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**HOW CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS INFORMS THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
AND DECISION-MAKING ABOUT K-12 ELA CURRICULA:  
A MIXED METHODS APPROACH**

by  
Christa Tamanas Wade

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
February 20, 2018

Dissertation Chair: Ane Turner Johnson, Ph. D



## **Dedications**

This dissertation is dedicated to my encouraging family. To my parents for instilling in me the importance of education and never giving up on my dreams. To my sister for doing this first and inspiring me to copy yet another part of your life. To my brother for keeping me laughing during this process. I love you all.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my husband who does not know life with me without homework or writing. You truly make me believe that I am capable of doing anything. I love you. We did it.

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## **Abstract**

Christa Tamasas Wade

### **HOW CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS INFORMS THE DEVELOPMENT OF AND DECISION-MAKING ABOUT K-12 ELA CURRICULA: A MIXED METHODS APPROACH**

2017-2018

Ane Turner Johnson, Ph.D

Doctor of Education

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how cultural responsiveness informed the development of and decision-making about K-12 English Language Arts curricula in New Jersey. Through the use of a survey and interviews, twelve curriculum supervisors offered an array of insight regarding their professional agency, curriculum processes, and factors that influence the areas associated with the program of study. Findings revealed that although supervisors do not have autonomy in the curriculum development process, they do have greater agency when it comes to selecting supplemental instructional resources and classroom supports. Another key theme was how a district's demographics controlled who was responsible for connective learning. Districts that considered themselves to be diverse rely on the classroom teacher to adapt the curriculum to meet student needs, whereas non-diverse districts embed cultural content into the written program of study itself. Finally, this study revealed that efforts toward a culturally responsive curriculum vary, though many districts utilize extracurricular celebrations as methods of embracing and learning about others' cultures. Ultimately, this study highlighted the importance of cultural responsiveness and its impact on the development of, decision-making about, and overall execution of the English Language Arts curriculum.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	v
List of Figures .....	xi
List of Tables .....	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
New Jersey State Standards .....	3
The Impact of the Curriculum.....	4
Curricular Decision-Making .....	6
The Role of the Curriculum Supervisor .....	7
Problem Statement .....	8
Purpose Statement.....	9
Research Questions .....	10
Definition of Terms.....	11
Agency .....	11
Cultural Responsiveness .....	11
Curriculum Supervisor .....	11
Hidden Curriculum .....	11
Theoretical Framework.....	11
Delimitations .....	13
Significance of the Study .....	14
Policy .....	15
Practice.....	16
Research.....	16

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Organization of the Dissertation .....	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	18
Culture and Education.....	18
Cultural Responsiveness .....	20
Curriculum .....	21
Cultural Responsiveness in the Curriculum.....	24
Hidden Curriculum .....	26
Curriculum Supervisors .....	28
Communication.....	29
Coordination .....	30
Implementation .....	30
Evaluation .....	31
Supervision and Cultural Responsiveness .....	32
Theoretical Framework.....	33
Culturally Responsive Care .....	34
Professional Agency .....	35
Conclusion .....	36
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	38
Research Questions .....	38
Assumptions of and Rationale for Mixed Methods Research .....	39
Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Design .....	41
Participants.....	42



## Table of Contents (Continued)

Context .....	42
Participants.....	43
Data Collection Methods .....	44
Quantitative Data .....	44
Survey .....	44
Qualitative Data .....	45
Semi-Structured Interview .....	45
Instrumentation .....	45
Survey Protocol.....	45
Interview Protocol.....	46
Data Analysis .....	46
Quantitative Data .....	46
Qualitative Data .....	47
Coding .....	47
Legitimation.....	48
Role of Researcher .....	49
Pragmatism .....	50
Ethical Considerations .....	51
Privacy and Confidentiality .....	51
Chapter 4: Findings.....	52
Quantitative Phase Overview.....	52
Quantitative Data Findings .....	53

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Participants.....	54
Qualitative Phase Overview.....	55
Qualitative Data Findings .....	56
Agency After Collaboration.....	57
Responsibilities .....	57
Agency .....	60
Dependence on Demographics .....	63
Diverse Districts.....	64
Non-Diverse Districts .....	65
Cultural Influences.....	67
Impacts on Learning .....	67
Impacts on Decision-Making.....	74
Classroom Supports .....	76
Efforts Toward a Culturally Responsive Curriculum .....	79
Conclusion .....	82
Chapter 5: Discussion and Limitations .....	83
Discussion of the Findings.....	84
Agency After Collaboration.....	84
Dependence on Demographics .....	86
Cultural Influences.....	89
Impact on Learning .....	90
Impact on Decision-Making .....	91

## Table of Contents (Continued)

Classroom Supports .....	93
Efforts Toward a Culturally Responsive Curriculum .....	95
Theoretical Framework .....	96
Implications .....	97
Policy .....	97
Research .....	99
Practice .....	101
Leadership .....	102
Conclusion .....	103
References .....	105
Appendix A: Survey Protocol .....	118
Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....	124
Appendix C: Participant Information .....	125

## List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1. Research Process .....	39

## List of Tables

Table	Page
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Quantitative Data .....	54
Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Participant Responses .....	55

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2016), the average number of immigrants entering the country has nearly tripled in the last half century, drastically increasing the diversity of the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that in 1960, 4.7% of the 9.6 million residents in the United States were foreign born. In 2010, it was estimated that 12.9% of the 40 million residents were from other countries. In education, 48% of the student population in America came from culturally and linguistically diverse homes (DOE, 2014). Though the country has shifted as a whole, particular states have faced more change than others.

New Jersey's population has steadily increased in the last seven years, with some groups rising at a quicker rate than others. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau disclosed that the state's population was approximately 8.8 million, comprised of the following number of individuals who reported self-identified races: about 6.5 million White, about 1.3 million Black or African American, about 50,000 American Indian and Alaska Native, about 746,000 Asian, about 8,000 Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and about 160,000 two or more races. In 2016, it was estimated that every race, excluding White, showed a gain of at least 1.04%. The White population, however, experienced a loss of 1.01% of its residents.

With fewer Whites and an increasing number of other races and ethnicities residing in the state, there is a need for a more diverse and culturally responsive education curriculum. A culturally responsive curriculum involves the inclusion of cultural knowledge and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make

learning encounters more relevant and effective for them (Gay, 2000). Trueba (1988) stressed that conditions for effective learning are created when the role of culture is recognized and used in the activity settings during the actual learning process.

There are many advantages to providing a culturally responsive curriculum. Researchers noted that a culturally responsive curriculum has the potential to improve academic success, enhance relationships between teachers and students, empower students, and provide equal learning opportunities that prepare them for living in a multicultural society (Stephenson & Fowler, 2006). Along the same lines, Nieto and Bode (2012) claimed that a culturally responsive curriculum, and specifically teachers with a culturally responsive practice, nurture a sense of agency and action in their students; they implant in them a will and sense of ability to further social change. This concept of empowerment translates into academic competence, personal confidence, and the will to act, and offers students an active process to not only obtain information about what is happening around them but develop improved solutions for the injustices within their communities (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2002).

Students' self-esteem and motivation are also enhanced when they see and read about the contributions made by their own ethnic and/or racial groups to the history and culture of the United States (Saravia-Shore, 2008). Jordan, Tharp, and Baird-Vogt (1992) declared that when teachers integrate students' home cultures into the classroom, they feel more comfortable and participate further in learning situations. Thus, adapting a culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach for districts to recognize and accept the home-community culture of its students, and merge these cultural experiences, values, and knowledge into the teaching and learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper,

2011). Furthermore, Klingner et al. (2005) asserted that all students can excel in academic endeavors when their culture, heritage, language, and personal experiences are appreciated and used to promote their learning and development.

### **New Jersey State Standards**

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a set of standards that define clear and consistent expectations for all students in grades Kindergarten through twelfth. They outline what students should know and be able to do to be successful in college and beyond (NJDOE, 2016). The standards are intended to promote the development of critical thinking skills and capacity to solve real-world problems more so than to encourage memorization of facts.

In 2016, then New Jersey Governor, Chris Christie, declared that schools would no longer follow the CCSS. Instead, the state adopted a revised and renamed version: New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS). Though about 84% of the original Mathematics and English Language Arts CCSS were maintained, over 200 standards were modified. These new standards went into effect in New Jersey schools in the 2017-2018 school year (NJ DOE, 2016).

Neither the CCSS nor the NJSLS serve as a curriculum; rather, the responsibility to develop curricula that align to the standards is given to individual school districts. Decisions regarding content, plans, textbooks, and activities are made at the local level. Therefore, the duty of including multi-cultural content that aligns with the standards falls to the Language Arts curriculum supervisors.



## **The Impact of the Curriculum**

The traditional, Eurocentric curriculum that has customarily been followed by districts thus far fails to recognize the contributions and perspectives of non-dominant groups. Banks (1994) claimed that such a curriculum does not support the cultures of minority groups, which can further distance them from their already different peers. Additionally, such a curriculum emphasizes the dominant group's untrue sense of supremacy, negates them opportunities to benefit from others' knowledge and standpoints, and presents them with a distorted notion of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups (Banks, 1994). Often, the message that is construed by the curriculum is that what is taught is important, while what is not taught is not important. This concept, better known as the hidden curriculum, can be as influential to the learning process as the formal curriculum itself. Hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended principles, lessons, and viewpoints that students learn in academic settings (Abbott, 2014). Further, Abbott (2014) proposed the way schools acknowledge, incorporate, and honor diversity and multicultural perspectives may suggest both intentional and unintentional messages.

Though such curricula have been developed for some time now, many districts have made attempts to incorporate multicultural content through commemorating wonders such as heroes and holidays. Though this representation is progress over the mainstream curriculum, it strengthens the indication that acquiring information about these "Other" groups outside of the necessary curriculum is supplementary (Thompson & Cuseo, 2012), as if it were secondary to the traditional information students should be receiving.

For curriculum to have its most significant impact in multicultural education, it needs to incorporate diversity seamlessly and be presented in multiple perspectives. Doing this thereby encourages students to learn major ideas and events through different cultural lenses (Thompson & Cuseo, 2012). However, Shor (1992) also pointed out that though multiculturalism can be effectively infused into curricula, students' own perspectives should still be valued. John Dewey's perspectives on curriculum highlight the need for personal connection to be infused with the curriculum. Dewey (1938) felt that the purpose of the curriculum was to produce individuals who would be able to efficiently tackle the modern world. Therefore, the curriculum should not be presented as complete constructs, but rather, should incorporate the student's preconceptions and combine how the student views his or her own world. By doing this, students acknowledge their ethnic identities represented in the curriculum and witness that their cultural history is valued.

Zeichner (1992) summarized the widespread literature that describes successful teaching in diverse populations and outlined twelve key elements for effective teaching. They include: teachers have a clear sense of their own ethnic and cultural identities; teachers communicate high expectations for success of all students; teachers are personally committed to achieving equity for all students; teachers have developed a bond with their students and cease seeing them as "the Other"; schools provide an academically challenging curriculum; instruction focuses on students' unique creation of meaning in a collaborative learning environment; teachers aid students in seeing that learning tasks are meaningful; curricula are inclusive of contributions and perspectives of the ethnocultural groups that are present; teachers provide scaffolding to link curriculum

to the cultural resources that students encompass; teachers explicitly teach the culture of the school and seek to maintain students' ethnocultural pride and identity; community and family members are encouraged to become involved and be given a voice in making decisions; and finally, teachers are involved in struggles that aim to achieve a more just and humane society. Combining these elements with a multicultural curriculum has the potential to execute a program that has meaningful and significant impacts on student learning.

### **Curricular Decision-Making**

Fundamentally, a curriculum outlines what students are supposed to learn and how to learn it. These expectations are brought about from multiple contributors. While there is no national curriculum, nearly all levels of government have some role in decision public schools' curricula (Ingersoll & Rossi, 1995). While the Executive and Legislative branches set nationwide educational goals to ensure that American students can compete in a global society (U.S. DOE, 2008), the United States Department of Education enacts policy and manages funding for districts that meet the standards set forth by the federal government.

State governments participate in the development of the curriculum in a similar way. Though each state's role varies from state to state, in general, it sets comprehensive curriculum goals for each district to follow (U.S. DOE, 2008). These standards serve as foundations from which curricula are developed. Furthermore, standardized assessments, like the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), are aligned to these standards to measure students' achievement levels (The PARCC Tests,

2016). These assessments also contribute to the development of curricula through emphasizing and prioritizing the skills necessary for each grade level.

Finally, local boards of education play the largest role in the decision making of schools' curricula. Because each district differs in funding, administrative roles, and overall decision-making structure, there is no one universal solution to deciding on a curriculum (U.S. DOE, 2008). In New Jersey specifically, several options exist. While some districts have curricular teams that develop unique courses of study for their schools, other districts use funds to purchase uniform curriculum sets from commercial educational service providers. Additionally, there are other districts that do not provide any outlined curriculum, but rather highlight standards and allow the schools to meet the goals in their own ways. In either solution, the role of the curriculum supervisors is to contribute to the decision of the solution and oversee the process and execution of the English Language Arts curriculum.

### **The Role of the Curriculum Supervisor**

Curriculum supervisors serve as instructional leaders who promote instructional and supervisory staff to provide an effective educational program through a “guaranteed and viable curriculum” (Doll et al., 1958; Marzano et al., 2005, p. 83). Schafer and Mackenzie (1965) further this definition by describing that curriculum supervisors encourage human growth, development and learning, human relations and leadership, and the sociology and politics of change (p. 76). In all, curriculum supervisors are change agents who are responsible for the function of quality control addressing systematic staff development, effectively instructional resources, evaluation of programs, and support for teaching excellence (Bailey, 1982; English, 1978).

Hamm (1994) described eight functions within a typical work day for curriculum supervisors: communicating with supervisor, communicating with other administrators, communicating with teachers, fostering group facilitation skills, developing curriculum, facilitating the selection of instructional materials, implementing staff development, and finally, being the technical expert (p. 15). Though these performances may vary based on district and title, the overarching responsibilities remain comparable. Additional information describing the history and responsibilities of curriculum supervisors will be explored further in Chapter Two.

### **Problem Statement**

With fewer Whites and more non-dominant races and ethnicities residing in New Jersey, we can no longer accept that the popular White, middle-class, cultured, and educated skills that were once deemed the exclusive gatekeepers to the opportunity structure will remain so as our society changes (Paris & Alim, 2014). As a result, there is a need for a more diverse and culturally responsive curriculum. As many researchers found, students' levels of self-esteem, motivation, and achievement are enhanced when they see and read about the contributions made by their own ethnic and/or racial groups to the history and culture of America (Klingner et al., 2005; Saravia-Shore, 2008). Similarly, others reported that when students' home cultures are integrated into the curriculum, they are more comfortable, and, in turn, more inclined to participate in learning (Jordan, Tharp, and Baird-Vogt, 1992). Along the same lines, Nieto and Bode (2012) claimed that a culturally responsive curriculum nurtures a sense of action in their students; they implant in them this concept of empowerment that translates into academic competence, personal confidence, and the will to develop improved solutions for

injustices (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2002). Ample research is present that outlines the benefits of having a culturally responsive curriculum, yet few districts do.

Unfortunately, the traditional, Eurocentric curriculum that has customarily been followed by districts thus far fails to recognize the contributions and perspectives of non-dominant groups. Such a curriculum emphasizes the dominant group's untrue sense of supremacy, negates opportunities to benefit from others' knowledge and standpoints, and presents a distorted notion of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups (Banks, 1994). Embedded within the traditional curriculum is also this notion of the hidden curriculum, which can be as influential to the learning process as the formal curriculum itself. Hidden curriculum is the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended principles, lessons, and viewpoints that are communicated to students while they are in school (Abbott, 2014; Hafferty, 1998).

Districts' curricula are guided by the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, which are revised versions of the nationally known Common Core State Standards. Though neither the CCSS nor the NJSLs serve as a curriculum, leaders in decision-making roles are required to decide content, plans, textbooks, and activities throughout their development process. The curriculum supervisor plays a key role in this process by participating in the development and/or decision-making of such curricula. This study explored how curriculum supervisors allow the notion of cultural responsiveness to inform them when developing and making decisions about the curriculum.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how the concept of cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about the K-12

English Language Arts curriculum in New Jersey. Per Creswell and Plano Clark (2010), this sequential explanatory study began with the quantitative phase, which was an online survey administered to all English Language Arts curriculum supervisors in the state. This survey intended to gather data on each participant's inclusive role, background information, levels of knowledge of cultural responsiveness, and amount of professional agency in the decision-making process. The results of the survey identified individuals with knowledge of and experience with cultural responsiveness, who were then interviewed for the qualitative phase of the study. The interviews explored how cultural responsiveness is used as a catalyst for curricular scheduling, content, and activities. The goal of this study was to bring to light the importance of cultural responsiveness and explore how it is being used by those who have the agency to guide change; the curriculum supervisors.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How much professional agency/autonomy does each curriculum supervisor have in the development and decision-making process?
2. How does cultural responsiveness inform district curriculum supervisors' development of and decision making about English Language Arts curricula in the state of New Jersey?
3. In what ways have district curriculum supervisors responded to statewide demographic shifts?
4. How do the qualitative results expand upon the reported quantitative measure of cultural responsiveness?

## **Definition of Terms**

**Agency.** I refer to the term agency, or autonomy, as meaning the amount of power, control, or responsibility a supervisor has in his or her role. Agency also focuses on how an individual functions as the representative to act for another/group of people (students) (Hewson, 2010).

**Cultural responsiveness (CR).** Cultural responsiveness is the act of being aware of who children are, how they perceive themselves, and how society perceives them through the lens of culture (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Being culturally responsive “acknowledges the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform” (Montgomery, 2001, p. 4).

**Curriculum supervisor.** This term is used to describe the individual who is responsible for the decision-making and/or development of the ELA curriculum. Some other titles of this position may include: director of curriculum, curriculum manager, and curriculum coordinator, or supervisor/director of instruction.

**Hidden curriculum.** Defined by Abbott (2014), hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended principles, lessons, and viewpoints that students learn in school. Hafferty (1998) further described this concept as consisting of the unspoken or implicit messages that are both delivered and received.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was centered around how cultural responsiveness influences the process of developing and making decisions about English Language Arts curricula that cater to the demographical needs of each district. In doing so, it focused on curriculum



supervisors being culturally responsive by expressing culturally responsive care and simultaneously having the professional agency to act on it.

Individuals who are culturally responsive are aware of the impacts of culture on students' lives, especially in their educational careers. This leads itself to the concept of culturally responsive caring (CRC) that goes beyond just the possession of knowledge. Culturally responsive caring shifts from caring about to caring for the individual well-being and academic success of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2000). This change leads to an active engagement in doing something to positively affect these interrelated concepts. Thus, CRC encompasses concern, compassion, commitment, responsibility, and action (Gay, 2000). However, the type of and extent to which action can be made in determining the components of the curriculum depend heavily on one's amount of professional agency.

Agency is viewed as the capacity of participants to significantly structure their responses to problematic solutions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Similarly, job autonomy, a concept related to professional agency, allows employees to determine the pace, sequence, and methods necessary to accomplish tasks (Volmer, Spurk, & Niessen, 2010). Specifically, autonomy is "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion of the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures used in carrying it out" (Hackman & Oldman, 1980). In short, these concepts describe one's ability or capability to undertake and carry out solutions. Without agency, or the authority to finalize decisions, little action can be done.

This study relied on one's knowledge of cultural responsiveness, and in turn, engagement in culturally responsive caring, coupled with one's level of professional

agency to determine the degree to which CR influences the development of and decision-making about the curriculum. These theoretical concepts are explored in more depth in Chapter Two.

### **Delimitations**

As with all research, this study has some limitations. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) argued that both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection have limitations, but the use of multiple methods can counterbalance or nullify some of the troubles of certain methods. At the same time, a mixed methods design requires a great attempt to sufficiently study a phenomenon with two separate methods (Taskakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Additional limitations of both quantitative and qualitative approaches independently are present in this study as well.

Through conducting a survey to curriculum supervisors alone, I am limiting data retrieval from other members of the governing team who may be influential to the process of developing and making decisions about the curricula, i.e. the superintendent. This survey may also limit the sample size as the participants must both meet the criteria and provide consent to be considered for an interview. In addition, using a survey design limits responses to key issues. Ackroyd and Hughes (1981) argued that there is no way of determining how truthful a participant is being, nor is it possible to know how much thought a respondent put into answering a question on a survey. The qualitative strand of this study aimed to explore participants' answers further as a way to amend this concern.

Furthermore, I am operating from the assumption that all participants will be responding honestly and truthfully to the questions being asked. Participants may be reluctant to be open about their experiences since they could be perceived as weaknesses

or failures in their positions. To ameliorate this delimitation, participants were told that their identities would remain confidential. Moreover, participants were involved in member checking to review the data and findings to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another delimitation is that the responses of each participant vary based on position, experiences, and agency. To overcome this limitation, every curriculum supervisor was invited to participate in this study. Next, distance and proximity of the participants may be a delimitation. Those who live quite far to the researcher were asked to participate in a virtual interview via Skype or other form of communication software. Because this type of interaction can be impersonal and not as interactive, all attempts were made to meet with everyone in person.

A further delimitation of this study is that it focuses on experiences that are unique to the individual's' personal background and respective district setting, while remaining within New Jersey state lines. Because of this, findings can therefore not be assumed for different populations and positions. To alleviate this limitation, generalizations will be avoided.

### **Significance of the Study**

Being culturally responsive and adapting a culturally relevant pedagogy can have profound impacts on diverse students. This research will provide current curriculum and other district leaders with data and feedback that can assist with ways of embracing their diverse population while achieving higher levels of academic success.

## **Policy**

An assortment of regulations exists in New Jersey regarding supervisor preparation and requirements. Prior to becoming a curriculum supervisor, individuals in that role must have taught in the classroom for at least 3 years (NJDOE, 2016). Additionally, each supervisor must complete at least 6, but as many as 9, graduate credits in curriculum design (NJDOE, 2016). The results of this study can provide policymakers with an array of tools for and a foundation of the importance of cultural responsiveness in the curriculum design process.

Furthermore, educational policy needs to create a culture of mutual interest and respect, and a belief of being valued among all ethnic, racial, and cultural groups. Thompson and Cuseo (2012) suggested that when students see their ethnic identities represented in the curriculum, they see that their cultural history is valued. This then leads to promoting students' sense of political efficacy and the belief that participation in their nation's governance may make a difference for them. This has valuable impacts considering how, historically, people of color have not been empowered to influence political policies and institutions (Thompson & Cuseo, 2012). By incorporating a culturally responsive curriculum, districts are mitigating the sense of societal helplessness and lack of political authority these individuals have felt from the dearth of empowerment (Ogbu, 1990). The NJDOE can use the results of this study to develop policies that require culturally relevant curricula to be present in each district.

Finally, while the process of schooling is replete with demands and hardships, a prominent one is the preparation of teachers who can effectively teach students whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own (Banks, 2000; Gollnick & Chin, 2004).

Teachers can demonstrate and increase their cultural knowledge through professional development sessions. In accordance with the New Jersey Professional Standards for Teachers (N.J.A.C. 6A:9C-3.4), educators must complete at least 20 hours of professional development per school year, totaling 100 hours for every 5-year cycle. Districts will be able to use this study to develop policies that require their teachers to attend professional development sessions regarding strengthening their skills in culturally responsive teaching and implementing a culturally responsive curriculum.

### **Practice**

Curriculum supervisors can make influential and meaningful decisions that affect hundreds, if not thousands, of students within their districts. Having such responsibility makes it imperative that leaders in these positions understand the importance of being culturally responsive and adapting a culturally congruent curriculum.

Because of this study, curriculum supervisors will have information that can assist with the development and decision-making process of English Language Arts curricula. Curriculum supervisors will be able to clearly identify the importance of incorporating cultural knowledge, experiences, and content into their courses of study. Additionally, they will know the risks involved of maintaining curricula that do not cater to the demographics of their district. On a more global level, leaders in an array of fields will have information regarding the importance of being culturally responsive and its need for its existence in the classroom.

### **Research**

Emergent from the results of this study could be additional mixed methods studies on how cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about

math, science, social studies, and arts curricula. Because cultural responsiveness caters to the needs of the students in learning, it can be addressed in all subjects and classes. Further, content analyses can be conducted in districts that have experienced specific demographic shifts to determine if content reflects the demographics of the population. Lastly, additional qualitative studies can be conducted to explore the experiences of teachers in culturally responsive classrooms.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This mixed method study was designed to explore how the concept of cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about K-12 English Language Arts curricula in New Jersey through the lens of the curriculum supervisor. This dissertation will be divided into five chapters. Chapter One will summarize the overall context of the study. Chapter Two will offer a review of the literature regarding cultural responsiveness, the curriculum, and the power of language. Chapter Three will outline the methods that will be used for conducting the study. Chapter Four will present the overall findings of the research as they relate to the research questions guiding this study. Finally, Chapter Five will discuss the results and implications of the new discoveries.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In this chapter, I provide a critique of scholarly research and empirical studies in the fields of cultural responsiveness with a focus on curriculum and supervision. I also describe the theoretical framework that guides this study and provide background information on culturally responsive caring and professional agency.

### **Culture and Education**

Before being able to understand the impact of cultural responsiveness and its implications on student learning, knowledge of culture itself must first exist. The term culture, as defined by Lederach (1995), is described as the “shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them” (p. 9). Yazzie (2000) further argued that culture cannot be disconnected from daily experiences as it influences social, political, and intellectual actions. Moreover, Bruner (1996) added that it is culture that offers the tools for organizing, grasping, and intertwining worlds in communicable ways.

Since culture is considered to be the total shared life of sets of people and serves as a distinguishing factor between groups, it can be argued that education is viewed differently for those particular societies (Sahin, 2003). Though such differences may exist, Cardenas and Zamora (1993) found that there is a relationship between a student’s culture and education program. If characteristics from certain cultural groups are not compatible with those required by the educational program, it then leads to the unsuccessful attempts of mastering the at hand tasks. Instead, the mismatch constitutes

the problem and leads to further unproductive and inadequate comprehension of concepts (Cardenas & Zamora, 1993; Sahin, 2003).

Moll and colleagues (1992) described a concept known as Funds of Knowledge (FoK) as the abilities, ideas, and any other body of knowledge from one's personal life that are essential to the continued wellbeing and functioning of the individual. These not only include cultures but students' various ethnicities, languages, and other defining characteristics that separate groups, as well. In education, FoK are critical for learning as they provide a conceptual framework for communicating effective disciplines for diverse students (Hogg, 2011). FoK are based on the premise that merging students' experiences and priorities in instruction validate students' knowledge and principles (Gonzalez, 2005; Hogg, 2011). This makes way for connective instruction, a concept proposed by Martin and Dowson (2009), that allows students to form personal connections to what is being taught as a way to absorb new information more successfully. Educators who relate the content to what students are experiencing in their personal cultures are theorized to engage students more as it creates personal significance for academic work (Cooper, 2014; Conchas, 2001; Nasir & Hand, 2008).

Students who are unable to make connections with education due to personal differences are defined as "Students at Risk" since the likelihood of experiencing success in school is less (Wyman, 1993). Wyman (1993) argued that the chief factor in causing this classification was the dominant culture that is reflected in schools. For any group of people, the preservation of their history, language, community, beliefs, and skills are of paramount importance. These areas are threatened when current school practices do not promote their maintenance, and instead, undermine how such education is structured and



treated in school (Hidalgo, McDowell, & Siddle, 1990; Sahin, 2003). Wyman (1993) and Ogbu (1993) further argued that “Students of Risk” can be at odds with the school and feel torn between two worlds, ultimately hurting them academically and limiting their future employment opportunities. Without mindful engagement of students’ FoK, actions in the classroom can operate as hidden obstacles to learning (Moje et al., 2004), and students from culturally diverse groups continue to remain at risk of feeling as though school is foreign, uncomfortable, and isolating (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). It is vital, then, that students’ cultures are not only considered but represented in their educational programming. This practice leads itself to being culturally responsive.

### **Cultural Responsiveness**

A plethora of research surrounding cultural responsiveness is present in the healthcare field. Roberts, Moussa, and Sherrod (2011) posited that cultural responsiveness involves both organizations and individuals to be conscious of cultural standards and diversity in patients, accept and respect patients’ opposing cultural viewpoints, and cooperate with patient and family interactions to provide services in genuine, empathetic, and professional demeanors. Furthermore, those in community service positions (nurses, doctors, social workers, etc.) are encouraged to foster cultural responsiveness as a way to better engage with patients to adequately communicate their healthcare needs (Bowen, 2008). Though the fields of education and healthcare vary dramatically, they are similar in that their need to promote cultural responsiveness is critical.

Much of the literature surrounding cultural responsiveness in education deals directly with culturally responsive pedagogy and relevant teaching strategies. Brown-

Jeffrey and Cooper (2011) defined cultural responsiveness as the act of being aware of who children are, how they perceive themselves, and how society perceives them through the lens of culture. Cultural responsiveness involves the acknowledgement of the company of culturally diverse students, or “Students at Risk,” and their need to make appropriate connections among themselves and with the subject matter they are taught, the tasks they are asked to perform, and the content they are required to master (Montgomery, 2001).

Many researchers (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Ares, 2006; Klingner et al., 2005) studied the importance and impact of culturally responsive instruction and pedagogy on student learning. In these bodies of literature are the need for teachers to get to know their students and their cultures and bring those experiences to the forefront of their teaching as ways to allow students to make connections, enhance self-esteem, and bring change that will allow for schools to educate all equitably. Though this research involves the concept of curriculum and the need for teachers to alter and structure their teaching of concepts around the needs of their classrooms, it fails to identify the process or party responsible for the educational program that must be altered.

### **Curriculum**

Fundamentally, a curriculum outlines what students are supposed to learn and how to learn it. One of the most significant pioneers in education, John Dewey (1938), felt that the curriculum should ultimately develop students who would be able to effectively handle and partake in the modern world. To succeed in doing this, the curriculum should not be presented as something abstract, but rather should include students’ preconceptions and views as means for discovery and growth. Furthermore,

curricula should encourage expression and subjectivity as well as include opportunities for students to deliberate about the world (Friere & Macedo, 1987).

Traditionally, a curriculum encompasses a variety of information that includes who will be educated, the goals they would meet, the content they would master, and the ways in which material should be collected, ordered, communicated, and evaluated (Yazzie, 2000). Until the mid 1960s, “monocultural” or “monistic” planning was the basis of planning education, reflecting the notion of a singular nation and national culture in which minority groups were expected to assimilate to the norms, belief system, language, and identity of the majority (Sen et al., 2016). The customary, Eurocentric curriculum that has typically been followed by districts thus far fails to recognize the contributions and perspectives of non-dominant groups. Banks (1994) claimed that such a curriculum does not support the cultures of minority groups, which can further distance them from their already different peers. Additionally, such a curriculum emphasizes the dominant group’s untrue sense of supremacy, negates them opportunities to benefit from others’ knowledge and standpoints, and presents them with a distorted notion of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups (Banks, 1994).

Only in the past couple of decades has North American planning come to recognize the demand to combine matters of diversity and social justice into the curriculum (Sen et al., 2016). Though such curricula have been developed for some time now, many districts have made attempts to incorporate multicultural content through commemorating wonders such as heroes and holidays (Thompson & Cuseo, 2012). Though this representation is progress over the mainstream curriculum, it strengthens the indication that acquiring information about these “Other” groups outside of the necessary

curriculum is supplementary, as if it were secondary to the traditional information students should be receiving (Thompson & Cuseo, 2012; Banks, 1994), Friedman and Kuester (1994) reasoned that such information should no longer be attached to the educational program as addendums. Instead, concepts surrounding diversity and social justice, along with students' varied backgrounds, must be integrated into all parts of the planning and execution of the curriculum. Doing such caters to effective learning through situations that are created when the role of culture is acknowledged and employed during the actual learning process (Trueba, 1988; Philips, 1983).

One way to include the diverse aspects of individuals in education is to foster the shared values needed to boost the harmony and advancement of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society (Sahin, 2003). Moreover, students need to be more mindful of the ideals embedded in the acts of learning and be presented with situations that not only nurture mainstream values, but also offer equivalent recognition of the influences their personal cultures add to the learning process (Trueba, 1988). Gay (2013) stressed that "positive attitudes about ethnic, racial, and gender differences generate positive instructional expectations and actions toward diverse students, which, in turn, have positive effects on students' learning efforts and outcomes" (p. 56). Additionally, students in the minority need to be able to internalize both their own culture and that of the school to further academic achievement (Yazzie, 2000). Without these attempts, curricula that are dominated by the culture of the majority may lead to students in minority origins perceiving themselves as unconnected and developing antagonistic attitudes toward education (Banks, 1994; Sahin, 2003). Such negative impacts in learning reflect the notions described in the self-determination theory, in which students' inherent motivation

and longing to achieve influence their personal learning investments into their own education (Ryan & Deci, 2011; Marks, 2000). Weiner (2014) further supported this theory through the claim that those who undergo failure consider themselves to be incompetent and, thus, develop an apathetic attitude towards school and the learning process altogether.

Sleeter (2011) asserted that well-designed and well-taught culturally diverse curricula have beneficial academic results for students. Several organizations have supported this claim and exhibited learning gains from students who partook in varied culturally infused education models. Through the KEEP (Kamehameha Early Education Program) Project, Au and Mason (1981) found that students in K-3 who participated in an English Language Arts curriculum that was culture based performed significantly better than their peers who were not in the program. More recently, using the Talent Quest Model, another program that builds on students' cultural, family, and community resources, students improved their performances in both reading and math (Boykin & Ellison, 2008). As evidenced by these studies, providing a culturally diverse curriculum has the potential to increase academic achievement, which is often a chief goal in districts.

### **Cultural Responsiveness in the Curriculum**

Culturally responsive educators understand and value the full potential of each student and offer the necessary instruments to aid students to reach that potential (Brown, 2007; Gay, 2000). Though much research of cultural responsiveness through an employment lens is surrounded in the healthcare field (Bowen, 2008; Berry-Caban & Crespo, 2008; Werkmeister-Rozas & Klein, 2009), many of the findings are relevant in

education as well. Roberts, Moussa, and Sherrod (2011) found that a culturally responsive staff accepts the power of their own culture, recognizes and speaks to cultural obstacles, delivers educational and empathetic care, and advocates on behalf of those they are servicing. Culturally responsive educators also strengthen a child's sense of cultural identity and purpose in the world and make use of the unique experiences students bring as a way to bridge the gap between what they know and what they must learn, supporting the theory that home lives contribute to the advances students have in school (Brown, 2007; Yazzie, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). When cultural responsiveness exists in the curriculum, students from varied backgrounds acquire cultural sensitivity and appreciation and experience that they, too, are worthy (Nganga, 2006; Laughlin & Nganga, 2009).

There are many advantages to providing a culturally responsive curriculum. Researchers noted that a culturally responsive curriculum has the potential to improve academic success, enhance relationships between teachers and students, empower students, and provide equal learning opportunities that prepare them for living in a multicultural society (Stephenson & Fowler, 2006; Lindquist, 1997). Along the same lines, Nieto and Bode (2012) claimed that a culturally responsive curriculum, and specifically teachers with a culturally responsive practice, nurture a sense of agency and action in their students; they implant in them a will and sense of ability to further social change. This concept of empowerment translates into academic competence, personal confidence, and the will to act, and offers students an active process to not only obtain information about what is happening around them, but develop improved solutions for the injustices within their communities (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2002).

Students' self-esteem and motivation are also enhanced when they see and read about the contributions made by their own ethnic and/or racial groups to the history and culture of the United States (Saravia-Shore, 2008). When teachers integrate students' home cultures into the classroom, students feel more comfortable and participate further in learning situations (Jordan, Tharp, & Baird-Vogt, 1992; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). Thus, adapting a culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach for districts to recognize and accept the home-community culture of its students, and merge these cultural experiences, values, and knowledge into the teaching and learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Klingner et al. (2005) and Gay (2010) asserted that all students can excel in academic endeavors when their culture, heritage, language, and personal experiences are appreciated and used to promote their learning and development. Unfortunately, such positive opportunities do not always exist.

### **Hidden Curriculum**

Hidden curriculum refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended values, lessons, and perspectives that students learn in an education system (Hafferty, 1998; Miller & Seller, 1990). Further, it consists of the unspoken, implicit academic, social, and cultural messages that are communicated to students while they are in school (Abbott, 2014; Hafferty, 1998). How schools recognize, integrate, and honor diversity and multicultural perspectives may convey both intentional and unintentional messages.

Schools have certain values that they explicitly choose to pass on to students alongside formal instruction of content and skills (Phillips, 2013). Though these beliefs may not be reflected in curricular objectives, they influence what is expected of students. The focus, then, should not be on what shapes these institutional values, but rather on

what shapes this learning (Phillips, 2013; Hafferty, 1998). This understanding is the essence of the hidden curriculum.

Hidden curricula are embedded within the daily exchanges that transpire between teachers and students, as well as amongst students and their peers (Rønholt, 2002). While staff are not always mindful of what is taught across their behaviors, priorities, and exchanges with students, Dillard and Siktberg (2012) claimed that students are very aware of these “hidden agendas”. The actions, as a result, can perpetuate ethnic, cultural, and class inequalities, all of which could have more of an ongoing impact than the formal curriculum itself (Dillard & Siktberg, 2002). In short, students learn a multitude of lessons in addition to what teachers intend to teach (Casey, 2017).

The hidden curriculum is not only made up of unwritten content, but it also includes the learning students gain from the attitudes, reactions, and practices of their peers (Wilkinson, 2016). The hidden curriculum communicates social roles and relationships through a series of structures that often times mimic wider society and how it functions (Casey, 2017; Kirk, 1992; Rønholt, 2002). Since political, economic, and social forces influence and shape the nature of the school, they, in turn, impose values, rules, and acceptable social behaviors onto students (Dodds, 1985). In other words, students learn academics in tandem with how to be a particular type of citizen (Evans, Davies, & Wright, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2001; Öhman, 2010). These powerful, largely unintentional drivers of student education lead to a student’s professional identity formation. Wilkinson (2016) argued that in forming this professional identity, students gradually accept the values and norms of the in-group they are joining while rejecting the values and norms of the out-group from which they are leaving.



Eisner (1985) argued that all schools “teach” three curricula: the explicit, the implicit, and the null. While the explicit is the communicated program that the school makes public and the implicit includes the values and beliefs not included in the formal agenda, the null curriculum encompasses what schools do not teach. These include the possibilities that students are not given, the viewpoints they may never comprehend, and the notions and skills that are not part of their scholarly repertoire (Eisner, 1985). Information students cannot consider and skills they are unable to process produce learning they cannot develop (Eisner, 1994). These, in turn, can lead to consequences for the kinds of lives they lead. Therefore, it is especially essential that careful consideration and preparation are present from those responsible for the development of the curriculum.

### **Curriculum Supervisors**

Despite supervisory roles existing since the early years of formal education, there is still no clear perception of defining the role among educators, administrators, and supervisors (Ching, 1977). Not until the last decade has research described the duties, responsibilities, and work of superiors, specifically those in curriculum supervisor roles, in a clearly conceptualized way (Reader & Taylor, 1987). Among other responsibilities, the curriculum supervisor is tasked with helping to evaluate both the appropriateness and quality of the curriculum programs, using and analyzing both national and district data to guide future decision making, and working with other professionals to advance and encourage improvement within the school system (Ott, 2012; Doll et al., 1958; Peterson, 1998).

Many researchers in many different types of publications have referred to the responsibilities of the role of a curriculum supervisor in their own way. In a brief

synopsis of Hamm's (1993) work in describing the position, four main themes emerged: communication, coordination, implementation, and evaluation. Though the role may involve duties and responsibilities that may not align with these categories, the ones that do indicate the importance of having such skills to be successful.

### **Communication**

There are many areas of the work of the curriculum supervisor that need to be communicated in clear, concise ways. Specifically, Hamm (1994) identified that curriculum supervisors should be able to communicate these needs effectively with other administrators and teachers. Through attempting, relational communication theory suggests that supervisors can ease uncertainty and align expectations between themselves and other superiors (Harvey & Harris, 2010; Callister et al., 1999; Harris & Kacmar, 2005). This is of particular importance since supervisory responsibilities include working with other supervisors to enhance the execution of the district, advising educators on matters related to curriculum and instruction, and even serving as liaison to the community through the involvement of communicative activities with the public (Hamm, 1994).

Supervisors also thrive on communication as a way to reduce ambiguity and, instead, support expectancies between themselves and those directly influencing the students (Behrman et al, 1981). Maintaining clarity by way of group facilitation and shared decision-making opportunities with instructional staff strengthens the potential to positively impact school culture and student growth (Bailey, 1982; Ott, 2012). Specifically, communicating the needs of the district and those within it allow for chances for links and blending to occur. Gipe (2000) found that difficulty with learning is

perpetuated because often times students confront formal schooling as unconnected from their cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences. Therefore, having in place and communicating a relevant curriculum that caters to the needs of the students are critical.

### **Coordination**

The role of the curriculum supervisor relies heavily on coordinating, as the execution and success of the curriculum itself are reliant on multiple cycles and members. Not only are supervisors accountable for coordinating the several stages of curriculum development, they are also in charge of selecting suitable instructional resources and assessing the effectiveness of the programs (Hamm, 1994; Ott, 2012). Supervisors are responsible for planning the curriculum in terms of what is perceived as valuable knowledge-content (Moyle & Hargreaves, 1998) and ensuring that the curriculum is beneficial for those who will learn from it. Through coordinating the curriculum to the population's backgrounds and experiences, supervisors validate the students and advance achievement (Ruggiano-Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006).

### **Implementation**

The responsibility of implementation acknowledges not only the execution of the curriculum itself, but the operation of the support areas that relate to the improvement of the district as a whole. Curriculum supervisors are tasked with supporting professional growth, development, and learning of the instructional staff (Ott, 2012; Schaefer & Mackenzie, 1965). Specifically, supervisors are accountable for the planning and implementation of staff development and other associated properties of instructional support. Recognizing the potential of both instructional and supervisory staff in delivering the proposed educational program by identifying and coordinating the abilities

and skills to do so (Doll et al, 1958) is a critical responsibility for the curriculum supervisor (Ott, 2012; Hamm, 1994).

In all, curriculum supervisors are change agents who are responsible for the function of quality control addressing systematic staff development, effective instructional resources, and support for teaching excellence (Bailey, 1982; English, 1978). This change, that involves positively influencing the culture and progression of the district in methodical and significant ways, requires supervisors to implement strategies and reassess as necessary to maintain growth (Bailey, 1982; Ott, 2012). Hughes and Achilles (1971) argued that the focus of those in supervisory roles is innovation and change. It is their responsibility to initiate this transformation through developing plans and providing support throughout the change process (Hughes & Achilles, 1971; Schafer et al, 1965). Through these attempts at continuous change, patterns of endless modifications that continuously improve the organization and unblock impediments lead to further learning and growing (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

## **Evaluation**

The final responsibility of curriculum supervisors categorized by Hamm (1994) is the demand for evaluation. Because supervisors are accountable for quality control as it refers to learning (English, 1978), evaluating the process to assess its quality is necessary. Marzano et al. (2005) highlighted that this function not only focuses on the various opportunities for learning, but it simultaneously addresses the gaps in professional development, pedagogical resources, and support for instruction.

In addition to surveying the quality of what is currently in place, curriculum supervisors must continue to also expand their knowledge base to better prepare for

changes and maintenance. Hamm (1993) suggested that supervisors attend conferences, stay abreast of modern literature surrounding best practices, and network with other supervisors as ways to improve their own districts. By staying current and learning additional strategies, supervisors gain a basis to further evaluate and compare their own programs against.

### **Supervision and Cultural Responsiveness**

Supervisors who are culturally responsive have the potential to contribute to gains in academics, strengths in professional practice, and positivity in district culture. As evidenced by a study conducted by Burkard et al. (2006), possessing cultural responsiveness assisted supervisors in feeling more comfortable in their position and often rose feelings of being more capable of tackling cultural matters with others. Though Burkard et al. (2006) posited that cultural responsiveness and unresponsiveness in supervision are on a continuum, learning how to become more responsive through developing into culturally sensitive supervisors is possible.

Lopez and Hernandez (1987) described four stages involved in developing culturally sensitive individuals. Though their study focused on therapists, these steps can be translated to build sensitivity in supervisors. The process begins with stage one: embracing a cross-cultural perspective. In this stage, supervisors attempt to boost awareness of ethnic diversity and the ways in which ethnic and cultural experiences form behavior, principles, and social structures (Lopez & Hernandez, 1987; Porter, 1994). This stage is intentionally controlled and didactic to limit defensiveness and initiate the building of competency and confidence in a non-combative way (Lopez & Hernandez, 1987).

The second stage introduces a sociocultural framework through taking this newly acquired knowledge and understanding more deeply how the oppressions that students face impact their behaviors (Lopez & Hernandez, 1987; Porter, 1994). This stage emphasizes the collaboration of cultural influences of a group's role within the greater society (Porter, 1994). Once a grasp of others' behaviors is understood, supervisors then begin to explore their own biases, stereotypes, and racism (Lopez & Hernandez, 1987). This stage requires continued efforts, pain, and time (Siegel, 1990), as it deals with taking responsibility for one's own privileges and hierarchy (Porter, 1994). Nonetheless, this stage is necessary in order to understand how different expectations and goals are inherently made for diverse groups (Porter, 1994).

The final stage in developing culturally sensitive individuals comprises a united, social action viewpoint (Lopez & Hernandez, 1987). Supervisors who are supported to develop their involvements beyond individuals to the dimension of communal resolutions and social action find the most success (Porter, 1994). Reflective within this position, supervisors are encouraged to function as advocates, to ensure that youth are presented with additional positive support systems, and to empower those in the local public to continue to grow (Belitz and Valdez, 1994; Porter, 1994). Supervisors who find success in completing these stages acquire a cultural sensitivity that can assist in developing a curriculum, and overall school community, that cater to the needs of those involved.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was centered around how cultural responsiveness influences the process of developing and making decisions about English Language Arts curricula. In

doing so, it focused on being culturally responsive through expressing culturally responsive care and simultaneously having the professional agency to act on it.

### **Culturally Responsive Care**

Individuals who are culturally responsive are aware of the impacts of culture on students' lives, especially in their educational careers. Culturally responsive care is a moral obligation and a pedagogical necessity when working with ethnically diverse students (Lyons-Moore, 2014). This kind of care shifts from caring about to caring for the individual well-being and academic success of such students (Gay, 2000). Gay (2000) explained that culturally responsive caring not only creates authentic relationships between educators and students, but also engages both sets to work together as partners to improve academic achievement. This action-oriented initiative demands educators to hold high expectations, credit students' intellectual potential, and withhold from degrading students' ethnic identities (Gay, 2000; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Such a shift in action leads to educators encompassing concern, compassion, commitment, and responsibility (Gay, 2000).

A study conducted by Bondy et al., (2007) found that educators must not only be culturally knowledgeable, but they must also be able to understand the role of culture in their exploration of behavior and be able to use students' backgrounds to produce classroom experiences that respect, cherish, and support those involved. In doing so, students begin to participate in their quest for academic growth (Bondy et al., 2007; Brown, 2004). Similarly, Heath (1983) supported the idea of going beyond "caring about" by incorporating learning techniques used in students' personal lives. She found

that when educators developed a more culturally relevant practice by drawing on home familiarities, students' success significantly improved (Heath, 1983).

While Gay (2000) proposed culturally responsive care as a responsibility for teachers, it can be transferred to those in supervisory roles as well. Specifically, a curriculum supervisor who is responsible for establishing guidelines, generating teachable material, and proposing opportunities for higher levels of student achievement (Doll et al., 1958) may benefit tremendously from adapting such a mindset throughout the curriculum development process. The ability to make such impacts, however, relies heavily on the level of professional agency one encompasses within one's position.

### **Professional Agency**

Professional agency is viewed as the capacity of participants to significantly structure their responses to problematic solutions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). It encompasses the power to perform within surrounding constraints, the power to act on something, or the power above another (Archer, 2003; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Giddens, 1984). In such a concept, power is inseparable from the practice of agency, as agentic supervisors need to have the capability to influence or intervene when necessary (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Forsman, Collin, & Eteläpelto, 2014). Kidd (2008) found that negative emotions surface when employees are unable to do what they feel is right, when there is a lack of recognition and support, and when there are limited learning opportunities. As a result, without agency, or the authority to finalize decisions, little action can be done.

Agency involves partaking and collaborating within the work organization (Collin et al., 2010; Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008; Sawyer, 2006; Forsman, 2014). In doing so,



professionals exert authority, make decisions, and take stances in ways that impact the organization and even their own professional identities (Forsman, Collin, & Eteläpelto, 2014). Numerous studies (Billett, 2011; Day et al., 2006; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Tomlinson et al., 2013) emphasized how agency could have an impact on professional identity, work practices, and structures through conceptualizing how employees consider and act out their decisions within their workplace. Though each study revealed different forms of agency, they all examined the importance and impact of having agency in various work situations.

Similarly, job autonomy, a concept related to professional agency, allows employees to determine the pace, sequence, and methods necessary to accomplish tasks (Volmer, Spurk, & Niessen, 2010). Specifically, autonomy is “the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion of the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures used in carrying it out” (Bohlander & Snell, 2010). In short, these concepts describe one’s ability or capability to undertake and execute solutions.

One of the goals of this study was to identify the relationship between a supervisor’s level of culturally responsive care and the degree to which professional agency is exerted when making decisions about the English Language Arts curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review described the critical role of curricula in student learning and the parties accountable for providing such programs. As curriculum supervisors, these educators are responsible for designing, developing, and making decisions about curricular content and any other facet associated with instruction. Taking into account the

cultural backgrounds of students as factors that impact learning, supervisors become culturally responsive and have the potential to make significant advances in achievement.

The degree to which this culturally responsive care actually influences curricula depends heavily on one's professional agency. This study aimed to explore how one's knowledge of cultural responsiveness coupled with one's level of agency blend to inform the development of and decision-making about English Language Arts curricula throughout the state of New Jersey.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how the concept of cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about the K-12 English Language Arts curriculum in New Jersey. Per Creswell and Plano Clark (2010), this sequential explanatory study began with the quantitative phase, which was an online survey administered to all English Language Arts curriculum supervisors in the state. This survey aimed to gather data on each participant's inclusive role, background information, levels of knowledge of cultural responsiveness, and amount of professional agency in the decision-making process. The results of the survey identified individuals with knowledge of and experience with cultural responsiveness, who were then interviewed for the qualitative phase of the study. The interviews explored how cultural responsiveness is used as a catalyst for curricular scheduling, content, and activities. The goal of this study was to bring to light the importance of cultural responsiveness and explore how it is being used by those who have the agency to guide change; the curriculum supervisors.

### **Research Questions**

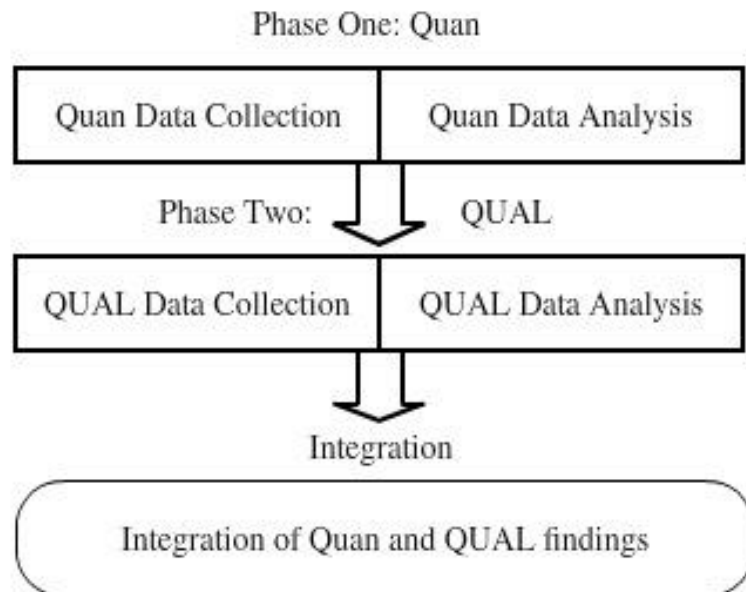
This following research questions guided the study:

1. How much professional agency/autonomy does each curriculum supervisor have in the development and decision-making process?
2. How does cultural responsiveness inform district curriculum supervisors' development of and decision making about English Language Arts curricula in the state of New Jersey?

3. In what ways have district curriculum supervisors responded to statewide demographic shifts?
4. How do the qualitative results expand upon the reported quantitative measure of cultural responsiveness?

The sections to follow will provide an in-depth description of the entire research process.

Figure 1 illustrates a graphical representation of the process, adapted from Onwuegbuzie and Leech's (2006) identified mixed methods typologies.



*Figure 1. Research Process*

### **Assumptions of and Rationale for Mixed Methods Research**

Mixed methods research is best understood when measured against its “monomethod counterparts” because it combines quantitative and qualitative methods, using both to apprise each another (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2004, p. 771). According to

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), the purpose of combining approaches provides a superior grasp of problems than either quantitative or qualitative approach alone. Furthermore, mixed methods are used for breadth and depth of real-life contextual understandings, multi-level perspectives, and cultural influences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Moreover, the knowledge acquired during the research process assists in understanding complex phenomena by creating a fuller picture (Greene, 2007).

Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) identified five key justifications for mixing method approaches: triangulation, complementarily, development, initiation, and expansion. This study used mixed methods for the development phase, in which initial results from one method, the quantitative phase, were used to develop the second, the qualitative phase. Additionally, due to the study's sequential design, the use of mixed methods had the purposes of complimentarily and expansion (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

A mixed methods approach was best suited for this research problem since educational researchers struggle with identifying best practices in learning from either quantitative or qualitative research alone (Torgerson, 2003). Soso et al. (1998) found that using a mixed methods design offered a cornucopia of information and permitted a more comprehensive analysis of educators' commitments to education. Accordingly, a mixed methods approach emerged as most fitting in recruiting individuals in the best position to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2009).

## **Sequential Explanatory Mixed Method Design**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how the concept of cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about the K-12 English Language Arts curriculum in New Jersey. The sequential explanatory design allowed me to acquire a quantitative database through means of a survey that was then explained further by the qualitative data acquired through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014).

This study consisted of two distinctive phases; an initial quantitative strand followed by a qualitative strand. This study used quantitative participant characteristics to guide purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase (Creswell et al., 2003). Furthermore, the data from both the quantitative and qualitative phases were merged during the interpretation stage to further explore how the two sets of data created a fuller picture (Greene, 2007).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) describe two variants of the explanatory design: the participant selection model and the follow-up explanations model. Though both have an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase, they differ in the connection of the two strands. The follow-up explanations model puts emphasis on the quantitative phase, identifying findings that need additional explanation. Conversely, the participant selection model highlights the qualitative strand by using quantitative information to identify and purposefully select participants for a follow-up phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This study used the latter model to identify curriculum supervisors who possess an understanding of cultural responsiveness with varying levels of professional agency. These individuals were then selected for the qualitative phase of the study.

The qualitative phase of the study aimed to further explain the quantitative database through in-depth interviews with a subset of participants (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research captures information not expressed in quantitative data concerning beliefs, principles, approaches, and motivations that trigger behaviors (Berkwits & Inui, 1998). The goal of the qualitative phase was to reveal patterns or theories that support the explanation of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013).

## **Participants**

### **Context**

The study took place with public school curriculum supervisors throughout the state of New Jersey. For the 2017-2018 school year, there are currently 584 operating school districts within the state's 21 counties (NJDOE, 2017). These districts educate a total of 1.37 million students (NJDOE, 2017). Though the professional title of each individual varied based on the district, the study focused on those who are responsible for the development of and decision-making about the English Language Arts curricula.

There are approximately 360 English Language Arts curriculum supervisors within the state of New Jersey. Curriculum supervisors serve as educational leaders who promote instructional and supervisory staff to provide an effective educational program through a "guaranteed and viable curriculum" (Doll et al., 1958; Marzano et al., 2005, p. 83). Schafer and Mackenzie (1965) further this definition by describing that curriculum supervisors encourage human growth, development and learning, human relations and leadership, and the sociology and politics of change (p. 76). In all, curriculum supervisors are change agents who are responsible for the function of quality control addressing

systematic staff development, effectively instructional resources, evaluation of programs, and support for teaching excellence (Bailey, 1982; English, 1978).

**Participants.** To be eligible for the supervisor standard certificate and serve as a supervisor in any role, the New Jersey Department of Education requires individuals to meet the following requirements: hold a Master's or higher degree from a regionally accredited 4-year college or university; possess a NJ instructional or educational services certificate; have at least three years of successful, fulltime teaching or educational services experience; and must complete 12 graduate hours in general principles of instructional staff supervision for grades K-12, general principles of curriculum design and development for grades K-12, curriculum design and development, and instructional staff supervision and/or curriculum design and development (NJDOE, 2015).

All participants who were invited to partake in this study have met these requirements and currently serve as the curriculum supervisor in their respective public-school districts. Participant contact information was gathered manually through each district's website and kept in a private document until distribution. Each individual was asked to complete a brief online survey to determine if he/she is knowledgeable of cultural responsiveness and if he/she would be willing to participate in the study.

**Sampling.** Because of the specific sample population (curriculum supervisors in New Jersey), purposive sampling was used. This technique leads to a greater depth of information from a smaller number of carefully selected cases (Patton, 2002; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). From the quantitative phase, participants who scored at least 13 in CR, had varying levels of professional agency, and indicated a desire to be interviewed further qualified for the qualitative phase. Because this information was used to identify and



purposefully select participants for the interview, a participant selection model was applied for qualitative sampling (Kemper et al., 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

## **Data Collection Methods**

### **Quantitative Data**

**Survey.** The purpose of surveying is for collecting data from individuals about themselves, dispositions, and other social phenomena (Rossi, Wright, & Anderson, 2013). Though quantitative research is often intended to be objective, surveys can provide data that can be further explored through subjective measures (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Implementing a survey is especially useful when a researcher aims to gather data from a very large group (Blackstone, 2012). The ease of administering a survey afforded the swift opportunity to collect data including levels of knowledge of cultural responsiveness and professional agency, two of the main criteria participants needed to meet to be eligible for the qualitative arm of the study. The survey data was collected in a consistent manner under the assumption that the participants offered a truthful and reflective account of their experiences and knowledge (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Per the participation selection model, visual inspection of the survey data identified the participants for the qualitative arm of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Participants were selected based on their quantitative responses using the aforementioned pre-determined criteria. I was seeking individuals who have knowledge of cultural responsiveness and possess varying levels of professional agency.

## **Qualitative Data**

**Semi-structured interview.** Semi-structured interviews offer opportunities to attend to the complexity of a topic in need of contextualization (Galletta, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of the interviews, conducted after the initial survey was administered, was to explore the experiences and knowledge databases of curriculum supervisors. I used a semi-structured approach to provide a format and help direct participant responses, yet still allow for elaboration and clarity when necessary (Creswell, 2005; Nohl, 2009).

Though phone interviews allow for great flexibility in scheduling, a drawback of such an approach is that it does not allow for inclusion of nonverbal participation (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Because of this, every effort was made to interview individuals in their district setting or in a place that was most convenient and comfortable for them. If face to face was not an available option, the interviews were then conducted via technological software like Skype and FaceTime. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed using a third-party transcription service.

## **Instrumentation**

**Survey protocol.** The quantitative strand of this study required the administration of an online survey to all participants. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained for the survey's use prior to distribution. The survey, which was created on Rowan's Qualtrics system, began with demographic data that allowed participants to describe themselves in terms of race/ethnicity. Additional identification-specific questions, including district's county, professional title, years of experience, and years of service were also listed. The survey (see Appendix A) explored curriculum supervisors'

own perspectives about cultural responsiveness and its impacts, if any, on students' learning. Furthermore, the survey aimed to quantify the amount of professional agency one has in one's role. Finally, at the end of the survey, participants were asked to check a box and provide contact information if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview at a later date.

**Interview protocol.** The qualitative phase of this study required one on one interviews with the eligible participants. The interview questions were developed based on a review of recent literature surrounding the phenomenon. I developed a semi-structured interview protocol for this study to guide the interviews (see Appendix B). The interview questions, which served as open-ended prompts, reflected the following themes: levels of knowledge of cultural responsiveness, opinions on the impact of one's culture on learning, and levels of professional agency. As researcher, I also maintained a journal throughout the interview process to serve as a means of gathering notes and further data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010).

## **Data Analysis**

### **Quantitative Data**

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure the location of ordinal data. Goos and Meintrup (2015) define location statistics as the values that best outline the central tendency of data, most commonly finding the mean, median, and mode. In addition to finding the location of data, scores were given to each survey question. The following scoring system was put into place for the survey questions: "Strongly Disagree" (SD) answers earned a score of 1; "Disagree" (D) answers earned a score of 2;

“Agree” (A) answers earned a score of 3; and “Strongly Agree” (SA) answers earned a score of 4.

Questions 1-4 pertained to the supervisor’s knowledge and level of professional agency. Because I was seeking individuals with varying levels of agency, there was no minimum score participants needed to reach (range: 4-16). Additionally, this study pursued individuals who already possess knowledge of cultural responsiveness. As a result, participants had to earn a score of at least 13 on questions 5-9 to be considered (range: 13-20). Questions that were omitted or had more than one response were not counted. The final criterion that had to be met was consenting to participate in the interview. Individuals who met all three sections of the requirements were invited to partake in the qualitative phase of the study.

### **Qualitative Data**

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, word for word, after the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The transcripts were then used for coding, which took place in two cycles. Saldaña (2009) describes a code as “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3).

**Coding.** The first cycle of coding was descriptive coding, which recaps the main ideas of the quotes (Saldaña, 2009). I then identified and examined the initial codes that addressed my research questions for patterns and overlaps between and within participants, allowing parallels to transpire and become the basis for secondary coding (Saldaña, 2009). The second cycle, pattern coding, which “further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating

categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8) was performed manually. The purpose of this second cycle was to detect reiterating patterns in experiences as documented in the data (Saldaña, 2009). Pattern coding also helped to reduce the initial codes by sorting and relabeling into groups and subgroups (Saldaña, 2009). By comparing groups to each other, I was able to identify and create themes, which are, as defined by Saldaña (2013), “the outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (p. 14). Identifying themes was used as a framework that targeted the significant meanings of the phenomenon.

### **Legitimation**

Brown (2014) described legitimation as “the degree to which MMR integration of qualitative and quantitative research strengthens and provides a legitimacy, fidelity, authority, weight, soundness, credibility, trustworthiness, and even standing to the results and interpretations of MMR” (p. 128). As a way to plan and enhance the legitimation of my study, I applied Brown’s (2015) six key techniques: convergence, divergence, elaboration, clarification, exemplification, and interaction.

Convergence involves uniting more than one data source as a way to offer evidence of comparable conclusions and cross-validate one another (Brown, 2015). I was able to do this through my merging of both survey and interview data. In a like manner, I was able to use the divergence technique to analyze data for any contradictions or inconsistencies (Brown, 2015). I also employed member checking as a way to review the data and findings to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants did this through being provided with the transcript of their interviews and the findings of the

study for their review (Creswell, 2009). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) posit that member checks are frequently considered to be the most important credibility check since participants can speak to inferences made and ensure that they are indeed trustworthy. Thus, participants had the opportunity to correct or clarify any responses, further contributing to two more techniques: elaboration and clarification. The final technique, interaction, involves continued cycling from qualitative to quantitative and back to build on all of the other techniques (Brown, 2015). I employed this method during the integration stage to ensure that all efforts were made to strengthen the study and heighten the soundness of my findings.

Due to the study relying on data from only one district position in a single state, generalization may be limited. However, generalizability was not an intention of this study. Instead, the results of this study may serve as a catalyst for future studies involving additional roles in more states. Moreover, because the survey questions mostly asked participants for their personal attitudes and knowledge, which may not necessarily be precise or consistent, measurement error is a concern and possible limitation of my instrument (Salant & Dillman, 1994).

### **Role of Researcher**

Creswell (2009) urges researchers to identify personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study as indicators of how these familiarities can influence the interpretation of data. As the researcher, it was vital that I recognized how my lived experiences and professional practice have shaped my thought processes and expectations about education. Because of this, I aimed to put aside my own beliefs and assumptions to accurately describe the participants' personal and professional input (Chan et al., 2013). I

did so by staying open to their responses and keeping any subjective observations and reactions separate.

My desire to pursue this research stemmed from my involvement in working in K-8 settings in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. As both an educator and consultant, I have viewed how students make connections to content in multiple ways and the benefits that arise because of those associations. At the same time, I have also witnessed the struggle some students have faced attempting to learn content to which they can make no connections. I understand the importance of having opportunities to relate to the learned material and I was curious to know the process behind ensuring that to be the case.

### **Pragmatism**

The larger philosophical worldview tendered in this study is pragmatism. This worldview shapes the research since more than one method was used to understand the research problem (Creswell, 2014). Overall, pragmatists deem the research question to be more significant than either the method or the worldview that is proposed to underlie the approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Accordingly, using a mixed methods approach empowered me to answer the research questions more efficiently.

Pragmatism is also viewed as the knowledge which allows an individual to conquer self-interested drivers for the benefit of others (Thomas & Rowland, 2014). That is, embracing the awareness that one's actions have both motivators and consequences for others (Thomas & Rowland, 2014). In this study, curriculum supervisors' actions serve as those promoters and drawbacks for the students in their districts. By looking at the top tier of those with knowledge of cultural responsiveness, as determined by the quantitative data, the qualitative data revealed the degree to which they employ their

awareness for the benefit of their students. Doing so also allowed me to look at any potential differences between the levels of professional agency and helped me to mark any outcomes those led to; factors which might otherwise be overlooked if the complete distribution was to be studied.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical obligations of the researcher as mandated by Rowan University and the Institutional Review Board were applied to this research. This study gained official IRB approval prior to its commencement. Additionally, participants were provided verbal and written consent for the data that was used. Participation was in no way mandated nor rewarded. I made every effort to confirm that participants' decisions to commit to, decline, or dismiss participation at any time were not reflected poorly in the write up of the study.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

As with much other research, my chief concern while conducting this research was to protect the privacy and rights of the participants. Because many curriculum supervisors shared reserved details of their professional lives, I certified that all names remained confidential. A list of the participants' names, contact information, and pseudonyms were kept in a secure location with access to it by me only and then destroyed at the completion of the study. In addition, I obtained formal and written consent from each individual prior to the start of our interactions. As the researcher, it was my duty to ensure that all participants were fully aware of the purpose of my study and disclosed any foreseeable risks or benefits of participating from the start.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how the concept of cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about the K-12 English Language Arts curricula in New Jersey. During the first phase, the quantitative portion of the study, survey data were collected to elicit participants' inclusive roles, background information, knowledge of cultural responsiveness, levels of professional agency, and interest in participating in the study. Then, to better understand how the concepts were connected and the ways in which they informed one another, qualitative data were collected. This process was completed through face-to-face and virtual semi-structured interviews that used open-ended questions to complement and expand upon the quantitative findings (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

This chapter describes the findings from data analyses in relation to the research questions that guided this study. Chapter 4 is divided into two parts: First, it will present the quantitative findings through use of descriptive statistics that measured the location of ordinal data, including the mean, median, and mode (Goos & Meintrup, 2015). Second, this chapter will discuss themes that arose from thematic analyses of the qualitative data collected from participants. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings and how they relate to the developed themes.

### **Quantitative Phase Overview**

The first phase of the study collected survey data to examine knowledge of cultural responsiveness and levels of professional agency. The survey was created on Qualtrics and distributed electronically to all curriculum supervisors throughout the state

of New Jersey. Contact information, including name, title, and email address, for these supervisors was collected manually through each district's website and stored in a private document until distribution. These data collected from the survey were later used to identify the selection of participants for the qualitative phase that sought to better understand how cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about K-12 English Language Arts curricula through the role of those who have the agency to make curricular changes.

### **Quantitative Data Findings**

Thirty surveys were submitted for participation. Three of those surveys were incomplete and therefore not considered for analysis. The remaining 27 finished surveys were completed by individuals representing 12 of the 21 counties in New Jersey. Specifically, there were the following representatives from those 12 counties: one from Atlantic; three from Bergen; four from Burlington; two from Camden; one from Gloucester; one from Hudson; four from Mercer; two from Monmouth; three from Morris; four from Ocean; one from Somerset; and lastly, one from Union.

Approximately 92% of the participants self-identified as White, 4% as Hispanic, and 4% as African American. The role of each individual varied not only in title but position as well. Roles included supervisor of instruction, director of curriculum, director of curriculum and instruction, district ELA supervisor, director of data assessment and accountability, principal, department head, instructional supervisor, supervisor of elementary ELA, teacher, instructor, assistant principal, supervisor of humanities, and superintendent.

Table 1 delivers a summary of the responses to the survey questions. It provides descriptive statistics for the number of years in the participant's current role, the number of years in education, and the responses for each survey question.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Quantitative Data*

	Years in this position	Years in education	SQ1	SQ2	SQ3	SQ4	SQ5	SQ6	SQ7	SQ8	SQ9
Mean	5.11 years	20.11 years	3.22	1.93	2.89	3.44	3.22	3.37	3	3.78	3.33
Median	4 years	18 years	3	2	3	4	3	3	3	4	3
Mode	1 year	15 years	4	2	3	4	3	3	3	4	3

### Participants

The purpose of the quantitative phase was to identify participants for the qualitative portion of the study. To qualify, participants needed to meet the following criteria: serve as curriculum supervisor (or equivalent position based on respective district), score at least 13 on the questions pertaining to cultural responsiveness, have varying levels of professional agency, and indicate an interest in participating in the interview portion of the study.

Of the 27 completed surveys, 12 met the mandatory requirements for participation in the qualitative phase of the study. Participants represented 9 counties of New Jersey, and, collectively, have an average of 23 years of experience in education. Table 3 (see

Appendix C) outlines each participant (pseudonym), his/her background information, and responses to the survey questions, while Table 2 uses descriptive statistics for the survey questions.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of Participant Responses*

	Years in position	Years in education	SQ1	SQ2	SQ3	SQ4	SQ5	SQ6	SQ7	SQ8	SQ9	Total agency score	Total CR score
Mean	5.46	22.83	3.33	1.83	3.17	3.75	3.58	3.42	2.92	3.67	3.50	11.83	17.33
Median	4.5	24	3	2	3.5	4	4	3.5	3	4	3.5	12	18
Mode	4	24	3	2	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	14	19

### **Qualitative Phase Overview**

The second, qualitative arm of the study collected data through face-to-face (n=5), phone (n=3), and virtual (n=4) interviews with the purpose of expanding upon the quantitative findings (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Priority was given to this phase to further explain how cultural responsiveness informed the development of and decision-making about English Language Arts curricula. These qualitative data were used to generate themes to better understand the research questions.

With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, word for word, after the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To check for credibility, participants were provided with copies of the transcript for member checking purposes. During that time,

participants had the opportunity to correct or clarify any responses. The transcripts were then analyzed using two coding cycles to reiterate main ideas and detect repeating patterns that emerged into themes.

### **Qualitative Data Findings**

Theme generation from analysis of semi-structured interviews sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How much professional agency/autonomy does each curriculum supervisor have in the development and decision-making process?
2. How does cultural responsiveness inform district curriculum supervisors' development of and decision making about English Language Arts curricula in the state of New Jersey?
3. In what ways have district curriculum supervisors responded to statewide demographic shifts?
4. How do the qualitative results expand upon the reported quantitative measure of cultural responsiveness?

Data were analyzed using two cycles of coding: descriptive and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2009). Descriptive coding was used to recap the main ideas of the quotes and identify parallels that were then used as the basis for secondary coding. Descriptive codes were put into categories based on similarities and overlaps. From there, pattern coding was then performed manually to further detect reiterating patterns and grasp meaning in participant experiences (Saldaña, 2009). As a result, five main themes answering the research questions emerged.

The first theme depicts participants' agency in their positions. Central to this theme is the impact of others in the process of the development of and decision-making about curricula. The second theme, dependence on demographics, illuminates the ways in which the make-up of each district influences how the curriculum is developed and, in turn, executed. This theme differentiates the thought processes and responsibilities of individuals in "diverse" and "non-diverse" districts. Cultural influences, the third theme, outlines how the cultural, including linguistic/racial/ethnic needs of the population impact student learning and, as a result, how those needs also influence the decision-making about the curriculum. The fourth theme, classroom supports, highlights the impact of resources, both for students and educators. Described in this theme is the supervisor's role in providing professional development to enhance instruction of the curriculum and further student learning. The final theme, efforts toward a culturally responsive curriculum, further clarifies the significance of resources as the main source of exposure of diversity for students.

### **Agency After Collaboration**

Each supervisor's level of agency is not only supported but also influenced by the numerous responsibilities and duties that come with the position. Though not all individuals share the same amount of autonomy at their respective districts, they do perceive their roles to be similar.

**Responsibilities.** When asked to describe a typical day as a curriculum supervisor, most participants initially responded that there was "no such thing as a typical day" for them. Despite having an unconventional schedule, every participant did describe that he/she was responsible for the following three tasks: conducting teacher

observations, organizing and running professional development sessions, and collecting, analyzing, and generating district data and state reports. Mary concisely summarized what the other supervisors also described:

I do a lot of observations. We use the Marshall Rubric, which is one of the evaluation systems approved by New Jersey, and so I get into classrooms and I see what the teachers are doing and I follow up, do follow up write-ups about what happened. I also do ordering for subjects. Today, I did a PO for the math textbook. I'm working with the schedule. I'm going to do some PARCC meetings next week with a couple of new teachers, so I'm planning some PD. I'm looking at testing data. I do that a lot. That's pretty typical. It's a very varied position, so every day is different, every hour is different, so I'm all over the place.

Among other responsibilities reported were dealing with administrative tasks like emails, implementing student as well as educator assessments, and being involved in the budget process for each year. As Rachel described:

A typical day I get to work around 7:30am and immediately just check my emails, see if there's anything important that has to happen and then for that morning something urgent. I always have a running list, prioritized list, on my desk of things that need to get done... Instructionally, I conduct at least two to three walkthroughs a day and a walkthrough is a formative assessment of instruction. So, we have an online program that we use so I'll just walk through with my iPad and give feedback to teachers. ... And I'm also the grant manager for the district so I'm in charge of all the Title 1, II and III funding that's funneled into the [district name] Schools.

Though she stays busy, Emily shared how she loves that her job is not predictable:

What I love about this job tremendously is, my days are always different. Some days, I'm collecting data. Other days, I'm doing observations as part of admin responsibilities. Other days, I'm meeting with each of the principals in the buildings to make sure that initiatives that were coming from the curriculum office are being followed through with in their respective buildings. And if they're not, then I have to try to support them and then, if they're still not following through, it goes to my bosses to handle. That's pretty much ... my days are always different, which is nice.

In one situation, Nick explained how his position goes far beyond curriculum-related responsibilities to serving as arbiter in work-related situations. He shared, “And so, half my job is probably directing curriculum and instruction, and the other half is just making the place work, quite honestly.” Similarly, Beth shared that she, too, often finds herself in situations with unhappy parties. In her role, Beth explained:

There are always meetings with the principals, with the director, with the superintendent, with parents. I handle on the first line when any parent has a problem with language arts in 6th through 12th, so that's about 2,000 students. If any parent has a concern, they email me or call me. If they do not like my response, then they go to the principal, and after the principal, the director, and after the director, the superintendent, and then the school board. I'm the first line for that.



Despite the wide range of responsibilities that come with being a curriculum supervisor, each participant also expressed his/her agency in the role. Coincidentally, while each had autonomy to some degree, most of the agency that was present, in terms of decision-making, came with or even after collaboration from others.

**Agency.** For the purpose of this study, agency is defined as the amount of power, control, or authority a supervisor has in his or her role (Hewson, 2010). As a result, levels of agency varied per district. There was no specific pattern detected based on demographical locations. However, one pattern that did emerge was that though most individuals were able to make small updates, no supervisor acted completely alone in making significant curricular decisions. One participant, Wendy, shared:

I pretty much have authority. I mean, I can't go in there and change the entire curriculum, because it's been adopted by the Board, but I can go in there and tweak. I can make changes, I can add resources... To revise the curriculum, I need the resources in order to revise the curriculum and then the revision would have to be adopted by the Board, so that's a chain of command situation. But, in terms of tweaking performance tasks or updating a pre-assessment to use a different text that's more accessible to kids, those kinds of things... I can do that.

Similarly, Olivia, whose workplace differs considerably from Wendy's in terms of demographics, expressed:

I would say I have a great, great deal of autonomy. We have a Board of Ed. of course and we have an education committee, which is a sub-committee of the Board of Ed. I sit with them and explain the direction we're going in. They're always very supportive. They're not there to say yes or no; they're really there

more to support the work. I have a lot of autonomy, but again, it's because it's within the confines of the vision. In other words, if I were to say today, 'I want to go get workbooks and a reading program,' I probably have no autonomy because our district vision is to do Reading & Writing Workshop. As long as what I'm proposing and suggesting aligns with that vision, it's very autonomous.

As these two participants indicated, community organizations, like the Board of Education, play a large role in the final approval of the district's curriculum. However, multiple other stakeholders are heavily involved throughout the development and decision-making process, as well.

***Collaboration.*** Though having the agency to make some decisions and influence the curriculum development process, all curriculum supervisors articulated not only the presence, but the importance of collaboration within their workplace.

Most districts that were involved in the study develop their own curricula. The process of doing so for many involves recruiting teachers within each discipline to work together to develop/revise programs. Emily shared, "we use a distributed leadership model where we have the teachers write the curriculum. And it's something that's done over the summer."

While most other districts make suggestions and revise their programs at the end of the school year, or even in cycles of every 5 years, Olivia's district employs a continuous cycle with her collaborative approach. She shared:

It's ongoing here. We want culture and we're still working on developing it where once it's written and the teachers teach the unit, they do get together after the unit is done to reflect on it right then and there. They don't have to wait until summer

or until one time a year. What we also have are some delayed openings during the year. Teachers have about five to seven two-hour delayed openings during the year, and some of that time is used for that work too.

Nick's district, too, aims to continuously improve the curriculum that they developed. He expressed:

So, it's a lot of collaboration... Just the writing of the curriculum is one step. And then what we always do, every other week or so, just always, perpetually, with that written curriculum is tweak it, clean it, do this to it, put more resources, do that to it, put it online, make the format a little different. We are always programmatically trying to improve it. And our coaches do that. They meet every other week or so with the supervisor for half a day or so, and do that kind of work.

Even the districts that buy curricula are still heavily influenced by collaboration. Curriculum supervisors collaborate with teachers, principals, and other district officials to discuss their needs and wants in determining which programs to purchase. In Jack's situation, a district that is considered to be incredibly diverse and hosts over 20 languages, collaboration involving the superintendent and selected teachers led to picking specific programs,

largely because the selections that they had in there included more diverse authors, more diverse characters. It wasn't just when you did have an African American student that he had to overcome poverty... So, they did a nice job, both of those series, of having more diverse material.

Similarly, Mary added that the decision-making about curricular programs in her district depended upon multiple avenues. She claimed, "we do consult our other districts

in the area to see what they're doing... At the school level, teachers are involved... We get sometimes surveys, but sometimes just informal talks about what they want to use.”

While each curriculum supervisor shared some degree of agency in his/her position, it is clear that other shareholders heavily influence the decision-making about curricula. Though demographics were not found to play a role in how much agency a supervisor has, they did appear to impact the development and execution of the curriculum.

### **Dependence on Demographics**

Because this study took place throughout the entire state of New Jersey, there was varied demographical information for each district. Some districts are very affluent and have previously been awarded top district in the county, while others struggle with performance and receive Title I funds. As a result, experiences and opportunities in the workplace varied for each individual.

Coincidentally, when asked to describe their workplace’s demographics, every supervisor used words like “diverse”, “non-diverse”, or a variation of each. William pointed out that his demographics are approximately “...96% White. Very, very homogenous community... So, a very small amount of diversity, unfortunately....” On the other hand, Jack shared that in this workplace, “the district is one of the more diverse, I mean, New Jersey is one of the most segregated states and we're more segregated now than we were 30 years ago. We are happy that we have diversity...”.

Regardless of demographics, two patterns emerged. The districts that described themselves as “diverse” or having multiple cultures and/or races depended upon the classroom teacher to modify the curriculum during the execution stage. Contrarily, those

who considered themselves to be non-diverse made curricular changes at the development stage, putting emphasis on including resources, content, and instructional learning experiences into the written curriculum for all students within the district.

**Diverse districts.** Curriculum supervisors who identified their districts as diverse had similar approaches to developing the curriculum. In most cases, focus on the state mandates was put forth as the reasoning behind their process. As Rachel put it, “the expectation is standards, objectives, lesson planning ideas, links, resources.” In education, this is considered to be the “traditional method” of creating educational programs and is often still used as a measure of deference. Nick, in particular, shared that such a process was followed in his district, “...because we had to come into compliance”. In general, state frameworks with prescribed standards and sequencing set the curriculum from which then modifications could be made.

Similarly, Emily outlined the thought process that many of the teachers in her district have when developing and revising the curriculum. She expressed:

As the teachers are writing the curriculum, [the curriculum office] approve[s] it and we have the final say, but a lot of the times it's very basic. It's very much like, ‘this is the standard from the New Jersey student learning standards. These are activities that go along with it. This is the mandated accommodations and modifications I got to put in. This is the mandated technology standard I have to put in.’ It's very compliance when writing the curriculum.

Once the curriculum is approved and ready for execution, the expectations of modifications and catering are then brought about. Emily continued by sharing, “In the actual curriculum, there's not a lot of cultural things being embedded. The cultural piece

comes in each person's individual classrooms and their lesson plans.” Similarly, Claire expressed how teachers in her district have the flexibility of deciding how they want to supplement the provided curriculum. In her case, “because there's not a ‘one size fits all’ that works across the district, teachers have a lot of flexibility in what resources they use, and when they use them, and how they implement them, how much they differentiate to meet the needs of different students.”

Unfortunately, not all teachers are equipped with the skills or desire to make such modifications. Wendy shared a conversation she once had with an educator about the curriculum and the intent of modifying it for the particular set of students each classroom has. She said, “Not all teachers feel comfortable ‘playing that game’, as one teacher told me. It's like, ‘I don't want to play that game, I just want to tell my kids what they have to do.’” In such situations, limited catering is made, and therefore, students in those particular could be at an academic disadvantage.

**Non-diverse districts.** Curriculum supervisors who described their districts as ones that did not have much diversity approached the curriculum differently. For most, these districts recognized that diversity is not represented through people in the classroom, and therefore, needs to be present in the content students are learning.

Michelle highlighted:

... we're definitely, with respect to different ethnicities, we're trying to make sure that we're inclusive in our curriculum choices so that students get a broad array that way... It's because our demographics are not diverse at all, and our immediate town is not diverse even though the larger community is, but our immediate town is not. So, then you've got a school that's not diverse, staff that's

not diverse, you know, doesn't represent diversity, and so then you're trying to put that ... you're trying to emphasize that within an environment that isn't already that way. And I think that's kind of a little bit of a challenge, a little bit sometimes.

William echoed this idea when he shared that “life outside the confines of our district is varied, diverse, unusual, and for us to not give them this information would be a disservice. So, we have to provide this for them.”

In one case, Mya’s district is going so far as to change its policy to ensure that the curriculum is representative of diversity. She shared:

About a year ago, the Superintendent started a cultural committee, a Cultural and Diversity Committee, that also has a focus on character education. On that committee, the Superintendent, leaders from the district, principals, vice principals, teachers, students, and parents, all met periodically during the course of the year and actually put a framework together with what we wanted to see in our district in regards to cultural competence and character education. That's going to be published to the public this year as a formalized policy around this, and part of that expectation that came from the group, and this is a group that's made up of all the stakeholders, is that we want to see a representation of multi-cultural experiences and perspectives, diversity, embedded in the curriculum.

Whether districts considered themselves to be diverse or non-diverse, a repeating pattern that continued to arise was the focus on resources and how instrumental they were to supplementing the curriculum and being one of the sole providers of instruction. Often times, they are used to fill in the academic and social gaps that arise from the varied degrees of cultural backgrounds students have.

## **Cultural Influences**

Despite how diverse or non-diverse a district is, students bring a cornucopia of experiences, knowledge, and challenges to the classroom. For many of the districts in this study, supervisors shared that students lacked basic background knowledge and, therefore, often struggled with learning new content with which they did not relate. For the remaining districts, supervisors expressed that, although students were academically gifted and had additional supports outside of the classroom to enhance instruction, they lacked the communal experiences and social learning that are reflective of the global society. In both circumstances, student learning and supervisory decision-making are impacted by the cultural influences these students bring.

**Impacts on learning.** During the qualitative phase, participants were asked to describe the make-up of their respective districts. Among the most common demographics were Caucasian/White, African American/Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, and Eastern European. More often than not, supervisors claimed that these backgrounds were influential to students' learning for an array of reasons: home challenges, parental support, and educational values.

***Home challenges.*** Multiple supervisors expressed how students' language barriers and lack of background knowledge contributed negatively to their learning. In most cases, these supervisors worked in low income areas and shared how situations outside of school affected students' abilities to advance academically. In one example, the students in Nick's lower performing district are viewed as being at an academic disadvantage compared to peers living in other areas. Nick suggested:



Our students typically come with very little if any background knowledge. So just in terms of world experience, cultural literacy, content knowledge, that you get just from ... If you're in a middle-class background, that you get just from having typical middle-class experiences: being around educated adults, the kind of T.V. you watch, the kind of clubs you join, the kind of teams you play on. Our kids typically don't have that. A lot of our kids are home watching younger siblings, they're home by themselves, their parents work two or three jobs. Their home life is filled with a whole lot of challenges, we'll just put it that way. Single parent, no parent, we have a lot of homeless kids, lots of foster care ... So, they typically lack the baseline knowledge and common experiences that kids in a wealthier town show up with.

Similarly, Wendy described how language barriers in her district varied, yet still negatively impacted student growth:

We have students who come here and speak no English at all. We have students that enter the district that have a little bit of English. We have students who come here when they are children and learn English, so that by the time they get to middle school, they are in general education classes, and we have students who come here when they're 16 or 17. They enter the high school with no English. We also have students who speak indigenous languages, and some who may be illiterate. They don't have any literacy in their first language. So that makes it particularly difficult to teach literacy skills in a second language when they don't have any literacy in their first language.

Rachel's experiences with students coming from low socioeconomic homes expressed how those experiences, situations out of the students' control, affect their performances in school. She shared:

So, we teach many children from homes of poverty, a lot of our kids have significant social or emotional problems because often that is related to children of poverty. So, there's definitely a lot of factors that play into how they learn and what kind of access they have to education even before we meet them when they're four. So, we deal with a lot of that and a lot of major struggles in their home lives obviously impact how they perform in school.

Mya echoed that circumstances outside of school are often reflected negatively in students' performances. She concluded:

There is a different culture for a student that comes from a family that struggles with money than a student that's very affluent. When you send a child home and say, 'I need you to bring in X, Y, and Z' or ... 'I need you to bring in this money' ... That's a hardship for a student where they may get a zero on something, or they may not be available for a project, have what they need for a project, and they get a zero.

Mya continued by sharing how students may get discouraged and think, "I don't have internet in my house, and you've asked me to go online and to do something." This then not only leads to poor performances, but also contributes to a growing sense of inadequacy and resentment of school.

Whether related to language barriers or financial struggles, students' home experiences have the potential to impact their learning before they even become exposed to the written curriculum itself.

***Parental support.*** Another concept that impacts learning, both in positive and negative ways, is parental support. In some cases, having parental support leads to higher levels of student and teacher accountability, as well as higher levels of academic performances. As one supervisor, Michelle, indicated:

The community is very, very much involved in education. I'll give you an example. Parent night, we have lots of parents attend. The parents, we have a student data management system, Genesis, and the parents are on there looking day to day, week to week, on their student's progress. So, they're actively involved in their child's education, which is nice.

Comparably, Mary portrayed how present the parents in her district are. She expressed:

There are parents who are very involved in this district. They get involved with lots of assemblies. They sponsor tons of cultural events. For example, they are very involved in the Veterans Day assemblies that are in both buildings. We have a Lunar New Year celebration in both buildings. They will buy recess equipment or they run the lunch program. They're very involved. Right now, I've got parents in the art room working with them, helping out with the art programs, so they're very involved.

Alas, not all districts share similar experiences. Sometimes, like in Claire's district, some parents want to be involved and supportive, but are not always able to. She described:

And the support at home varies as well. And not even to say that some parents don't care. They don't know how to support the students. I know in the other building that I've worked in, the one that has a really large Hispanic population, a lot of those kids, as [a coworker] said, come with limited ... not limited but less life experiences than other kids in that building and across the district. But also, the parents want to help but don't always know how to help or how they can support.

Unfortunately, limited parental support is common in Nick's district, as well. Especially compared to high performing, more affluent districts, he communicated how his students' experiences produce adversities. He expressed:

The other challenge is, the things that middle class parents do more frequently, and wealthy parents do more frequently, is academic support at home. A lot of our parents either don't have the ability to do that themselves, or don't have the time, because they're working multiple jobs. So, you're not necessarily going to have kids who have parents that are making sure their homework's done, or making sure it's right.

It is evident that parental support, or lack thereof, contributes to student learning. According to the supervisors, if parental support is present, students are more likely to be held accountable and perform better than those who have limited support. Like home

challenges, this notion is another impact of learning that is beyond the control of the students themselves.

***Educational values.*** One final influence that resulted in both positively and negatively impacting student learning was the level of value of education. In Mary's high performing, affluent district, "...education is valued in the community... [parents] have education as a high priority." As a result, student performance is above average since

[Parents] are always looking for more, more to do after school. A lot of our students participate in those afternoon, evening tutoring sessions like Kumon and whatever the private ones are, and so it's almost like second school that they have or if we don't offer enough homework, they want more. They are always asking for more and more and more.

In her experience, Beth found that certain cultures are more likely to value education more highly than others, and as a result, make greater efforts to increase student learning. She shared:

... like if a student comes in from India or if a student comes in from, well, from many different cultures, sometimes the parents immediately are asking questions, having their child tested to see if they can go into an honors program. They're on top of it and education is valued in the home. Those students immediately, we'll sit down with them, we'll go over results, we'll talk about the plan to get their child in honors if they're not quite there. We do that with everyone, but we find that some cultures really, Asian culture, some cultures, we find that we're talking one on one with parents regularly.

On the other hand, Wendy found that a lack of putting education as a priority acted as a barrier for student achievement. She emphasized:

One of the things that we've encountered is how students and their families view education and its importance, and some students we've encountered and their families, it's not that they don't think education is important, they want their children to learn English and be able to function well in society, but their first priority is their families. So, it's not their education, and the whole idea behind education is 'get your diploma so you can go get a job and help the family.'

There's not a focus on college. It will be an improvement for the family if you work and help the family financially. So that can be difficult, because many of our high school students, once they are able to secure a job, and many of them work... I've even encountered 8th graders who have a work schedule. Not many, but some, certainly by the time they're 15 or 16, many of them are working, and some of them are working long hours. Some of them work a night shift in a factory off the books or whatever. And it makes it very difficult, because when they come to school, they're tired. And it certainly impacts their readiness to learn on a daily basis.

To summarize, students' lack of background knowledge, whether academically or culturally, impact how and what they learn. As a result, home challenges, parental support, and educational values not only impact student learning, but also impact supervisors' decision-making about the curriculum and curricular-related resources.

**Impacts on decision-making.** Together students and educators are impacted by the circumstances that arise outside of the district's control. However, supervisors have the ability to make curricular decisions that both enhance and further support these factors. Most often, they reported that the most influential way their decision-making is impacted by students' cultures is through the selection, implementation, and execution of resources.

For example, Jack shared his role in ameliorating the barriers that derive due to language differences not only by encouraging his staff to question and reflect on their individual instruction, but also by implementing district-wide initiatives to serve as supplemental curricular materials. He commented:

... If we do believe that people in certain affluence or professionals have advantage, their students, their children, with tutors, with having professionals in the house, what can we do as educators... What can we offer them? ... So, programs, program selection, the materials used in programs... We have programs in language arts, technology like Lexia, it's an online program to help kids with phonics and other skills. It translates the directions into a couple of different languages, so as an administrator, I'm making sure that all of the kids that are listed as having separate home languages are matched up into programs like that and might be particularly useful to them. It's another way that I can help support kids with cultural and language differences.

Olivia also encourages reflection in practice in providing resources that are culturally responsive. She shared:

Now that we've started to look at cultural diversity and having the work of a person coming in working with the staff, now questions are coming up on their own like, 'What books are we having students read?' The way it's impacting us, it's impacting us to reflect and to take a look back now again at our literacy and say, 'What kind of books are we reading and why? How do we need to revise?'

In William's and Beth's non-diverse districts, resources were the way that students were exposed to diversity. In Beth's case, "We've tried to make sure that we have resources that are for all populations... That's one thing that we looked for... We try to address diversity." Analogously, William reiterated that in his district:

We do encourage, and we do expect that at all levels we do require them to use multicultural literature, multicultural history. We build that into our curriculum even though our community is mostly White. We do want them to understand that there's a world outside our town and that that world looks a lot different from you and thinks a lot different from you and is a lot different from you. And if we can teach that in a very safe environment like literature or in history, we do encourage that.

For Michelle, her role in finding appropriate resources that encourage diversity and encompass a culturally responsive mindset is a priority:

So, one thing that I look to see with respect to the resources, are there diverse selections? Because that way you're meeting more of the needs of the students and helping to promote that cultural responsiveness. If you're exposing them to all different types of authors, for example, in the English Language Arts curriculum, the idea is that there are certain skills to be, for the students to learn, yet that can



be accomplished in a myriad of different ways. It doesn't have to be just White poets and authors from England, for example. It can be a diverse array of different sorts of readings from authors of different ethnicities, and different backgrounds, and then I think that makes students more well-rounded, and it also helps to achieve the skills and objectives of the curriculum.

Wendy echoed the sentiment of needing to provide students with relatable resources as ways to make connections and expand learning. When describing how she and other curricular supervisors can provide culturally responsive care for students, she suggested:

Providing varied resources, resources that particularly in the English curriculum, books of fiction and non-fiction, that when kids open them up they can see themselves in there. I think that's really important, and then we can do a much better job of that in our classrooms.

The importance of not only having enough resources, but providing materials that incorporate diversity, showcase the demographics of the district, and allow for connections to be made to advance learning are crucial duties. In addition, providing resources, not just for the students but for the teachers, as well, is a high priority for the curriculum supervisor.

### **Classroom Supports**

Resources are often one of the most useful tools for scaffolding instruction and closing gaps between prior knowledge and required learned information. However, materials are not the only way to improve curricular practices and maximize student learning. For curriculum supervisors, in addition to supplying resources for students, a

significant approach to ensuring that the curriculum is as beneficial as it intends to be is to provide professional development (PD) for teachers.

For Jack, his responsibility in executing his district's professional development is a priority. He reasoned, "You can have a multicultural curriculum and still not have an anti-racist classroom, so that's why I started talking about professional development. I think is as important as the curriculum you pick." Furthermore, Claire added:

What I really do is try to give teachers as many resources as I possibly can... And then just professional development... as much as we can give teachers in their bag of tricks to support children from all backgrounds and all developmental levels as well.

Rachel added that for her district, professional development is catered to the specific gaps that are found in both the curriculum and teacher practice. She expressed:

When we see a need, we try to address it... We dedicate grade level meetings to that. We do a lot of coverage for teachers to go see what this looks like in practice. It's a focus of our PLCs. We expect to see sheltered English strategies in lesson plans specifically to meet the needs of their students based on their access score, their language English proficiency score. If we have a port of entry student we have a different grading system then they're not expected to do the academic work. They have work that will be appropriate for their level of English proficiency. So, we do a lot of training on that, and I think our level of understanding has grown tremendously because of it.

Olivia echoed a similar intention in discussing how she feels students can most benefit from instruction. She voiced:

I would say the way we get to the students is that we provide an awful lot of PD to the teacher on how to do that... Raising awareness in the teacher's mind because I feel once we've raised an awareness in the teacher's mind that it transfers to students.

More specifically, Emily outlined a situation that explains why providing professional development is such a precedence in her role. For her, it is a way to engage teachers in supporting and empathizing with students in ways that may be considered a bit more unconventional. She explained:

When I'm doing PDs, when I'm supporting teachers, when I'm going in from a literacy perspective, I'm doing a lot of, 'how are you bringing these kids' cultures? Did you get to know your kids? You have a kid in here who speaks Russian. Why don't you let him read a book from his culture, from his house? Who cares if the kids have no idea what's he saying? Let him feel he's accepted instead of constantly having ... let you be in his shoes. All day, he sits there listening to you babble, other kids babble in a language he has no idea what you're talking about. You be him, see how he feels. Let him get up and speak in his language and read a book in his language, and you guys are all like "huh?" Do that, and then he has got to model and show pictures.' I'm a big proprietor in that.

Though resources for students are vital for having additional materials from which to learn, supports for teachers can be equally as important during that process. Actions like delivering professional development not only offer educators training on the curriculum, but also provide them with opportunities to better understand their students and, in turn, engage in instruction that leads to higher levels of student learning.

## **Efforts Toward a Culturally Responsive Curriculum**

Though districts differed in having a culturally responsive program of study, every district expressed the efforts it makes in incorporating more diversified ways of learning about and appreciating others. Emily's comments on what it means to be culturally responsive represent what many of the supervisors expressed in their own definitions of the term. She described:

The goal of being culturally responsive is not only being accepting of others and what makes everybody in your classroom and people in general. Not only that part, but it's also ... when you're a teacher, when you're a leader in any way, it's providing resources and supports for all different people, and not just what you believe. It's having a lot out there, melting pot, everything.

Mya described one specific course of study that is aimed at educating others on inclusivity and understanding. She shared:

In sixth grade, we teach World Religions. We work with a group, and we're fortunate in [the district] to have a lot of parent groups and community-based groups that are there just to support us... They bring in professionals and people from the community to be guest speakers. They get them fingerprinted, and they have a database of people from all different professions. They work with us to bring in, around the world religion talks, people that practice those religions, and so that's something now that's going to be for all sixth graders. It's embedded in our curriculum, where as part of the experience, the students, take a day where ... usually, it takes a couple of days, where they have a rabbi come in, and a Buddhist monk, and we had an Imam come in. They get to talk to someone who

actually practices the religion and talk through some of the misconceptions or understanding about the religion. What's really nice is they get to see that thread that weaves through, that commonality that is weaving through all the religions, that we really all have the same common beliefs, common core beliefs, about what it is to be good. That's part of something that we've gotten embedded.

For Rachel, efforts at educating both students and their families are made through strengthening communication with those whose cultures differ from the majority. She described:

We've worked really hard to break down some barriers in our district and one of the ways we've done this is by strengthening our bilingual parent advisory club or committee, not a club, it's a committee. And getting our non-English speaking parents into the school. Very intimidated by that. So, getting them into school, conducting meetings in Spanish. Making sure that everything that's sent home is sent home in the home language. So that's huge and that should just happen but it doesn't always.

While some districts embedded these culturally responsive efforts within the written curriculum itself or via further determinations at inclusivity, others mentioned a wealth of events that are reflective of embracing students' cultures. For William, exposing students to diversity through celebrations is a common practice at his district. He shared:

We have multicultural nights. Kids can come in and celebrate their language and their culture both at the elementary and secondary levels. The music program will play selections from African music or Middle Eastern music or South American

or Latin music as well. They really try to build a multicultural attitude inside of the very homogenous town that we have.

Nick was brief in describing how his district caters to its students' cultural needs. He expressed, "Very simply we have Hispanic heritage nights in all schools. We had the Latino Family Project, which was an outside organized thing for a while. We had conversational Spanish classes for our teachers." In another district, one that has almost 40% of its population celebrating Lunar New Year, Mary shared how this cultural piece is represented through a school-wide gathering. She noted:

Lunar New Year, it's one of the biggest things that we do all year. We rotate the countries that celebrate Lunar New Year, and we do maybe a two-hour assembly that the parents get involved, the students dress up, the orchestra and the band and the chorus perform. There's games to play and poetry, readings, and all focused around one country each year and it changes.

Michelle, however, believes that being culturally responsive has to do with more than just adding celebrations or events during the year. She shared:

It's being aware of it, but also taking action, and our conversation today, a lot of what we discussed was curriculum and how can we make that more culturally responsive, and I feel there's a lot of different ways to do that through resources and activities. Approaches. It can't just be something where, well, we formed X, Y, Z club. We have a multicultural club, and we're going to do during Black History Month, we're going to do X, Y, Z. It can't just be a one and done. It's got to be something that's integrated throughout the whole kind of fabric, if you will, of what goes on in the school.

Whether efforts are made in the written program of study, during extracurricular activities, or represented through both, efforts toward a more culturally responsive curriculum exposes students, teachers, and the community to various cultures, experiences, and learning that are representative of the global society.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described the quantitative and qualitative findings for this study. In addition to the separate findings described in this chapter, the results from both phases were integrated to showcase how the qualitative data were used to elaborate upon and expound the data from the initial quantitative strand. The quantitative phase was used to identify participants for the second phase, selecting curriculum supervisors who possessed knowledge of cultural responsiveness and had differing levels of professional agency. From there, five key themes emerged: agency after collaboration, dependence on demographics, cultural influences, classroom supports, and efforts toward a culturally responsive curriculum. Together, these themes outlined the role of the curriculum supervisor and represented how cultural responsiveness impacts the development of and decision-making about the English Language Arts curriculum throughout the state of New Jersey.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Implications**

As discussed in the literature review, cultural responsiveness is guided by the notion of strengthening a child's sense of cultural identity and purpose in the world and making use of the unique experiences students bring as a way to bridge the gap between what they know and what they must learn (Brown, 2007; Yazzie, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Furthermore, researchers noted that a culturally responsive curriculum has the potential to improve academic success, enhance relationships between teachers and students, empower students, and provide equal learning opportunities that prepare them for living in a multicultural society (Stephenson & Fowler, 2006; Lindquist, 1997).

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about English Language Arts curricula through the lens of the individuals who are responsible for districts' instructional programs; the curriculum supervisors. This study was guided by four research questions:

1. How much professional agency/autonomy does each curriculum supervisor have in the development and decision-making process?
2. How does cultural responsiveness inform district curriculum supervisors' development of and decision making about English Language Arts curricula in the state of New Jersey?
3. In what ways have district curriculum supervisors responded to statewide demographic shifts?



4. How do the qualitative results expand upon the reported quantitative measure of cultural responsiveness?

By employing a sequential explanatory method and using the quantitative strand to identify participants for the qualitative phase of the study, twelve curriculum supervisors who possessed knowledge of cultural responsiveness, had varying levels of professional agency, and showed interest in being interviewed provided data regarding how cultural responsiveness informed the development of and decision-making about the ELA curricula. After analysis, five key themes were identified: agency after collaboration, dependence on demographics, cultural influences, classroom supports, and efforts toward a culturally responsive curriculum.

The following chapter presents a discussion of the findings and themes related to the research questions. In addition, there are implications, as well as recommendations, for policy, practice, leadership, and the need for additional research.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

#### **Agency After Collaboration**

The first research question asked about the amount of professional agency each supervisor has in the development of and decision-making about the curriculum. It was discovered that individuals have the most agency when it comes to their independent responsibilities, like conducting teacher evaluations and professional development. When it comes to the actual curricular process, however, very limited agency is present.

Districts that purchase curricula collaborate with stakeholders on which series to buy that will make the most impact on student performance. Often times, these stakeholders include teachers, supervisors, and directors who evaluate existing

educational programs and collectively select the most appropriate series for their district based on content, resources, and budgeting. In this instance, curriculum supervisors provide input and make suggestions, but they are not the sole party responsible for the decision. Since there is a joint effort toward the selection process, this action confirms the notion that agency involves partaking and collaborating within the work organization (Collin, Paloniemi, & Mecklin, 2010; Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008). Furthermore, together, the stakeholders support Bailey's (1982) view of incorporating shared decision-making to impact student growth as they seek to decide upon an appropriate program of study that will benefit the district's student population.

Similarly, even districts that create their own curricula collaborate heavily throughout the process and support Hamm's (1994) stance of supervisors needing to work together to enhance the execution of the school community. In most cases, teachers and content specialists, sometimes with help from the curriculum supervisor, form curricular planning committees and serve as the ones responsible for the development of the curriculum by revising, updating, and modifying the existing curriculum. Again, during this process, the curriculum supervisor can make suggestions or recommendations, but the decision ultimately comes from the collective group of stakeholders. Despite the curricular process, the districts in this study showcased that collaboration with multiple partners is the prime way of getting to the finalized program of study.

At the same time, however, these processes also disconfirm Moyles and Hargreaves' (1998) suggestion that the supervisors are the ones responsible for planning the curriculum. As evidenced by both the development and decision-making processes formerly described, supervisors have little responsibility when it comes to the actual

planning of the curriculum. As a matter of fact, the one area of the curriculum that does provide supervisors with more agency in the decision-making process is supplemental resources. In most cases, though approval from the superior is still necessary due to budget spending, many supervisors shared that they are the party accountable for deciding which supplemental materials they will provide for the teachers. As a result of having this more autonomous responsibility, supervisors serve as quality control agents (Bailey, 1982; English, 1978) who ensure that instructional materials are appropriate and aligned with the collaboratively-approved curriculum.

### **Dependence on Demographics**

Arguably, the biggest takeaway from this study was how cultural responsiveness informed the development of and decision-making about the English Language Arts curriculum. In answering this and the fourth research question, two key subthemes emerged: differences between diverse and non-diverse districts.

In this study, the terms diverse and non-diverse were coincidentally portrayed by the same groupings for all participants. Though supervisors were never asked to describe their districts' demographics in terms of any specific group, each individual's instinct was to separate the student population by race rather than language, socioeconomic status, special education classification, or any other category. Though it is unclear as to why the default categorization led to identifying students in this way, it is evident that the presence of racial groups that were not White contributed to the defining of the district as diverse or non-diverse. This finding reflects what Unzueta and Binning (2010) found in that minorities are more associated with diversity than Whites. Furthermore, with 11 of the 12 participants being White, this discovery also corroborates the assertion that for

Whites, the term “diversity” was most closely linked to race, leading with the presence of Blacks and Latinos, followed by Asians (Unzueta & Binning, 2010). Despite this inclined defining of demographics, each district that shared a diverse or non-diverse classification followed the same curricular process.

Districts that considered themselves to be diverse are driven by state compliances. Often times, they adapt the model curriculum that the Department of Education provides with limited to no customization for their own populations. As a result, there is little indication of the presence of cultural responsiveness throughout the program of learning. This absence of inclusivity and lack of given opportunities for creating student connections lead to reduced chances for connective instruction (Martin & Dowson, 2009), a concept that suggests that students form associations to what is being taught as ways to absorb new information more successfully.

Further, not including customized content that reflects the district’s demographics perpetuates the concept of the hidden or null curriculum. As Furnham (2015) posited, students understand society in three main ways: direct instruction, observations of others, and approval or disapproval of behaviors. This gained knowledge is largely associated with the education students receive in school by way of both the written curriculum and the hidden curriculum (Furnham, 2015). As a consequence of the hidden curriculum, educators imply that what is taught is important and what is not taught is not important; thus, these actions, as a result, can maintain ethnic, cultural, and class inequalities, all of which could have more of an ongoing impact than the formal curriculum itself (Dillard & Siktberg, 2002).

Irvine (1992) suggested that if the tools for instruction, including the curriculum and its parts, are not compatible with, or worse, if they marginalize students' cultural experiences, a disconnect with school is probable. Therefore, if schools lack representation of their population in their instruction, they again minimize the opportunities for connective instruction and, alternatively, strengthen the null curriculum. The null curriculum, which includes the possibilities that students are not given, the viewpoints they may never comprehend, and the skills that are not part of their scholarly inventory, can lead to consequences for the levels of learning they master and, ultimately, the kinds of lives they lead (Eisner, 1985).

Instead, diverse districts rely on individual teachers to establish culturally responsive classrooms from which they then cater the curriculum to the needs of their students. The intention is that educators can accommodate students on more personal levels and create moments to excel in academic endeavors when their culture, heritage, language, and personal experiences are appreciated and used to promote their learning and development (Gay, 2010; Klingner et al., 2005). Unfortunately, this requirement lacks substance when there are no formal instances of training or assessments for accountability. Rather, only those students who are in classrooms with teachers who possess knowledge of and make efforts toward culturally responsive teaching can benefit from such instruction.

According to study findings, non-diverse districts enforce policies that require culturally responsive content to be embedded within the written curriculum. These districts shared that because of their homogeneous demographics, students otherwise are not exposed to the diversity they will encounter once they leave their community. Thus,

supervisors include multicultural along with the “traditional” content during the development phase of the curriculum process as a way to divulge students of other cultures, languages, and experiences, and better prepare them for the global society.

As such, curriculum supervisors in these districts expose their students to a more unified culturally responsive curriculum. These programs of learning have the potential to improve academic success, enhance relationships between teachers and students, empower students, and provide equal learning opportunities that prepare them for living in a multicultural society (Banks, 2013; Lindquist, 1997; Stephenson & Fowler, 2006). More importantly, this effort shifts the purpose of the curriculum from being a method of standards-based compliance through standardized testing to promoting harmonious understandings among students (Miller, 2012; Pinar, 2013). Through academic exposure of diverse concepts and happenings that students in non-diverse districts may otherwise not face, these supervisors nurture a sense of agency in their students and implant in them a will and sense of ability to further social change (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

### **Cultural Influences**

In answering how supervisors have responded to statewide demographic shifts, research question number three, participants shared the new challenges they face and how those barriers influence their decision-making. Though the difficulties that impact student learning do not alter the development and decision-making about the curriculum process itself, they do shape the decisions that are made pertaining to the supplemental materials that coincide with the curriculum.

**Impact on learning.** When students begin their educational career, they bring with them differing cultural backgrounds, experiences, and languages. While some of those attributes are foundational stepping stones for future learning, others are viewed as negatively impacting students' abilities to succeed academically. For the supervisors who argued the latter, the presence of deficit perspectives gave heavily to the way they regarded the contributions of their students. This deficit perspective, one that focuses on what students lack rather than focusing on the value of what they do have, discounts the ways in which classrooms could be enriched through cultural influences (Volk & Long, 2005). In any regard, for some districts in this study, specifically those in lower socioeconomic areas, home challenges, lack of background knowledge, and language barriers were found to adversely influence student learning.

Children coming from low-income families experience significantly less cognitive stimulation and enrichment when compared to their higher income peers (Blazer & Romanik, 2009). Since many disadvantaged homes lack educational materials like books and toys, a foundation for learning from home is hindered. This gap is then widened when new knowledge is attempted at school. Furthermore, language barriers have the potential to negatively impact student learning, not just through the lack of English knowledge, but potentially because of the stress of relocating and adapting to the “new” (McBrien, 2005).

On a related note, both immigrant and native parents bring varying feelings and awareness about schooling and educational structures that impact student learning (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Tienken (2012) found that a child from a middle- or upper-class environment who has parents who are involved enter preschool already

having heard about 45 million words compared to a child living on welfare, who has only heard approximately 16 million words during the same time. Because word knowledge is strongly linked to academic success, students with large vocabularies can better comprehend new ideas and concepts more quickly than those with limited vocabularies (Sedita, 2005).

In this study, the high performing districts that have parental support and those who value education authenticate the existing literature that suggests that students whose parents value schooling and are involved are more likely to experience academic success (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Specifically, additional research found that students in elementary school gain greater academic, language, and social skills, while those in middle and high school have greater achievement and future ambitions (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Evidently, educational values and parental support impact learning in more positive ways than do home challenges and language barriers.

**Impact on decision-making.** Because some districts have experienced greater demographic shifts and, therefore, have certain barriers impacting student learning, some needed to make more changes to their instructional programs and approaches than others. Though all supervisors shared that the development and decision-making processes have not been altered due to these demographical changes, the supplemental learning opportunities have. Every supervisor shared that one of the biggest ways to adapt to the population of the district, answering research question three, was to provide resources in which students saw themselves and with which they could make connections.



Hamm (1994) suggested that, in addition to other responsibilities, supervisors were accountable for selecting suitable instructional resources to ensure that the curriculum and its materials are beneficial for those who will learn from them. Analysis from the data confirmed this duty through participants' desire to guarantee they find appropriate and meaningful materials. These not only included completed series but supplemental resources, as well.

In some districts, in addition to the traditional content provided by the state, including resources that differed from the demographics was the priority. As a few supervisors exclaimed, there was a need to expose students to multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic populations since they do not see much diversity within their own communities. For the supervisors in non-diverse districts, providing learning opportunities through resources was a method of including varied aspects in education and fostering the shared values needed to boost the harmony in a multifaceted society (Sahin, 2003).

The effort to which supervisors will go to align resources with their student populations depends heavily on their level of culturally responsive care. This care, which shifts from caring *about* to caring *for* the individual well-being and academic success of students (Gay, 2000), demands educators to withhold from degrading students' cultural identities and instead, hold high expectations and credit intellectual potential (Gay, 2000; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). In being culturally caring, supervisors recognize that students' backgrounds contribute to their abilities to learn and use that understanding as motivation to continue to provide opportunities for academic growth through the selection of materials.

The decision to find and implement these appropriate resources, however, relates back to the supervisor's agency to do so. Though supervisors do not have autonomy in the curriculum development process directly, the greater level of agency they have in the decision-making process, as it pertains to materials, provides chances for students to make learning more accessible. Specifically, these supplemental resources have the capability to fill gaps, scaffold instruction, and expand students' Funds of Knowledge (FoK) as ways to form personal connections to what is being taught in order to absorb the new information more successfully (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

### **Classroom Supports**

Another way supervisors have responded to statewide demographic shifts, again answering the third research question, is through providing classroom supports. For curriculum supervisors, in addition to supplying resources for students, a meaningful method to ensuring that the curriculum is as valuable as it intends to be is to supply professional development (PD) for teachers. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) highlighted that this function not only focuses on various opportunities for learning, but it simultaneously addresses the gaps in pedagogical resources and support for instruction. As such, the supervisors within this study highlighted that the goal of providing PD is not just for instructional purposes, but to better engage students in appropriate behavior and promote a safe environment that is conducive to learning.

The current responsibility of providing PD supports what Schaefer & Mackenzie (1965) found over half a century ago; supervisors are tasked with implementation. The process of implementation incorporates not only the execution of the curriculum itself, but the operation of the support areas that relate to the improvement of the district as a

whole. Curriculum supervisors are liable for supporting professional growth, development, and learning of the instructional staff (Ott, 2012; Schaefer & Mackenzie, 1965). The aim is then that educators are provided with the necessary tools to simultaneously teach the required program of study and promote a positive learning environment from which to do so.

Unfortunately, this intention is not always met. As a result of diverse districts following the state's structure for compliance, supervisors in these areas do not include additional content that reflects their demographics. Subsequently, manipulating the curriculum to meet student needs is a task that falls on the classroom teacher. This is of particular concern since none of the supervisors in these districts shared that culturally responsive PD is a requirement in their workplace. Because such PD grants educators with moments to learn new knowledge, reflect on classroom practices, and refine their own multicultural awareness and understandings that later impact how they teach new information (Hudley & Mallinson, 2017), these districts put their students at another academic disadvantage; students then are not only provided with a curriculum that does not match their needs, but they are also being taught by individuals who may not be trained with the strategies to do so successfully.

Unlike supervisors in non-diverse districts who are able to demonstrate their culturally responsive care through the act of including varied content in the curriculum itself, supervisors in diverse districts are left with relying on others to demonstrate care instead. Without requirements on or ways of assessing the kinds of professional development being offered, supervisors must make other attempts at incorporating students' cultures within their academic setting.

## **Efforts Toward a Culturally Responsive Curriculum**

The final theme that emerged from this study that truly encompasses responses for all four research questions is efforts toward creating a culturally responsive educational program. For the participants in this study, this is an intention that is made both within the curriculum itself, as well as through extracurricular events and activities. For some districts, including culturally responsive content and learning opportunities in the program of study are priorities. These efforts not only include providing courses that were created specifically to expose students to multicultural learning, but also forming active committees in the community that intend to educate, expose, and blend home and school cultures. These efforts aim to bridge cultural gaps and support the assertion that encouraging attitudes about cultural differences produce constructive instructional opportunities and actions toward diverse students. These, in turn, lead to positive outcomes for students' learning and performances (Gay, 2013).

For most of the other districts, however, efforts toward meeting the cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial needs of their students are brought about through school activities and celebrations. Multicultural nights or assemblies celebrating specific cultures were among the most popular efforts for incorporating home lives with school teaching. These endeavors corroborate Thompson and Cuseo's (2012) finding that many districts make attempts to incorporate multicultural content through commemorating wonders such as heroes and holidays. Unfortunately, this action strengthens the indication that acquiring information about these "Other" groups outside of the necessary curriculum is supplementary, as if it were secondary to the traditional information students should be receiving (Banks, 1994; Thompson & Cuseo, 2012). Furthermore, Friedman and Kuester

(1994) reasoned that such information should no longer be attached to the educational program as addendums. Instead, concepts surrounding diversity and social justice, along with students' varied backgrounds, must be integrated into all parts of the planning and execution of the curriculum.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was centered around how cultural responsiveness influences the process of developing and making decisions about the English Language Arts curriculum. In doing so, it focused on curriculum supervisors being culturally responsive by expressing culturally responsive care and simultaneously having the professional agency to act on it.

The aforementioned sections touched upon the supervisor's attempts at demonstrating their care through their role. Even though every supervisor had knowledge of cultural responsiveness and understood the impact culture has on education, not all acted on it in the same way. Despite the suggestion that this kind of care demands action (Gay, 2000), it was not previously evident to what degree this action was considered appropriate or "enough". As a result, regardless of the level of autonomy each supervisor had, care was considered to be demonstrated through the various attempts at transitioning from caring about to caring for the students. Such actions led to improvements within the curriculum itself or inclusions of multicultural activities and community-based events. Though the latter may discredit other theories of multicultural education, it does serve as an act that attempts to incorporate students' cultures into their learning experiences. Thus, they contribute to my assertion that care can be demonstrated in numerous ways through various facets.

When reviewing the second theory guiding this study, professional agency, participants supported some defining components but nullified others. While supervisors are required to partake and collaborate within the organization (Collin et al., 2010), the only area they are able to exert authority and take stances, in relation to the curriculum, is via supplemental resources. The participants in this study did not have autonomy in the development or decision-making of the curriculum, which discredits the notion of “substantial freedom, independence, and discretion” (Bohlander & Snell, 2010). Instead, the findings concluded that collaboration is a more significant component in one’s agency than individual authority to undertake and execute solutions.

### **Implications**

This study not only provides educators with an array of information regarding cultural responsiveness and its influence on student learning, but also suggests recommendations in policy, practice, further research, and leadership that intend to improve education in the state of New Jersey and beyond.

### **Policy**

Currently, the New Jersey Department of Education requires individuals who are seeking a supervisory certification to complete at least 6 graduate credits in curriculum design (NJDOE, 2016). None of those credits, however, is targeted toward any cultural training. The participants in this study had knowledge of cultural responsiveness, but not all who completed the survey did. Burkard et al. (2006) found that supervisors who possessed cultural responsiveness were more comfortable in their positions and often rose feelings of being more capable of tackling cultural matters with others. As a result, it is suggested that supervisory certifications include at least one course geared toward

educating individuals on the importance of cultural responsiveness and the significance of being responsive in education. In doing so, the state can guarantee that any supervisor, regardless of role or position, can be culturally equipped to prepare students for the global society.

Furthermore, it was discovered through this study that most districts implement the structures and standards provided from the state's framework as their own curriculum. As a result, limited, if any, additional concepts, like culturally-embedded education, are included; only those that are required are integrated. This is of particular concern since Sleeter (2011) found that well-designed and well-taught culturally diverse curricula have multiple beneficial academic results for pupils, yet many schools are not providing such programs for their students.

In New Jersey, mandates exist that require modifications for English language learners and students receiving special education, adaptations for gifted students, and education on the 21<sup>st</sup> century life and career standards in all subject areas (NJDOE, 2017). As mandates, these demands require that every single district, despite population, location, or any other factor, includes these in their curricula. In dealing with specific disciplines, legislation like the Amistad Bill (A1301) requires schools to incorporate African-American history into their social studies curriculum, while P.L. 2014, c.36 requires high schools to provide instruction in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and automated external defibrillation in their health curriculum (NJDOE, 2017). Currently, however, there is no state legislation that requires the presence of specific content in the English Language Arts curriculum.

Despite this, the state's vision still claims, "New Jersey students will be exceptionally prepared for the global economy and socially ready to contribute to local, national, and international communities" (NJDOE, 2017). To meet this goal, it is recommended that the state enact a mandate that requires culturally responsive learning in the English Language Arts curriculum to occur. In doing so, districts can not only empower all ethnic, racial, and cultural groups through representing their backgrounds and signifying that their cultural history is valued in multiple subject areas (Thompson & Cuseo, 2012), but also mitigate the sense of societal helplessness and lack of political authority that some groups have traditionally felt (Ogbu, 1990).

As with any change in educational policy, reluctance and displeasure from teachers and administrators are possible. Establishing an additional mandate can be viewed not as a useful tool in reaching students, but as yet another requirement on an already extensive running list of items that need to be followed. The concern is further amplified when studies show how such orders could have negative impacts on teachers, teaching styles, and ways in which the curriculum is taught (Corput, 2012). However, for students, the instructional and personal effects of establishing a cultural mandate and requiring that their backgrounds are both present and valued throughout the ELA curriculum have the potential to outweigh any possible resistance from educators.

## **Research**

This study focused specifically on curriculum supervisors who were responsible for the English Language Arts curricula in the state. As a result, it is recommended that additional mixed methods studies on how cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about math, science, social studies, and arts



curricula be conducted. Though development and decision-making methods may be similar across disciplines, influential factors like mandates and resources may impact features of the process.

Additional studies on the relationship between length of curriculum writing time and student achievement may also be considered. As was brought up in the qualitative phase of the study, the time allotted for curriculum writers to develop and revise curricula vary by district. While some districts only approve 10 hours per curriculum, others approve as many as 40 hours. This could suggest that the districts that have longer intervals to develop and revise curricula are able to dedicate more time to incorporating culturally responsive content, and therefore, as other studies have shown, produce higher levels of academic achievement. A study conducting the relationship between assigned time and academic success may be beneficial for districts as they prepare their budgets and plan ahead.

Finally, because this study was guided by the concepts of culturally responsive care and professional agency, studies on the perspectives of supervisors within these contexts could shed light on the personal motivation behind the role. Supervisors expressed their knowledge of cultural responsiveness and its importance in education, but many shared that they did not have the agency to make decisions around cultural content in the curriculum. Conducting research on these perspectives and inquiring the ways in which supervisors remain motivated to perform in their roles despite their responsibilities not mirroring their own beliefs may contribute to changes in the development of and decision-making about curricula in the future.

## **Practice**

Participating in cultural responsive professional development is not a current mandate for educators or administrators throughout New Jersey. Consequently, districts that require the teachers to be culturally responsive and modify the curriculum in their classrooms are often times ill-equipped to do so successfully. Additionally, administrators who do not possess the background knowledge of cultural responsiveness may fail to incorporate best practices regarding this topic throughout their roles. To ameliorate these issues, it is recommended that district staff participate in on-going training on topics such as cultural awareness, sensitivity training, and employing appropriate resources as ways to become more culturally responsive. In doing so, all district staff may benefit from the gained knowledge and be better qualified for educating students in more culturally responsive ways.

Moreover, as Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) suggested, if teachers should alter their practices in ways that efficiently respond to students' cultural needs in the classroom, then supervisors should have similar requirements to meet the needs of the district. In addition to participating in professional development opportunities to further their own practice, supervisors could exercise their agency to develop an assessment for quality control. This not only includes ensuring that any updates to the curriculum meet newly formed cultural guidelines, but it also provides direction for lesson plans and components for evaluation; two areas that supervisors already oversee and assess. By developing a quality control assessment, supervisors can better ensure that cultural content is not only embedded throughout the program of study, but that it is also distributed amongst all levels of learning.

## **Leadership**

Gay (2010) suggested that while a culturally responsive practice is meaningful, it alone cannot resolve the extensive challenges facing many students. As she asserted, reforming and transforming all facets of education, including policymaking and leadership, to also be culturally responsive are vital in the progress toward student success. As such, it is recommended that district leaders exert their agency in developing district-wide goals that are aimed to increase and enhance culturally responsive knowledge. The first way to meet this goal could be for leaders to use their platforms to raise awareness of the importance of cultural responsive practice, not only in the classroom itself but throughout the core of the educational institution. Doing this by way of professional development sessions for teachers and administrators, workshops for parents, and events for the community could be favorable in meeting culturally set goals.

Leaders could also incorporate more culturally responsive learning opportunities through developing partnerships with local institutions and facilities. Students and staff alike could benefit from exposure of surrounding efforts that cater to the cultural needs of others. In addition to forming cohorts with universities or community groups as avenues for future instruction, leaders can also work with school improvement teams to ensure that cultural components are in keeping with current demographics. The ongoing exposure and various methods of education could serve to be influential in the progress toward creating a culturally responsive district while molding culturally responsive staff and students.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how cultural responsiveness informed the development of and decision-making about K-12 English Language Arts curricula in New Jersey. The twelve participants involved in this research offered an array of insight regarding their agency, the processes of getting to the implemented curricula, and factors that contribute to student learning through the lens of being culturally responsive.

Five key themes emerged from this study. Firstly, it was discovered that although supervisors do not have autonomy in the development and decision-making processes of the curriculum, they do have greater agency when it comes to selecting supplemental instructional resources that are used to bridge gaps and introduce students to diversity. The decision-making surrounding the selection of these resources is often affected by the cultural influences that impact student learning. In addition to selecting resources, curriculum supervisors are also responsible for supplying the classroom supports that are necessary for teacher growth. These include professional development opportunities that aim to present best practices and improve procedures. Another key theme was how a district's demographics controlled how cultural responsiveness was demonstrated through student learning. Districts that considered themselves to be diverse rely on the classroom teacher to adapt the curriculum to meet student needs, whereas non-diverse districts embed cultural content into the written program of study itself to guarantee that students get the exposure and experiences they may not otherwise find in their communities. Finally, this study revealed that efforts toward a culturally responsive curriculum vary, though many districts utilize extracurricular celebrations as methods of embracing and

learning about others' cultures. Ultimately, this study highlighted the importance of cultural responsiveness and its impact on the development of, decision-making about, and overall execution of the English Language Arts curriculum.

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**Appendix A**  
**Survey Protocol**

## **Cultural Responsiveness**

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**Start of Block: Cultural Responsiveness and the English Language Arts Curricula**

Q10 You are invited to participate in this online research survey titled How Cultural Responsiveness Informs the Development of and the Decision-Making about K-12 ELA Curricula. You are included in this survey because you are listed as an English Language Arts curriculum supervisor in the state of New Jersey.

The survey may take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, do not respond. Completing this survey indicates that you are voluntarily giving consent to participate in the survey. You will have two weeks to complete the survey.

The purpose of this research study is to explore how cultural responsiveness is used as a catalyst for curricular scheduling, content, and activities. The goal of this study is to bring to light the importance of cultural responsiveness and explore how it is being used by those who have the agency to guide change.

There are no risks or discomforts associated with this survey. There may be no direct benefit to you, however, by participating in this study, you may help us understand how cultural responsiveness informs the development of and decision-making about ELA curricula.

Your response will be kept confidential. Data will be stored in a secure computer file and the file will be destroyed at the completion of this study. Any part of the research that is published as part of this study will not include any identifiable information. If you have any questions about the survey, you can contact Dr. Ane Turner Johnson at 856-256-4500 x3818 or johnsona@rowan.edu. Please complete the checkboxes below.

☐ To participate in this survey, you must be 18 years or older and serve as an English Language Arts curriculum supervisor in New Jersey. Place a check box here if you meet these requirements (1)

☐ Completing this survey indicates that you are voluntarily giving consent to participate in the survey (2)

**End of Block: Cultural Responsiveness and the English Language Arts Curricula**

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**Start of Block: Background**

Q11 School's County

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Q12 Years in this position

---

Q13 Years in education

---

Q14 Formal title of role

---

Q15 Race/Ethnicity

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**End of Block: Background**

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**Start of Block: Survey**

Q1 I have agency to make decisions in my workplace without needing additional permission to carry out decisions.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
- 

Q2 I am the sole decision-maker for English Language Arts curricula.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
- 

Q3 I am the responsible party for developing the Language Arts curriculum.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
-

Q4 I am able to define the term cultural responsiveness as it relates to education.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
- 

Q5 I have participated in cultural responsive professional development and/or learning.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
- 

Q6 I consider myself to be culturally responsive.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
-

Q7 I understand the cultural contributions of the cultures represented in my district and use this knowledge to design culturally relevant curricula.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
- 

Q8 I think incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into their new learning will enhance student achievement and performance.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
- 

Q9 I have made curricular decisions based on the changing needs of my district's students.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Disagree (3)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (4)
- 

Q17 If you are willing to participate in an interview on this topic, please include your name and email below.

\*No personal information will be shared publicly and no identifiable information will be used in this study.\*

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**End of Block: Survey**

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## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol



1. What is the nature of your interest in your job? How did you get into this work?
2. Can you walk me through a typical day? What does your job entail?
3. Tell me a little bit about the make-up of your district. What are your impressions of the demographics?
4. Taking these demographics into consideration, how have the students' diverse cultural, linguistic/racial/or ethnic needs impacted learning?
5. How has that influenced your decision making about the curriculum? Give me an example.
6. How would you explain the kind of authority you have within your role?
7. Walk me through the process of getting to the implemented ELA curriculum.
  - a. Who is involved, what are the steps taken, from where does the final product come?
8. What are some factors that you take into account when deciding the curriculum?
9. How would you define cultural responsiveness?
10. In what ways do you care for the diverse cultural/racial/linguistic needs of your students? Can you provide an example?
11. What areas of the curriculum do you think can be most impacted by this care? Why do you think so? Tell me about a time you experienced such an impact.
12. Is there anything else that you find is important to discuss that we haven't already in relation to this topic?

## Appendix C

### Participant Information

Table 3

#### *Participant Information*

Name	Participant's Race	District Demographics %	Participant Designation	Years in Position	Years in Education	Formal title	SQ1	SQ2	SQ3	SQ4	SQ5	SQ6	SQ7	SQ8	SQ9	Total Agency Score	Total CR Score
Jack	White	44% White 16.5% Black 23% Hispanic 10.7% Asian .1% N.A. .1% H.N. 6% 2 or more	Diverse	15	27	Supervisor of Instruction	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	3	14	16
Mary	White	49% White .4% Black 6.6% Hispanic 42% Asian .2% N.A. .7 H.N. 1.4% 2 or more	Non-diverse	4	13	Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction	4	1	1	4	4	4	3	4	4	10	19
Olivia	White	86% White .5% Black 5% Hispanic 6% Asian .05% N.A. .05% H.N. 2.7% 2 or more	Non-diverse	2	35	Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction	4	2	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	14	19
Beth	White	71% White 7% Black 5.8% Hispanic 11% Asian .1% N.A. 0% H.N. 5% 2 or more	Diverse	6	30	District English/Language Arts Supervisor	3	3	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	14	18
Michelle	White	81% White 8.2% Black 4.3% Hispanic 4.3% Asian .1% N.A. .2% H.N. .2% 2 or more	Non-diverse	12	28	Supervisor of English	3	1	2	4	3	4	3	4	3	9	18
Nick	White	10.5% White 36% Black 50% Hispanic 2.4% Asian .1% N.A. .2% H.N. 1.2% 2 or more	Diverse	4	17	Director of Curriculum and Instruction	3	1	4	4	3	3	3	4	4	12	17
Emily	White	75% White 11.5% Black 7% Hispanic 5.7% Asian .06% N.A. .2% H.N. .2% 2 or more	Non-diverse	1	11	Instructional Supervisor	3	2	2	4	4	4	3	4	3	10	19
Mya	Black	77% White 3% Black 4% Hispanic 12% Asian 0% N.A. .08% H.N. 4% 2 or more	Non-diverse	1	15	Director of Curriculum and Instruction	3	2	3	4	4	3	3	4	3	11	18
Claire	White	43.5% White 15% Black 18% Hispanic 19% Asian .03% N.A. .03% H.N. 5% 2 or more	Diverse	8	24	Instructional Supervisor	3	2	4	3	3	2	2	3	3	12	13
Rachel	White	59.5% White 8% Black 31% Hispanic 2% Asian 0% N.A. .1% H.N. 0% 2 or more	Diverse	5	24	Director of Curriculum	3	2	3	4	4	3	2	3	4	12	16
William	White	84% White 1.2% Black 6% Hispanic 7.2% Asian .4% N.A. .3% H.N. .8% 2 or more	Non-diverse	2	18	Director of Curriculum and Instruction	4	1	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	13	20
Wendy	White	.5% White 31% Black 67% Hispanic .3% Asian .09% N.A. .1% H.N. .3% 2 or more	Diverse	5.5	32	Supervisor of Secondary ELA	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	11	15