

Fall 10-10-2017

## Perceptions and Experiences of White Teachers Teaching African American Students in K-5 Rural Midwest Schools

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# Perceptions and Experiences of White Teachers Teaching African American Students in K-5 Rural Midwest Schools

Tiffany L. Snyder

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Perceptions and Experiences of White Teachers Teaching  
African American Students in Rural Midwest Schools

Tiffany Snyder

Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Educational Administration

Julie McCann, Ph.D. Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University-Portland

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the teaching experiences of White educators working with African American students in rural elementary schools. The findings offered insight into the following questions: (a) How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students? (b) What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools? This study occurred in a predominately White community in the Midwest and involved three schools from the same district. The target group included nine White participants. Research methodology included individual interviews, researcher's journal, and a self-assessment survey. The interviews were recorded on an iPhone and transcribed. Data analysis involved coding to identify themes related to the research questions. Through analysis, the results discovered themes that corroborated with previous research about multiculturalism and culturally-responsive teaching. The most important theme of the study is the lack of White teacher preparation programs and professional development. The results indicated that the nine participants did not feel prepared to teach African American students, nor had they received professional development. The challenge to close the opportunity gap between African American and White students will continue if White educators are not prepared to teach students from different cultures.

*Keywords:* multiculturalism, culturally responsive teaching, achievement gap

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom and dad who have always offered unconditional love and support and have always been there for me. Thank you.

## Acknowledgements

It is difficult to know where to begin with this acknowledgment. I owe many thanks to the people in my life that have encouraged, supported, and have been patient with me on this journey. To my husband, Matt, thank you for all the pep talks, for believing in me when I was unsure of myself, for believing I could succeed, and for your endless support. To my mom, Carol, thank you for “putting up” with me at family gatherings when I was physically present but mentally was focused on this process. Thank you, mom, for reminding me of the importance of family and to “stop and smell the roses”. To my dad, Rodney, even though you are not here with us on earth, I know you have been with me through this journey from above. Dad, you taught me that with hard work and determination I can accomplish anything. There were many nights of tears throughout this process, but the memory of your love and support helped me through. To my children, Destinee, Karsen, and Kaden, thank you for providing unending inspiration. I love you all with my whole heart.

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair; Dr. Julie McCann, your guidance and understanding throughout my years of study have been treasured. I appreciate your patience with me through this long process and for helping me see cultural competency through a different lens. Additionally, I want to thank my committee members, Dr. Corey McKenna and Dr. La’Toya Thomas-Dixon, for your perceptiveness, wisdom, and positive feedback. Thank you to my colleagues who have played a significant role in support throughout this process.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my staff; you are an amazing group of educators. Thank you for your trust and support in me. Thank you for making a difference in our students’ lives. I AM BLESSED!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers are working diligently to prepare all students to be successful in the 21st century. Educators understand the importance of preparing students but may not be reaching all students. Revealing statistics on the racial balance among teachers in the US are astonishing sharing that 82% of the K-12 teaching force is White (NCES, 2015a). Despite awareness of the opportunity gap and promising attempts to close this gap, progress has been disappointingly slow. The reading and math achievement gap between White students and African American students has narrowed very little over the past 50 years, despite nearly a half-century of supposed progress in race relations and an increased emphasis on closing academic discrepancies between groups and students (Cramer, 2016). Consciousness is growing that there is a gap between the educational achievement of White and African American populations in the United States. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began tracking the gap in the 1970s. Throughout this dissertation, the term “opportunity gap” will be used. The opportunity gap refers to “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources-expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources-that support learning at home and in school” (Darling-Hammond, 2012, p. 28).

The researcher is aware of the dilemma in using correct terminology when describing categories of race. Agyemang, Bhopal, and Bruijnzeels (2017) spoke to this issue and defined racial terms in the rapidly changing social lexicon can be problematic. “African American is currently the preferred description for a person with ancestral origins who self identifies, or is identified as African” (Agyemang et al., 2017, p. 1016). For purposes of this paper, this researcher used the term African American to describe the changing student and parent

population in the participant district. This study was conducted due to the changing demographics of African American students in rural communities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the teaching experiences of White teachers who taught African American students in rural elementary schools. This study was conducted to address a lack of research about White teachers educating African American students in a rural setting. Evidence from the NCES (2015a) showed the majority of public schools do not educate African American students well, and the debate regarding how to successfully educate African American students is continuous and ongoing. This study sought to answer the following questions in search of strategies for closing the opportunity gap.

1. How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?
2. What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools?

**Opportunity gap and its history.** Racial and ethnic inequality in education has a long and persistent history in the United States and has been well documented (Lee, 2002). In 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled for equity and against segregation in *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, progress was made toward the academic opportunity gap (McBride, 2006). However, progress between White students and African American students has been slow and incomplete. Opportunity gaps, measured using standardized test scores, are one means by which the inequality of educational outcomes can be monitored. The Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA), implemented in 1965, was intended to increase focus on the inequality of school resources (G.M. Miller, 2011). After ESEA was signed into law, the Civil Rights Act in 1964 spiked optimism for progress in education. The Equality of Educational

Opportunity report (Coleman et al., 1966) drew attention to significant differences in academic achievement between White students and African American students. Although the opportunity gap narrowed during the 1970s and 1980s, progress then leveled off and the opportunity gap stubbornly persisted (Lee, 2002).

Federal legislation in 2001 passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in hopes that all schools would meet uniform academic requirements (G.M. Miller, 2011). All students were required to meet the standards and schools were held accountable to specified measures. The goal of NCLB was to ensure all students were proficient in reading and math by 2014. NCLB required states, for the first time, to disaggregate the data into subgroups which included race (SARAC, 2013). The intention was to create a clear picture of achievement among all students, so no child was left behind. Instead of raising achievement for African American students, the data from NCLB painted a larger picture of inequities in education (Finkel, 2010). NCLB did lead to more targeted interventions for struggling students, but the opportunity gap remained a decade after the Act was implemented.

**Data on opportunity gap.** The opportunity gap between African American and White students was measured over time by achievement scores on reading and math assessments and the graduation rate. Despite 40 years of research, African American students still do not perform well. Analysis of test scores by the National Report Card in 2015 showed that approximately 30% more White students scored at or above the proficient level than African American students on 4th-grade and 8th-grade math and reading assessments, equating to two grade levels difference (NCES, 2015).

Achievement disparities are often attributed to socioeconomic factors (Miksic, 2014). According to 2015 data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), 21% of children younger than 18

lived in poverty and 38% of those were African American children. Living in poverty is defined as a family of four earning \$24,230 or less per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Research also showed that dropout rates tended to be greater among children who live in poverty. Hernandez (2011) reported that children who live in poverty and read below grade level in 3rd grade are three times more likely to fail to graduate from high school and low-income students were more likely to drop out of high school than students from high-income homes. According to Lynch (2013), students from low-income families are over 10 times more likely than high-income families to drop out. This data supported my interest and curiosity on whether preparation for White teachers working with African American students was sufficient.

With schools in the rural Midwest becoming more diverse, it has become more difficult for White teachers to provide an equitable education to all students they serve because of their lack of culturally-relevant pedagogy, understanding of racial cultures, and teacher training. The population of African American students in rural schools has steadily increased each year. It is critical for our education system to respond and use resources available to address the needs of African-American students.

### **Research Problem**

There has been a plethora of research from education departments at the federal, state, and local levels on the White and African American student opportunity gap and ideas on how to address the learning of African American students, but the issue persists (Friedlaender et al., 2014). In 2012, 82% of classroom teachers were White and 7% were African American nationwide (NCES, 2015a). In one state in the Midwest, 95% of teachers were White and 1% were African American (NCES, 2015a). White teachers educating African American students

experience challenges arising from racial and cultural differences of their students daily (Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

Burkhalter (2011) addressed the experiences of White teachers teaching African American students in a study when she interviewed five White teachers who acknowledged the effect their culture had on their teaching. In the Burkhalter study, teachers transformed their teaching to better meet the needs of African American students. The study looked at three areas: how racial and cultural differences between White teachers and African American students might stimulate teachers' transformative learning, how White teachers understood their culture, and how their White culture affected teaching practices and students' learning. Three major findings emerged from the study:

1. Every participant's understanding of racial and cultural differences was not complete.
2. Participants' connections with their students, as well as among their students, reflected engaged interactions.
3. Every participant experienced a disorienting dilemma as each realized that their African American students see the world differently (Burkhalter, 2011).

The Burkhalter study reflected what many White teachers working with African American students have faced. Many White teachers were raised in primarily White communities and had little interaction with different races or ethnicities (Burkhalter, 2011). Because of this limited contact, many White teachers had a monoculture perspective (Anderson & Hill, 2013) and viewed African American students as less capable of achieving academically. This limited perspective White teachers held impeded efforts to bridge cultural gaps and gain knowledge about the racial and cultural differences of students of color, thereby affecting the teaching practices and students' learning (Lynn, 2006).



Our systems were designed in a way that does not provide equity to all students in the educational system (Jones, 2005). Teachers in a school that has predominately students of color are at a disadvantage and need information and awareness regarding the culture of power and the inequitable educational access for some students. A difficulty White teachers face is the inability to inspire their African American students and to engage them in the learning that cultivates critical learners (Jones, 2005).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because, historically, African American students perform at a lower level than their White peers. Further, as the student populations are increasingly made up of African American students, the White teacher population remains the same. In 2015, NAEP reported that 82% of teachers were White; therefore, African American students are being educated by people who do not share their race or cultural background (NCES, 2015a, 2015b). Hence, the cultural mismatch makes it difficult for students to make academic progress. Given that beliefs about the reason for this dissimilarity vary, a detailed investigation is warranted. In addition, students benefit from any pedagogic strategies that help to narrow the opportunity gap between African American and White students. The following research questions were key to this study:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools?

The theoretical framework is grounded in critical theory. Critical theory was developed in the Frankfurt School, known as the Institute of Social Research. Critical theory highlighted that all knowledge is historical and biased (Coradetti, 2011). Frankfurt School leaders believed

that people should become experts of their own knowledge. In addition, critical social theory stimulates the need for transformative learning through the application of theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2013). This critical learning allows learners to view education with a mindfulness of racial and cultural difference with the determination to change.

In critical theory, the goal of examination is to review and transform a person's established beliefs to create a more unbiased education system (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Critical theory in education is about asking how our educational system can best offer education to all students by presenting different views of underprivileged members of society (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Similarly, my hope is that this study will, as Denzin and Lincoln (1998) stated, generate an "understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new understandings as information and sophistication improve" (p. 211).

Within the critical theory perspective, attentiveness to Hatch's (2002) thoughts regarding the impact of historical structures have an influence on life for individuals. These structures exist as part of a person's experiences and result in varying ways based on their race. As an educator and a researcher, I reflected on how these constructions continue to affect the wellbeing of students of color and White teachers. The understanding I embody, as a White researcher, is innately subjective given that knowledge is brought about through the set of beliefs of the researcher (Hatch, 2002). The purpose of critical inquiry is to raise awareness of injustice and derive change; therefore, discourse is an essential piece of the process that will occur during the interview process. In addition, examining the Whiteness of teaching and its relationship to teaching is critical when the number of African American students is increasingly filling the classroom. A report by the National Education Association, 'Time for a Change: Diversity in

Teaching Revisited,” claims that the discrepancy between students of color in the classroom and White teachers is a roadblock towards an increase in academic achievement for all students (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014). Over 80% of our classrooms represent White educators. Picower (2009) notes that White teachers play a critical role in creating opportunity for African American students. For this reason, examining White educators’ experiences when teaching African American students is plausible that new understandings may be unveiled.

I began this journey with excitement and I was ready to examine the literature knowing I would have much to learn. As a White educator teaching in a school whose student body was 68% African American, I was unprepared to teach African American students. Upon entering a school with a large population of students of color, I realized quickly that I was traveling on an unexpected journey. My prior experiences as a White teacher made me feel confident about my teaching ability; however, I soon realized that racial and cultural differences that I was unfamiliar with were present, which caused me to doubt my abilities. I was determined to acquire effective strategies as my awareness increased through my new classroom experience. These experiences caused me to reflect often on what White teachers must know and do to be effective teachers for African American students. I enjoyed many conversations with colleagues and my committee chair but struggled to make sense of the information at times. Seeing the potential bias, I wanted to align my beliefs with and become more culturally competent. As I entered into this study there was much I was unaware of when working with African American students. My journey quickly turned into a process as I wrestled with the conflict of my beliefs as a White woman and from my upbringing and experiences in a White culture. As I continued to examine and reflect on my perspectives, I realized I have just begun traveling on a continued journey of learning and self-reflection.

## **Limitations of the Study**

In this study, as the researcher, I assumed that the majority of the participants surveyed met the criteria and participated with honesty. My assumption was that the participants were being honest but may have been cautious in their answers. Participants may have provided answers at times that were diplomatically suitable. The possibility that a participant might want to drop out of the study was accepted and provided for; participants were assured that there would be no consequences for dropping out of the study. It was also possible that participants were cautious in their replies regarding cultural competency, as well as the academic achievement gap (Diller & Moule, 2005). Participants may have had anxiety that they sounded prejudiced or that they were not successful teaching all students (Narayan & George, 2003). The consent form assured participants that data would remain confidential and offered participants the option to withdraw at a later date.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Academic Achievement Gap:* The discrepancy in educational outcomes between various student groups, namely, African American, Native American, certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, as compared to primarily White and various Asian American students at the higher end of the academic performance scale (Pitre, 2014).

*African American:* The ethnic group of non-Hispanic persons who have origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (Race and Ethnicity Classifications, n.d.).

*Black:* A population of people having darker skin from the African American culture (Black, n.d.).

*Cultural competence:* The “ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in the context of human resources, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies whose employees work with persons from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds” (Diller, 2010, p. 16).

*Culturally-responsive teaching:* Instruction that uses “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches *to and through* the strengths of these students” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 31).

*Equality:* “Promoting fairness and justice by giving everyone the same thing” (Mann, 2014).

*Equity:* “People getting access to the same opportunities” (Mann, 2014).

*Multicultural education:* “Any form of education or teaching that incorporates the histories, texts, values, beliefs, and perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds” (Multicultural Education, 2013, para. 1).

*Racial Groups:* The term *race* refers to differences that people have. These groups may have commonalities and differences, but society labels them as dissimilar and treats them differently (Lumby, 2006).

*Underserved students:* Students who are not meeting academic services. It is also believed that these students are not receiving an equitable education (Rendón, 2006).

## **Summary**

Chapter One briefly introduced the persistence of the crisis of the opportunity gap affecting African American students in the Midwest and throughout the nation. This chapter examined the background of the problem of the underachievement of African American students.

Additionally, historical insights were shared regarding why African American students have been underserved in the United States. Chapter One concluded with the definition of important terms and concepts.

The dissertation will consist of five chapters. The first chapter included background information, a narrative of the research problem, and the research questions. Succeeding chapters comprise a review of the literature related to the study, an explanation of the research design and methodology, and a presentation of the findings from the research. The final chapter will present conclusions derived from the findings as they relate to the theoretical framework and to implications for theory and practice.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The gap in results in reading and math between White and African American students in America continues to be a matter of concern in the realm of education. The U.S. Department of Education (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin-Anderson, & Rahman, 2009) reported that, in 2003, in spite of spending billions of dollars in federal money to help close the academic gap, the problem continued, and reports indicated that African American students generally score lower than White students in reading and math. Therefore, the question persists regarding what is required to close the opportunity gap between African American and White students. The alarming statistics of White teachers in schools as compared to African American teachers must also be examined and addressed. The NCES (2015a) revealed that in 2015, 83% of all teachers were White and 7% African American teachers. There was an increase of minority students in schools along with an increase of White teachers. However, the African American teacher population remained the same (King, 2016).

This chapter will discuss the cultural mismatch of White teachers, their views about culturally-relevant pedagogy, along with how White educators can advance educational opportunities for African American students. The purpose of this chapter is to examine relevant studies that illustrate African American students' standings in terms of the opportunity gap, special education, discipline, and dropout rates. My research questions for this study are:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools?

## **Conceptual Framework**

This research examined how White educators perceived the opportunity gap between African American and White students in rural elementary schools. This study provided an understanding to strengthen efforts to inform quality instruction for African American students and to improve student achievement. This study sought to illuminate a glimpse of White teacher's knowledge of working with African American students. Research indicated that the preparation or training of White teachers does make a difference and enhances learning for African American students (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Examining the framework of the study, the researcher investigated the perceptions of White educators, cultural mismatch, and culturally-responsive pedagogy to gain an understanding of why the opportunity gap exists. Understanding the perceptions of White teachers is essential to address the research findings that teachers have a White unconscious attitude towards their students and do not use effective teaching practices (Yoon, 2002). Examination of this issue allowed insight into if and how these attitudes are showing up in schools in the study.

The change of demographics between African American students and teachers has illustrated the need for White teachers to be responsive to the needs of African American students in the classroom because African American students continue to trail White students in academics. Clark (2010) claimed that understanding multiculturalism has never been as important for educators as it is in today's society. Research indicated that students who have teachers who neither reflect their race, nor have a substantial understanding about the communities from which they come, easily misread the behaviors and needs of African American students. Studies also demonstrated that although there is a growth in diverse cultures,



the opportunity gap is not lessening (Clark, 2010). Educators have struggled unconsciously with diversity and are often unaware of their own bias or how it affects their relationships with students of color (Clark, 2010). It has been documented that a cultural mismatch between students and teachers exists (Saffold, 2007). According to Guild and Ganger (1998), a mismatch may form where there is a difference between the learning styles and beliefs in the home compared to the school environment. The abundance of literature on the cultural mismatch between White teachers and African American students informed me that researching this topic further was essential.

Studies indicating the significance of teacher-student relationships (Fritz & Miller-Heyl, 1995; Yoon, 2002), and the quality of teacher characteristics and development (Siegel, 1999; Vavrus, 2008) exist, connecting these elements to student academic success. Yet, evidence also exists that shows White teachers, especially in highly diverse schools, tend to have unconscious biases towards their students and tend to use ineffective teaching practices (Solomon & Battistich, 1996; Waxman, Huang, & Padron, 1995; Yoon, 2002).

The third point in the framework addresses Culturally-Relevant Pedagogy. Student achievement is affected by the instructional strategies used in the classroom. According to Gay (2000), Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy addresses what happens in the classroom and enhances the power of teaching and what it can achieve for African American students. Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy is not something that occurs once a semester or once a day. It occurs under all aspects of teaching to teach the whole child using culturally-suitable applications for learning and culturally-valued knowledge in the curriculum (Gay, 2000).

Demographics are changing in the classroom and teachers must be receptive and perceptive to the shift of cultures and what it means for their teaching pedagogy if they are to

effectively instruct African American students (Saffold, 2007). According to Banks (2001), teachers match the typical figure of the White and middle class yet White teachers are tasked to create a learning environment for diverse students as well. Figure 1 depicts an illustration of the conceptual framework for this study.

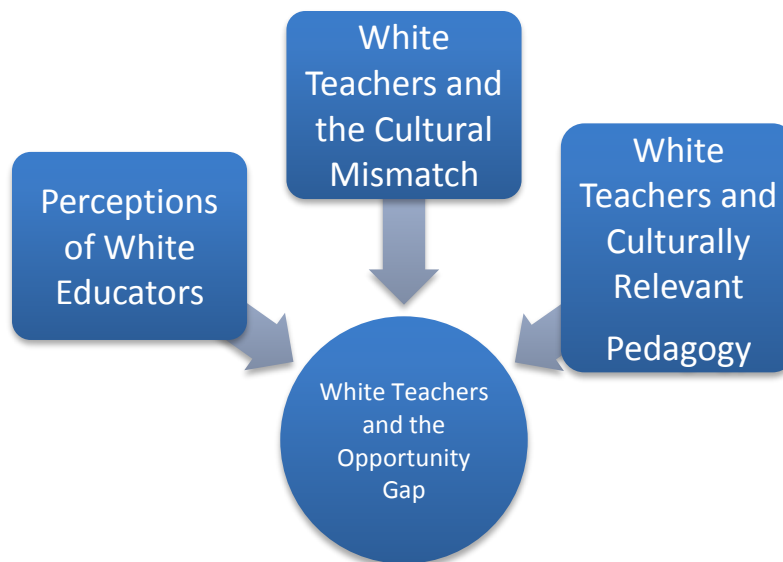


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the literature review.

To create a frame to guide the researcher, case study propositions and rivals were created (Yin, 2014). This case study's proposition is White teachers' will promote equity for African American students. The rival proposition for this case study is White teachers' will not promote equity for African American students.

### **Statistics and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups**

The opportunity gap has persisted for decades. Coleman et al.'s (1966) *Equality of Educational Opportunities* brought society's attention to the reality that opportunity between White and African American students is different. Specifically, the report found the background of students and their social standing play a large role in influencing educational outcomes (Coleman et al, 1966). The study confirmed that schools and teachers had a significant impact

on student outcomes. The report also suggested that different school environments led to diverse outcomes for students. Statisticians immediately critiqued the study because the methodology used in the report was becoming outdated (Hanushek, 2016). However, the report proved to be a foundation for understanding the U.S. education system.

According to the NCES (2014), African American students made up 16% of the nation's student body. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), the population of minority students has grown by 9% since 2014, whereas the White student population has decreased by 9%. The number of minority students was projected to increase gradually over the next 10 years (Riche, 2000). For example, in some urban schools, African Americans were the majority population, and Riche (2000) projected that by 2030, more than half of United States students will be students of color.

In contrast, data from the NCES (2015) showed that the racial distribution of schoolteachers demonstrated a trend notably different from that seen among the students. According to NAEP (NCES, 2015a, 2015b), 81.9% of teachers in the nation's public schools were White, while only 6.8% were African American. The district in which the study took place, conducted in the Midwest, had a population of 95% White teachers (Boser, 2014). The data offered in this section demonstrated there was a significant difference between the racial distributions of the teaching force and that of the student population. Bireda and Chait (2011) stated that minority students make up 41% of public schools but only 14% of the teaching force represented Latino or African American educators. Maxwell (2014) wrote, "Policymakers report that minority students are already the majority in elementary grades" (p. 2). It is likely that a White teacher will stand in front of a class that is majority nonwhite students. Cochran-Smith

(1995a) shares that 80%-93% of teacher education students are White and over 80% of our teaching force is White.

**Cultural mismatch.** The vast difference between the makeup of the teaching force and students in the American classroom suggested that many African American students would never experience having a teacher who reflects their race (Gay, 2000). Cultural mismatches have had detrimental effects on the learning among African American students. Guild and Ganger (1998) stated that White teachers have not been successful teaching African American students because of the cultural mismatch and lack of culturally-competent teachers. Furthermore, if the U.S. educational system is going to be successful, White educators must be aware of the importance of understanding African American students' backgrounds and become aware of their unconscious biases (Bolgatz, 2005).

The racial and cultural mismatch between the African American student population and the White teacher population has been considerable (Cross, 2003). Many experts (Gay, 2002; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Sleeter, 2001) warned that the mismatch has effects that harm the education of African American students, including the following:

- Students not achieving to their potential
- A higher number of special education referrals
- A higher number of African American students referred for disciplinary actions
- A lower graduation rate for African American students (Vavrus, 2008)

The harmful effects occurred because White teachers do not provide culturally-relevant instruction and do not understand cultural differences. The effects of a cultural mismatch presented a problem, as Ladson-Billings (2006) suggested, because many White teachers were inadequately prepared to work within diverse classrooms. According to Romo (2016), teacher-

training programs struggled to develop a way to prepare teachers to work effectively in a multicultural classroom. Hammond (2015) noted that culturally-responsive teaching would empower student learning. Culturally-responsive pedagogy was not about teaching diversity in the classroom but helping teachers design instruction that students of color understand at deeper levels. Culturally-responsive pedagogy enabled students to use their culture as a cognitive scaffold that assisted in making learning easier. Furthermore, teachers often thought that teaching about culture through food, music, etc. was meeting the needs of African American students, but much more than that was needed. Hammond (2015) shared that teachers must organize student learning around cultural principles. In addition, culturally-responsive pedagogy was to help White teachers understand their biases and help them better understand the lives of their students outside of school.

According to Milner (2006), White teachers expected less of African American children, which affected the learning in the classroom and, therefore, yielded harmful effects on African American students. Literature suggested White teachers held lower expectations for African American students' behavior and academic success (Morris, 2005). McGrady and Reynolds (2013) contended that cultural mismatch between White teachers and African American students could occur from racial stereotypes. Therefore, the life experiences of White teachers make it challenging for them to understand the importance of culturally-relevant teaching. Studies conducted on cultural mismatch implied that African American students were treated differently than their White peers when taught by White teachers. Specifically, African American students received lower grades from White teachers on both behavior and ability than their White peers (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). Furthermore, the study conducted by Downey and Pribesh (2004) also communicated that White teachers who taught nonwhite students were less satisfied with

teaching than White teachers who taught a majority of White students. The literature indicated racial matching between teachers and students continued to shape student-teacher relationships in ways that were harming African-American students.

Deruy (2016) stated that around 7% of the country's educators are African American, even though African American students make up around 16 percent of the student population. This statistic revealed that the majority of both White and African American students would never experience a nonwhite teacher. Romo (2016) indicated that there was an alarming disconnect as the student population was shifting to be more diverse, the teaching workforce remained 80% White across the nation. According to data from 2013 and 2014, the majority of students entering K-12 schools were nonwhite, but only 17% of their teachers were people of color (Klein, 2014). If the current trend continues, White teachers will teach in front of a class that encompasses predominantly African American students without being trained properly in appropriate pedagogy.

**Impact of White teachers on African American students.** As the student population of African American students continues to grow, the population of White educators remains dominant. In return, African American students are confronted with the stress that their teacher does not share the same racial and cultural background or understanding (Lewis, 2005). African American students are being taught by people who are not of their race. Consequently, African American students are confronted with challenges that White teachers do not or have not faced.

Picower (2009) shared that the number of White educators teaching, and the history of inequality, has repercussions for White teachers in creating patterns in the opportunity gap. Ladson-Billings (2000) conveyed racism is embedded in White people and must be examined for White teachers to understand inequality. Racism is rooted in the American society; it must be

analyzed and not ignored (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Consequently, White educators are oblivious to their Whiteness and are oblivious to their privilege. Ladson-Billings (2000) concluded that White educators must examine their biases, and even their own culture, so they have an understanding of White privilege and power. Cochran-Smith (1995b) agreed that White educators must develop mindfulness around issues of race, privilege, and power if they want to have success with African American students. Specifically, it is recommended that potential educators enroll in courses aimed to help them examine their belief system and their life experiences, particularly their understanding of race.

Picower (2009) addressed educational leaders and shared that Whiteness had an impact on teachers' understanding of African American students in schools. Educational leaders have a responsibility to address and change these understandings to prepare teachers for any environment that they teach in (Picower, 2009). Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, and Garrison-Wade (2008) concluded that efforts are needed to “reverse the stereotype White teachers have towards African American students” (p. 60). White educators must become more aware of the needs of African American students and attend professional development workshops that will support them in understanding a culture or race different from their own. Douglas et al. (2008) also shared that classroom environments must be without preconceptions and all students must be held to the same expectations.

**Opportunity gap.** Achievement disparities for White and African American students have been noted in reading and math. The NAEP (NCES, 2013) reported that White students continued to score 25 or more points higher in math than African American students, and that there was an average gap of 31 points in reading achievement in the nation. Poliakoff (2006) exposed an even more troubling picture when she reviewed the 2013 NAEP scores and found

only 9% of White fourth graders were below basic levels in math. By contrast, 34% of African American students scored below the basic level on the same assessment. The National Report Card (NCES, 2015a) analyzed the data in a different light. The report noted that in 2015, 51% of White fourth graders scored in the proficient range on the math assessment, but only 19% of African American students did so. The achievement gap in reading was similar; the number of White students performing at the proficient level was 46%, whereas it was only 18% for African American students (NCES, 2015b).

The opportunity gap between African American and White students is not new. Coleman et al. (1966) brought this problem to light in the 1960s; their report, *Equality of Educational Opportunities*, unofficially known as the Coleman Report, was one of the largest social science reports in history. The study conducted by Coleman and colleagues involved 600,000 children in 4,000 schools in the nation. Coleman et al. (1966) concluded that school-based poverty issues were influencing the school opportunity gap. Researchers argued that the opportunity gaps created long-term consequences, including limiting post-secondary opportunities, employment, and wages (Jencks, 1992). Although the NAEP (NCES, 2010) revealed that the gap narrowed in 2007, progress was slow, indicating the need for a change in the U.S. education system.

Although there was a history of intense study of the opportunity gap, reasons for its existence, and information on how to fix it, questions persisted. Lacour and Tissington (2011), along with other scholars, blamed single-parent households, poverty, socioeconomic circumstances, and student behaviors for the existence of the opportunity gap. Scholars including Kathryn Au, Roland G. Tharp, Lisa Delpit, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Geneva Gay worked tirelessly to construct culturally-responsive pedagogy to address the absence of a cultural curriculum in schools (Gay, 2000, as cited by Williams, 2008). The absence of cultural



curriculum and teaching practices has been frustrating for educators, motivating scholars to seek ways to bring cultural responsive pedagogy into the classroom.

**Special education referrals, including gifted.** Zorigian and Job (2017) reported that African American students made up 16% of the student population in the United States, yet African American students made up almost 32% of the students who received special education services. Disproportionate placement is defined as a certain group in a program that is larger than the percentage of that group in the school system. Disproportionate placement continued to be a concern at the national level for African American students. Gay (2002) contended lack of knowledge about culture by White educators, along with comprehension of how culture affected learning, caused African-Americans to be over-referred for special education services. Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) defined the term *disproportionate placement* as a particular group of students represented more frequently than in the general population. Research suggested an over-representation of African American students in special education and an underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education (Rebora, 2011). According to statistics compiled by NCES (2013), African American students made up 16% of the student populace, but 32% of the African American population were in special education programs. Conversely, NCES (2013) reported that African American students were underrepresented in gifted programs. Approximately 4% of White students were in gifted programs, compared to 1% of African American students.

Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) researched the issue of disproportionality and found three major themes when examining educational literature. The themes included:

1. Cultural variables that affected initial referral;
2. Bias in the assessment procedure; and

### 3. Effectiveness of instruction and intervention. (p. 16)

In addition, Russell et al. (2006), as cited by Williams (2008), found, in the case study, African American disproportionality in school discipline, three other factors that led to disproportionality in special education: “social and environmental factors, contributions of general education, and the special education referral process” (p. 26). Through the research design, Russell et al. (2006) observed race had a substantial effect on the student’s viewpoint. The study also reported there was a strong link between economic threat factors and school readiness. Additionally, educators reported during interviews they did not have resources available to help manage student behavior, which may also result from a cultural mismatch. Participants in the study shared they were unsure how to handle disruptive behaviors, especially as students got older, so they referred and placed students in special education. Additionally, participants shared if they would have had more resources for behavior they could have addressed the issue and got the behaviors controlled. The findings were objectively reported and indicated that teachers’ instructional time was frequently interrupted by social problems, discipline problems, and concern for the welfare of students. These factors prompted many referrals. Several studies indicated schools faced challenges when interacting with poor minority students and their families (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2006). Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) found to lessen teachers’ troubles in the classroom, predominantly behaviors, African American students were being placed in special education classes which increased the number of African American students in the special education classroom.

Gay (2002) proposed African American students were often over-referred for special education services because educators lacked knowledge about cultural diversity. Over-referring had been evident in the number of minority students placed in special education, and the data

illustrated the need for increased professional development regarding culturally-responsive teaching. Culturally-responsive teaching was a determinant of how problems of underachievement were solved and is a vigorous teaching method to advance student's learning. Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy is assisting students to learn at a deep level, uses culture as a cognitive frame, it is building relationships to lower students' stress, and it is organizing instruction around cultural foundations or socio-cultural learning (Hammond, 2015). Gay (2002) noted that White educators must receive culturally-responsive pedagogy to contend with learning challenges. She also pointed out that students must not be "expected to divorce themselves from their culture" but rather to embrace it (p. 14). Gay (2002) further asserted that the lack of White teacher cultural competency had a significant effect on the academic achievement of African American students.

**Discipline.** Several studies reported that African American students are more likely to be disciplined and receive more discipline referrals (Skiba et al., 2006). In fact, Monroe (2005) acknowledged that African American students were suspended two to five times more than White students. Monroe (2005) investigated literature on school discipline and the alienation of African American males; his literature suggested White teachers often disciplined African American students more harshly than was needed because they did not connect with their students nor understand their behavior. In addition, Monroe (2005) suggested that educators dedicated little effort to address behavior concerns in the beginning when non-punitive methods were likely to be successful.

White teachers may not have realized consciously how biased their views of African American students were; yet trends suggested that White teachers were influenced by stereotypical views that African American students required harsh discipline measures rather

than non-punitive ones (Ferguson, 2000). According to the United States Department of Education in Civil Rights (Monroe, 2005), African American students were suspended or expelled three times more frequently than White students. More specifically, 4.6% of White students were suspended, compared with 16.4% of African American students. The high number of discipline referrals suggested the need for teacher training about racial issues and treatment of African American students in the classroom (Townsend, 2000). Monroe (2005) claimed restricted knowledge of cultural diversity limited White educators to implement inappropriate discipline procedures. Teacher education programs failed to use culturally-responsive pedagogy that went beyond academics and the programs did not include management in classrooms and student discipline (Gay, 2002).

The high number of referrals for discipline placed African American students at risk for emotional disorders (Simon & Burns, 1997). Simon and Burns (1997) reported that nationwide, African American students were three times more likely than White students to be suspended. What seemed to follow racial disproportionality in schools was an overrepresentation of African American students being incarcerated (Simon & Burns, 1997). Close to 1 million of the almost 2.3 million incarcerated in the United States were African Americans. The over-representation of African American males in the U.S. justice system justified the need for continual analysis of racial disproportionality (Fenny & Rose, 2007).

**Dropout rate.** Statistics provided by NCES (2012) revealed African American males dropped out at a rate of 8.7%; the rate for White students was 5.4%. Overall, NCES (2014) stated a growing body of research predicted factors that contributed to students' dropping out of school (). Somers and Piliawsky (2004) suggested these factors included students living in poverty, large family size, low levels of family support, self-esteem, and education. Somers and

Piliawsky wrote that at-risk youth should be identified and provided with interventions. Prevention included programs that provide academic tutoring. It was also worth noting that relationship building with the tutor and having tutors who were role models encouraged students to be hopeful about their future (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Intervention programs helped those faced with other hardships as well. As Somers and Piliawsky (2004) stated, powerful dropout prevention programs would provide students with an idealism that they can overcome generational poverty and be provided with employment opportunities.

The research reported by Somers and Piliawsky (2004) did include limitations. The sample size was comparatively small, and measures used in this study were newly crafted for this research. Somers and Piliawsky observed that upcoming research would be more beneficial if it were assessed through experimental protocols in which students were randomly selected from the population.

**White teachers' attitudes and practices.** The culture of a school had significant implications for teaching practices and student success. The culture of the school was critical because it could assist in retaining great teachers and help teachers learn. Studies indicated that teacher-student relationship (Yoon, 2002) and the quality of teacher characteristics (Vavrus, 2008) were connected to student achievement. Further, evidence revealed White teachers, especially those in high-poverty schools, and schools with a large population of African American students tended to have unconscious bias and attitudes toward students and tended to use poor teaching practices (Yoon, 2002). The findings provided important information of teacher-student relationship. However, it must be noted that the study used a self-report of teachers for variables and a small population of teachers in a metropolitan area. Teachers' reports of their relationships with students may have been influenced by their perception and the

findings could not be generalized to the rural areas of the United States. Sleeter (2001) found White teachers must be prepared to work in diverse schools if the opportunity gap was to be reduced. He noted White teachers were receptive to learning about diversity. However, education programs and professional development provided disorganized multicultural content. Additionally, teachers in urban schools were unprepared for the students and the environment. Many White teachers who experienced community-based learning have shared the benefits of teaching cross-culturally (Sleeter, 1992; Weiner, 2006). Community-based learning included curriculum that was connected to their experiences and made a connection to the community (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

According to Townsend (2000), White teachers must also acknowledge cultural differences. Merryfield (2000) suggested White teachers needed to experience and listen to diverse students to gain a better understanding of their needs. Ortlieb, Burt, and Cheek (2013) conducted a study to measure fourth-grade student's attitudes and perceptions of their teachers about fairness, interests for students, understanding, classroom management, individual attention, and motivation. Their findings suggested students would be engaged and make an effort if they had a strong family environment, formed relationships with their teachers, and experienced verbal communication and support in the classroom.

Carter (2012) noted White teachers must think intentionally about African American students and their differing needs so connections between students can be made. Moreover, Thompson (1999) found White teachers did not hold African American students to the same standards as White students. Additionally, Thompson found White teachers did not value the knowledge that African American students brought to a classroom.

Similarly, Douglas et al. (2008) found that White educators did not hold African American students to the same standards as they did their White peers. Therefore, they found that holding students to low expectations hindered African American student's achievement. Ladson-Billings (1994) reported that academic achievement of African American students was often devalued by teachers' perceptions that African American students would not learn as well as their White peers. Moreover, White educators must understand their personal biases because bias has adverse effects on the academic needs of African American students (Bonnie, 2015).

White teachers must confront their unconscious bias. Clark (2010) shared that school leaders must also undertake the challenge of confronting biases to have a positive effect on schools. Larson and Barton (2013) claimed that equity in education will begin to occur when school leaders undertake the challenge of educating themselves about race or culture biases they may have. First, comprehending the difference between equality and equity is key. For change to occur, professional development must be ongoing. Kose (2009) suggested that leaders in the educational system should approach equity in school improvement with their teachers. School leaders have the power to address change in their schools. Therefore, if leaders at the school and district level demonstrated the importance of viewing policy and practice through the lens of equity, teachers in their building would also see the importance (Larson & Barton, 2013).

Confronting issues of race is not an easy feat because it can be difficult to withstand racial biases and stereotypes that are too easily accepted in society (Clark, 2010). As the literature has shared, educators have no training or experiences in leading direct conversations about race that are critical to making progress. Larson and Barton (2013) shared that, if school leaders did not have the abilities to engage all stakeholders in those conversations and did not yet

have the understanding of equity in education, it would be difficult for the leaders to “control” the strong opinions that rise from educators, and causes additional problems to occur.

**Culturally-responsive teaching.** Sociologists have analyzed ways in which White teachers could have stronger relationships with the homes and cultures of African American students who were not successful in school (Banks & Banks, 1997). The theory of culturally-responsive teaching allowed educators to protect students’ cultural background and helped them to succeed academically (Banks & Banks, 1997). Gay (2002) shared the knowledge and attitudes that teachers possess regarding diverse culture were critical to the academic achievement of African American students. A critical component of building a community and strong classrooms was effective communication. Understanding how styles of communication differed among racial and ethnic groups and reflecting upon cultural values and how they shaped learning behaviors was essential for educators (Gay, 2002). For example, Tannen (1990) discussed “rapport talk,” in which students talked along with the speaker to show support. However, this style would be problematic in U.S. classrooms and students would not be allowed to use it, meaning they would be silenced, denied their natural way of talking and participating, diminishing their academic efforts (Gay, 2000). Rapport talk was problematic in classrooms because teachers found it to be rude and uncouth because it was not a norm for White culture (Gay, 2002).

Many scholars examined teaching itself to address specific concerns about educating White teachers and how to succeed with African American students. Scholars such as Au and Jordan (1981), Mohatt and Erickson (1981), Cazden and Leggett (1981), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggested the importance of using culturally-appropriate pedagogy. Villegas and Lucas (2002) provided suggestions to improve the curriculum to include culturally-



responsive teaching strategies, making curriculum responsive to the needs of all students. First, they suggested creating a curriculum that was sociocultural conscious. Such a curriculum helped White teachers understand at a deep level the ways in which people think and behave were influenced by their race. Second, White teachers needed support for students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Third, White educators should have the “commitment and skills to act as agents of change” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 24). White teachers carried the expectations that they would do whatever they could to make sound educational decisions based on what was best for their students. Fourth, White teachers needed to increase their level of cultural competency. Finally, White teachers should connect their students’ personal experiences to their learning. This would aid teachers in designing instruction that was meaningful.

Research supported the need for culturally responsive teaching due to the increase of the minority population (Gay, 2002). To reach the minority population, White teachers should not only teach relevant subject matter, but they must have knowledge of the student population they teach. Gay (2002) noted that teachers’ knowledge of cultural diversity must go much further than awareness of racial and ethnic groups. A culturally-responsive educator must obtain detailed facts about the makeup of his or her students. Gay (2002) found that a White teacher who used culturally-responsive teaching made learning fascinating and more invigorating to racially and ethnically diverse students. These notions raised questions about curriculum.

The literature suggested current curriculum did not meet the standards for ethnic and cultural diversity (Wade, 1993). Therefore, it was critical White teachers know how to determine the changes needed to improve the quality of the curriculum (Gay, 2002). It was important to note, however, that these changes were tough because they often led to controversy (Gay, 2002). For example, many of the attitudes about cultural, ethnic, and racial differences

caused conflict among White teachers and educator leaders regarding culturally-responsive teaching. Making changes to the curriculum to include cultural diversity produced doubt because of practices that treated race and cultural diversity as controversial, skeptical, unimportant, or nonexistent. The potential conflict may have caused teachers to concentrate on safer and less important subjects about cultural diversity and abandon more disconcerting issues (Gay, 2013).

An important element of culturally-responsive teaching is creating a classroom environment that would benefit learning (Gay, 2002). Baruth and Manning (1996) observed that educators planned their lessons for White middle-class students and expected other students to learn through the White lens. Gulati-Partee and Potapchuk (2014) defined *White lens* as the way White people saw the world. Seeing with a White lens kept a person from seeing other cultures. Gay (2002) recommended teachers use their own cultures and experiences to expand their “intellectual horizons and academic achievement” (p. 109). Further, White teachers had to care so much about the diversity in the classroom that they expected nothing less than high levels of success (Foster, 1995). Results were positive when “teachers accepted and built on students’ home language; structured interaction with students in a manner consistent with their home values; kept expectations high; and focused on meaning-making rather than lower level skills” (Au & Kawakami, 1994, p. 6).

Once teachers knew what they needed to be responsive culturally, they applied this knowledge to racially and ethnically different students. Educators must not expect students to disconnect themselves from their culture or learn, and live in only White cultural norms (Gay, 2002).

**Comprehensive multicultural pedagogy.** In terms of specific pedagogy, Banks (1997) expressed the belief that the Transformative and Social Action Approach must be included in the curriculum. For Banks (1997), the Social Action Approach referred to educating students about how to be active citizens in a democracy through taking action and proprietorship in educational activities and daily customs. Difficulties arose when educators added only celebrations, holidays, and celebrated minority heroes in their classroom during a designated month. Banks (1997) challenged teachers to use the Social Action Approach because it seemed to be more efficient.

Ladson-Billings (1994) highlighted the importance of “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually socially, emotionally, and politically, by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitude” (p. 382). A culturally-responsive curriculum must be available to White teachers, so they can help students. Kuykendall (1989) suggested incorporating features relevant to students’ lives into the curriculum. These features included communication, students’ background knowledge, and extracurricular interests. According to Kuykendall (1989),

Culture determines how children perceive life and their relationship to the world.

Because culture also influences how and what children learn, educators can use culture to improve self-image and achievement. Not only must teachers show an appreciation of cultural diversity, they must also incorporate teaching strategies that are congruent with the learning styles of their students. (pp. 32-33)

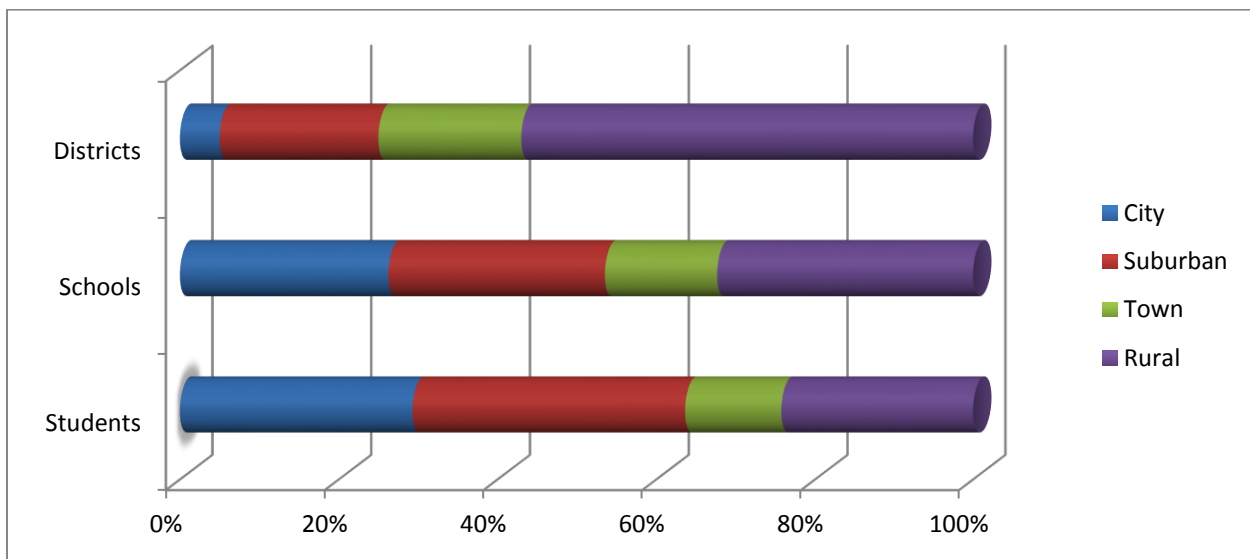
Gay (2000) described the importance of students interacting closely with their education. According to Wade (1993), textbooks were the basis of approximately 90% of all classroom instruction, and Gay (2000) observed that textbooks were manufactured by the governing culture. Banks and Banks (1997) agreed, noting that teachers must use a variety of resources to

fill any voids in the curriculum. There has been little research on how biased textbooks have affected the achievement of African American students. Therefore, it is critical that White teachers incorporate a wide range and appropriate relevant material in their teaching on a regular basis (Banks & Banks, 1997). White teachers should consider assigning readings from diverse literature and novels, rather than from textbooks, so that students can make a connection to their own lives (Kim, 1976).

**White rural teachers.** Little research was found on the challenges rural schools faced when teaching African American students. Much research had been focused on urban districts. However, rural schools shared many of the same challenges as urban schools and possibly had more distinct challenges (R. Miller, 2011). Randy Miller (2011) found that young adults found it somewhat less attractive to live in a rural community because such communities had fewer amenities; for that reason, it was more difficult to find quality teachers for rural areas. *Rural* is defined in a variety of ways; therefore, no single definition exists. Factors such as population density, community size, and geographic isolation have been used to classify places as rural (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000). Rural communities differ from one another due to their characteristics. The lack of a consistent definition makes it challenging to analyze the rural population. However, as the United States increasingly becomes a nation in which the number of minorities increases, it is critical to examine the effect on the rural community (Witte, 2015).

Estimations of the number of rural districts and/or schools in the United States vary. According to the NES's 2013–2014 report, the national average for the percentage of rural schools across the country is just under 33%, but states differ significantly from a low of 6.5% in Massachusetts to a high of 75.3% in Montana (NCES, 2014). At least half or more of all public

schools are rural in 15 states, with the state in this study being one of the 15, and at least one-third of all schools are rural in 15 other states (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Public schools in rural areas enrolled more than 12 million students. Figure 2 provides information from a 2010–2011 NCES (2012) report showing more than half of all school districts were located in rural areas. It is apparent that rural schools make up a substantial portion of schools in the United States.



*Figure 2.* Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary schools and districts by locale (NCES, 2012).

According to NCES (2012), 90.3% of teachers are White and only 4.6% are African-American (NCES, 2012). This statistic is troubling because the minority student population continues to grow. Epstein (1995) reported that deficiency of related understanding could lead to challenges between teachers and parents. Cultural differences often create a barrier to communication. Rural African-American parents often did not communicate with White teachers because they feel that their children are negatively labeled because of the color of their skin (Mukolo, Heflinger, & Wallston, 2010).

Good, Masewicz, and Vogel (2010) reported that many rural teachers do not feel knowledgeable about multiculturalism. Rural White teachers' lack of knowledge influenced their ability to efficiently work with African American students and families. Additionally, rural White teachers lacked knowledge about culturally and linguistically diverse families. Waterman (2006) identified strategies to help rural communities with these challenges. One strategy was to adapt school practices so that they were more responsive culturally. Another strategy was to communicate school information in a way that was culturally responsive (Waterman, 2006). Increasing the number of minority staff was an ideal solution. Multiple studies show that hiring more minority staff benefited rural minority students and schools in rural communities (Witte, 2015).

Rural communities have been challenged in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. New teachers had less desire to live in areas with scarcer amenities (G.M. Miller, 2011); teachers who grew up in an urban setting were more likely to teach in an urban rather than a suburban or a rural setting (Player, 2015). Research suggested that rural areas yielded fewer people who were competent to be teachers, which created a substantial shortage of teachers in rural areas (Witte, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In this literature review, the experiences of African American students in schools were discussed in order to provide support that the following research questions were valid: (a) how are White teachers prepared to teach African American students? and (b) what are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools? I reported research on the opportunity gap, special education referrals, discipline, and dropout rates. In addition, White teachers' attitudes and practices, and education in rural communities were examined to gain an

understanding of the causes of existing challenges. The literature review provided insight into the definition of culturally-responsive teaching and how it can benefit African American students.

Although gains have been made in scores among African American students, White peers still outperform them (NCES, 2012). Coleman et al. (1966) emphasized the importance of the large body of research that had arisen as a result of the multitude of concerns about the opportunity gap. The opportunity gap has proved to have lasting effects for African American students. Ladson-Billings (2000) asserted,

Our teacher education programs are filled with White, middle-class, monolingual female students who will have the responsibility of teaching in school communities serving students who are culturally, linguistically, ethnically, racially, and economically different from them. Our teacher education literature is full with this reality (p. 29).

As the literature revealed, culturally-responsive teaching is a powerful mechanism for addressing issues of race in education and teacher education. Chapter three will describe the research design and the methodology.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter describes the research methodology and inquiry methods used to answer the research questions presented below. The guiding research questions that supported the study's emphasis will be discussed along with information about how the data collection and analysis procedures will be shared. In addition, the reader will learn how the target population was selected. Lastly, the author will address ethical issues of the study and limitations of the research. The purpose of the proposed study was to examine the teaching experiences of White teachers who taught African American students in rural elementary schools.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools?

The information collected and examined for this study assisted understanding of the relationships between White teachers and African American students in the classrooms and how different racial backgrounds impact academic success. The study also assisted in seeing how White teachers do not have a strong sense of what cultural awareness is due to growing up in White communities.

#### **Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine White teacher perceptions and how White teachers understand culturally-relevant teaching. Prior studies indicated that White teachers' perceptions did influence African American students' achievement (Muñoz, Scoskie, & French, 2013). Carter (2012) made the point that White teachers must think deliberately about African American learners, their cultural differences, their different needs, their environment, and



teaching techniques to engage African American students in learning. This study added to the research on White educators working with African American students in a rural, predominantly White population and provided insight into White educators' need for more training and understanding about culturally-relevant teaching.

Qualitative research was used for this study; qualitative methods relate to understanding aspects of social life, and its methods, rather than numbers and data, as quantitative research does, for analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Qualitative methods were suitable for this study because the research questions focused on making sense of White teacher attitudes regarding African American student achievement and how school personnel characterized African American student success and failure. In accordance with the qualitative tradition, multiple methods for data collection and analysis were used (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative techniques allowed researchers to acquire more comprehensive information about the topic of study from the viewpoint of those most involved and affected (Patton, 2002). Additionally, through direct engagement with the participants in the study, I gained a better understanding of how educators teach all students, regardless of their race or ethnicity, and answered the research questions. Naturalistic inquiry was used to conduct the case study because it focused on how people behave when they are absorbed in their day-to-day life in a natural setting. Furthermore, naturalistic inquiry transpires and unfolds as the study progresses (Patton, 2002) and uses the data collection strategies outlined in the following two sections.

The study of the research problem, objectives, and questions was accomplished through a case study design. Case studies are the most often used type of qualitative methodologies (Yin, 2002). Qualitative case study researchers are interpreters, according to Stake (1995), because researchers are gathering interpretations to report the knowledge that was gathered during the

investigation. Case studies are used to gain a deep understanding of a specific situation, what it means for those involved, and to provide feedback that could be used to influence practice (Yin, 2014). The purpose of a case study is to comprehend human interaction within a social unit, a sole occurrence bounded by the researcher in the course of creating the research study (Stake, 1995). An intrinsic study involves learning about a person or occurrence that a researcher wants to investigate. Stake (1995) explains that an instrumental case study is when the researcher concentrates on a concern and chooses one bounded case to investigate. As Yin (2003) states binding a case study can prevent a topic from being too comprehensive. A case study can be bounded by time, space, or activity (Stake, 2006). This study is an example of an instrumental case study because it examined experiences of White teachers in improving teaching and learning African American students, questions this researcher wished to understand. Stake (1995) shared three differences between case study and quantitative research methods: “1) While the purpose of inquiry is explanation in quantitative research, the purpose of inquiry is understanding in case study research. 2) Although the role of the researcher is objective in quantitative research, the role of the researcher is personal in case study research. 3) Knowledge within quantitative research is discovered. However, knowledge within a case study is constructed” (p. 37). To accomplish this, rich description and interpretation of circumstances and events characterize case studies.

Because I was studying White teachers, the bounded system I studied is White teachers in a rural community in three elementary schools, working with African American students. Bounding the case is critical to focus the case study and manage the data gathering and collection (Stake, 2006). By binding the case study to White teachers in rural elementary schools, I hoped to discover the challenges White teachers face when teaching African American students.

Within this study, teachers were identified from one district who taught K-5 grades. In this research, [redacted] Elementary schools (pseudonyms) served as the schools and provided faculty for the case study.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

**Sampling frame.** Consistent with the qualitative practice, participants were purposefully selected. Creswell (2003) stated, “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher to understand the problem and the research question” (p. 185). By choosing a representative sample of White teachers, I was able to collect data about interactions White teachers have with African American students. The White participants of [redacted] Elementary schools were engaged in the study through individual interviews.

Using purposeful sampling, I identified the target group for my study. A White teacher was selected from each grade level to balance grade level representation. Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative research to locate and select cases that contain much information (Palinkas, 2014). The schools selected for this study were all Title I schools. [Redacted] had an African American population of 60% and 37 certified teachers who were 100% White; [Redacted] had an African American population of 62% with 100% White teachers; [Redacted] had an African American population of 60% with 100% White teachers. With a high percentage of children from low-income families, Title I schools receive financial aid to help ensure that all children meet state academic standards. I chose these schools because of the high population of African American students and the high number of White staff.

**Participant selection.** Three schools that have similar demographics across a district were used in the study. The target group for this study was White teachers from [redacted]

Elementary schools. The researcher chose to survey participants that were non-probationary teachers. I dispersed the participant survey, found in Appendix A, to all participants who were non-probationary. The survey assisted in determining participants willing to be a part of the study. Possible participants offered information such as number of years of teaching experience, number of years teaching at the participating school, grade level(s) taught, demographics of schools they have taught in, their educational background, college degree(s), and any professional development or courses that have pursued related to culture or race. Non-probationary in the state where this study is located is defined as teachers with more than three years of experience. I wanted to be certain no first-year White teachers were in the study, but rather that all participants had experience. White teachers interested in the study stated how many years of experience they had. The survey explained the study. Prior to introducing the survey to any potential participants, I requested permission from the [redacted] School District and the principals of [redacted] to conduct a research study in adherence to their board policy (the district and school names are pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes). I received a letter of support granting permission to conduct the research study prior to conducting any research work. Interested participants returned the survey to me via e-mail, which indicated their interest in the study. My goal was to have up to six teachers, one from each grade level, and to have diverse ranges in gender, backgrounds, and age if possible among the participants. I had a pool of 10 White teachers in case a teacher would drop out of the study. Six teachers from each of the three schools responded to the survey. Potential participants were identified using a number that indicated the level in which the criteria were met with one being the highest and four being the lowest documented after their name on the survey. Following the number was M or F to indicate gender and a number indicating years of teaching experience. The sample selected included

diversity such as different grade levels, different subjects taught, gender, age, years of experience, and years of teaching at their current school. Information on each participant is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

*Information About Participants From [redacted] Elementary*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>
Participant 1	35	14	10
Participant 2	26	5	5
Participant 3	34	13	13
Participant 4	44	23	10
Participant 5	25	5	5
Participant 6	26	5	5
Participant 7	59	33	28
Participant 8	39	18	18
Participant 9	27	6	3

### **Instruments and Data Collection**

Various strategies were used with the case study to collect data, including interviews, researcher memos, and a self-assessment checklist. Multiple methods were included to ensure that the research was thorough and to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences being studied, strengthening the validity of the research (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The interview process included a 60-minute face-to-face conversation comprised of a greeting, a review of the research study, and the interview. The interview was held at a quiet location outside of school. The interviews attempted to find answers to the research questions identified. In efforts to acquire high-quality data, I recorded all interviews using an iPad and transcribed them following the interview. I reviewed the transcription for accuracy by listening to the recording and I reviewed the text to acquaint myself with the data. The transcriptions were reviewed three times

to ensure all data was collected. The transcriptions were also reviewed by each participant to check for accuracy.

**Interviews.** Interviews are commonly used to collect qualitative data (Creswell, 2003). In-depth interviews provided rich and deep information about the experiences of individuals. The goal of any interview is to uncover the interviewee's perspective on the research topic and to understand how and why he or she comes to have this particular perspective (Cassel & Symon, 1994).

Participants were interviewed using questions developed to probe attitudes and behaviors of White teachers working with children of another race. Using literature collected on race, schooling, cultural mismatch between students and White teachers and the influence of racism in the school setting, I developed questions intended to elicit perspectives and beliefs. The interviews were conducted face-to-face. In the interview, relationship building was critical. Diller and Moule (2005) stated discussing race can be difficult as participants may have felt anxious that they would sound racist when responding to questions. It was the researcher's goal to build relationships with the participants and a level of trust, so they felt safe in responding openly to the questions. The questions asked provided insight about what White teachers experience when teaching in a rural school with a high minority population; challenges they face as White teachers; and how they describe and work for social justice, individually and with staff. The interview was recorded on an iPad; however, a backup device was available to record the interviews in case the technology failed. The interview questions for this study can be found in Appendix A.

**Researcher journal.** Keeping a researcher journal allowed me to record my thoughts and observations related to my questions. Reflection is a process that helped me to examine,

clarify, and confirm my findings as a researcher (Murray & Kujundzic, 2005). This process developed my thoughts and ideas to advance my research and add to my interpretation of the data. Further, I made entries into the journal immediately following each interview to record my thoughts and reactions to the individual interviews. In addition, journaling helped address the researcher bias that undoubtedly infuses the socially dependent nature of qualitative research. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) noted that journaling enables the research to consider ways in which thoughts may have been impaired by personal presumptions. Therefore, journaling sensitized the research to her prejudices.

**Self-assessment survey.** As educators, understanding the current reality of the needs of students in the school system is critical to all students attaining and receiving an equitable education. Having participants take a self-assessment survey contributed in their reflection on race, ethnicity, and differences in culture. The self-assessment survey was created by the Colorado Department of Education (2010) to make changes in eliminating the negative impact on students in the school community. Permission was not required due to the assessment being available to assist any school community in supporting the goal of creating a more accepting school culture. The self-assessment survey can be found in Appendix B.

The data from the self-assessment survey could provide information to assist in making decisions about curriculum and policies. The self-assessment survey is intended to support educators and schools in creating a culturally-responsive curriculum. The survey was developed by Colorado State Department of Education (2010) to help administrators create an action plan and interventions to create a more accepting culture.

**Triangulation involving individual member checking.** Triangulation is one method used to verify that the data is accurate. Triangulation involves gathering corroborating evidence

from various sources to draw out themes in the data (Creswell, 2003); therefore, methodological triangulation was used due to the different methods used in this study. Data collection for this study involved a self-assessment survey, interview transcriptions, and follow up member checking.

Data collection began with the self-assessment survey to assist in self-reflection on race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism before the interview occurred. The survey information was collected from the participants using an online format. The online format allowed only the researcher to view the results. From this information, categories and themes emerged. The data from the survey was used to increase the validity of the initial data. The interviews were the main source of data. Once the interviews were transcribed, participants reviewed the transcriptions to validate their correctness and to identify, change, and explain any inconsistencies. According to Harper and Cole (2012), member checking was an important quality control process in qualitative research while conducting a study. Member checking was a way to confirm the data from transcripts was accurate. Within a month of the sessions, each member received a copy of the transcript. The various tools assisted in triangulating the data and provided better interpretations of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

### **Instrument Reliability and Validity**

In qualitative studies, researchers must be concerned with the reliability and the validity of data collected (Golafshani, 2003). Patton (20) stressed the importance of researchers' evaluating outcomes and judging the importance of the study. Additionally, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) reported that researchers viewed reliability as a fit between what they recorded as data and what truly occurred in the setting that was studied. In this case study, interviews, member



checking, and researcher journaling were conducted. Several methods, such as transcription and coding, were used to safeguard the validity and the reliability of the data collected.

For a White researcher examining African American student results and White teacher effectiveness, the topic was sensitive; therefore, clarifying research bias in this study was crucial. My position as a White researcher who brings a White lens to the study must be clearly named to acknowledge any biases that influenced the inquiry (Merriam, 1998). I maintained a journal to note my feelings and comments. Additionally, evoking rich and thick descriptions during the interviews added to my understanding and informs decisions about transferability.

### **Data Analysis**

A critical element of data analysis is the systematic search for meaning (Hatch, 2002). Many tools can aid researchers by facilitating the search for meaning while data is being examined. As Miles and Huberman (1994) noted, “The strengths of qualitative data rest on the competence with which their analysis is carried out” (p. 10). Data analysis began with the responses from participants. A process of data analysis began with the generation of themes of the teaching experiences of White educators teaching African American students in rural elementary schools.

For this study, I analyzed the data after transcribing all interviews and conducted a coding process, which is the foundation of analyzing data (Creswell, 2003). In coding, compiling data and interpretation of data were linked to create the support of the research analysis. The quality of the research is based on the quality of the coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Due to the amount of data collected, it was critical that the researcher pulled out significant data pertinent to the research questions (Krathwohl, 1998). Saldaña (2009) explained that coding is divided into two sections: first and second cycle coding. Additionally, in vivo

coding was used to capture “behaviors or processes which explained to the analyst how the basic problems of the participants are processed” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 33). In vivo coding is literal coding that prioritized and honored the participants’ voice. In vivo coding created a deep understanding of their culture because it provided an essential check regarding whether the researcher understood what was significant from the interviews (Malawi, 2015). I conducted and reviewed the interviews and I manually coded the information to classify the data.

The codes emerged from the transcribed interview data responses collected from 9 study participants from the interview process. This coding occurred after I read each transcript three times to find comparable key words and phrases in the interview data. After the codes in each transcript were documented, checked for accuracy, and edited as necessary, assigning labels began. In creating a category, data was gathered together and appointed a label. Once a label was assigned, each category was given a code to assist with the organization and analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

From the codes, I began to sort the codes into categories. I examined the survey data and the transcripts looking for words or phrases that Saldaña (2009) would refer to as bold, italics, underlined, or highlighted, indicating that they feature the participant’s voice. As I read and reread the transcripts, I identified words and phrases that were significant to the participants’ responses or to the questions. Transcripts were reviewed three times to ensure all data was collected. After I completed the coding, data were categorized into themes that emerged.

Next, categories were unified into themes. The data analyzed determined the participants’ perspectives on their experiences of White teachers teaching African American students. The categories were synthesized into the following themes:

1. study participants’ responses to multiculturalism,

2. study participants' responses to teacher training/professional development, and
3. study participants' responses to cultural competence and pedagogy.

The data analysis of the findings collected through the interviews allowed me to identify themes regarding the perception of teaching African American students of the participating teachers.

As the researcher, I paid particular attention to any unforeseen issues that surfaced during the discussion. For instance, results may be influenced by the attendance of a very dominant or opinionated member; more reserved members may be cautious about revealing their stories or opinions. Parker and Tritter (2006) suggested that researchers assess the overall discussion in such a way that consideration is given to individuals and the interactions. To better analyze the data, Parker and Tritter (2006) noted the importance of being cognizant of the participants' reactions to the researcher and of what the participants are willing to reveal.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

To protect the participants in the study, Institutional Review Board approval was sought before the study commenced. All participants were asked to sign a consent form before the interviews began. The consent form explained the purpose of the study, asked for voluntary participation, promised that all data would be confidential, and communicated to participants that they may withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. Consent forms are in Appendix B. In addition, pseudonyms were used for the town, the school, and the individual participants in reporting the findings, to further protect the participants. Finally, to protect the confidentiality of data collected, e-mail was not used; all correspondence regarding data results were hand delivered.

## **Limitations**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher assumed that the majority of the participants surveyed met the criteria and participated honestly. Additionally, it is possible that participants provided answers at times that were diplomatically suitable. There was a possibility that a participant wanted to drop out of the study; there were no consequences for dropping out of the study. The consent form assured participants that data will remain confidential and will offer participants the option to withdraw at later date. If this were to occur, a replacement would have been pursued.

## **Delimitations**

A definite limitation of this study is the incapacity to generalize findings. Due to the small sample size of three elementary schools in this rural Midwest state, this study cannot be considered representative of the United States. The site is a rural school in the Midwest and the context in schools outside of this location is very different. Furthermore, because the participants are from the same district, the perspectives they offered may be narrow in scope and not representative of all White teachers in this school or district. Conducting this study in other school environments could have led to completely different suppositions and findings.

## **Summary**

The focus and purpose of this study were to examine the teaching experiences of White teachers who teach African American students in rural elementary schools. This study was explored through two questions related to the research questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools?

These questions were explored from each individual's perspective. The study was designed to provide detailed data and provide participants with an opportunity to share views individually that they felt were important. The study is substantial if meaningful data can be provided to improve the knowledge of multicultural relationships between White teachers and African American students in the classroom, thereby reducing the opportunity gap between African America and White students.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of the qualitative study was to examine the teaching experiences of White teachers who taught African-American students in rural elementary schools. Participants in the study were certified teachers. Seven participants grew up in the Midwest and two participants grew up in other states. The range of teaching experience varied among the participants, as well as, their years of experience teaching at their current school and the ages of the students they taught. The participants taught at schools in the same school district. Each of the participants completed the self-assessment survey (Appendix A) prior to the individual interview. The data collected from the individual interviews were the primary data used to answer the questions of the study.

When examining school achievement, researchers consistently found academic gaps in reading and math between African American students and White students (Barton & Coley, 2010). Evidence from the NCES (2015a) reported that most public schools did not educate African American students well, and the debate regarding how best to accomplish this task is continuous and ongoing. In addition, the cultural mismatch due to the growing number of African American students and high population of White educators continues to be a concern for the academic gap. For example, The National Report Card (NCES, 2015a) revealed 51% of White fourth graders scored in the proficient range on the math assessment, but only 19% of African American students did so. The academic gap in reading was similar; the number of White students performing at the proficient level was 46%, whereas it was only 18% for African American students (NCESb, 2015). This study sought to answer the following questions in search of strategies for closing the achievement gap.

1. How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?

2. What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers at rural elementary schools?

In the following sections, I present the principal findings of the study that includes: an explanation of the research methodology and analysis; a discussion of results; and a summary of the findings.

### **Description of Sample**

The data given in this chapter was generated from the results of a screening survey, self-assessment survey, and individual interviews. Three schools from the same district agreed to participate in the study, which produced the data for this chapter. Each school had three White teachers participating. The three school administrators and teachers involved in the study signed letters of consent and the school administrators distributed screening surveys to their teachers. The screening survey helped determine eligibility for the study. To be included in the study, teachers were required to be White and have spent two or more years teaching in a K–5 school. Additionally, it was the researcher’s goal to include a diverse pool of participants that varied in backgrounds, gender, and ages, as all teachers were White. I had a pool of 10 White teachers in case a teacher would drop out of the study. Six teachers from each of the three schools responded to the survey. Potential participants were identified using a number that indicated the level in which the criteria were met with one being the highest and four being the lowest documented after their name on the survey. Following the number was M or F to indicate gender and a number indicating years of teaching experience. The sample selected included diversity such as different grade levels, different subjects taught, gender, age, years of experience, and years of teaching at their current school. Of the nine participants, six were female and three were male. The states of the participants were located in the Midwest. The number of years teaching

ranged from 5 years to 33 years. The number of years of teaching at the participants' school ranged from 5 to 28 years. Participants' names were removed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

The schools selected for this study were all Title I schools. [Redacted], a K–5 school, had an African American student population of 60% and 37 certified teachers who were White; [redacted], a K–5 school, had an African American student population of 62% and 37 certified teachers who were White; and [redacted], a K–5 school, had an African American student population of 60% and 37 teachers who were White. Once participants were selected, teachers signed the consent form and the date, time, and location for the interviews were agreed upon.

Teachers that participated in the study and responses to the questions were to be kept anonymous. Their identity and involvement in the study were not revealed at any time. Each participant, as described as P for participant and a number, was assigned for the purpose of research. This allowed participants to share their honest feelings about their experiences. It is imperative to the study that their responses reflect how you truly feel.

**P1.** P1 is a white female and has been teaching for 14 years. Ten of these years have been at [redacted] elementary teaching kindergarten. P1 did not have any coursework on culturally-responsive teaching and did not plan to further her professional learning because it did not seem important to the district. P1 stated that it was important to understand the culture of the students she works with. Therefore, she celebrates Martin Luther King to bring diversity into the classroom.

**P2.** P2 is a White female and has been teaching for 5 years and all 5 years have been at [redacted]. She is a 3rd-grade teacher. P2 stated she participated in a course during her undergraduate coursework but was unable to state the course name. She had not received



professional development around culturally-responsive practices but would appreciate having speakers come to speak about multiculturalism and culturally-responsive pedagogy. P2 studies famous African Americans and incorporates Kagan structures to educate students about diverse cultures.

**P3.** P3 is a White female and has been teaching for 13 years at [redacted] elementary. Ten of these years were in a small rural town in the Midwest. She teaches 2nd grade. P3 enrolled in a college course on Multiculturalism in Education while pursuing her Master's degree. P3 shared she has not taken steps to integrate professional development into her learning, but, following the interview, she stated she would like to discuss with administration how to bring some professional development on the topic into the school. Further, P3 stated that she uses units to teach about culture a couple time a year. She also shared using visuals and front-loading vocabulary is used often in her class because students from various backgrounds will benefit.

**P4.** P4 is a White female and has been teaching for 23 years. Ten of these years have been at [redacted] Elementary. She teaches first grade. P4 had no training around culturally-responsive practices during college courses. P4 shared she has not received professional development during her 23 years of teaching. P4 shared that she understands all students are different and bring various needs to the classroom, but she has a difficult time understanding their needs because of her limited experience with diversity.

**P5.** P5 is a White male and has been teaching for 5 years and all 5 years have been at [redacted] Elementary. He teaches 4th grade. P5 took 10 hours of coursework around culturally-responsive practices. P5 recently completed his Master's degree and was able to take a course on Multicultural Education. P5 stated he reached all learners from various cultures in

his classroom. However, he shared that overall the community is White, so the White culture is predominantly the focus in the curriculum.

**P6.** P6 is a White female and has been teaching for 5 years and all 5 years have been at [redacted] Elementary. She teaches 2nd grade. P6 received training around culturally-responsive practices during college enrollment. P6 shared she had no plans for pursuing professional development towards culturally-responsive practices. P6 shared that she likes to include traditions of different cultures when holidays are celebrated in isolated units.

**P7.** P7 is a White male has been teaching for 33 years. 28 of them at [redacted] Elementary. He teaches 2nd grade. P7 had no training around culturally-responsive practices during college courses nor had he received any professional development. He shared he did not know where to begin to look for professional development on this topic. He also shared that it didn't seem to be a priority for the district. P7 believed he reached African American students when he teaches about Martin Luther King and teaches a unit on black history month.

**P8.** P8 is a White female and has been teaching for 18 years and she has taught at [redacted] for all 18 years. She teaches 5th grade. P8 did no training around culturally-responsive practices during college courses. P8 did not plan to attend any professional development unless it was offered by the district. She could not name any specific strategies that she would use to meet the needs of culturally-diverse students.

**P9.** P9 is a White male who has been teaching for 6 years. Three of these years have been at [redacted] Elementary. He teaches 3rd grade. P9 enrolled in one course during his college career but could not name the course or give specifics. He also shared that his district does not seem to be interested in providing professional development on culturally-responsive

practices. He stated that due to his lack of knowledge in this area and the predominance of his own White culture, he knew he did not meet the needs of all of his students.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

Multiple strategies consistent with the qualitative tradition were used to collect data for the case study including interviews, a self-assessment survey, researcher notes, and member checking. Participants were interviewed using questions developed to probe their attitudes and behaviors when working with African American children. One individual interview session lasting for 60 minutes in length was completed with each participant. To begin the interviews, participants were greeted, given information about the study, and information on confidentiality and the purpose of the study was reviewed. Additionally, the researcher informed participants they would receive transcripts to review for accuracy. Throughout the data collection phase, journal entries were constructed to note researcher reflections from interviews, thoughts about the study, and any reactions the researcher had about participants' responses. Because the researcher is also White, the journal aided in writing notes noting any personal bias or reactions that were noticed throughout the research process.

Once the interviews were transcribed, participants reviewed them to validate their accuracy and to identify, change, or explain any inconsistencies. The participants did not report any inaccuracies and the transcripts were returned. Participants had the opportunity to share their feedback, which was a form of member checking. Next, the process of coding began. I analyzed the data after transcribing all interviews and conducted a coding process, which is the foundation of analyzing data (Creswell, 2003). In coding, compiling data and interpretation of data were linked to create the support of the research analysis. The quality of the research is based on the quality of the coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Due to the amount of data collected, it was critical that the researcher pulled out significant data pertinent to the research questions (Krathwohl, 1998). Saldaña (2009) explained that coding is divided into two sections: first and second cycle coding. Additionally, in vivo coding was used to capture “behaviors or processes which explained to the analyst how the basic problems of the participants are processed” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 33). In vivo coding is literal coding that prioritized and honored the participants’ voice. In vivo coding created a deep understanding of their culture because it provided an essential check regarding whether the researcher understood what was significant from the interviews (Malawi, 2009). I conducted and reviewed the interviews and I manually coded the information to classify the data.

The codes emerged from the transcribed interview data responses collected from 9 study participants from the interview process. This coding occurred after I read each transcript three times to find comparable key words and phrases in the interview data. After the codes in each transcript were documented, checked for accuracy, and edited as necessary, assigning labels began. In creating a category, data was gathered together and appointed a label. Once a label was assigned, each category was given a code to assist with the organization and analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

From the codes, I began to sort the codes into categories. I examined the survey data and the transcripts looking for words or phrases that Saldaña (2009) would refer to as bold, italics, underlined, or highlighted, indicating that they feature the participant’s voice. As I read and reread the transcripts, I identified words and phrases that were significant to the participants’ responses or to the questions. Transcripts were reviewed three times to ensure all data was collected. After I completed the coding, data were categorized into themes that emerged. A number of issues surfaced through the collection of data, such as teacher perceptions, thoughts,

and feelings towards teaching students from a different race or culture than their own. Responses indicated that participants were not confident or felt they lacked experience in teaching students from different cultures as the findings indicated. Member checking was one method used for triangulating data.

Next, categories were unified into themes. The data analyzed determined the participants' perspectives on their experiences of White teachers teaching African American students. The categories were synthesized into the following themes:

1. study participants' responses to multiculturalism,
2. study participants' responses to teacher training/professional development, and
3. study participants' responses to cultural competence and pedagogy.

The data analysis of the findings collected through the interviews allowed me to identify themes regarding the perception of teaching African American students of the participating teachers.

### **Self-Assessment Survey**

Each participant received the self-assessment survey. The self-assessment survey was created by the Colorado Department of Education (2010) to make changes in eliminating the negative impact on students in school communities. The survey provided me, as the researcher, validation and corroboration of the interview responses. The self-assessment survey was a self-reflection tool to assist participants in reflecting on issues of race and ethnicity. The survey was created to assist educators and leaders in becoming aware of the bias, prejudice, and discrimination unconsciously held by educators, in an effort to hold courageous conversations surrounding biases. The assessment consisted of 26 statements that assisted participants to discover their current biases. Participants completed the survey one week prior to their scheduled interview.

## Results of the Self-Assessment Survey

The findings from the survey were categorized into three sections that aligned to the findings from the interviews. Discussion of the participants' responses and attitudes towards multiculturalism will be addressed first. Next, findings that described participants' understanding of culturally-competent practices will be presented. The final section reveals participants' level of training regarding teacher preparation programs and professional development related to teaching African American students. Table 1 documents the participants' responses from the survey. Only the statements that aligned with my findings are included in the table.

Table 1

### *Results from Self-Assessment*

<b>Interview Question on Attitudes Toward Multiculturalism</b>			
Statement from Survey	Most of the Time	Some of the Time	Never
5. I value the perspectives and cultural practices of others.	0	0	9
23. I actively dispel racial and cultural stereotypes in my classroom environment.	9	0	0
25. I avoid imposing my personal values and opinions on students.	9	0	0
1. I am aware of my own racial, ethnic, and cultural background.	0	2	7
3. I regularly reflect on my own bias and how I view and treat people from different backgrounds than my own.	0	0	9
19. I review curriculum and assessment for cultural relevance.	0	2	7
20. Culturally-relevant lessons are embedded in my day-to-day teaching.	0	0	9
22. Holidays are equally represented to the varying religions and cultures of my students.	0	3	6
2. I seek opportunities to about cultural practices	0	2	7
9. I engage in professional development to examine my cultural awareness	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9</b>

*Source:* Self-Assessment Survey (Appendix A)

**Multicultural education.** The statements in this category related to the participants' understanding of multicultural education. All nine participants disagreed with statement 25 of the survey, *I am comfortable in leading discussions about race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religions with students*, but all participants strongly agreed with statement 24, *I actively dispel racial and cultural stereotypes in my curriculum, assessments, and materials*. Each participant's responses were primarily Never in the two other statements that fit in this category: I value the diverse perspectives and cultural practices of my colleagues; I act as a student and family advocate if practices are inequitable.

**Cultural Competency.** In this category, participants marked statements in this category as Some of the time and Never. The responses with the highest level of disagreement from all nine participants included three statements: statement 21: *Culturally-relevant lessons are embedded in my day to day teaching, rather than taught in isolated units*; statement three: *I regularly reflect on my own bias and how I view and treat people with cultural practices that different than my own*; and statement one: *I am aware of my own racial, ethnic, and cultural background, and understand how it affects my perceptions and values*. The responses of participants on remaining statements in this section varied between Some of the Time and Never.

**Professional Development.** The statements within this category centered on professional development that teachers engaged in. Responses from all nine participants indicated that they never engaged in professional development to examine their own cultural awareness or to develop culturally-relevant teaching strategies. Responses from seven participants were Never to statement two: *I seek opportunities to learn about cultural practices in our school community, including staff, families, and students*. There were only two statements about professional development on the survey.

## **The Findings**

The findings were categorized into three sections. Discussion of the participants' responses and attitudes towards multiculturalism will be addressed first. Next, findings that described participants' understanding of culturally-competent practices will be presented. The final section reveals participants' level of training regarding teacher preparation programs and professional development related to teaching African American students.

**Section I: Teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism.** Participants' shared their thoughts around multiculturalism throughout the interview. For purposes of this study, multiculturalism is defined as the presence or support of several cultural groups in society. All participants shared the importance of building relationships with African American students. For example, participant P3 shared, "I believe I must build relationships with all students and create an environment where children feel safe to share their stories, ideas, and even struggles." P1 stated,

It is important to value students' heritage and culture. I never want a child to think I want them to lose their customs by learning different ones. I share my experiences as growing up in a rural community, so they know it is okay to share where they are from. Building a relationship is critical.

Participants shared they were unsure how to accomplish this task.

Through data analysis, recurring themes were identified to aid in understanding their attitudes from the self-assessment questionnaire. The following categories emerged and will be shared in the following paragraphs: lack of awareness and frustration with multiculturalism in the classroom because participants did not know how to support students that came from cultures different than White. P5 responded, "Overall our community is White, so we focus on White



culture.” P9 shared his frustration because his “district does not seem to have an interest in providing professional development around multiculturalism.” P7 concurred as she said, “It does not seem to be a priority for my district.”

The participants shared an awareness of the issues of cultural competency in the classroom. Additionally, participants’ responses expressed a limited understanding of what defined cultural competency. For example, seven participants shared that they taught tolerance in their classrooms. Participant P4 shared she “makes sure to point out how everyone has something special they bring to a situation.” This thought was an example of the participants’ level of understanding of multiculturalism. When asked about culturally-relevant lessons embedded in day-to-day teaching rather than teaching in isolation as stated in the self-assessment survey, responses from participants were “never.” In one instance, Participant P3 stated he felt confident that his integration of Black history month was an example of incorporating multicultural education. He said, “I feel confident in my integration of multicultural education because we take a month and read about famous Black Americans.” Participant P5 expressed, “We have studied Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Ben Franklin and others who worked for the rights of all people, regardless of their race.” Respondents 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 shared that their school celebrated famous African Americans to demonstrate multiculturalism, but reported it is an isolated unit. For example, Participant P1 shared, “We spend time discussing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and we discuss how segregation was in place in our country.” Another interviewee said, “I do what I can to have students share about their traditions.” The self-assessment questionnaire specified eight out of nine participants sometimes celebrated holidays that represented the cultural practices of their student population. Participant P9 stated, “Honestly, I don’t know what I don’t know. I am not afraid to admit that I lack knowledge about

cultures other than White.” all participants acknowledged that multiculturalism is much more than what they currently practice. Responses from the interview and the checklist indicated that White teachers needed more training in understanding multiculturalism to move forward with culturally-responsive pedagogy in the classroom, but participants were confused as to how to move forward. For example, Participant P5 shared, “I would do better providing more cultural curriculum if I was provided more educational opportunities on how to incorporate cultural responsive teaching strategies into the classroom.”

The final category, frustration, stemmed from the lack of understanding of racial issues, multiculturalism, or Whiteness. Each participant believed that their school accepted all students and provided opportunities for students to feel included. Participants expressed the need to build relationships with students and parents. One individual stated, “I had a parent request that their child be moved out of my classroom because I am White. They didn’t even give me a chance.” Participant P2 alluded that due to no formal training, she did not know how to interact with African American parents and she did not know what she should do differently in the classroom. Participant P3 shared, “I work hard to meet the needs of all learners, so I am not sure why African American parents get upset with me and my classroom management.” Table 2 shares participants’ transcribed responses surrounding their lack of awareness in the table below.

Table 2

*Participant responses regarding lack of awareness.*

Participant	Response
P1	<p><i>I spend time discussing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to bring diversity in the classroom.</i></p> <p><i>I spend more time on vocabulary because students from various cultures can benefit from this.</i></p>
P2	<p><i>We study people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Barack Obama, and others who have worked for the rights of all people.</i></p> <p><i>I also incorporate Kagan in my classroom so students from various backgrounds have the opportunity to work together.</i></p>
P3	<p><i>I teach cultural diversity through a reading Unit called Families, Neighborhoods, and Traditions and we spend a week celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.</i></p> <p><i>I use lots of visual/pictorial representations and front-load important vocabulary because students from different backgrounds will benefit from this.</i></p> <p><i>The school invites guest speakers representing ethnic diversity throughout the year when possible.</i></p>
P4	<p><i>I implement a lot of Kagan into my daily routines for everyone to get to know one another. I feel this method helps students honor the uniqueness of each individual because students are being allowed an opportunity to hear and share their lives in a personal manner.</i></p> <p><i>On a minimal basis, I have implemented Black History month lessons somewhat.</i></p> <p><i>Honestly, I don't look at my students in regards to their racial ethnicity.</i></p> <p><i>We talk a lot about Native Americans because that material is covered in our 5th-grade social studies units.</i></p>
P5	<p><i>I have studied 10 hours about various cultures, so I do feel I reach all learners.</i></p> <p><i>Overall, our community is White so we focus on the White culture.</i></p> <p><i>I have adapted my classroom climate to include learning about others daily in morning meetings and students of the week activities.</i></p> <p><i>I teach a unit on Martin Luther King Jr.</i></p>
P6	<p><i>I make it a point to have them include their experiences of traditions within discussions we have on events and holidays.</i></p> <p><i>I think the best way is to use your students as a tool when the opportunity arises. If there is a time when you are learning about how people from a different ethnic group dealt with an event.</i></p>
P7	<p><i>I reach all learners twice a week to celebrate Black History Month and Martin Luther King Jr.</i></p>
P9	<p><i>I don't know enough about multiculturalism to teach it throughout the year unless a unit is required by the district.</i></p>

**Summary of findings: Teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism.** Overall, the results from the interviews indicated White participants appeared to feel strongly that they understood and incorporated culturally-relevant pedagogy. The participants' responses modeled information learned from the literature regarding White teachers in a rural school. Hyland (2005) suggested that racism may occur due to White educators' lack of knowledge on cultural competency; most White educators did not know how to teach students from a different culture.

**Section II: Teachers' understanding of cultural competency.** Building relationships with all students was a phrase repeated throughout the interview process. Participants acknowledged students educated within their classrooms were taught to build on relationships established by White teachers and students. The participants in this study felt strongly they should build relationships with their students. For example, Participant P1 said, "I believe you must connect and build relationships with all students and create an environment where children feel safe to share their ideas, stories, and even struggles." Participant P7 expressed, "My goal is to create a safe and accepting environment no matter their race." Responses indicated that building relationships was crucial, but participants did not have examples of how they incorporated strategies that addressed diverse challenges.

The theme of limited knowledge was persistent throughout the data. Research supported that limited knowledge occurred from the cultural mismatch of White educators and African American students (Bonnie, 2015). As one interviewee stated, "I have a difficult time understanding their beliefs when they are drastically different from my own." In attempts to improve academic achievement in African American students, the need for culturally-responsive teaching was critical. Ladson-Billings (2000) suggested culturally-responsive teaching must involve students preserving some of their cultural identity as well as academic merit. Students

must also widen their knowledge base regarding cultural awareness and educators must stay attuned to cultural awareness (Vavrus, 2008). Brownlee and Lee (2012) considered the effect of cultural assumptions. They shared that assumptions led students and White educators to incorrect presumptions. “As people move to new areas and meld with other cultures it creates a kaleidoscope of subcultures within racial groups. Understanding situations such as this can lead to a better understanding of the complexity of diversity” (Brownlee & Lee, 2012, p. 1).

Participant P9 shared, “I would be willing to attend training on cultural competency if my district would offer such a training.”

Participants shared the various obstacles they faced in teaching multicultural students. Participant P1 alluded, “I’ve been called racist from a mother when I disciplined her child and I didn’t understand why she was so upset.” The participant then stated (her tone of voice changed to a low voice and her face a scowl), “When their parents have a negative attitude towards their child’s education, I find it more difficult to be understanding of their beliefs.” These comments echoed the data from the self-assessment survey where participants indicated that they do not reflect on their own biases or how they viewed cultural practices that were different than their own.

Participants offered information regarding their pedagogy, when asked to describe a time when they changed their style to work more effectively with a student from a different background. All participant responses were similar. One participant stated that having a discussion about slavery and Native Americans with her students demonstrated knowledge of cultural competency and culturally-responsive teaching. Another participant felt using Kagan with students was culturally-responsive teaching because “It allows students to be more social and work together in ways they may not be exposed to outside of our school.” Kagan

cooperative learning encouraged cooperation and communication among students in a classroom. Participant P3 stated she had done nothing specifically to work more effectively with students from different ethnic backgrounds because these practices were common in her classroom. She shared:

I use lots of visuals/pictorial representations and I front load important vocabulary. These are common special education and ESL teaching strategies, but I think it is best for all students. Especially those I work with, as they are from a lower socio-economic background. Most of my students struggle with vocabulary simply because of their lack of exposure and experiences. Therefore, I believe this will help all students, even those from different ethnic groups.

The self-assessment data supported the participant responses above. All nine participants marked they never embed culturally-relevant lessons in their day to day teaching, only in isolated units. Likewise, all participants shared they never reviewed curriculum and assessment for cultural relevance or bias.

**Summary of findings: Teachers' understanding of cultural competency** The findings from the interviews indicated participants gave few examples of culturally-responsive teaching in their classroom. An interviewee alluded to the absence of culturally-responsive curriculum in textbooks. She shared, "Our textbooks are so outdated I rarely use them and when I do, I do not see many lessons on African American history to bring into my classroom." While all participants revealed compassion towards reaching all students, their examples of cultural competency and pedagogy were limited. Ladson-Billings (2006) explained that educators "recognize that achievement gaps are real, but frequently, we fail to see that students caught in this situation are too often underserved" (p. 8) and this was due to their lack of knowledge.

Table 3

*Participant Responses Regarding Limited Knowledge*

<i>Participant Response</i>	
P1	<p><i>I spend time discussing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to bring diversity in the classroom.</i></p> <p><i>I spend more time on vocabulary because students from various cultures can benefit from this.</i></p>
P2	<p><i>We study people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Barack Obama, and others who have worked for the rights of all people.</i></p> <p><i>I also incorporate Kagan in my classroom so students from various backgrounds have the opportunity to work together.</i></p>
P3	<p><i>I teach cultural diversity through a reading Unit called Families, Neighborhoods, and Traditions and we spend a week celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.</i></p> <p><i>I use lots of visual/pictorial representations and front load important vocabulary because students from different backgrounds will benefit from this.</i></p> <p><i>The school invites guest speakers representing ethnic diversity throughout the year when possible.</i></p>
P4	<p><i>I implement a lot of Kagan into my daily routines for everyone to get to know one another. I feel this method helps students honor the uniqueness of each individual because students are being allowed an opportunity to hear and share their lives in a personal manner.</i></p> <p><i>On a minimal basis, I have implemented Black History month lessons somewhat. Honestly, I don't look at my students in regards to their racial ethnicity.</i></p> <p><i>We talk a lot about Native Americans because that material is covered in our 5th-grade social studies units.</i></p>
P5	<p><i>I have studied 10 hours about various cultures so I do feel I reach all learners. Overall, our community is White so we focus on the White culture.</i></p> <p><i>I have adapted my classroom climate to include learning about others daily in morning meetings and students of the week activities.</i></p> <p><i>I teach a unit on Martin Luther King Jr.</i></p>
P6	<p><i>I make it a point to have them include their experiences of traditions within discussions we have on events and holidays.</i></p> <p><i>I think the best way is to use your students as a tool when the opportunity arises. If there is a time when you are learning about how people from a different ethnic group dealt with an event.</i></p>
P7	<p><i>I reach all learners twice a week to celebrate Black History Month and Martin Luther King Jr.</i></p>
P9	<p><i>I don't know enough about multiculturalism to teach it throughout the year unless a unit is required by the district.</i></p>

The results further supported the idea that participants did not understand cultural competency. One interviewee stated, “If I knew how to better reach African American students I would, but I do not know what to do differently.” Eight out of nine participants shared they would change one of their lessons for an entire year to be considered culturally relevant. The ninth participant stammered, I would like to skip this question,” so we moved on. Responses that outline the theme limited knowledge can be found in Table 3 above.

**Finding Section III: Teacher preparation programs and professional development.**

The lack of teacher preparation and professional development was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. The most striking observation to emerge from the data comparison was not a single participant could share that they address diverse challenges within the classroom, due to their lack of understanding and training. The following emergent themes were identified: (a) background experience did not prepare participants to teach African American students, (b) teacher preparation programs did not prepare educators to teach African American students, and (c) lack of professional development had not prepared educators to teach African American students.

***Background experience.*** Seven out of nine participants stated their background experience did not prepare them to teach African American students. Participant P4 stated:

Because I am a White middle-aged woman from the middle class, I view life through my experiences. I recognize this about myself, so I work hard to truly understand where my students are coming from and get to know their families. However, it is going to be difficult to understand needs of multicultural students.

Participant P6 stated:



I feel that my own cultural identity can somewhat hinder my understanding of the issues that my students may face in society. I really try to have my students explain to me what they may go through so that I can better understand it, because I have very little experience with which I could relate to their struggles.

Participant P5 added that his background experiences did not prepare him, but he also shared, “People might question my experience with culture because I am a White male. I must do my best to not quickly judge others based on their own diversity.”

*Teacher preparation programs and professional development.* This theme was noteworthy because six of the participants shared they had not been trained formally. Two participants, P2 and P3, shared that they had received training in college more than 10 years ago, but they were unable to state the course or provide a description. Another participant, P5, stated he completed 10 hours of coursework in Mexican history and culture.

Participant P9 expressed, “My classes prepared me to teach White middle class, not specific teaching methods or ideas to teach students from different races.” The comments detailed White educators’ desire for more preparation teaching African American students.

Throughout the interviews, participants also discussed the lack of professional development on cultural competency. Participants were asked on the self-assessment survey whether they engaged in professional development to examine their own cultural awareness and develop culturally-relevant teaching strategies; the nine participants marked they never engaged in professional development on culturally-relevant teaching strategies. The nine participants also shared they never participated in action research focused on equity to better meet the needs of their students or to improve instructional strategies. Participant P6 shared, “I personally haven’t integrated multiculturalism into my professional development plan, nor has my district.”

Participant P4 shared, “Honestly, I have not really taken much in regard to multi-cultural teaching during professional development. That would be something I need to continue to work towards.” Interestingly, participant P9 shared:

My school is in a small rural district. Although my school is highly populated by African American students, my administrators look past the fact that we need additional training. I do not work with a single non-White licensed educator, yet we are standing in front of non-White students every day. It is frustrating that not once has professional development on multiculturalism, cultural competency, culturally-responsive teaching, etc., been brought into my school, not even during summer sessions. I am going to be honest because of the confidentiality of this interview; administration in this district is either deliberately or unconsciously biased. They do not see a need to have professional development on multiculturalism. Educators in this district will continue to move forward and teach the middle to upper socioeconomic White class. Until this mindset changes, there will be no change in professional development; therefore, no change in achievement for our multicultural students.

The Table below provides additional responses in reference to the final theme, professional development and teacher training.

Table 4

*Responses regarding teacher preparation programs.*

Participant Response	
P1	<i>I have not been educated formally.</i>
P2	<i>Through my teaching experiences I have been exposed to some training but nothing formally.</i>
P3	<i>Yes, I have been trained formally.</i>
P4	<i>I don't feel that I have been formally educated to understand the history of social groups.</i>
P5	<i>Yes, I studied 10 hours of multiculturalism.</i>
P6	<i>I have been trained formally in college.</i>
P7	<i>I have not received formal education.</i>
P8	<i>Unfortunately, I have not received any training.</i>
P9	<i>I may have had a course that touched on multiculturalism in college, but I can't remember for sure. I haven't received anything other than that.</i>

**Summary**

This study was designed to examine the teaching experiences of White teachers who teach African American students in rural elementary schools. Participants, on the whole, spoke frequently about the lack of knowledge of pedagogy and understanding of multiculturalism due to their lack of training. Through analysis, the results uncovered themes that corroborated with previous research studies around multiculturalism and culturally-responsive teaching. The impact of student learning, through teaching with culturally-responsive practices, was examined by Cohen, McLaughlin, and Talbert (1993). Cohen et al. indicated that educators who used culturally-responsive teaching strategies had a positive effect on the academic performance of African American students. Previous research found that teachers must have knowledge of culturally-responsive teaching (Sleeter, 2001).

The most prominent theme from the responses was the lack of culturally-responsive training in teacher preparation programs and the need for professional development to meet the

needs of African American students. Overall, the results indicated that nine participants did not feel prepared to teach African American students, nor had they received professional development. As I analyzed the researcher journal entries during the conversations about the study, I constructed notes detailing reactions to my understandings of the participants' discussions and their teaching experiences. I noted several times when participants stated they did not feel confident in their ability to teach African American students due to lack of training and lack of professional development. The study findings in this chapter were based on analysis of interview transcripts and the self-assessment interview with nine White educators. The participants were all White teachers who grew up in predominantly White cultures and communities. In the chapter that follows, a summary and discussion of the results will be presented, along with implication of the results, and recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions**

We cannot teach what we do not know and we cannot lead where we will not go.

—Malcolm X, Howard, 1999

The purpose of the study was to examine the teaching experiences of White teachers who taught African American students in a rural community. This qualitative study was designed to fill the gaps of research regarding White rural teacher attitudes and perceptions of cultural competency. Interviews with White educators allowed the exploration of the factors that contribute to the opportunity gap between White and African American students. This chapter provides a comprehensive summary of this study, including a discussion of the results, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Results**

Reflections on my educational experiences as a White female educator and of my administrative positions revealed I was oblivious to race and the opportunity gap that persists between White and African American students. I believed culturally-competent White educators knew that “All students, regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics, should have an equal opportunity to learn in school” (Banks, 2007, p. 3). I, however, had not previously examined social justice issues that surrounded me. Marshall and Olivia (2012) expressed the view that digging deeply into the challenges of social justice meant that I must confront my beliefs and analyze traditional configurations of privilege, keeping in mind that such discussion of race can release uncomfortable emotions. My life experiences in a rural community and my college courses did not prepare me for the experiences I encountered as a White educator. Race was not a factor to me during my teaching career, or so I thought, as I

unconsciously maintained the status quo of White power and privilege. The questions that guided my research were:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What are the cultural competence abilities of White teachers in rural elementary schools?

The purpose of this study was to examine the teaching experiences of White teachers who taught African American students in three rural elementary schools. Throughout this study, it became apparent that participants lacked cultural awareness due in part to growing up in White communities without formal educational training on strategies to reach African American students. Indeed, findings suggested that participants grew up in predominately-White communities and did not have adequate experiences interacting with other races and cultures. Additionally, all study participants worked with only White educators. Overall, these findings suggested that growing up in predominately-White communities and working with all White educators has limited White educators in seeing and understanding their unconscious bias.

### **Discussion of Results**

Data analysis of the research questions revealed themes resulting from individual interviews and the self-assessment questionnaire. These instruments provided insight as to how participants perceived their experience of teaching African American students in a rural school. Through the interviews and in reading the survey, I gained a better understanding of how the cultural mismatch between African American students and White teachers may be affecting African American students' success in the classroom. This study adds to the research studying White teachers and working with African American students in a rural setting.

Examination of the data revealed that participants had insufficient training in their teacher preparation programs and that school districts did not provide professional development courses on culturally-relevant practices to support their ability to understand and relate to students of other races. Although the participants believed it was important to reach all learners, they did not have an understanding of cultural competency. Participants, on the whole, demonstrated an understanding that White educators must become culturally-competent to respond to increased diversity in schools. They expressed teacher training programs and school districts must offer coursework on culturally-relevant teaching strategies. Participant P4 shared, “honestly, I have not really taken much regarding multicultural teaching during professional development. This is something I would need to seek out. The interviews from this study have made me more aware of the need to incorporate more specific teaching in regards to multicultural issues.”

Additionally, participants felt they needed more knowledge about cultural competency and multiculturalism and how it related to their school and classroom. Participant P7 stated, “I am very limited in my awareness of different cultures since I grew up in an all-White community. I have not received training for teaching diverse populations and I am not sure where to even begin looking for workshops. It doesn’t seem to a priority for my district.” These findings suggest the following three themes from the data analysis of the study: (a) teacher attitudes about multiculturalism, (b) teacher understanding of cultural competency, and (c) teacher preparation programs and professional development on cultural competency. These themes emerged from the data and analysis that identified concerns and knowledge of the teachers’ perceptions regarding teaching African American students in a rural setting.

**Research question 1. How are White teachers prepared to teach African American students?** This question uncovered how teachers were prepared to teach African American

students. Of all the responses, the dominant theme was they did not feel they were formally trained. In fact, only two participants indicated they received relevant preparative training, and then, only minimally (two hours of coursework). Participant P2 expressed, “I have never received formal training on working with a different culture, other than White, which makes it difficult to improve the learning environment to better meet the needs of African American students.” It could also be argued that teachers did not receive professional development relating to working with African American students. Participant P7 commented, “I have not received any professional development throughout my teaching experience to help me be more culturally competent. I have not thought about seeking out a workshop, nor has my district offered any training.”

White educators hesitate to have the conversation about their own Whiteness and privilege fearing what may surface; therefore, not wanting to attend training or professional development is not surprising. Four participants felt that it was up to the school district to provide professional development and three participants shared that it is not their responsibility to seek out training on this concept. The problem of insufficient teacher preparation programs and lack of professional development regarding cultural competency was an issue that might directly affect the learning of African American students (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Despite the small number of White teachers in the study, it was apparent there is a need for more coursework and training to provide strategies to equip teachers to work effectively with African American students. The data also indicated the need for school leaders to provide professional development to assist teachers in understanding the importance of cultural competency.

**Research question 2. What are the cultural competence abilities of teachers at rural elementary schools?** In this question, the degree of cultural competency of White teachers in



rural elementary schools was examined. Overall, it was revealed teachers lack cultural awareness as classroom managers and an understanding of culturally-relevant pedagogy. This result confirmed that participants valued diversity but were not culturally self-aware, nor did they understand the dynamics of cultural interactions, or cultural competency. For example, Participant P2 stated;

I understand the importance of working with children and interacting with all students, but I am unsure of how to embed it into my everyday life as an educator. I realize there is so much more to being culturally competent than inserting a lesson or two throughout the year.

### **Results Related to Literature on the Need for Teacher Training**

According to Gay (2002), there are several actions that assist African American students' academic achievement. The components are White educators must: (a) develop a culturally-diverse base; (b) design culturally-relevant curricula; (c) build a cultural learning community; and (d) be skilled in cultural communications. However, as this study found, the participants were not prepared to teach African American students because they did not learn the importance of this in teacher prep programs and school leaders. Data analysis in this study exposed the absence of professional development focused on culturally-responsive teaching. Participants in the study acknowledged the aspiration of all students to experience academic success, and White teachers' lack of knowledge regarding culturally-relevant pedagogy made this goal difficult to accomplish. Romo (2016) strongly asserted that teacher-training programs must find a way to bridge this opportunity gap.

Participants reported that they created several units on a famous African American. As one interviewee stated, "I have a difficult time understanding their beliefs when they are

drastically different from my own.” Being a culturally-competent White teacher requires “removing the White, middle-class lenses through which brown and black children are often judged,” (Romo, 2016, p. 2) and adding units to teach African American history for the year is not adequate.

According to Gay (2002), cultural knowledge must be embedded in teacher preparation programs. Additionally, Sleeter (2001) explained that the shift in thinking must occur throughout the educators’ teaching experiences. Likewise, Benegas (2014) claimed that professional learning communities were an opportunity for teachers to work collaboratively to meet the needs of marginalized learners.

Throughout the interview sessions, seven of the nine participants shared they had not received coursework on becoming culturally competent in college. Five of the nine participants attended college in a small rural community. The lack of training notably affected the knowledge White educators possessed when teaching African American students. According to Madar (2015), coursework in educational preparation programs seldom prepared teachers to establish an understanding of cultural pedagogy. Overall, the results indicated the need for teachers to receive professional development on culturally-responsive teaching and called for teacher preparation programs to require coursework for culturally-responsive teaching.

#### **Results related to literature on cultural competence abilities of white teachers.**

According to Randy Miller (Miller, 2011), there was a need for White educators to encourage cultural competencies that were crucial in the classroom. White participants concurred, in the interview sessions, that all students were unique and deserved the opportunity to learn and be successful. Participants also shared that the curriculum provided was not culturally relevant. These results concurred with that of Miller (2011), who maintained that “culturally competent

teachers assured that the curriculum will be taught and delivered in a way that is responsive to the collective norms and experiences of the student populations” (p. 2) that includes diverse populations.

The findings suggested in this study support the literature stating that White teachers lack cultural awareness. Seven out of nine participants grew up in a rural community and the self-assessment survey pointed out participants had not explored racial and cultural identities. Gay (2013) stated, “African American students and their teachers are from different backgrounds and do not understand, nor appreciate each other’s realities” (p. 50). Due to the lack of awareness, White educators are unconsciously generating an environment that does not address the needs of African American students. Therefore, as Gay (2013) pointed out, it is important to assist teachers in understanding how beliefs about race affect instruction and student learning. Finally, this study showed that White educators must be mindful of their habits of being more culturally competent.

In her book, *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) communicated that culturally-relevant teaching should be a part of the curriculum. She stated, “Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). As discussed, participants felt all students had the right to learn and could succeed, but there had been no indication or mention of culturally-relevant pedagogy in participants’ classrooms to help African American students succeed. The lack of awareness indicated that participants had difficulty recognizing racial differences and relating them to their own experiences as a White person and meeting the needs of African American students the classroom. This difficulty indicated White educators

had dysconscious racism, “an uncritical habit of mind that justified inequity and exploration by accepting the existing order of things given” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 35).

**White teachers’ experiences in rural schools.** A vital component of this study was to hear the teachers reflect on the rural schools African American students attended. This section provides the teachers’ perceptions. All but two participants had personal experiences growing up and living in a rural community. Participant P3 communicated, “My own personal experience of rarely leaving the rural community has made it difficult to understand other cultures.” All participants stated that the number one issue preventing African Americans from being successful in their classroom was the lack of culturally-responsive pedagogy. The participants stated that they had not received professional development to help them address their curriculum or teaching strategies. Some of the teachers discussed that lack of resources within the rural community negatively affected their teaching. Participant P2 said, “Resources are needed to reach all learners and address the curriculum. However, current funding in the Midwest has been minimal and the small rural communities were scarce in the resources being purchased.” Participant P8 shared, “It always goes back to money. In rural environments, it is more difficult to have the dollars to do what needs to happen.” Two of the participants concluded the lack of funding is the reason why professional development has not occurred.

### **Implications for White Educators**

Data collected from this study offered information with respect to providing effective training for White educators. The findings have important implications for developing culturally-competent White teachers. Participants openly shared their lack of knowledge concerning culturally-responsive teaching as the data demonstrated. The inquiry of the study was to discover if White teachers were prepared to teach African American students and examine

if they were culturally competent. The findings from the study suggested that White educators must self-reflect on their White race and culture to have a strong understanding of their cultural background along with the impact of a racialized identity to ensure they are culturally competent.

Furthermore, the findings had important implications for developing multiculturalism and cultural competency courses in teacher preparation programs. Romo (2016) stated teacher preparation must help teachers understand their bias and understand the lives of their students, both inside and outside of the classroom. It is imperative that teacher preparation programs examine their coursework with respect to addressing diverse learners and reflect on their unconscious biases as White educators.

The combination of findings provides support for the need of culturally-relevant teacher training for White teachers working in school districts with African American students. In addition, it is critical that school leaders examine their practice relating to diverse learning backgrounds. Examining their practices regarding diversity may assist in establishing that racial and cultural differences are legitimate and that they make a difference in education outcomes. The interviews revealed that eight-out-of-nine participants were interested in receiving training through professional development to meet the needs of diverse learners. The first step in becoming culturally competent is understanding one's own culture. This step of reflection can be difficult for White teachers because they worry about having conversations about White privilege. College, universities, and school districts must move forward and transform their understandings and prepare White teachers to teach students of any color. The following section describes recommendations for further research.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

While only nine participants from one district participated in this study, helpful insights emerged regarding the experiences of rural White teachers educating African American students. This research demonstrated the need to explore the use of culturally-responsive teaching strategies and to develop culturally-competent teachers due to the increasing population of White teachers working with African American students. It is evident from the study that research to identify causes of the disparity of academic results between White students and African American students. The researcher suggests several future studies:

- Examine teaching practices with a large White teacher population working with high numbers of students of color.
- Examine and update coursework in teacher preparation programs in small colleges located in rural communities regarding culturally-competent teaching strategies.
- Examine White participants' culturally-responsive pedagogical training in teacher preparation programs and how African-American student learning is affected.

## **Implications for Practice - Recommendations for White Teachers and School Leaders**

Gay (2013) asserted that culturally-responsive teaching would improve the academic achievement of African American students. Therefore, the following recommendations arose from the present study:

1. School leaders must develop the will, skill, knowledge, and competency to lead transformation for a culturally-competent staff. Equitable education must begin with school leaders informing themselves about cultural biases.
2. White teachers should be provided professional development focused on improving learning for a diverse community. School districts can use professional development

- as a path to assess White teacher's attitudes and beliefs toward teaching African-American learners. There are instruments that can be used or consultants who will facilitate the discussion and instrument.
3. Develop strategies to train White teachers to become more culturally responsive in the classroom and in their schools. School districts must provide high-quality professional development and resources to educate staff about the culture of African American students, including learning styles, cultural heritage, norms, beliefs, and practices.
  4. Provide meaningful professional development programs to help faculty understand and identify their beliefs and attitudes about teaching diverse learners, to ensure that the learning needs of all learners are addressed (Gay, 2000).
  5. White teachers attend professional development initiatives that engage teachers in collaborative interaction about racial literacy and culturally-relevant pedagogy and practice.
  6. White teachers must assess their attitudes, bias, and beliefs toward teaching African American students and work to expose negative deeply held beliefs.
  7. Educate the school community about culture in appropriate and responsive ways. Being a White educator who is culturally relevant is much more than celebrating a holiday or having a speaker come visit during Black History Month. It is yearlong infusion of curriculum that is responsive to different cultures and races in the classroom.
  8. Facilitate meetings for staff, to brainstorm barriers impeding progress in African American student achievement and how to address them. School teams plan for

ongoing professional development to address the needs of the assessment findings. Furthermore, discussing cultural competency during grade level meetings or PLC meetings should be a standing agenda item.

## **Conclusion**

The research in this study triggered strong emotions and identified the challenges of White teachers educating African American students. Marie Curie once said, “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less” (as cited by Saraf, 2014, p. 120). Participants in the interviews shared they were not culturally-competent White teachers. Additionally, the participants stated they must be more reflective about their own practices and be aware of any biases they may have. The interviews identified the strong need for course offerings and training regarding culturally-responsive teaching and cultural competency for White teachers in preparation programs and school district professional development. The individuals in the study and their collective experiences were essentially the same in that they received very little training from teacher training programs and were provided little to no content through professional development. The current data highlight the importance of school districts and colleges/universities working to train White teachers and future White teachers in culturally-responsive teaching strategies. Although the current study is based on a small sample of White rural participants, the findings suggest the importance of professional development and teacher preparation programs and of embedding culturally-relevant pedagogy into the curriculum. School leaders must stay attuned to research-based information on cultural competent pedagogy that will help inform and address the plans for professional development.



The effect of school principal leadership on the achievement of students has been reviewed in the literature. Research has found that school leadership does influence student achievement while they are coaching school staff (Hallinger, 2005). Further, noteworthy research stated that a strong principal positively affects the well-being of a school community (Villani, 2006). Therefore, school leaders, opportunities for teachers to explore social justice must be provided in hopes that the opportunity gap gets smaller.

In addition, the findings from this study further support the concept that if White teachers are to include culturally-responsive teaching strategies in their classroom, district staff development and teacher preparation programs must offer courses that go further than simple exposure to culturally-responsive teaching. White educators must learn strategies and teaching methods that are research-based so they can apply new learning and provide students with the educational experiences they deserve.

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**Appendix A: Participant Survey Interview Questions**

Self-Assessment

Participant Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym one-name choice: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

School Year you began teaching at this school: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Years of Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

Below, please delineate grades taught / years at each grade:

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Please list where else you have taught, what grade and for how long. Include the general demographics of the school. (For example Carver is currently about 67% African American / 100% Title I)

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Educational Background:

College Degree Received – Date

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Please list and briefly describe any Multicultural Classes you took in college:

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Please list and briefly describe any classes/professional development courses on race/culture in which you have participated in as a teacher.

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Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. It will serve as background information for the study. Please know that this questionnaire is confidential. If you want to add more thoughts, please attach an additional sheet.

## Participants Interview Questions

Thank you so much for participating in this project! This interview will take no more than 60 minutes. I am going to ask you questions related to teaching African American students. I want to remind you that all your answers will be kept confidential. I will not share anything you say with anyone else. Your name will not be used or any other information that would identify who you are.

You can tell me you do not want to answer any question you do not want to answer, and you can stop the interview at any point. If after the interview is over, you want to withdraw from the study, I will destroy your information. There will not be consequences for withdrawing. I will provide you with my information, so you can call or email me with any questions or concerns.

I would like to record the interview. All information gathered will be locked in a secure location and labeled with a code name. The interview will be transcribed and I will provide you with the transcriptions.

1. How many years have you taught in this school?
2. Please describe your ethnic, cultural, and/or racial identity (how you self-identify)?
3. Before you taught in this school, were you teaching in a school where more than 30% of the school student population might self-identify as their being within a racial or ethnic minority population?
4. What is your definition of diversity?
5. Do you have a particular method or instance (example) to encourage people to honor the uniqueness of each individual?
6. Have you been educated either formally or by your experience(s) to understand the history of African American, Latino, Asian, Native American, and/or other historically marginalized ethnic or racial groups in the USA?

7. Do you have a particular method or instance (example) to improve the learning environment to better meet the needs of students who have been historically marginalized?

8. Do you think that your current school provides opportunities to make a diverse student population feel they are within a multicultural and inclusive setting or environment?

9. Do you think your current school has benefited from multiculturalism in the student body (the student population)? Can you provide an example?

10. Do you think your current school has been challenged from multiculturalism in the student body? Can you provide an example?

11. Do you think your current school has or could benefit from more multiculturalism in the teacher body (the teacher population)? Can you provide an example?

12. Do you see opportunities to improve the learning environment to better meet the needs of students who have been historically marginalized in the USA?

13. What has been the greatest obstacle in teaching a multicultural student?

14. Describe a situation in which you encountered a conflict with a student from a different cultural background than yours? How did you handle the situation? (Please be specific).

15. Can you describe a factor that might **positively** impact the learning of a student identifying with a historically marginalized ethnic or cultural group?

16. Can you describe a factor that might **negatively** impact the learning of a student identifying with a historically marginalized ethnic or cultural group?

17. Can you describe a situation in which you utilized a multicultural skill to solve a teaching or teaching environment problem?

18. Can you describe a time when you changed your style to work more effectively with a student from a different background? How was that received?

19. What have you learned from working with a diverse student body?

20. Do you have ideas about or for educating students about diversity and/or specific multicultural aspects in your school environment? Can you share an idea or two?

21. How does your own ethnic and/or cultural identity impact your communication and/or relationship with a diverse student body?

22. In what ways have you integrated multicultural issues as part of your professional development?

23. Do you have some specific things you want to do within the next two years to further your communication and/or relationship with a diverse student body?



### Self-Assessment

	<b>Most of the time</b>	<b>Some of the time</b>	<b>Never</b>
I am aware of my own racial, ethnic, and cultural background, and understand how it affects my perceptions and values.			
I seek opportunities to learn about the cultural practices in our school community, including staff, families, and students.			
I regularly reflect on my own bias and how I view and treat people with cultural practices that are different than my own.			
As a faculty member, I feel supported and valued for my own identity and perspectives.			
I value the diverse perspectives and cultural practices of my colleagues.			
I regularly examine academic and behavioral data for achievement gaps by race, native language, socioeconomic status, and gender.			
I review data to inform instruction in ways that best meet the needs of individual learners, and collaborate with colleagues in data-based decision-making.			
I create positive relationships with families so that we can work as a team to best meet their child's needs.			
I engage in professional development to examine my own cultural awareness and develop culturally relevant teaching strategies.			
I encourage all families to give me feedback and volunteer in my classroom.			

	<b>Most of the time</b>	<b>Some of the time</b>	<b>.Never</b>
I participate in action research focused on equity to better meet my students' needs and improve my instructional strategies. I monitor student engagement within this research.			
Students and families feel comfortable when reporting inequitable practices or incidents, whether parties involved include me, students or fellow colleagues.			

Communication is available to families in multiple languages.			
I make sure that there are translators available to improve school and family communication.			
Artwork and photographs embedded in communication and classroom decor reflect the demographics of the students positively and are age appropriate.			
I act as a student and family advocate. I openly confront my colleagues if I see practices that I feel are inequitable.			
I preview visual media to make sure that it is culturally relevant and anti-bias.			
My behavioral expectations and policies have taken into account the varying cultural expectations and norms in my student demographics.			
I review curriculum and assessments for historical accuracy, cultural relevance,			

multiple perspectives, and anti-bias.			
Culturally relevant lessons are embedded in my day to day teaching, rather than taught in isolated units.			
I differentiate to meet the needs of students from varying backgrounds and have high expectations for all. I provide the support needed to reach expectations.			
Holidays are equally represented and celebrations are sensitive to the varying religions and cultural practices of my student population.			
I actively dispel racial and cultural stereotypes in my curriculum, assessments, materials, and classroom décor.			
I am comfortable in leading discussions about race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion with students.			
I avoid imposing my personal values and opinions and assist students in learning the difference between fact and opinion. I encourage the sharing of opinions that are different than my own and looking at multiple perspectives.			

## Appendix B: Consent Forms

### CONSENT FORM

**Research Study Title:** Exploring White Teacher's Experience in the Rural Schools  
**Principle Investigator:** Tiffany Snyder  
**Research Institution:** [redacted] Elementary  
**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Julie McCann

#### **Purpose and what you will be doing:**

The purpose of this study is to explore white teachers' experiences, in elementary rural school, around the opportunity gap between African-American students and White students. They will also talk about their teaching strategies in reaching African-American students. We are hoping up to nine teachers volunteer for the study. It is important to note that teachers will not be paid in the study and the participation is voluntary. To be in the study, participants will partake in individual interviews. The interviews will take no longer than 60 minutes.

#### **Risks:**

There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your personal information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. When we or any of our investigators look at the data, none of the data will have your name or identifying information. We will use a pseudonym and a password protected code to access and analyze the data. We will not identify you in any publication or report. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study. You are not required to share that you are a part of the study to anyone you work with and it is recommended you do not.

**Benefits:**

It is my belief that information gathered and examined, from this study could help the teaching profession and society gain a better understanding of multicultural relationships between educators and students and that relationships can affect teaching and learning for all students.

**Confidentiality:**

This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private, under lock and key, and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us about abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is greatly appreciated, and we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free, at any point, to choose not to answer questions or stop participating in the study. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

**Contact Information:**

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, [Researcher email redacted] or [Researcher phone number] redacted. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [redacted]).

**Your Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University- Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

Tiffany Snyder

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Digital Signature

Tiffany Snyder

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Name (Typed)

11/29/17

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Date