following information: The community of Atco, New Jersey is comprised of 12,503 people with a median age of 41 years old. The median household income is $70,000 and 68% blue collar. The town is small and has few amenities. The local school district serves students from Pre-K to sixth grade. After sixth grade students go onto Hammonton High School.

School

Thomas Richards Elementary School is one of three elementary schools in Waterford Township school district located in Camden County in the town of Atco, NJ. The school has a total of 3 grade levels including Pre-K, second grade, and third grade. The total school enrollment is 229 students. The student population is comprised of majority white/Caucasian 89.8%. The other ethnic groups include black/African American 2.2%, Hispanic 6.1%, American Indian 0.4%, and 3.5% of two or more racial groups. The primary language spoken is English (98%). There are 37.5% students categorized as economically disadvantage and 14% with disabilities. According to the school report card there is a total of 41% of students that are partially proficient in Languages Arts Literacy.

Classroom

My second grade classroom has a total of 18 students. There are seven females and eleven males. The classroom is an inclusion classroom with two teachers including myself. The makeup of the class includes 13 white/Caucasian students, two multiracial students, two Latino students, and one black/African American student. A total of five students were selected for the study. The classroom environment promotes a loves of
literacy with a comfy reading area that includes a couch, a plant, and a fish named Finn. A leveled library houses several books in bright colored bins. Students book shop weekly for books to read both in class and at home. The environment is both cozy and welcoming to all students.

**Students**

The success I experienced over the summer with one student inspired me to explore culturally responsive teaching further in my classroom. Low motivation and a negative self-perception lead to the creation of my research question centered on students that had experienced literacy failures. The students selected for this study have all had difficulties centered on the various components of reading. One of the most challenging areas of reading is decoding for some of the students in my class. Other students read the words, but with little or no understanding of the text. The students selected represent both elements of culturally diversity and a variety of strengths and weakness in reading. One thing in common each student has is that they have displayed evidence and signs of frustration associated with reading. Throughout the course of the study, I sought to see how small group culturally responsive instruction would impact the group of selected students.

There were a total of five out of 18 students selected for the study. There were two females and three males. One of the students has an IEP. His classification is Specific Learning Disability. The five students selected for the study are all students that have received a basic skills literacy intervention during their first grade year. They are also categorized as basic skills for this current school year. This basic skills category makes them eligible to receive the support of a supplemental classroom aid during the
The language arts literacy block of the school day. There is one aid for all the basic skills children in the classroom. The basic skills category does not provide them with any pull out services this school year; however, each of the students did receive a pull out literacy intervention during first grade. There is currently no pull out individualized intervention program for second grade. It is currently the responsibility of the classroom teacher to design and implement classroom interventions based on student need.

The students in the classroom have access to a large classroom library that includes various levels and genres of books. Each student takes home books from the classroom library daily. The environment is literacy rich and promotes a culture of reading and learning. The students sit at round tables that work in cooperative groups on a regular basis. The literacy block embodies a balanced literacy framework. Students have several opportunities throughout the day to read both independently and participate in workshop style lessons, as well as guided reading instruction in small groups.

The five students selected for the study have experienced several literacy failures and struggle in various areas of reading, including accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Some of the students have developed a lack of motivation to read in combination with a low self-efficacy and perception of themselves as a reader. Some of them have also regressed since their last intervention and are not showing signs of the previous interventions success. The students are in their regular class for a full day and will received 40 minutes of culturally responsive literacy instruction in small groups three times weekly as a part of this study. In the upcoming chapter, student work samples combined with a narrative description of the study are presented.
Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Chapter four provides an overview of the findings of my study. The voices of the students will tell the story of how the study evolved over a period of three weeks. This study stemmed from a desire to provide culturally responsive instruction to a group of struggling readers, and it turned out to be an amazing experience for both my students and myself, as their teacher. The data is shared using a narrative format, combined with pages from the books that sparked awakening conversations between the students. Also, my journal reflections paint a picture of how powerful a piece of multicultural literature can be. In essence, this chapter exemplifies how a teacher can plan out each day, but the unplanned teachable moments sneak up on you, and change the course of your agenda. Rather than resist, I choose to embrace them all. I let the students lead the discussion and adjusted my instruction to their responses. I found this to be a very authentic experience. The end result was a series of priceless moments filled with everything from laughter, surprise, innocence, and accomplishment. I am so proud of their newfound love and desire to celebrate culture. Moreover, I provided the students with an intervention outside the realm of basic skills services that the school currently offered. Another area of my study that set it apart from the basic skills instruction approach is that I used data to inform my instruction and monitored the student’s progress and response to my interventions. I then used that information to plan for my next intervention.

Defining Culture

I posed a question to a group of children; little did I know their responses would guide my study down an unanticipated path. A path that would end with our very own
celebration of our classroom’s culture that was both suggested and planned by the students. Their questions became contagious, and it was as if I had lit a spark of curiosity that couldn’t be tamed. I set out to see if a group of students who had experienced difficulty in reading could be motivated by culturally responsive instruction, but I had no idea how they would react to learning what culture is. I never set out to expose the students to their own culture, but this is what happened when I posed a simple question to a group of second grade students on the first day of my study. I thought they would each add their own interpretation of the meaning of culture relating it to their own unique cultural identities. I thought it would only take us a few minutes to come to one definition for me to write on our chart paper. The kids, however, had a different agenda in mind, as they reshaped my lesson plan. I realized they not only lacked understanding of what culture is, but they were completely unaware of their individual cultural, racial, and language differences.

Me: What is culture? Let’s share what we think it is and then we can all work together to put a definition of culture on the chart paper.

The students looked up at me and they glanced at each other, and I repeated the question.

Me: Does anyone know what culture is?

Amber: Oh I know, I know yes! Culture is where you’re born. Like the place or something like that.

Jessica: “Really? I thought its part of what you say when you talk to people.

The boys in the group looked to me to for approval. Both girls in the group seemed really sure about their definition of culture. I allowed them to keep discussing in order to see where they developed this understanding.
Amber: Like being born at a farm or in a hospital or in the city. Your culture is the place that you came from.

At this point my eyes got really big because I was so surprised with their answers.

Me: A farm? Like with animals! Well than what cultures are we?

Jessica: Wait your culture is what you speak. Like the words you talk and say and how you say them.

Joe: I never heard of the word and I don’t know what Amber is talking about.

Amber: Our culture is human we are humans.

Joey: Yea we are alive so we are humans and we can talk.

Amber: Well I know my family is human and we speak tongue.


Amber: No I mean it’s our language. Like if I want milk I would say mom please pass me the Chooocolllate milllllkkkk. That is our language.

As I sat back and absorbed the dialogue I couldn’t help but crack a smile especially when Amber broke out in a song about milk insisting that she was speaking a different language. On the surface their answers seemed innocent and silly, but they weren’t joking. They were all so intrigued and engaged in an in-depth discussion about the definition of culture and language.
Me: Okay hold on let’s think about this. All people are human and we are all speaking a language right now. What do we call that?

I expected this question to be quickly answered, as I attempted to try and figure out how to explain culture to a group of students who clearly were attempting to make sense of a word they knew little about. I was surprised to find out that my interjected question did not help. Everyone looked at me. They looked at each other and there was a long pause of silence.

Me: English! All of us speak English right? And we all have our own cultures or way of life.

I could see by the looks on their faces that they knew we spoke English, but speaking specifically about languages and culture had caught them by surprise and had them all together a bit confused. According to my pre-planned schedule of lessons, we were supposed to start the read aloud on the first day, but clearly we had spent the time debating the meaning of a very important word. I decided to adjust my schedule.

I reflected about why they lacked concrete examples of what culture and the meaning of the word language and then in clicked. They have no frame of reference for the word culture. It is not taught within the school curriculum, and many of the books they read on their own do not provide context or support for this subject area. Then I wondered if it is a topic of conversation at home because the students in the study were also diverse. Since culture is a way of life my students were just living life, as they knew it with no awareness about the unique aspects of their own cultures because no one had talked to them about it. Originally, I had not planned on using myself as an example, but one of the students looked right at me and asked me a very important question.
Amber: Well, Ms. Williams what is culture then like what is your culture? I looked at each of them before I responded, and I noticed that I had each student’s undivided attention. I could tell by the way they looked at me that they were all wondering the same thing. Before I knew it, the rest of the time of our first session included me sharing all about myself. The more I shared the more questions they fired back. They were getting more and more excited about this word culture. I shared with them how I was unique because I had two cultures. I shared that my mother was Puerto Rican, and my father was African-American, and that I celebrate both of them. I gave them some examples of my Hispanic culture, foods, and traditions that I celebrate and they all wanted share things about their families.

Jessica: Ms. Williams I am Spanish too I think. My mom sometimes speaks to us in Spanish, but its called something with a “C” I can’t remember what it’s called.

Me: Is your mom Colombian?

Jessica: Yes! That’s it I’m Colombian.

Me: Everyone put your arms out. Lets look at how unique we all are. Just look at our skin colors we all come from different cultures, different races, and we all have unique ideas to share with each other. There is so much we can learn from studying other cultures.

As we sat there with our arms out skin-to-skin, they took time to notice something that they truly had not considered until that very moment. They realized that we are not all the same. I wanted them to know that this is something that should be celebrated and welcomed. In my journal, I reflected about how powerful that moment was. I had so much to write about, and it was only day one. I had no idea things would take this
direction. I never planned for us to put out arms out and discuss our own cultures in that manner, but it happened early on and I am thankful it did.

Unlike the basic skills support that the students received throughout the school day, my approach to intervention was not solely skill driven. Practicing reading strategies in isolation will not help the students apply them in context. For example, if the goal for the students was to learn how to ask questions before, during, and after reading they may be asked to generate questions about a paragraph on a worksheet. This method of practicing the skill of questioning is not effective. The problem with that is that there was no discussion that went along with the worksheet. There is no check in to see if the students possess any schema about the topic. The questions are not authentic; rather the students are attempting to fill out the blanks on the page and complete the assignment. Instead of teaching the skills in isolation, I connected them with culturally relevant text. I hooked the students and captivated their attention very early on. I also built on our previous sessions and made the instruction relatable to their lives. The dialogue above highlights the connections the students were making with the text. In addition, the students were asking questions. Questioning is a great indicator of how much the students are in fact thinking about the text. I gained insight about their background knowledge and schema. As we continued the sessions I started to see the students connect deeper with the characters. The upcoming section is dedicated to those connections.
Figure 1. Pablo and his family. This illustration is from the text Jalapeno Bagels by Natasha Wing

Connecting With Characters

I introduced the first text with the above illustration, and I asked the students to look closely at the picture and write down one thing they noticed on a post it note and one question or wondering they had about the book. All the students started jotting down their answers on their post it notes and after a few minutes I asked them to share.

Amber: It’s a family.

Joey: There is a mom and a dad and a kid I think.

Brittney: Maybe he is in second grade he looks our age.

Jessica: I wonder what he is holding. It’s round like a cookie but it has spots all over it.

Victor: Yea what is he holding?

I went on to show them the cover of the book, and I shared the title of the book with them.

Me: We are going to be reading a book called Jalapeño Bagels. Does anyone know what a Jalapeño is?
Jessica: Yes! I do it’s a pepper

During the next few sessions I continued the read aloud. As I read and shared my thinking with the students we all dialoged about the characters in the story. Each student had his or her own clip board and blank Venn diagram. After a mini lesson about comparing and contrasting we began to look for character traits about Pablo the main character of the text. The students also continued to use post it notes to jot down connections and questions they had about the text as I read aloud. We had discussion about words like culture, respect, and tolerance. The students were highly engaged in higher level thinking and practicing a variety of comprehension strategies as we explored a unique text for the first time together. As the teacher I did not know how the students would react to such a unique story. The students met a character that was biracial. They connected Pablo to the story I shared with them on the first day.

Brittney: Ms. Williams you and Pablo are both from two different cultures! They extended their own connections as some of them realized something I knew all along; some of the students in our group are biracial too! Below is a work sample that belonged to Jessica. She connected with the character Pablo because they both have mothers that are Latino. She told the other students in the group what some of the Hispanic dishes that were shown in the illustration below tasted like!
Jessica: Oh I know what those are! They taste so good. Sometimes I help my grandma make them! They filled with meat and sometimes we like to put cheese in them. I never had the pumpkin ones like this story.

Joey: My dad his mom makes Spanish food sometimes I’m going to ask her to make me some!

The students were actively using a variety of comprehension strategies as they interacted with the text, illustrations, and dialogued with each their peers. A stark contrast to a basic skills approach, the text selections challenged students to draw on multiple strategies. The variety of skill levels of the students allowed them to bounce ideas off of each other, and deepen their understanding by conversing with each other. Most importantly, the students felt comfortable to take risks and challenge each other’s thinking. This serves as evidence of why it is essential for educators to hold high expectations for all students. Focusing on their areas of strength and not doubting their
ability to engage in higher-level discussions. It is in fact a clear example of CRT. The lesson was not “dumbed down,” because of perceived skill deficits. Instead, the students were given the opportunity to grapple with the content and challenge their own thinking.

This work sample below shown in Figure 3 belongs to Jessica who learned that she was biracial. She is Colombian and Italian. She connected with the main character Pablo who was also biracial. She documented some things they have in common below. She shared traditions from both cultures with the group. Her writing in the center of the diagram shows the things Jessica found that she and Pablo had in common. The yellow sticky note is a text to self-connection she wanted to jot down that came to mind during the reading. She was reminded about a Hispanic holiday she celebrates with her family.

Figure 3. Jessica’s Venn diagram. A comparison between the character and herself.
Jessica’s diagram is evidence of the extent of her thinking about the character as she related the content to her real life. This was the first time Jessica “met” a character that was Latino. I reflected back to myself in the early grades and thought about what an impact it would have if more children like Jessica could make connections to culturally diverse characters as they practiced higher-level comprehension skills. This is a lesson I feel Jessica will always remember because it also taught her something about herself. She was excited and proud to be Latina. The value of the experience for Jessica cannot be measured. When students can take what they learn in the classroom and apply it to the real world we are truly doing our job as educators. That again is another benefit of CRT.

Figure 4. A photograph of Luisa.

A True Story

Another important turning point in the study was the incorporation of a nonfiction article. In the article pictured above, the students learned about a young girl named Luisa.
As we read the article the students continued to document their thoughts, questions, and connections to Luisa. As we discussed the article the students identified traits about Luisa based on evidence from the text. The students determined that Luisa was both brave and very determined. They told me that she loved school and that her life was not easy. They connected with Luisa on many different levels. She is a soccer player not much older than them, and her family is from Mexico. They began to notice something about her that made this text stand out from the rest of the text we had shared together. As I read the article aloud the students jotted down so much information on sticky notes. Figure 4 below shows a collection of student responses before, during, and after reading. The students were shocked to find out she traveled such a long distance for soccer practice. One of the sticky notes below states: “It takes her 10 hours to go back and forth and she has to take a bus and a train” another says “it looks like a bus that picks up people if they do not have a car.” Some of the sticky notes sparked additional conversations as the students posed questions like: “Why don’t they have a car?” and before I could answer the students started their own discussion citing evidence from the article. Victor explained to the girls that he thought the family couldn’t afford a car that it reminds him about his family. Victor went on to explain that although he is not as poor as Luisa sometimes his family doesn’t have a lot of money, but that's okay because they have each other.
Once again, I sat back and observed the students display that they were actively thinking about the text and relating the concepts to their real life. I continued to see evidence of increased motivation and engagement. I wasn’t required to prompt students to engage in conversation about the content. Often they interacted independently. I could hear them discussing Luisa and her family outside of our sessions with confidence. Sharing her story with other students that were not participants the study. Right away I thought: Wow! It was clear the students did not see our small group sessions in a negative way. They were not embarrassed; I felt they didn’t feel labeled by basic skills, as some of
them have felt in the past. They were readers participating in a literature circle. They were actually enjoying themselves and sharing information we learned with other classmates. I could see a change in self-efficacy, and I was even more excited to continue.

We started to discuss internal and external character traits about Luisa. We discussed what she was like on the inside and outside. We used evidence from the text to support our ideas. Students also used text evidence to create inferences about things that were not specifically stated in the text. During the process Amber pointed something out that was very important.

Amber: Ms. Williams we are figuring out character traits about Luisa, but she’s not a character she is a real person right?

Amber pointed to the photograph of Luisa pictured above in figure 4.

Amber was right! I mentioned that this was an article, but I had not emphasized that this is a true story and that Luisa is in fact a real person. Once Amber asked that question my lesson took an unexpected turn. They all began asking me more questions about Luisa! They wanted to know more about her and her family. We learned that she traveled five hours both ways just to get to soccer practice. The students were amazed that she did all of her work on the bus and that even her little brother worked to help bring money home for the family.

Joey: Wow Luisa does not have an easy life, but she doesn’t give up!

Brittney: I wish we would meet Luisa! She is amazing!

When my lesson took an unexpected turn I went with the flow, providing my students with the instruction that they needed at that time. Being flexible and allowing the
student need to dictate instruction is another component of CRT. I was not bound by a checklist of skills that the students were pressured to meet, rather we engaged in an authentic reading experience. I demonstrated my metacognitive thinking and the students began to do as I did.

The students were so excited and they began asking me if they could some how reach out to Luisa. I told them I would look into it that maybe I could send an email to the paper that published the article, but I wasn’t sure it was possible. The next day Jessica brought in a letter she wrote at home. The letter is pictured below in figure 6. She explained to me that he kept thinking about Luisa and that she wanted to send her a letter. The letter below Jessica wrote. In the letter Jessica said that she wishes she could be like Luisa. When I asked her what that meant she told me that she’s a soccer player just like Luisa and that she admires how hard Luisa works to do well in school. She wants to work hard to get better at reading and not give up just like Luisa.

![Figure 6. Jessica’s letter to Luisa. It was Jessica’s idea to write the letter.](image-url)
Jessica’s confidence began to shine throughout this process. During the interview process she shared with me how her stomach would hurt when she had to read aloud in front of the class. I sat back in awe of a blossoming confident girl who was excited to read and passionate about the content. Basic skills instruction was not accounting for the individuality of the students. A label that is placed on many students struggling in reading became a label that students became aware of. Sitting at the basic skills table practicing the same skills day in and day out with little progress was not responsive to their needs. Jessica broke free from her basic skills label, and she felt liberated to find herself in the books we read together.

Celebration

The last page of the text shows the character Pablo celebrating his culture with his class. The children pointed out how diverse the class in the illustration was. They looked around at each other and began to discuss the idea of having our very own day of celebration for the cultures in our class. Figure 7 shows the page from the book that inspired the children to plan our celebration.
Jessica: We need to read these books to the other kids in our class because they probably won’t know what international day is so we can read them this and then we can all bring in something to share our culture.

Victor: We could read books about all the cultures around the world!

Amber: Can I look up some cultures on the Chrome Book?

The group of students went on to discuss all the ways they could celebrate the cultures of the kids in our class. They started making a list of cultures they wanted me to find books about. Stories to read with the class, food to taste, books, and traditions. They asked me to draw bubble letters on a poster that they could color, and they wanted to put flags on our poster just like the one in the book we read. Without worrying about the details of the planning I didn’t hesitate to grab a large sheet of paper and in bold black marker I wrote out the words: International Day. Each of the students themselves is so
unique in their own cultural identities. They were all excited about exploring authentic pieces of multicultural literature with a refreshed and renewed love for reading. They all displayed signs of an intrinsic motivation to learn something new. They even discussed what it would be like to meet kids from other cultures and learn about them. Figure 8 below shows the students working together to design the banner.

Although I can’t take my students on a plane and travel the world, I can continue to provide them with culturally responsive literacy instruction that increases comprehension, motivation, and inquiry by incorporating diverse text.

Figure 8. All Hands. The students work together to design their International Day banner.

The above image in Figure 8 speaks volume to the beautiful skin colors that make up my classroom. Each of them identified as a basic skills student incapable of engaging with rich content. As their teacher, I disproved that misconception and watched their advanced literacy unfold before my eyes. I can’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment as I took
this picture knowing that it represented the benefits of my Culturally Responsive philosophy of teaching.
Chapter 5

Summary

At the conclusion of the research study, it was clear that I had tapped into a subject area of high interest. I had no intention on focusing so much of our time exploring the definition of culture, but the students were so interested I had to modify my original plans to meet their needs. The students became infatuated with the concept of diversity, and they wanted to learn about their own cultures, the cultures of the students in our classroom, and the characters in the books we read. They even became curious about the different shades of skin we have. Prior to the start of the study the students were not aware of their own culture. They learned that some of the traditions they celebrated regularly represented something special from their culture. For example, Jessica thought that everyone in the class celebrated “Día de Los Ninos,” but she learned that the tradition was unique to the Hispanic culture. Jessica was so excited to share all about her special holiday with the rest of the students in the group. During conferences her mother shared with me that Jessica could not stop asking about her Colombian culture and that she developed a new found determination to learn speak Spanish. I never set out to have my students discover new things about themselves, but I saw first hand how powerful a text selection could be as it unlocked a very exciting journey of self-discovery for my students.

The students that participated in the study developed early signs of growth in areas such as engagement and comprehension and motivation. This was evident from both the overall participation in the lesson and the construction of lesson extensions created by the students themselves. It was also demonstrated during the discussions how
much the students were took the information from a text and connect it to their lives. The
time the students were took the information from a text and connect it to their lives. The
shared their connections via their sticky notes, partner conversations, and reading
responses. The students found the characters relatable and captivating. This was the first
time I ever saw students have such an in-depth connection to a text. I couldn’t have
planned for the way in which some of the lessons turned out. There were times I had an
agenda, and a student would pose one question taking us down a different path. As a
teacher, I learned the value of giving the children the chance to take the lesson where
they need it to go. When Britteny asked me about being a biracial child, I shared, and
they were intrigued and captivated by my stories. It was at that turning point that I knew
this was going to be a great experience for us all.

**Conclusions**

As the study came to an end I began to reflect on the observed areas of growth
that could provide evidence that the culturally responsive instruction was overall more
effective than the basic skills instruction and aid support. Over the course of the three
weeks, it was recorded in my journal that all the students displayed signs that they were
actively engaging and motivated to read and explore the content. Excitement was evident
in their body language, dialogue, and their desire to seek out additional text to read for
fun. I watched the children connect the content to their personal life experiences and
answer higher-level comprehension questions. The most valuable observation I made was
watching my students interact with each other, smile, laugh, and have a great time as they
read. Finding joy in reading for a group of students who a few weeks ago were becoming
frustrated and discouraged was a huge gain.
The multicultural texts provided several opportunities for the students to reflect and share their background knowledge, as well as build upon their schema. As I focused on the areas of strength, and became more responsive to their needs, the instruction became authentic. I learned first hand how essential the discussion element of literacy circles is. I have always prompted my students with questions about the text we read and encouraged them to talk it over with other students. In this study, I took a step back and started observing student led discussions. I witnessed rich dialogue with varied opinions and active participation from a group of students considered to be basic skills. This was very fulfilling. The students became the facilitators of the content and they learned from each other rather then solely from me as the teacher.

Due to the positive response and growth I have seen from my group of small group students, I will be making plans to incorporate literature circles into the literacy block of our schedule more frequently. I plan on sharing the data from the study with my grade level and school community. I want to highlight the advantages of using this style of instruction in place of interventions centered on the skills that students are missing. If we could replace basic skills instruction with Culturally Responsive interventions using multicultural texts, and literature circles, we may begin to see the reading reflection of students shift.

**Limitations**

The greatest limitation of my study was the element of time. This study took place during a forty-minute intervention block three times a week. During the small group sessions the students were engaged and actively participating. I often ran out of time and had to extend into the next session. I set a timer to keep us on task because time seemed
to escape us as the students were truly enjoying the experience. The students also requested to have our small group sessions daily rather then just three days a week. Outside of the daily time constraints I faced there were no other substantial limitations. Since this study took place in a co-teaching setting I had the flexibility to pull my small group of students, without loosing instructional time for other students in the classroom. I did consider that with one teacher in the room it would be more difficult to conduct small groups of literature circles throughout the week in addition to the programing and curriculum currently set in place. A close examination of the daily schedule and literacy block is needed to allow for the addition of literature circles. The groups would also have to include more students. With small adjustments literature circles could become a part of the norm.

**Implications in the Field**

The data collected in the study reflects the response the students demonstrated over a short period of three weeks. I feel that it would be valuable to extend the time frame of the study in order to gather the long term affects. This way additional areas could be further analyzed and investigated. I would specifically like to see if the students retained the ability to apply the higher-level comprehension skills that they started to use throughout the study. Student engagement and motivation can also be reassessed and tracked for consistency providing insightful data.

In addition to an extension of the duration of the study another implication would be to increase the number of students that participate in the study. With an increase in the amount of participants the discussion and dialogue between students will have a different
dynamic. This also provides an opportunity for more students to increase their background knowledge and enhance their schema.

The student discussions were a valuable component of the study. Having the conversations between the students recorded would have been a great benefit. Further research centered on the conversations between students in response to reading multicultural text is also an area that could provide more insight to the affects of using literature circles as part of a culturally responsive intervention.
References


