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“WE WILL WORK A LOT, AND YOU ARE SO LOVED”: TEACHER  
PERSPECTIVES ON BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

By

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B.A., Middlebury College, 2011  
M.A.T., University of Louisville, 2013  
M.Ed., University of Louisville, 2015

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Education and Human Development of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction

Department of Middle and Secondary Education  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2022



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A Dissertation approved on

April 6, 2022

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Stephen and Gus

for your unconditional support and love through this journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe many thanks to those who have supported me throughout this journey. This work would not have been completed without them.

First, I'd like to thank my husband, Stephen, for always pushing me to continue this work when I wanted to give up. You reminded me of how far I had come and how fleeting the stress of any situation was. You always made yourself available to read through my work and bring me coffee and treats to keep me going. I appreciate your patience, humor, and love throughout all of this. A "little" thank you to my son, Gus, who was the last push that got me through my dissertation work. I never wanted to have to explain to you that I "almost had a PhD" or "did everything but my dissertation"; wanting to be a role model to you kept me going. Your kicks during my interviews, snuggles on my lap while writing, and little laughter in the last few months of work inspired me. I love you and I thank you. To my mom who instilled a "can do" attitude in me and a sense of drive, thank you for reminding me that I'm not one to give up. It makes me so happy to hear you brag about me to your friends and I'm always thankful for your love and support.

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## ABSTRACT

### “WE WILL WORK A LOT, AND YOU ARE SO LOVED”: TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Geena Constantin

April 6, 2022

This multiple case study using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Alase, 2017) supported a need to understand the specific realities of student-teacher relationship-building. This investigation allowed a deeper look into four teachers' perceptions of what it means to build positive relationships with students. This research study added to the literature demonstrating the importance of building strong positive relationships with students built on demonstrations of high expectations and care and driven by mutual understandings and celebration of diverse cultures and identities. Supporting this small group of teachers in investigating their personal beliefs about relationship-building was a step forward in defining systems and processes that can be used to help other educators navigate cultural differences and build positive relationships with students. Specifically, the findings from this study helped identify intentional strategies related to positive relationship-building, with implications for future teacher education programs and professional development.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Research Scope.....	4
Research Context.....	7
Theoretical Frameworks.....	10
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).....	10
Critical Race Theory (CRT).....	12
Research Questions.....	14
Researcher Subjectivity/Positionality.....	15
Limitations.....	19
Implications.....	20
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	22
Defining Terms Related to Relationships.....	23
Relationships.....	23
Positive Relationship-Building: High Expectations and Care.....	24
Equitable Educational Experiences.....	25



Cultural Perceptions of High Expectations and Care.....	27
Classroom Best Practices for Building Relationships with Diverse Students.....	31
Defining Terms Related to Language.....	37
Language Varieties and Linguistic Discrimination.....	39
Teacher Perceptions of Different Linguistic Identities.....	41
Cultural Norms of Conversation in Relationship-Building.....	46
Functions of Language in Relationship-Building.....	48
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>53</b>
Methodology and Methods.....	53
Participants and Research Context.....	57
Participant Selection.....	57
Participant Characteristics.....	59
Participant Schools.....	60
Research Participants.....	63
Study Design.....	70
Data Collection.....	71
Interviews.....	72
Self-Reflection.....	77
Data Analysis.....	79
<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>83</b>

Teacher Self-Perceptions.....	83
Teacher Cultural Identities: Impact on Their Teaching Styles.....	84
Teacher Concepts of “Respect” in the Classroom.....	89
Teacher Concepts of High Expectations.....	94
Teacher Concepts of Care.....	97
New Learnings Influencing Teacher Beliefs.....	99
Teacher Perceptions of Students and Navigation of Relationship-Building Process...	106
Teacher Understandings of Diverse Student Cultural Identities.....	106
Teacher Recognitions of Personal Cultural Identities at Odds with Students’ .....	111
Issues of Diversity and Inclusion that Impact the Teaching Experience.....	116
Processes for Building Relationships.....	120
Describing Student-Teacher Relationships.....	129
Maintaining High Expectations.....	132
Demonstrating Care.....	141
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS.....	145
Teacher Self-Perceptions.....	147
Evolving and Intertwined.....	148
Different, But Good.....	153
Teacher Perceptions of Students and Navigation of Relationship-Building.....	158
Knowing Me, Knowing You.....	158

Teacher Vulnerability.....	163
Individualized Attention: Targeted Caring and High Expectations.....	171
Relationship Boundaries.....	177
Flexibility and Adaptability.....	179
Diversity Literacy Program Learnings and a Commitment to Social Justice.....	182
Implications.....	187
Teacher Education Programs.....	188
Teacher Professional Development.....	194
Future Research.....	195
Final Statement.....	198
References.....	199
Appendices.....	216
Curriculum Vita.....	220

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Through this research study I investigated how four teachers perceived the process of building positive relationships with students. Specifically, I looked at how they thought about their own personal racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities during the process, and how they used these understandings to navigate cultural differences between them and their students. I focused on the ways the teacher participants described demonstrating care to students while holding high expectations for success. This study sought to understand the specific realities of the relationship-building process in order to identify ways to confront biased attitudes in current and future educators through professional development, and better prepare preservice teachers for diverse student populations. This study is important to the educational landscape today because schools are becoming increasingly diverse student spaces with a still predominantly White workforce. Recent public conversation about topics like Critical Race Theory, banning certain books, and censoring teachers' lessons, a study of teachers' perceptions on this unique time period is important.

Because conveying care and high expectations must be communicated during the relationship-building process, this study investigated how four teachers perceived their communication of these concepts. This study focused especially on building an understanding of how this communicative process is perceived by teachers as they described their use and understanding of cultural norms of conversation and intentional

relationship-building strategies. Because of research constraints placed on this study by the district due to the COVID-19 pandemic (L. Taylor, personal communication, September 2, 2020) I was unable to observe teachers in their classrooms. Therefore, this study focused more on teacher perceptions and descriptions of their processes for relationship-building instead of observations of the actual process itself.

As will be discussed further in the methodology section, teacher participants were chosen because they were part of the same graduate education program. The program was formed through a partnership between a large urban midwestern school district and a local university. It was designed to better support district educators teaching in what are referred to as “high-need” or “failing” schools within the state’s most diverse district. The partially funded program is available to certified teachers in schools with high concentrations of poverty and low standardized test scores. The program consists of two main components: a graduate education degree in teacher leadership and an advanced certificate in diversity literacy. The 30-hour graduate degree consists of coursework in topics like coaching, mentoring, leadership, assessment, and differentiated instruction. To obtain the certificate in diversity literacy, teachers enroll in 18 hours (or 15, depending on the year they enroll) of coursework outside of the college of education. The coursework for the certificate in diversity literacy focuses on enhancing teacher knowledge and skills in the areas of inclusion, equity, and diversity and explores such topics as world religion, Latinx and African American culture, history, philosophy, and the social sciences. Because they needed to have an interest in social justice to be in this program, it was anticipated that the selected participants for this study would be willing to engage in the type of analysis of their teaching that this study explored. It was also theorized that they

might bring concrete ideas from this program into practice. Because the participants mostly described the experiences they engaged in while earning the certificate in diversity literacy, throughout this study the joint program will be referred to as the Diversity Literacy Program (DLP) and the teachers will be described as educators with a “certificate in diversity literacy.” Since the participants indicated that it was not just the course and coursework itself (readings, lectures, etc.) that impacted them, I will refer to what they gleaned from their courses as “course/class learnings,” “new experiences,” or “new knowledge” to reflect the holistic nature of their experiences. This is important to distinguish because it was not always the literature or actual assigned coursework that made them reconceptualize an idea or belief. In some instances, it was another student’s reflection on the content that stuck with them or an experience where the new learning came into greater focus.

To begin this study, I first explored four teachers’ perceptions of how high expectations and care were expressed to them as young people and students within their own cultural spheres. This helped develop an understanding of how the educators thought about the ways in which they learned how these sentiments were being conveyed to them and how they learned to convey these sentiments to their students. This helped get a better idea of teachers’ expectations for relationship-building through examining where there were connections between personal cultural norms of conversation and conveying these sentiments. I investigated how, based on their own perceptions of these concepts, language and conversation styles were reported to be used in the classroom as tools for relationship-building, specifically in the areas of setting high expectations and demonstrating care. This allowed me to determine if there were patterns to successful

positive relationship-building in what the teachers. Analysis of these perceptions helped to reach a better understanding of how four teachers negotiated their perceptions of relationship-building with students who differed from them in various areas related to their cultural identity.

### **Research Scope**

This study focused on two areas of relationship-building: conveying high expectations and demonstrations of care. These elements were viewed through the lens of navigating students' cultural identities, including norms of communication. These areas were chosen because the combined literature on building positive relationships between students and teachers cites conveying high expectations (Cherng, H.Y.S., 2017; Cooper, 2003; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Howard, 2001, 2002; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ware, 2006) and demonstrations of care as contributing to both academic and personal success (Hayes et al., 1994; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Tosolt, 2009). In many instances, the literature uses the concepts (high expectations and care) interchangeably, demonstrating that they are often inextricably linked. Unless noted specifically, I considered high expectations and demonstrations of care as separate elements.

I defined cultural identity as the way a person views themselves as a cultural being racially, ethnically, and linguistically. This definition is modeled off the concept of cultural identity as explained by Banks (2001) and Ndura (2004). Specifically, the teachers in this study tended to view their cultural identities as an “evolving phenomenon” (Ndura, 2004, p. 14), constantly being re-realized through interactions with their students and with deeper theoretical and content knowledge provided from their various university courses. I recognized that there are other facets that contribute to an

individual's cultural identity, such as nationality, social class, and religion. However, the scope of this research looked at race, ethnicity, and language as the most salient elements in the investigation into the process of teacher-student relationship-building. This is because so much of this process stems from verbal and nonverbal communication in teacher-student interactions. I understand that identities can be defined by others, for instance, a teacher who looks at a student and determines without confirmation that they are of a certain ethnic or racial identity. I also recognize that there are other salient aspects of personal identity such as gender or socioeconomic status, and these are addressed at various points in the research. But racial, ethnic, and linguistic features were the largest foci of this study as they were the most frequently discussed by the participants and most pertinent to the research questions.

Honoring cultural identities, including norms of conversation in the classroom, is an important element of relationship-building because relationships are born out of verbal and nonverbal communication. When teachers and students experience cultural mismatches in linguistic or communication norms students can feel a limited sense of belonging and experience less success in the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 1995). The literature on cultural conflicts between teachers and students in the classroom demonstrates that teachers who identify and work to rectify these cultural mismatches are more effective teachers of diverse students (Cooper, 2003; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Seidman (2019) writes, "At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language" (p. 8). Cultural norms of communication are just one way that people identify themselves within the larger



framework of their identity. For teachers who feel most connected to their normative ways of conversing, code switching or honoring different norms of communication could violate their sense of identity. By investigating how four teachers thought about and described their cultural identities and those of their students during the process of relationship-building, I was able to see why they made certain instructional choices related to the way they viewed themselves as cultural beings.

I identified this group of teachers as participants because their voluntary engagement in the Diversity Literacy Program demonstrated a willingness to investigate and renegotiate normative values they might hold in the classroom. Therefore, I could see how teachers perceived relationship-building when they were open to diverse voices and experiences. Thus, drawing additionally from the literature on positive student-teacher relationships and culturally situated communication styles, this study sought to determine how differences in cultural identities, including norms of communication, connected to expressions of high expectations and demonstrations of care in the classroom.

Understanding the nuances of how teachers build positive relationships with students has important implications for the field of teacher education. Most teachers in American public schools are White, compared to an increasingly non-White student population. Ineffective and inauthentic student-teacher relationships, particularly those that lack high expectations and caring, can impact the personal and academic success of students (Baker, 2006; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Cooper, 2003; Ware, 2006). Teacher perceptions of students play a significant role in how they demonstrate high expectations and care to students. For instance, educators who do not understand diverse language acquisition and development are likely to view varieties of English that differ from their

own as inferior (Abdul-Hakim, 2002; Adger et al., 1999; Baugh, 2000). As a result, they may have negative perceptions and lower expectations for students who are now speakers of so-called “Standard English” based on the way the student communicates.

Thus, this study investigated how teachers with certificates in diversity literacy navigated cultural differences, including norms of conversation, while continuing to demonstrate care and maintain high expectations for students. It added to the literature by looking specifically at what teachers reported doing during the process of relationship-building in addition to investigating and how facets of the process are reported to be communicated to students by teachers. This helped identify strategies the teachers described using to build positive classroom relationships particularly with those students whose cultural identities did not align with theirs.

### **Research Context**

This study was important to the field because it looked directly at teacher participants who were actively working to build positive relationships with students through various strategies. As will be described in detail through this research context, when teachers do not intentionally work to build inclusive classroom communities there are various negative consequences for students. The literature on issues of cultural conflict in the classroom demonstrates that when teachers and schools do not value and affirm the identities of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students, issues related to behavior and low achievement such as frequent behavior referrals, suspensions, or course failure are likely to occur (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2001; Brown, 2003). As stated previously, while the population of Students of Color in schools is increasing, most of the teaching population is still predominantly White (Snyder et al., 2016). White teachers

often function in cultural spheres, situations and areas of interaction where their own norms of setting expectations and demonstrating care differ from those of their students. As a result, they do not often understand the lived experiences of students whose cultural identities differ from theirs.

Further, White teachers often live and converse in situations where White norms of communication, such as those connected to Standard English, are perceived as the only ways to correctly speak (Baker-Bell, 2017). For teachers in schools with high concentrations of minoritized students and students experiencing poverty, teachers' expressions of language often differ from the language varieties of the students they teach. For the purpose of this research, I classified language distinctions like African American vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard English as varieties (Rickford, 1999) as the use of the term "dialect" often has hierarchical classifications that favors the hegemonic variety (Standard English). While this racial and linguistic mismatch is not inherently a problem, it is one way in which cultural differences, and problems resulting from misunderstandings, can occur between teachers and students. Building positive relationships effectively requires teachers to understand this dichotomy in order to recognize and remove barriers related to communication in the process.

Teacher education courses do not always provide ample information to support teachers in building positive relationships with students with racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities that differ from their own (Brandon et al., 2009). Many teachers are unaware of the lived experiences of their Students of Color, many of whom have different cultural norms of conversation and experiences (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). This lack of knowledge leads to the tendency of teachers and schools to disproportionately refer

Students of Color and speakers of varieties of English other than Standard English for special education services (Ahram et al., 2011; Brown, 2003; Collier, 2004; Cummins, 1997; Krashen, 1981; McGlothlin, 1997).

Understanding racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences in the classroom is important because conveying high expectations and care are key to building strong relationships between teachers and students (Cherng, H.Y.S., 2017; Cooper, 2003; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Howard, 2001, 2002; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ware, 2006). High expectations and care are culturally situated, or experienced and lived differently depending on a person's life circumstances. They are also communicated differently depending on one's cultural norms of conversation. A concept like "respect," for instance, may have a significantly different connotation and impact on how the relationship functions depending on someone's cultural background and experiences with being or feeling respected (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2001; Brown, 2003).

A major element of student success in a classroom is the relationship a student has with his or her teacher. Oftentimes student-teacher relationships are strained because of a lack of understanding of the student on the part of the teacher. It makes sense that many of these misunderstandings are a result of conversations or interactions between teachers and students that do not function well. For instance, in many classrooms, speakers of AAVE or other non-Standard English varieties are often misunderstood or judged for their divergence from "normal" language patterns (Abdul-Hakim, 2002; Adger et al., 1999; Baugh, 2000). This might look like a student expressing a quality response to a teacher question but being corrected on their use of grammatical structures instead of being praised for their intelligent answer. Labov (1969) argues that ignorance of different

vernaculars leads to “serious conflict between student and teacher” (p. 8). According to Wolfram (1999), greater teacher cultural competency would result in more positive student-teacher relationships and higher levels of success for minoritized students.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study drew from two major frameworks related to cross-cultural relationship-building and the development of interpersonal relationships in the school setting: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). These frameworks were both used to describe the ways in which relationships between individuals, and the conversations and actions that go into building these relationships, were reciprocal processes situated within various constructs. These constructs included the experiences of people involved in relationship-building, navigating roles like that of “teacher” and “student.” The constructs also included societal and situational influences that were at play in the participants’ student-teacher interactions such as racism, privilege, and social status. Both frameworks utilized in this research centered around perception and understanding of one’s identity.

#### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

This study was grounded in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is more frequently seen in the field of psychology and is considered both a framework for thinking and a research method. The use of this framework as a method is described in detail in Chapter 3. One of the philosophies underpinning IPA is that experience can be analyzed and understood in a multitude of ways. Phenomenology as described by Smith et al. (2009) is “a philosophical approach to the study of experience” (p. 12). Within this study I focused on what the experience of building relationships was like. I looked deeply

into the various facets of how each participant viewed the process and made meaning of what was happening in relation to their distinct cultural identity and the identities of their students.

Because I was not able to observe participants due to the constraints placed on this study by the district as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic I was unable to hear exactly what was said in the interactions between teachers and students during the relationship-building process. Therefore, IPA was a useful framework since it placed more of an emphasis on the philosophy and perception of experience, which in this study revolved around the teachers' understanding of their relationship-building processes. Each teacher described in vivid detail their own intentional process for building relationships with students. This included recollections of conversations between themselves and students during the process. They also described their experiences as students, reflecting on how they came to understand concepts like high expectations and caring. In this way, the study places an emphasis on how the teachers' viewed themselves in relation to past experiences, their students, and the cultural spheres in which they function in society and schools.

The theoretical framework of phenomena allowed me to approach each lived experience as something that should be examined on its own terms, recognizing that when a person can accurately know their own experience, essential qualities for review and comparison can be identified (Smith et al., 2009). Viewing these four teachers as separate cases bound together by their common experience in the Diversity Literacy Program provided a look into how they left their shared experience with different perceptions and understandings. Getting to the essential nature of the experience of

relationship-building was integral to this study, as a major goal was to better understand what qualities strengthened a teacher's ability to build positive relationships with students, in hopes that these essentialized qualities could be taught to other teachers.

### **Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

Critical theories aim to empower marginalized groups through taking a deeper look at discriminatory practices and structures in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 11). Because this study looked closely at cultural differences in the process of relationship-building in the classroom, this lens was important because it supported understanding of the social situations surrounding the process. It also focused on investigating the ways in which teachers aimed to transform the relationship-building process through deeper understanding of the power structures at play.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) grounded the analysis of many of the findings from this study. CRT is a framework stemming from Critical Legal Studies (CLS). It centers on the experiences of law students and teachers who sought to illuminate how power, race, and racism permeate the American legal system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Crenshaw et al. (1995) argue that the CRT movement further looked to address the "constrictive role that racial ideology plays in the composition and culture of American institutions" (xix). Schools, being institutions heavily influenced by societal and political normative pressures, are places where issues of power, race, and racism can be seen in many areas such as funding, discipline, dress codes, and what takes place in the classroom and beyond.

While there are eight tenets of CRT, there are a few that were most pertinent to the analysis of the data in this study. First, the participants all expressed an understanding of tenet one, that race and racism are permanent, and that discrimination is a “normal” part of society. The term “normal” means that it is the everyday, typical experience of People of Color in the United States, not that it is correct or necessary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). This study used that understanding, as it applied to relationship-building, to argue that it is important for teachers to think about their own culturally situated norms for building positive relationships with students. When working to connect with the diverse personalities in their classrooms, they must always consider the effects of institutionalized and systemic racism or various “otherisms” (sexism, classism, etc.).

Tenet two of CRT is a challenge to dominant ideologies, which was used to think about how participants described pushback towards lesson plans or school rules that they felt were not inclusive to all students. There were instances where some of the teachers questioned policies and practices that aimed to be neutral but that they felt were grounded in “white supremacist beliefs and practices of meritocracy” (Martinez, 2020, p. 11). This second tenet ties into the third, interest convergence, which was seen as teachers wrestled with themselves and their own choices, constantly questioning whether their processes were promoting their own self-interest, or truly creating a more equitable space for their students. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism (tenet five) were also lenses through which I viewed the teachers’ descriptions of beliefs about students’ multiple identities, which they said must be recognized and celebrated during the relationship-building process. Most of the teachers placed a heavy emphasis on allowing students to tell their



own stories and make their own meaning in their classrooms, illuminating Cabrera's (2018) argument that the "social world is not static, but is constructed by people with words, stories, and also silences" (p. 16).

CRT's eighth tenet is a commitment to social justice, which was the through line most obvious in the teachers' analysis of their relationship-building processes. The teachers were all involved in the same Diversity Literacy Program that focused on inclusion, equity, and social justice in schools and communities. They were all willing to engage in the type of analysis of their teaching that this study required, aiming to bring concrete ideas from the program into practice. Martinez (2020) argues that a focus on inclusion and equity is important, but that "it is equally important to include the admission of critical self-reflection on privilege and to use this privilege to be an accomplice" (p. 17). The participants were constantly engaging in critical self-reflection through their monthly writing and then processing their experiences with me during their follow-up interviews.

### **Research Questions**

I sought to describe how teachers perceived the process of building positive relationships with students through this research. Thus, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do four teachers with certificates in diversity literacy think about their own personal racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities during the process of relationship-building?

2. In what ways do teachers describe how they navigate cultural differences to convey sentiments of high expectations and care to their students in order to build positive relationships?

### **Researcher Subjectivity/Positionality**

Because of the additional pressures and stress put on teachers by the pandemic, the IRB required that studies were minimally invasive and did not distract teachers from their professional responsibilities. Therefore, I was extremely cognizant of the time required of participants and made a very conscious effort not to inundate them with emails or other communications. I made sure to start all interviews on time and let them know approximately how long each interaction would take. If a participant needed to reschedule an interview, I made myself available to suit their timing needs.

It was important to identify and investigate my subjectivity and positionality during this research, particularly because of the use of critical perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that data collection related to a participants' experiences with topics like race, class, or sexual orientation can provoke "changes in their consciousness" (p. 63). While this may not always result in a change of practice, in this study, one of the logical consequences was that the teacher participants would take the knowledge they gleaned from the Diversity Literacy Program, coupled with their reflections from this research, to make changes within their relationship-building processes. These changes were evident as they wrestled with issues related to power dynamics in their classrooms.

I went into the analysis understanding as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note "that power relationships are everywhere, including in the research study itself" (p. 62).

Therefore, I closely examined the power relations in play throughout the process. I was open to revealing my own cultural identity to participants; I view myself as a White woman, and recognize the power dynamics of this position in society and while conducting research on how teachers think about the way they build relationships with students, most of whom are Students of Color. I was cognizant of my privilege throughout each step of this study (Sartwell, 1998).

Because I viewed the data through critical frameworks like CRT, I made sure to review examples where teachers described student voices. These scenarios were retellings of incidents and not reflective of the students themselves since I could not capture their voices. I also aimed to avoid inserting my opinion or looking at situations through my experience. In this way I maintained a commitment to the “centrality of experiential knowledge” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3) to help the analysis stay unobstructed by my own narrative. In a more ideal research setting, I would have also interviewed the students of the teacher participants, however this was not a possibility due to the constraints the COVID-19 pandemic placed on the project. Given my constraints, I made sure to probe teachers when they were describing scenarios or retelling stories so that there was a more rounded view of the occurrence. For instance, I asked questions like, “How did the student respond?” or “What was your relationship like the next day?” to clarify.

Another identity that was important to recognize related to my positionality in this research was my role as a teacher. My research interest in relationship-building came most predominantly from my years as a classroom teacher, and most recently, as an instructional coach. I noticed that some teachers were able to seamlessly build rapport

with students, while other teachers fell flat and maintained a tumultuous (at best) classroom. In my own classroom, I felt that relationship-building, getting to know students and creating trust between us, was one of the easier and more fulfilling parts of the job and would put myself in the category of a good rapport-builder. I continued to investigate this anecdotally, thinking about what is said between teachers and students, how it is conveyed, and the body language riddled throughout a class period. I found that teachers who worked to really get to know students, joked with them, or were “with it” in terms of slang and pop culture, typically seemed to have better relationships with students. I also found that teachers who yelled, asserted “correct grammar,” or argued with students, did not. It stood out to me that some of the most unsettled relationships were between White teachers and Students of Color, particularly speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). I wondered if there were situations where some teachers created a hierarchy that placed their mode of speaking or normative beliefs about expressing core values like care and high expectations, above those of the students in their classrooms.

Because I have taught in some of the schools where my participants presently teach or taught in the past, I needed to be cognizant of my “insider” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 63) status and how it impacted the study. For example, my insider understanding as an employee in the district could have created a power dynamic where the participants felt I was their equal, allowing them to feel more comfortable sharing stories and experiences that they may not have otherwise told an outsider. While I was a teacher and administrator in the same school district in which I completed this research, I made sure to distance myself and my experiences from what the participants were describing, so as

not to influence my analysis. I maintained a level of researcher reflexivity, the “awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied, and simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher” (Probst & Berenson, 2014, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 64). One possible positionality issue between myself and the participants was my recent role as an administrator in the district where I conducted this research. While I am no longer employed in this position, nor was I ever an administrator in the building where any of my participants worked, this position could have placed me in a role of assumed superiority to my participants. Because the district expressed that the study needed to be brief and not monopolize teacher time, I let participants know that I would be muting myself while they were speaking to both minimize background noise and also to make sure I was not adding to the conversation and thus lengthening the interview.

In addition, as an adjunct faculty member at the university where the participants attended, it was possible that the teacher participants in this research were going to be former or potential students of mine. Therefore, my sampling could have been biased towards teachers who I believed to be successful based on their commentary and participation in my courses. This is something I was aware of, particularly as I sought input from building administrators recommending these teachers. Once participants were selected, it was confirmed that none of them were my former (or potentially future) students.

Finally, it is important to note that I was in the inaugural class of students in the Diversity Literacy Program. All the participants were aware that I completed the DLP years before them, and some of the participants expressed interest to me in being a part of

the program well before they were involved in this study. In this way, I had insider knowledge of their interests in social justice issues, and a general awareness that they would want to use the information gleaned from the program to be changemakers in their classrooms and schools. This was beneficial because it helped to establish a baseline understanding that each teacher was going to use what we discussed in our interviews, and what they reflected upon, to better themselves and their classroom experiences. I made sure not to mention anything about my own experience in the program during the research process, and I also took care not to insert any of my own opinions into their descriptions of the program, courses they took, or professors they worked with. Because I am several years removed from the program and classroom teaching, I was able to focus on what the participants were telling me without drawing from my daily experiences as a teacher.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was that it was centrally focused on the perspectives of teacher participants. While I could make some inferences based on how teachers described the way students responded to their relationship-building efforts, I did not interview students nor have their opinions as a focus. This one-sided investigation was a necessary reality due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as all new research involving students was not allowed by the school district. Although there are no direct student voices in this research, I used the terms student-teacher and teacher-student relationship-building interchangeably. Relationship-building is a reciprocal process that involves both teachers and students. Although no students were interviewed during this study, anecdotes related to student discourse were told second-handedly through teachers' descriptions of the

process. This study was focused on the teachers' view of what they said and sounded like as they were building relationships, and although language and cultural norms of conversation were essential parts of the process, this study was not a linguistic analysis.

My selection criteria for the teacher participants assumed that a teacher participating in a program centered on social justice and equity would be willing to investigate their own cultural identity and take it into consideration when building connections with students. This may not always be the case, and perhaps I missed some other potential participants that were not members of the program. I had hoped to have about 10 participants in the study but because of the high demands placed on teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were not many teachers willing to be a part of this study. This resulted in a low participant number. The difficulty recruiting participants to this study also resulted in there being no elementary teachers in the participant pool. Until recently, there were no elementary teachers in the program, so the participant options in that demographic group were small to begin with.

### **Implications**

This research study aimed to add to the literature surrounding teachers' abilities to build strong positive relationships with students built on mutual understandings and acceptance of diverse cultures and identities. It did so by providing insight into teachers' intentional processes of relationship-building with culturally diverse learners. I wanted to investigate these intricacies as studies demonstrate that teachers who are perceived by students as caring are more likely to be successful (Cooper, 2003; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Hayes et al., 1994; Howard, 2001, 2002; Kleinfeld, 1975; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Tosolt, 2009, Ware, 2006). Therefore, investigation of these

questions was important to help teachers develop an understanding of themselves and the cultural dynamics of their classrooms and the different ways they describe assisting and engaging students. Supporting this small group of teachers in thinking about their personal beliefs about relationship-building was a step forward in helping educators in their building, district, and in teacher education courses navigate cultural differences and build positive relationships with culturally diverse students.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature centers on how conveying high expectations and care are demonstrated by teachers in the classroom, specifically when teachers' cultural identities (including cultural norms of conversation) differ from those of their students (Cooper, 2003; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994; Howard, 2001, 2002; Kleinfeld, 1975; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Tosolt, 2009, Ware, 2006). I will first outline the research surrounding building positive relationships in the classroom, particularly focused on what the research indicates students find important in a teacher. Then, I will define what is meant by cultural norms of conversation, including language and linguistic diversity, as they relate to this study. The inclusion of these areas of discourse is important because many instances of cultural confusion likely emerge from how students and teachers interact through verbal and nonverbal language. I will provide a basic overview of the complexities of language varieties, particularly African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Because language is the conduit for conveying high expectations and care, it is important to describe the literature on how teachers who are not native speakers of AAVE, or are otherwise linguistically different from their students, build positive relationships with students in their classrooms who are likely using varieties of English like AAVE in normal conversation.

In this literature review I will connect the discussion of linguistic diversity to the importance of building positive student-teacher relationships through the idea of honoring

cultural norms of conversation. This concept centers on making connections built on a mutual understanding and inclusion of home varieties of English and cultural styles of communication. I will use this discussion to define relationships and demonstrate the importance of positive student-teacher relationships as they relate to social-emotional learning and academic success. This literature review focuses mostly on minoritized learners, specifically African American students who are speakers of AAVE or other “non-Standard” English varieties. However, due to the intersectionality of various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic cultural identities, discrimination often occurs across blurred lines of group identification as is noted through the literature.

While the literature often describes cultural conflicts between White teachers and students who have different racial, ethnic, or linguistic identities, I do not claim that White teachers cannot be effective educators of Students of Color. The literature demonstrates that when educators investigate their own assumptions about students whose cultural identities differ from theirs, they more effectively understand and value the cultural experiences of others (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

### **Defining Terms Related to Relationships**

#### **Relationships**

Through this research, I focused on how teachers described the relationships between themselves and students, which reflected connections between people with different cultural identities. I sought to understand how teacher participants viewed their role in the process of building positive relationships with students. Most of the literature cited in the following sections reflected relationships built between teachers and students with different cultural identities. Relationships were defined in this research as

connections and understandings between groups of people. While it was not always explicitly stated and often just referred to as a “relationship” or “connection,” when I described relationships, I meant positive relationships which were comfortable and mutually beneficial for both teacher and student. These relationships were built in a space where teachers honored students’ cultural identities and treated pupils like capable and valued humans. This reflects a funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) approach which argues that a deeper teacher understanding of students’ home and community experiences allows an educator to be more apt to respect the inner-workings of the whole child (González et al., 2005; Reyes et al., 2016). This first section of the review of the literature demonstrated what research described as the best practices of teachers who were effective at building positive relationships with students.

### **Positive Relationship-Building: High Expectations and Care**

Positive relationships between teachers and students are integral to a successful classroom experience (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Delpit, 2012; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gay, 2001; Howard, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ware, 2006). When students perceive teachers as both caring and academically demanding, students typically experience better social and academic success. While it would have been ideal to separate the literature into expressions of high expectations and care, these qualities of successful teachers were most often linked. The literature demonstrates that teachers who effectively build positive relationships with students often tie these constructs together (high expectations and care). For example, a teacher who expresses high expectations but does not do so in a caring way is often seen as overbearing. Similarly, teachers who were viewed by students as extremely kind but not academically demanding were often labeled as pushovers.

Between these two extremes there is a “sweet spot” where teachers are seen as both caring and supportive of high levels of academic excellence. For this section of the literature review, I will first discuss how high expectations and care create an equitable learning environment. Then, I will discuss the literature related to each of these concepts, including how different cultures define the terms, and how teacher expression of these sentiments during the relationship-building process leads to improved outcomes for students.

### **Equitable Educational Experiences**

Tying together the sentiments of high expectations and caring creates a combined foundation of positive student-teacher relationships that results in an equitable educational experience. Equitable education takes many forms, often stemming from the tenets of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and culturally responsive (Gay, 2001) education. Ladson-Billings speaks to the influence of “social power” (p. 160) in the classroom, arguing that when students learn to value themselves and their skills, they can use their unique abilities to achieve academically. Gay speaks of the concept of a “mutual aid society” (p. 110) which is a community of learners engaging in cooperative efforts. By maintaining high expectations and not diminishing student strengths through “gentle nurturing” (p. 109), teachers encourage student success by helping them engage with both their own social powers and the combined powers achieved through cooperation. Both Ladson-Billings and Gay argue that the community plays an important role in an equitable education, and that when teachers leverage the cultural experiences of students, cultural mismatches that negatively impact relationship-building can be avoided.

Wilson and Corbett (2001) demonstrate that students value teachers who are effective, meaning that they are concerned about making a significant impact on students' learning. Echoing Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2001), they also argue that equity in the classroom looks like attending to student and community needs by seeking to understand and celebrate culture, while also maintaining high levels of rigor and student accountability. Smith and Strahan (2001) argue that “expert teachers” (p. 365) put relationship-building at the forefront of their classrooms and truly believe that their students make up communities of learners. Through expert teachers’ student-centered approach to instruction, students exhibit control of their learning and share ownership. The combination of these qualities puts a greater emphasis on student learning and growth as indicators of success in the classroom. Their vision of equitable education requires that students are at the forefront of learning, using their own cultural experiences and forms of expression to guide classroom activities. In this way, care is a culturally situated sentiment, one that becomes further nuanced when tied to high expectations.

Duncan-Andrade (2007) argues that a truly equitable education requires specific attention to the needs of a community through embracing the “sociocultural richness of the community as a resource, rather than as a barrier to be overcome” (p. 618). This focus on the larger cultural experience of the community reflects the tenets of care extended to students’ families and home environments. Paris (2012) describes the importance of this inclusion of the community in his concept of culturally sustaining pedagogies. He argues that learning must be relevant to the cultural experiences of students, and teachers must support young people in “sustaining the cultural and linguistic identities of their communities” (p. 95). Howard (2001) echoes these sentiments as well, demonstrating that

the closer classroom care resembles community norms of care, the more responsive students will likely be. The research also echoes the funds of knowledge theory (Moll et al., 1992), which advocates that by valuing students' home experiences, teachers are more likely to set higher expectations for students because they believe they are already coming to school with useful knowledge.

Belief in students' abilities is important because when students believe that their teacher does not think highly of them and their abilities, students tend to develop lower expectations for themselves (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). When students doubt their own intelligence, it is likely that they will either try to fade into the fabric of the classroom, or they will often act out to avoid being perceived as "less than" (Delpit, 2012, p. 14). Much of the literature focuses on the way this dynamic plays out in the classrooms of White teachers who are educating minoritized youth. In the next section, I will review the literature on cultural perceptions of sentiments like high expectations and care, particularly describing how these are viewed in minoritized communities. I will then continue to describe in the final section of this portion of the literature review, the best practices research indicates effective teachers use when building relationships.

### **Cultural Perceptions of High Expectations and Care**

It is important to note that even the sentiment of care looks very different for minoritized students than it does for White students. Tosolt (2009) argues that sentiments of care are quite individualized, and that an understanding of care differs between subclasses of minorities as well. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) classify minorities into different categories: autonomous (minorities in number i.e. Polish American), voluntary (minorities by choice, i.e. through voluntary immigration) and involuntary minorities (i.e.

enslaved peoples). It is important to look at the perceptions of caring for involuntary minorities, since most Students of Color in U.S. schools and in the research locations for this study, are reflected in this group. Tosolt (2009) found that care for autonomous and voluntary minorities was different from how involuntary minorities defined care. This illustrates that not all Students of Color experience care and support the same, indicating that perhaps there are other elements at play, cultural norms of conversation for instance, which may play a role in this system of oppression. Moreover, this illustrates that teachers must recognize cultural differences, and work to interact with students in ways that are culturally congruent.

Caring as defined by Hayes et al. (1994) was found to impact the emotional and intellectual growth of students. In their findings, African American students identified caring in interactions such as helping with academic work, encouraging success and positivity, and responding to individual needs. Students continued to indicate that simple actions like these were some of the most valued behaviors they looked for in quality teachers. The researchers argue that teacher awareness of differences in student perspectives of caring are necessary to maximize intellectual and social success.

These realizations are also in line with the analysis of Hayes et al. (1994) that show how demographic differences, particularly ethnicity and sex, impact student's perceptions of caring. In addition, Tosolt's (2009) findings also corroborate Delpit's (1997) findings that Black students define care differently. The findings also connect to various studies on Black parenting, which describe how care is perceived in parenting relationships, demonstrating that it differs for Students of Color. For instance, Brooks-Gunn and Markman (2005) identify both racial and ethnic differences in parenting

behaviors. Using the Home Observation for the Measurement of the Environment (HOME) inventory, they found that there were various “aspects of nurturance” (p. 141) that differed between Black and White mothers. In particular, the sentiment of “tough love” was attributed to Black mothers more so than White mothers. Their study indicates that Black students who experienced tough love, which is nearly synonymous with expression of care and high expectations, had higher levels of achievement. This study is important because it provides recognition that what contributes to school readiness is framed according to Western, middle-class White norms because those are the overwhelming powers in charge of schools. This does not mean that any parenting behaviors are inherently “good” while others are not. Teachers who understand these differences without arranging them into hierarchies can be more successful teachers of minoritized children.

Tamis-Lamonda et al. (2008) also tie high expectations to high levels of care and reiterate the concept of “tough love.” They found that in African American families, parents are prone to less permissiveness and maintain a “no nonsense” (p. 323) style of parenting. They found that high levels of parental control were most frequently coupled with high parental affection. Parents both prepared students for racial or other inequities, while also instilling pride and self-love through high levels of care and affection. This reinforces that the combination of high expectations and care can be effective for White teachers of Black children as it is more like typical family norms of care.

Another study by Golann et al. (2019) looks at what discipline means for Black and Latinx families at charter and Montessori magnet schools. Their study aimed to eliminate some of the gap in the research on Parents of Color and their understanding of



school discipline policies and procedures. The researchers found that Black parents were more likely to be direct or authoritarian with their children, echoing the “tough love” sentiments previously mentioned. Many of the parents posited that this parenting approach served as a protective mechanism to prepare children for societal racism. The “sweat the small stuff” (p. 4) approach, these parents argued, helped their children to develop strategies for dealing with discriminatory adults and situations in the future. In addition, parents consistently argued that policies where high expectations were at the forefront created a space where students were pushed to achieve instead of creating scenarios where teachers felt they needed to “save” students.

Ware (2006) argues that a mismatch between school culture and the culture of students’ home experiences contributes to misunderstandings between teacher and student. To demonstrate this point, Meier et al. (1989) determined that higher percentages of Black teachers in schools led to fewer Students of Color being placed into special education or disciplined through expulsion or suspension. Moreover, these schools and teachers placed more Black students into gifted programs and had higher rates of high school graduation, arguably because of their understanding of students’ cultural assets. Kelley and Meyers (1987) refer to this type of understanding as “cultural consciousness,” a critical reflection on one’s self, including one’s cultural influences, beliefs, and values. Including students’ culture, therefore, is an integral element in student success. Without this inclusion, students who do not assimilate into the culture of school, typically fraught with White middle-class norms and values, are more likely to fail. Ware (2006) identified an ethic of caring, beliefs about students and community, and instructional practices as the three common traits of exemplary African American teachers.

Overall, research consistently demonstrates that students find the incorporation of family and community practices in the classroom to be one of the most valuable pedagogical traits of caring classrooms (Howard, 2002). This includes creating an environment where students can speak freely and engage in ways similar to how they do at home, without judgement or comparison (Gay, 2002). Howard (2002) notes that many of the relationships most prized by the African American students in his study built on how students experienced expectations, communication and concern in their own homes and communities (p. 434). Being able to recognize oneself through the culture of home is important for teachers to consider.

### **Classroom Best Practices for Building Relationships with Diverse Students**

Connecting the literature on cultural parenting styles to schooling, various researchers have indicated classroom best practices to support building positive relationships with students whose cultural identities may differ from their own. Kleinfeld's pioneering (1975) research on Eskimo and Indian students articulates the need for teachers outside of the students' cultural community to both understand their culture and use it as a tool for perpetuating high expectations and care. She argues:

There is a prominent villain in Indian education- the ethnocentric teacher who strives to destroy his students' cultural identity in order to propel them into the American mainstream. Confronted with silent, resistive Indian students, he then quotes chapter and verse of cultural deprivation texts to rationalize his own teaching failure. (p. 301)

She argues that one of the main reasons White teachers are considered ineffective is because they perpetuate hegemonic viewpoints and even "personify antagonistic values"

(p. 304) of oppressive White culture. She cites previous research on Native American schooling (Wax et al., 1964) which demonstrates that effective teachers are both strict disciplinarians and demonstrate respect for their students. In this research, respect appears as fairness, and avoidance of situations that would embarrass or dishonor students. This includes focusing on qualities external to successful education, such as a students' dress, eating habits, or overall neatness. Kleinfeld argues that these are some of the first glimpses into characteristics of effective teachers of Indian students, but that what is missing is an understanding of how teachers' attitudes provide the foundation for how they approach and educate students. A similar question is asked in this study: What is it about some teachers that causes them to be effective educators of Students of Color?

Kleinfeld (1975) argues that concepts like respect are culturally situated, yet seemingly understood and practiced by effective teachers of Indian students, and I would argue, other effective White teachers of minoritized students. She notes that while we have a surplus of understanding of the qualities of ineffective teachers, not much is known or available about teachers who "get it right." Kleinfeld's argument can be broadened considering that even today there is not a wide-enough knowledge base of what makes teachers effective educators of marginalized youth, particularly African American students in American schools. Kleinfeld's (1975) study aimed to develop a theoretical model that described the psychological characteristics of both effective and ineffective teachers of rural Athabascan Indian and Eskimo students. Further, Kleinfeld explored the question of whether a teacher who was successful with Indian and Eskimo students would be effective with urban White and Black students as well. She argues that an understanding of these critical questions is important to understanding how to select

appropriate teachers for certain student groups, and I would argue, most importantly, how to train and develop the skills of teachers who will be teaching diverse youth.

Kleinfeld (1975) uses film analyses to demonstrate that nonverbal behavior can be seen to communicate warmth (affection) depending on physical distance between teacher and student and spacing between students. For instance, successful Eskimo teachers of Eskimo children demonstrate physical positive rapport with students by communicating “emotional closeness” (p. 304) through physical touch or standing close to students. This connection has been cited in other literature (Collier, 2004) and is shown to even transcend racial boundaries, specifically in African American communities where proximity is also seen as a type of emotional closeness.

Kleinfeld’s (1975) work demonstrates the need to analyze cross-cultural teaching relationships in order to determine what it is that makes students feel “loved.” She demonstrates that for example in Indian cultures, verbal praise is seen as embarrassing, whereas nonverbal praise like a smile or twinkle of the eyes demonstrates love. Because it is a culture built on mutual obligations, urging students to perform to please the teacher, instead of to receive a good grade, was more effective. Overall, these instances in Indian and Eskimo classrooms demonstrate that personal orientation instead of task orientation in the classroom contributes to successful cross-cultural teaching. Meaning that the “value of social harmony takes precedence over task achievement” (p. 304). This is important because for White middle-class students, this personalization may not be as critical to a successful student-teacher relationship as it is for Students of Color. Similar ideas are conveyed in Gay’s (2002) work as it pertains to patterns of task engagement and organizing ideas that are more culturally responsive to Students of Color.

To visualize the type of effective educator indicated by Kleinfeld's (1975) descriptions, Duncan-Andrade (2007) creates the metaphor of a "rida" (p. 623). This is a teacher who is always "down" or committed to the cause, personifying his vision of a truly culturally responsive educator. This type of teacher reflects qualities like critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), the ability to identify systems of oppression and work to change them. Critical consciousness can be observed in practices like proactive planning and frequent self-critique. Duncan-Andrade argues that for teachers to function like "ridas" in their classrooms, they must disregard the "savior complex" ideology often seen in movies and television shows where White teachers swoop in to change the lives of Brown and Black youths. Rather, "ridas" see themselves as caring servants to the children and continue to function as supporters and cheerleaders for diversity. In this paradigm, part of the servant mentality requires maintaining high expectations coupled with the belief that all students can and do achieve at exemplary levels.

Part of this ability for teachers to hold high expectations for all students is an understanding of cultural differences and awareness of the needs of diverse learners. Cherng and Halpin (2016) describe this through their study comparing educators of color and White teachers. They identify that students connect with teachers who recognize and understand power dynamics and personal struggle. Teachers in this study who excel at positive relationship-building echo the "rida" in Duncan-Andrade's (2007) study, showcasing interpersonal connection and beliefs that "teacher is who I am, not what I do" (p. 630). This desire to know and support students on a deep interpersonal level echoes the sentiments of care mentioned previously.

Research demonstrates that perceived caring is associated with academic success, in particular cognitive learning (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Howard (2001) argues that for many students, caring is expressed by teachers through high expectations and strictness about work. This, he finds, results in higher academic achievement. Howard calls this “culturally connected caring” (p. 434), displays of caring that evoke the cultural context of the home communities of which students are already familiar. The students in Howard’s study indicate that they can tell their teacher really cares about them and their success when they make sure students understand what they’re learning, help everybody who asks for it, and even demonstrate strong emotions like crying when students succeed.

Ware’s (2006) discussion of “warm demanders” similarly finds that teachers who are successful with Students of Color achieve this because they exhibit authority, care, and pedagogical intelligence in the classroom. Students who have teachers that demonstrate this type of “tough love” articulated that they believed their teachers did not lower their standards while still maintaining a level of care for them through frequent and authentic support. This, in turn, resulted in more confidence in their learning and a desire to work hard.

Ware (2006), in a study of two African American teachers, describes a teacher who sets high expectations and demonstrates consistent care as a warm demander. The warm demander requires quality work from all students, without sacrificing care in the process of high achievement. It is important to note that Ware’s warm demander approach is predominantly described as a quality of African American teachers. However, Ford and Sassi (2014) demonstrate that a White teacher’s approach to

authority can be similarly effective as a warm demander if certain other criteria are met. Importantly, White teachers must “prioritize interpersonal relationships, communicate in culturally congruent ways, link care with justice, develop a critical race consciousness, ally with students, and critique curriculum” (p. 39). These findings fall under the categories of conveying high expectations and demonstrating care. Moreover, these findings demonstrate that White teachers can be effective teachers of Students of Color, particularly when they are culturally conscious allies for social justice.

Cashdollar (2017) demonstrates that conveying high expectations often takes the form of the tone in which teachers express what they want students to do or accomplish. She argues that there is an important difference between a strict and authoritative tone versus one that is belittling or degrading to students. She explains that one of the limitations of her study was that it was conducted in a charter school where students have a “history of strong relationships with their teachers” (p. 144). This is important because the study relies on this underlying fact that students generally understand that the strict tone of the teacher indicates caring and a desire for students to work hard, as determined by many experiences at the school where a harsh tone is routinely followed up with positive praise or support. Cashdollar notes that if the sample were drawn from a school where these harsh tones were subsequently followed by disrespect or frequent consequences, the positive associations between teacher tone and caring or high expectations may not have been made.

Caring in the classroom also looks like engagement in students’ personal lives and experiences. The students in Howard’s (2001) study indicate that they can tell if a teacher cares about them when they ask questions about what is going on at home,

trying to get a sense of the unique experiences of every student. This echoes Nodding's' (1988) findings which indicated that "children will work harder for people they love and trust" (p. 10). It is often the little things like engaging in a personal discussion with students that build that love and trust. Slaughter-Defoe and Carlson (1996) discovered that students felt teachers really cared about them when they made themselves available, comforted them, and demonstrated concern about their life issues beyond the classroom. Hollins and Spencer (1990) similarly found that African American elementary and secondary students indicated that when teachers were responsive to their personal lives, they felt more connected to the classroom and expressed more positive sentiments and increased effort in their academics.

Overall, the research cited in this section of the review of the literature demonstrates how teachers build positive relationships with students through various strategies. It discusses culturally situated sentiments like high expectations and care, which research indicates are essential for teachers to understand and employ in the relationship-building process. Because this study explored what teachers report is said to students while teachers are actively trying to build relationships with them, in addition to the processes and strategies used, the next section in the literature review will discuss the nuances of language and cultural norms of conversation that are the conduit for many of these best practices to occur.

### **Defining Terms Related to Language**

Initially, this research study was designed to look specifically at what is said when teachers are building positive relationships with students, listening in on the discourse between students and teachers in the process. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and



the restrictions from the school district, I was not given permission to observe the teachers or interact in any way with their students. Therefore, investigating their language use and the language varieties of their students did not become a major focus of this study. Rather, what became more integral to the study was investigating the teachers' perceptions of their cultural identities (including linguistic identities) during the process of relationship-building, particularly the cultural norms of conversation that teachers reflected on as they described their relationship-building processes. This included investigation of the teachers' understandings of norms of conversation, and their second-hand descriptions of conversations they had with students while they were actively trying to build relationships.

For this portion of the literature review, I will focus mostly on cultural norms of conversation as they are observed in the classroom, specifically how they function within the process of relationship-building. I will first start out with a brief overview of language varieties, particularly African American Vernacular English (AAVE), since this language variety and Standard English are the two varieties most likely spoken by the majority of the study participants' students. Much of the literature on cultural norms of conversation and linguistic discrimination grounds itself in research on language varieties like AAVE because are often considered non-normative to those who believe in the hierarchical nature of "standard English". This will help set the scene for a larger discussion of cultural norms of conversation related to verbal and nonverbal communication, and how understanding of those norms impacts the relationship-building process.

## **Language Varieties and Linguistic Discrimination**

Discussions of language in this section of the literature review will focus predominantly on oral language. I understand that linguistic discrimination exists when speakers of non-Standard English write, but that is not the focus of this analysis. When I refer to language, I mean oral communication and/or cultural norms of language and linguistic expression. When referring to Standard English or Standard dialect I am alluding to the social convention of considering White linguistic norms as more prestigious than vernacular dialects like AAVE (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). This positioning of one language variety over another functions as a power dynamic that places White middle class “Standard English” above all other varieties. This is problematic because Standard English is no more inherently intelligent or useful than other varieties. Academic language is defined here as nearly synonymous with Standard English, as it is the typical variety of the classroom, most predominantly spoken and enforced by White teachers. The language of “teachers and textbooks” (p. 22), academic language is decontextualized, removed from the histories of diverse students. Nonetheless, it is the dialect most often required for success in text interpretation and standardized testing.

Although growing populations of immigrant and refugee students have led to increased research on English Language Learners (ELLs), for the purpose of this review of the literature, my conception of linguistic diversity is more focused on language variety, particularly AAVE. Throughout this research and review of the literature, AAVE is sometimes referred to as African American English (AAE) or Black English (BE). Green (2002) notes that the names of these communicative practices differ depending on

beliefs about history or origin. This review of the literature recognizes these terms, and those used by theorists and researchers within, as synonymous and interchangeable in the literature.

The literature on AAVE indicates that it is its own variety of English with its own rules and structures (McWhorter, 2000). For the purpose of this research, I am classifying language distinctions like African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard English as varieties (Rickford, 1999) as the use of the term “dialect” often has hierarchical classifications that favors the hegemonic variety (Standard English). Rickford and Rickford (2000) write, “The fact is that most African Americans *do* talk different from Whites and Americans of other ethnic groups” (p. 4). They refer to Black English as “Spoken Soul,” a term coined by Claude Brown, and which James Baldwin described as “this passion, this skill...this incredible music” (p. 3). Smitherman (1996) describes Black Dialect as an Africanized form of English that reflects Afro-centric linguistic-cultural heritage, particularly of conditions of servitude and oppression. These descriptions of AAVE demonstrate that there are accepted differences between Black and White English in academia, demonstrating that Black English is historically and structurally significant. With further teacher understanding of varieties of English and cultural norms of conversation, many cultural conflicts can be avoided.

Defining linguistic diversity rests on the understanding that there is more than one legitimate form of a language. AAVE or other varieties of English are not examples of “bad” English. In fact, they are legitimate varieties with a system of linguistic patterns and structures like Standard English or other language varieties (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Thus, circumstances where some languages or language varieties have been stigmatized

as being bad or inappropriate can be viewed through the lens of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) as examples of racism and linguistic discrimination. Yosso (2005) refers to viewing cultural knowledge and skills like linguistic diversity as community cultural wealth, a way to look at Communities of Color beyond the deficit perspective. In this way, adherence to the belief that Standard English is the norm is reflective of a power struggle between the language of White America and the language varieties of communities of color. Demonstrating contrasts between cultural norms of conversation and normative school expectations reinforces the idea that speakers of non-Standard varieties of English are often judged erroneously as having behavior issues or being academically inferior to Standard English speakers. Judgment of these discourse styles illuminate cultural conflicts related to patterns of conversation in the classroom as they deviate from what the teacher believes to be the norm.

### **Teacher Perceptions of Different Linguistic Identities**

The literature is clear that many teachers do not have a strong understanding of student language acquisition and language varieties (Abdul-Hakim, 2002; Blake & Cutler, 2003; Brandon, Taliaferro-Baszile, & Berry, 2009; Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2012; Cummins, 1997; Delpit, 1996; Young et al., 2013). Various studies indicate that gaps in teacher knowledge about language acquisition have an impact on the disproportionate numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) and Students of Color referred for special education services (Ahram et al., 2011; Fernandez & Inserra, 2013). Diversity courses for preservice teachers do not always prepare them to understand language barriers, or to combat them by using students' cultural attributes to support student success (Brandon et al., 2009). Unfortunately, many teachers, because of their

lack of understanding of linguistic diversity, see multilingual students or speakers of AAVE as academically inferior.

Many instances of linguistic discrimination are the result of teachers who are either unaware of cultural differences in language or who choose to value their own variety above all others. Labov (1969) argues that non-standard English is not an imperfect copy of Standard English but is an “integral part of the larger sociolinguistic structure of the English language” (p. 1). He cites the “doctrine of correctness” (p. 3) of the 17th and 18th centuries, which put negative emphasis on middle class varieties of English that were viewed as reflecting a lack of education or intelligence. Labov indicates that speakers of AAVE and native speakers of Spanish are believed to have inherent intellectual deficits because of their deviation from Standard English. This often contributes to teachers setting low expectations for speakers of non-Standard English, and the potential for students to feel that they are not being “heard” in the classroom.

Poor student-teacher relationships result in both personal and academic failures for students (Baker, 2006; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Cooper, 2003; Ware, 2006). The literature indicates that positive relationship-building is impacted by a teacher’s understanding of linguistic diversity (Delpit, 2006; Smitherman, 1998; Young et al., 2013). Teachers who are not knowledgeable in the area of language acquisition and development are likely to view varieties of English that differ from their own Standard English as inferior. As a result, they are likely to have negative perceptions of students who are speakers of non-Standard English, setting lower expectations for learning and potentially demonstrating lower levels of care for these students. Looking at cultural

norms of conversation is integral to this study because conversation and student-teacher interactions are conduits for conveying high expectations and care.

Negative perceptions towards the use of Black English in the classroom illuminate the breadth of the problem of linguistic profiling in education. Rickford and Rickford (2000) note that “between the 1960s and 1990s, a dramatic shift occurred” (p. 5) in the perception of Black English, particularly stimulated by the Oakland School Board’s decision in 1996 to recognize Ebonics as the primary language of African American students. Teacher predilection towards Standard English is also observed in classrooms staffed by educators with minimal connections to speakers of AAVE. Abdul-Hakim (2002) reveals that preservice teachers in Florida were more likely to display negative sentiments towards speakers of non-Standard English if they did not have personal interactions with People of Color prior to teaching. Blake & Cutler (2003) found connections in their research between negative attitudes towards AAE and other varieties of English by teachers of mostly non-bidialectal students. They found that ELL teachers or those who worked in school environments with higher numbers of bilingual students were more understanding of the need to value and focus attention on the validity of AAE.

Like Rickford and Rickford (2000) and Baugh (2000), Smitherman (1998) argues that disdain for the use of Black English in the classroom is more politically based and has little to do with misunderstandings or an actual lack of clarity in speech. Smitherman (1998) writes,

Africans in America have always pushed the linguistic envelope. The underlying

tone of resistance in the language may explain why African American linguistic innovations are so often dismissed as slang. It's an easier concept to deal with than confronting the reality that the words represent (p. 3).

This argument reiterates Baugh's (2000) conclusion that Black English and the vocabulary (slang) associated with it is not always dismissed as "wrong" or "bad" in many situations. However, the inherent racist attitudes towards it hold speakers of the language back from accessing equitable services. Teachers in Baker-Bell's (2017) study argue that students need to code switch or fluctuate between their home variety of English and Standard English, in order to be successful in the "real world." The teachers quoted in her study argue that forcing linguistically diverse students to speak "correctly" is part of their job as educators. However, this ignores the reality that students who speak other varieties of English likely already know how to code switch. The larger issue is that they should not be forced to code switch to express themselves in a culturally responsive classroom. Smitherman's addition extends this cycle to classroom conversation and arguably, equitable education overall. This aligns with the previous literature on demonstrations of care and conveying high expectations, as all these concepts focus on teachers' need to connect with students in ways that are culturally congruent.

Labov (1969) argues that when it comes to varieties of English, there must be a distinction between performance and competence; simply because a speaker's language deviates from the accepted norm, it does not mean that the student misunderstands. In fact, they may be performing their abstract knowledge through a different avenue of linguistic expression that is not inferior, but just *unlike* the norm. Delpit (2006) points to the idea of "other people's English" which is multifaceted. For speakers of varieties like

AAVE, standard English is often seen as the confining language of the classroom; it is both “other” to them and reinforces their position as other. Heath (1983) echoes this sentiment, reinforcing the need to value the differences between communities’ “ways with words” (p. 1).

Particular to language and literacy success, Labov (1969) concludes that reading failure is often a result of cultural conflicts between the English vernaculars of teacher and student, and not a misunderstanding of dialect or grammar. Again, in the United States education system, it is evident that many student speakers of AAVE have teachers who are White and therefore more frequently use Standard English. It is important to pay close attention to both the tenets of AAVE and the function of language in building student-teacher relationships. This will help to determine how teachers navigate language, particularly varieties that are not their own, to build positive relationships with students. The recurring theme in all these frameworks is that linguistic diversity is not representative of something deviant but is just an indication of cultural difference.

When looking at relationship-building specifically through the lens of language, scholars argue that an understanding of students’ cultural assets and celebration of diverse communities leads to positive student-teacher relationships (Delpit, 1996; Gay, 2001; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Smitherman, 1998; Trotman-Scott & Moss-Bouldin, 2004; Young et al., 2013). Recognizing student funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) includes understanding that all people have competencies specific to their cultural communities, many of which are overlooked in mainstream classrooms. This includes the way that minoritized students navigate language use in their home communities in expert ways that are undervalued in traditional school systems.



## **Cultural Norms of Conversation in Relationship-Building**

Cultural norms of conversation in non-Standard varieties of English, like oral linguistic differences, are often judged erroneously as wrong or improper. Foucault (1972) asserts that there is meaning and power in the social practice of discourse, and like Fairclough (1989), notes that there are often improper balances of power that hinder discovery and create obstacles for marginalized students (p. 45). These power relations can be seen in institutions, processes and classification systems. In the classroom, this hierarchy and imbalance is evident in how teachers respond to and relate to students. Michaels' (1981) research supports this concern. She writes, "when the child's narrative style is at variance with the teacher's expectations, collaboration is often unsuccessful and, over time, may adversely affect school performance and evaluation" (423). Negative sentiments towards discourse styles that deviate from what the teacher believes to be the norm reinforce power dynamics and cultural conflicts.

Trotman-Scott and Moss-Bouldin (2014) argue that teachers who are not culturally competent are likely to misinterpret characteristics of African American conversations. They highlight Hurston's (1934) *Characteristics of Negro Expression* as a demonstration that cultural characteristics in Black culture are not inferior to, but different than the "norms" of monocultural school settings. For instance, Hurston identifies qualities like drama, folklore, adornment, and asymmetry as qualities that are valued in the communication styles of African American communities. In classrooms, these qualities are often seen as circuitous and rambling by teachers who are not well-versed in these characteristics. They often result in punishment or rebuke, instead of being used to support or encourage student learning.

Foster's (1989) analysis of speech events between a Black teacher and Black students in a community college setting discusses the "performative" quality of interactions. She uses Hymes' (1972, 1974) ethnography of speaking framework which posits that communicating and speaking are part of a larger cultural system, organized in ways that are specific to a certain community. Her study identifies the "call and response" (p. 14) pattern so frequently evidenced in AAVE. She likens this pattern to a refrain in a song, where the teacher repeats the students' words, while extending the learning and clarifying misconceptions. This transition from a "mainstream" to a "Black" style of teaching accomplishes various goals, particularly eliciting student personal stories and narratives, which clarify meaning through sense-making connections. Interestingly, the teacher in her study used lecture as a threat to students when they were not actively engaged in the discussions, demonstrating its use as a punishment for Students of Color. This is significant because it shows that lecture is viewed as an abhorrent style of communication for African American students in the course, reinforcing a distinction in cultural modes of communication. Her research demonstrates that tapping into students' norms of social appropriateness through culturally responsive instruction results in achievement gains. Performative elements like talk stories and rhythmic language were most effective at engaging Black students.

Other examples of language expressions that are often judged negatively by Standard English speakers relate to issues surrounding intonation and speaking out in class (Martin et al., 2014). Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2011) argue that differences in how Students of Color respond to questions are viewed by some teachers as lazy or lacking enthusiasm. For instance, students who are asked to respond to questions where

there is already an obvious or simplistic answer either refuse to respond or do so without the level of interest the teacher expects. Instead of seeing that students are bored or unchallenged by the questions, teachers sometimes view this as disregard or laziness. In other instances, students might be seen as disruptive or disrespectful if they shout out responses, a reaction that for some students indicates attention and engagement.

Cultural conflicts that occur in relation to conversational norms in classrooms can be seen in instances of verbal play such as “joning” or “playing the dozens” (Delfino, 2016). Delfino argues that verbal play and ritual insults are common characteristics of AAVE. Teachers who are speakers of Standard English tend to view these insults as aggressive or threatening, reinforcing stereotypes that Students of Color are dangerous. Examples of these types of exchanges are “Mamma jokes” or other insults that are meant to demonstrate group inclusion, instead of being indicators of disagreement. Delfino argues that these jokes serve to challenge beliefs that Black youths are aggressive or threatening. She argues that students flip their presumed “dangerous” identities by joking in order to demonstrate humor and be socially included within their peer group. This common language of verbal play reinforces speakers of AAVE as members of a linguistic community.

### **Functions of Language in Relationship-Building**

Focus on language and its function in relationship-building matters because of the need for teachers to build culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) connections with students. Research indicates that students perform better when they feel cared for by their teachers (Howard, 2002; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). So, extending the discussion of relationship-building to linguistic diversity is yet another avenue through which to view

the complexities of student-teacher relationships. Discussion of these relationships in regards to linguistic differences is important because there is a discrepancy in the makeup of student populations in relation to teacher demographics; most schools attended by Students of Color in America are staffed by White teachers, with less than 20% of teachers who are racial or ethnic minorities (Goldring et al., 2013). Therefore, most Students of Color are taught by speakers of Standard English who often do not have a familiarity with AAVE or other language varieties that differ from their own.

Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2007) argue that teaching effectively requires not just the ability to understand the cultural norms like call and response and verbal play previously discussed, but also to incorporate them into the classroom. For instance, they posit that teachers must investigate their own personalities to build an understanding of how they are expressing information to students. This will give teachers better ideas as to whether their speech is aligned with or in opposition to cultural norms. The goal of using this knowledge of self is to craft more positive relationships with students.

The literature also makes clear the necessity for supporting students through recognition and celebration of diverse modes of speech in the classroom (Delpit, 2006; Paris, 2012; Young et al., 2013). Delpit (2006) argues that the actual study of linguistic diversity should be a part of the curriculum. She posits that a culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) classroom would have at its forefront a focus on the intricacies of language varieties. Suppression of home languages reemphasizes that certain varieties of English are inferior, suppressing student engagement and confidence particularly for speakers of

AAVE. Logically, if students are consistently corrected or told by teachers to “speak correctly” sentiments of inferiority are likely to be reinforced (Lee, 2006).

Young et al. (2013) argue that in addition to studying linguistic diversity in courses, teachers and researchers in the field of education must invite and accept the use of different varieties of English in classroom discussions. This demonstrates what they call “code-meshing” (p. 2) or the combining of two or more dialects to create more effective communications across students of different races and cultures. Ladson-Billings (1994) agrees that inclusion of both languages helps students to see that all language is valid, helping to overcome racial and ethnic stereotypes. Educators who support the use of different varieties of English give students freedom to speak their truth and live comfortably in their identities. This creates a more open-minded environment in which students can share their voices. Inclusion of home languages also reduces the possibility for instances of linguistic discrimination because teachers will be more familiar and confident in their understanding of the varieties of English in society.

Another type of communication that the literature indicates supports student-teacher connections is a display of personal emotion. A teacher in Howard’s (2001) study lost her father during the research. Her emotional response in class, crying and telling the students about her memories of her father, was indicated by the students as something that helped them feel more connected to her. She told the students that it would make her feel better if they were working hard and being successful, tying her happiness and peace of mind to their success.

Aultman, et al (2009) discuss the concept of emotional closeness and the boundaries associated with “appropriate” displays of emotion in the classroom. They

indicate that especially for new teachers, there is an ebb and flow in the process of realizing the appropriate amount of emotion that should be displayed in a classroom to maintain an “appropriate” relationship. Appropriate in this case refers to a relationship where the teacher is still seen as in control, but in a way that also demonstrates their own humanity and ability to emotionally connect. Shutz (2014) argues that teachers are often taught to repress negative emotions in the classroom and try to maintain an exterior that is “pleasant” (p. 7). This can be seen by students as inauthentic on the part of the teacher, since students are aware that teachers have emotions, and those teachers that seem too happy or too angry all of the time create a balance that can confuse students or make them uncomfortable.

Understanding that student-teacher relationships and sharing of emotions is transactional, meaning that students also display emotions in the classroom, the literature indicates that displaying emotions can be a way to connect. Compared to the teacher in Howard’s (2001) study, Schutz’s (2014) teachers’ emphasis on continuous learning (working hard and being successful), coupled with a relatable and reasonable display of emotion (crying at the loss of a parent) led to better connection with students. Essentially, the literature shows if the display of emotion is in line with what most people would consider “appropriate,” and combined with a need to maintain high expectations even when emotional, students and teachers seem to effectively connect.

Overall, an understanding of cultural norms of conversation is important to the investigation of building positive relationships between teachers and students with different cultural identities. Without an honoring of how high expectations and care are

expressed in different communities, it would be impossible to truly describe these teachers' processes.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Investigating teacher beliefs and relationship-building, Duncan-Andrade (2007) writes that “the measurement of an equitable education would require significantly greater attention to qualitative assessments of schools and classrooms” (p. 618). A qualitative approach supports development of an understanding of teachers’ beliefs on positive relationship-building and provides an appropriate avenue through which to describe their processes. This requires analysis of both the beliefs and experiences of teachers as they plan for and execute the process of building positive relationships with students. This study investigated the following research questions:

1. How do four teachers with certificates in diversity literacy think about their own personal racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities during the process of relationship-building?
2. In what ways do teachers describe how they navigate cultural differences to convey sentiments of high expectations and care to their students in order to build positive relationships?

### **Methodology and Methods**

In this chapter I will give an overview of the methodology of this study. Due to the in-depth nature of the research questions, I used a multiple case study design (Yin, 2003) to determine how teachers perceived the relationship-building process with a group of students with varied cultural identities, whose culturally-situated modes of communication and understanding of high expectations and care, likely differed from



theirs. My theoretical framework outlined the concept that relationship-building is a phenomenological process, and that it is influenced by critical elements like cultural identity (Vygotsky, 1978; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The IPA framework showcased the philosophical and phenomenological aspect of the process of relationship-building, particularly demonstrating that it is necessary to get to the essential experience of each participant in order to better understand the phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). This study was also designed to gain insight into how this phenomenon works.

This study first sought to understand how teachers build positive relationships with students despite differences in their personal and cultural identities. This type of research required an in-depth look at the experience, particularly in the context of contemporary events and social structures (Yin, 2018). I investigated each teacher's perception of their own cultural identity and their identity as a teacher. Analysis of self-reflections and interviews over time in addition to a personal identity investigation early in the relationship-building process was important to see how teachers' cultural identities impacted the relationship-building process. Looking at multiple narratives helped to understand how teachers made sense of their experiences within their own personal frames of reference. These individual experiences were then compared to determine themes and commonalities that unified the participants.

My use of a holistic multi-case study presented strengths and weaknesses (Yin, 2018). In this study I viewed each teacher as a case, bound together by their similar experience in a teacher leadership and Diversity Literacy Program. One strength of this type of study is that it allowed me to view the teachers on a deeper level, with all data sources pointing to their perceptions of themselves and their relationship-building

experiences. While it is sometimes seen as a critique of the case study methodology, the ability to be flexible and adaptive in this type of study was an asset to this research (Yin, 2018). This flexibility was particularly important as this study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, during a time when teachers were teaching virtually at the beginning of the study, but then moved back to their in-person classrooms after 2 interviews with 2 remaining.

The research questions emphasized culturally situated modes of communication as an element of why and how teachers build positive (or negative) relationships with students. If, throughout the course of the study, the interviews and self-reflections pointed to different elements of relationship-building, the study could have been flexibly adapted to fit this divergence. Moreover, the transient nature of the student populations in the teacher-participants' schools meant that the teachers' classrooms were constantly in flux because the students who were in their classrooms changed due to students dropping out of school, moving, etc. If I began by interviewing or discussing perceptions of relationship-building or the actual relationships between the teachers and their students, and then those participants were removed from the school setting, I needed to adapt my study to fit this change. A case study allowed me to incorporate this occurrence into the research without jeopardizing the entire project.

Within the constructs of this multiple case study design, I used the Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) approach to maintain a more flexible and participant-oriented study (Alase, 2017). Smith et al. (2009) argue that "IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (p. 1). They further describe "experience" as a complex concept which

consists of an “everyday flow” of meaning-making and personal significance (p. 1). What may be a “major life experience” for one person could be unremarkable for another. IPA is concerned with analyzing the participants’ “subjective experience,” while understanding that each of these experiences can be understood and examined in the broader lens of human experience (p. 1).

By using the IPA approach, I focused on the way teachers were making sense of their lived experiences building positive relationships with students. Because this study looked at the way teachers viewed themselves as cultural beings during this process, using IPA, which is typically more frequently seen in the field of psychology, was a logical approach (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. argue that a major theoretical axis of IPA is that it is interpretive and informed by hermeneutics and the “sense-making” desire of humans (p. 3). For this study, that comparative lens between each teachers’ individual experiences of relationship-building and the general experience of teachers during this process, as identified in the literature, was important to support identification of themes. As the researcher, I was engaged in what Smith et al. term a “double hermeneutic” (p. 3) because I was making meaning of the process of relationship-building in the same moment that the participants were making sense of the experience themselves.

Finally, because of the complex nature of this analysis, this case study displayed some elements of participatory action research. Mills (2000) identifies one type of co-researcher/participant methodology as “practical action research” (p. 9). This process involves systematic inquiry into the way the participant, in this case an educator, operates. I investigated how four teachers thought about relationship-building and navigated differences to build connections with students. While the participants were not

actually involved in the research design with me, we talked extensively about their teaching practices. I worked with them as they thought about this process in real time, describing what they believed it meant to navigate diverse identities and build connections with students. Components of effective practical action research center on a commitment to continuous professional development and personal reflection (Mills, 2000; Thomas & Howell, 2019), which, reflecting on Duncan-Andrade's (2007) concept of a "rida," is a quality of reflective teachers. Oftentimes during our interviews, the participants would say things like "I never really thought about this before," or "now that this is on my mind I realized..." This showed that their self-reflections were impacting the way they thought about their classroom experiences, and potentially shaping their day-to-day interactions with students. Therefore, I could not have engaged in a study with these educators without their desire to use our discussions as ideas to put into practice.

## **Participants and Research Context**

### **Participant Selection**

This qualitative analysis used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Participants were identified using a three-tiered process. This process is described below.

Tier 1: Because I wanted to research teachers who expressed an interest in investigating themselves and the strategies they use as teachers of students with diverse cultural identities, I needed to find an identifier that would isolate qualifying participants in a small group. I was given the names of teacher participants who had completed the Diversity Literacy Program by the advisor for the program. Teachers in this program were ideal because they had to demonstrate a desire to learn about and implement culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms to be a part of the program. In theory,

they maintain a high level of understanding of diversity concepts like varied cultural identities, as they graduated with a degree both in teacher leadership and a certificate in diversity literacy.

Tier 2: Once I was given the email list of teachers in the program, I sent out a recruitment message to garner interest. There were fifteen possible teachers in the population of those who had completed the program, and out of those six responded. Two of the participants who initially responded eventually dropped out of the study before we began, citing limited interaction with students due to career moves into more administrative roles. They also indicated that with the eventual shift back to in-person learning (all schools in the district were previously teaching online), they would be required by their schools to be part of planning the transition, and therefore did not have the time to be in the study. Because the population size was already so small, having only four participants was ideal and satisfied a reasonable amount to observe the phenomenon of positive relationship-building. Four participants also fulfilled the suggested participant number as identified by Smith et al. (2009) in the IPA approach. Because IPA requires a detailed look at each particular case, studies using IPA require a small number of participants so that the revealed experiences of each person can be described. In this study, each teacher was viewed as a single case so that similarities and differences between each participant could be explored in detail to satisfy the IPA requirements of a small and “reasonably homogeneous sample” (p. 3). Four teachers (cases) was a manageable amount for this study as it provided the expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Tier 3: To affirm a desire and capacity to engage in this type of research, I contacted each participant's administrator. Similar to Cooper's (2003) study, I used network sampling (Glesne, 2016) to confirm that these four teachers were in fact identified as effective at building positive relationships by their administrators. When seeking administrative support, I asked the building principals if these teachers displayed an openness to investigating themselves through the lens of cultural competency. In the classroom, this could look like application of the teachers' new knowledge or different professional development opportunities aimed at building positive relationships with all students. The information gained from their administrators was of interest to me because it signaled that the teachers would be open to being involved in this study. This openness was important because the teachers needed to meet with me frequently and needed to be comfortable with me asking questions about their practices. In addition, participants had to previously have a letter of approval from their administrator to be admitted to the Diversity Literacy Program, so each has been twice-confirmed as being suitable for this type of study. Any participant could have been administratively withdrawn if their desire and or capacity to be part of the study was not affirmed, for instance if the participant was not successfully fulfilling their professional obligations. This did not happen and all participants were successfully engaged in the study the entire time.

### ***Participant Characteristics***

Because I was not solely focused on White teachers of Students of Color, the teacher participants selected for this study did not necessarily have to be White. It was important, though, that they represented the typical teaching force, which is predominantly White. The participants identified themselves as one White male, two

White females, and one African American female. Regarding the age of the participants, I did not find this to be necessary parts of my criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and age information was not gathered. To be a part of the Diversity Literacy Program, participants had to be at least in their third year of teaching, so this veteran teaching status was a common feature of each participant. Veteran teaching status also varied, with participants ranging from their second and ninth years as a classroom teacher at the time of data collection.

In addition, gender identity was not a necessary criterion when choosing participants. Like trends seen in the racial makeup of teaching, many teachers in the United States are female, and the sample reflected this. I recognized that themes may have emerged in the data that reflected differences based on age or gender identity, however, this was something I anticipated and paid close attention to as the study continued. I understood that it could have been ideal if the four teachers were part of the same content department to avoid the relationship-building differences that may a result this variable. For instance, it is probably likely that content areas such as English lend themselves to more frequent class conversation. However, this was not a concrete requirement, and it was not problematic that the teachers were from different content areas. In fact, it provided the ability to look at themes across content areas, as all the participants came from different disciplines (English, science, social studies, and physical education).

### **Participant Schools**

The sites for this study were at various low-performing schools in a large midwestern school district. A requirement of the Diversity Literacy Program was that all

teacher-participants must teach at schools that the state department of education designated at the time of enrollment as “high-need” or “failing.” This qualifier distinguished that the school has not met yearly academic achievement goals for students. The district has roughly 100,000 students spread across about 150 schools. Data from the 2019-20 school year showed that the district identified roughly 66.6% of its students coming from economically disadvantaged households. The demographic makeup of the district was 41.3% White (non-Hispanic), 36.5% African American, 12.3% Hispanic or Latino, and 9.9% other. All state, district, and school data used in this study and analysis is from the 2019-20 school year because updated data was not present due the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the state, the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress data (2019-20) showed great disparities between different races in math and reading progress. Grade 8 NAEP reading scores indicated that 84% of African American students and 72% of Hispanic or Latino students were performing below or at basic reading levels. This was compared to only 63% at these same levels for White (non-Hispanic) students. Math scores told a similar story, with 91% of African American students and 79% of Hispanic or Latino students performing at basic or below basic levels of math. This was compared to 68% for White students in the same categories. The district itself mirrored many of these same inequities, particularly in the “failing” schools in which the research participants worked.

The schools selected for this study had high populations of culturally diverse students. This was important as it was necessary for the participants to be able to indicate how they built positive relationships with students who were similar to and different from



them culturally (including racially, ethnically, and linguistically). This study was supported by the Chief Equity Officer of the school district, who fully endorsed this research, indicating that the Diversity Literacy Program was something in which the district had invested a lot of advocacy time. Because each individual school within the district has different characteristics, I will dive into the specific demographics of each school as I describe the research participants below in order to view each teacher in the context of their unique teaching assignment.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools in the district switched to online learning which this study will refer to as the Virtual Instruction Model, hereafter identified as VIM. VIM began in March of 2020, continuing into the Fall of that year and Spring of 2021. Schools went back to conducting classes in-person on a hybrid schedule beginning April 7, 2021. The district's hybrid schedule meant that teachers were conducting classes in-person on Mondays/Tuesdays and Thursdays/Fridays, with Wednesdays off as a virtual day where district custodians sanitized the school buildings. Teachers were also expected to teach synchronously (students logged in) and asynchronously (students working at their own pace) online throughout the entire week. Students were given the choice as to whether they wanted to return to school in-person and could change their decision at any time. This meant that teachers' rosters and classrooms were always in flux.

Those students who elected to go back in-person rotated through the week, attending only two days total: those with last names A-K attended school in-person Mondays and Tuesdays, and those with last names L-Z attended only on Thursdays and Fridays. All other days when students were not in-person, they were expected to be

learning synchronously and asynchronously online along with their peers who elected to stay entirely virtual. Due to the start and end date of this study, half of this research was conducted while teachers were instructing classes entirely virtually during VIM, and the other half when teachers had returned to a hybrid in-person model. The transition period when teachers and students went back to in-person instruction was captured halfway through the research, providing insight into how relationships varied during that uncertain time.

### **Research Participants**

In this section I will describe the research participants in my study, and their individual schools and teaching assignments. The teachers came from the same large midwestern school district, from various middle and high schools. All participant names and school names were pseudonyms chosen by the participants. All school data came from the 2019-2020 school year and is provided to demonstrate demographics related to socioeconomic status, race, reading and math proficiency. School data also served to demonstrate that all teacher participants taught at schools described by the district as low-performing or persistently low-achieving. Tables 1 and 2 compare the features of each of the participants and their school assignments.

#### **Ms. Emily Taylor**

Ms. Taylor is a social studies teacher at Parkway High School. Parkway High School is a medium-sized high school in the district, with roughly 1,100 students in grades 9-12. The school identified that in the 2019-2020 school year, 85.2% of students came from economically disadvantaged households, well above the district average (66.6%). Parkway High School is a hub for refugees and English Language Learners, so

racial demographics are not like those in the district at large. Students at Parkway High School identify as 57.5% African American, 19.8% White (non-Hispanic), 13% Hispanic or Latino, and 9.7% Other. School reading proficiency for 2018-2019 measured at 5.2% (District: 37.2%, State: 44.5%) and math proficiency at 4.5% (District: 30.5%, State: 35.4%). Like the trends observable in the state and district at large, African American and Hispanic students fell far below their White peers in these testing categories.

Ms. Taylor identified herself as a White, cisgender, female, newly middle-aged, Christian, married, well-educated mom. She also described herself as “middle class-ish,” and noted that she believes there are a lot of dimensions to her identity. Ms. Taylor acknowledged the privilege associated with her cultural identity, arguing that it has really been in the background for most of her life, so much so that she did not really have to consider it. She said that if you asked her as a kid what her cultural identity was, she would have said “none.” Her political awareness and critical consciousness started when she was a teenager. She believed that her job as a teacher and her teacher preparatory program have made her more aware of the experiences of marginalized students and people in society. Ms. Taylor considered herself a constant learner, which has allowed her to discover how much these dimensions of her identity continue to influence her experiences. This awareness was something that she continued to be cognizant of. She often thought about how race, class, and gender identity influenced how she saw things. She understood the opportunities she’s been afforded and works diligently to make sure her students are given similar opportunities in her classroom and school.

Ms. Taylor has had diverse teaching experiences. She attended a traditional undergraduate program for her teaching degree and did her student teaching at the highest

rated high school in the state. She was then hired at a low-performing arts magnet middle school where she worked for 2 years. She admits that she realized quickly that middle school was not for her. The students would get under her skin and she acknowledges, regrettably, being someone who would yell at students and did not enjoy the atmosphere. She looks back at that time and remembers how unhappy, unsupported, and ineffective she was. When she got the call to transfer to a high school, she happily accepted and has been teaching high school social studies for 7 years. Ms. Taylor loved her students at Parkway High School. She constantly felt like she was learning from them and has been able to weave her passion for social justice into her daily lessons by continually growing in her knowledge of various diversity issues.

**Ms. Stacey Carter**

Ms. Carter is a physical education teacher at Redford Academy. Redford Academy is one of the larger middle schools in the district, supporting over 800 students in Grades 7 and 8 only. The school identified that in the 2019-2020 school year, 88.7% of students came from economically disadvantaged households, well above the district average (66.6%). Racial demographics were like those in the district at large with students identifying as 45.7% White (non-Hispanic), 38.1% African American, 8.3% Hispanic or Latino, and 8% Other. School reading proficiency for 2018-2019 measured at 25.1% (District: 49.7%, State: 59.6%) and math proficiency at 12.8% (District: 35.2%, State: 46.4%). Like the trends observable in the state and district at large, African American and Hispanic students fell far below their White peers in these testing categories.

Ms. Carter self-identified as an African American female. She noted that she is very interested in her cultural history, even going as far as to purchase a DNA testing kit to learn more about her exact heritage. Ms. Carter began her teaching career in 2006 as an employee in a Job Corps center, teaching reading and facilitating various high school diploma programs for roughly 9 years. When she applied for work in the district, she admitted to struggling to find a position because of the limited amounts of open teaching spots for physical education and health. She also was not told that she would not be eligible to teach in the state, being that she received her teaching credentials out of state and needed to complete additional paperwork and tests to be eligible in the district. Once the paperwork was completed, she was hired at Redford Academy in February of 2016, and has been a physical education teacher at the school since then. Ms. Carter very quickly noted that teaching is her calling. Her mother was a science teacher in the Detroit public schools' system, and Ms. Carter remembered going to work with her and being amazed by her classroom management and how she connected with the students. Her mom eventually became a physical education teacher, and Ms. Carter continued to visit her classroom and credits her classroom management style to what she learned from her mother. Ms. Carter described giving nicknames to her students, so they know that they are hers and so that they feel loved and protected.

**Ms. Camille Horton**

Ms. Horton is a science teacher at Summit High School. Summit High School is a smaller high school in the district, with roughly 670 students in grades 9-12. The school identified that in the 2019-2020 school year, 79.3% of students came from economically disadvantaged households, above the district average (66.6%). Summit High School has

an “early college” program, where students can earn college credits tuition-free. Student demographics at Summit High School were different from district averages, with students identifying as 70.6% African American, 20.4% White (non-Hispanic), 5.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 3.8% Other. School reading proficiency for 2018-2019 measured at 13.0% (District: 37.2%, State: 44.5%) and math proficiency at 6.9% (District: 30.5%, State: 35.4%). Like the trends observable in the state and district at large, African American and Hispanic students fell far below their White peers in these testing categories.

Ms. Horton self-identified as a White woman from the Midwest. Her cultural identity included being a college-educated, liberal-minded individual, who was a native English speaker. Ms. Horton grew up in a middle-class home, which she acknowledged afforded her various securities and opportunities such as access to a college education. Ms. Horton described herself as someone who always excelled in school and loved learning. She had close relationships with her teachers, and noted that those who were “kind,” “loving,” and “gentle” made the greatest impressions on her. Ms. Horton has been teaching various science courses at the same school for nine and a half years. She got into teaching because she had always loved science and was told by an adult mentor that due to her athletic coaching skills, she had a natural propensity to be a teacher. Because she loved school so much as a young person, being in a classroom felt natural and like something that would be a good fit. She completed an alternative certification pathway to begin her work in the classroom, and has continued to coach various sports, most consistently basketball, throughout her teaching career.

**Mr. Bard Bowman**

Mr. Bowman is an English teacher at Laketown High School. Laketown High School is a medium-sized high school in the district, with roughly 1,000 students in grades 9-12. The school identified that in the 2019-2020 school year, 83.1% of students came from economically disadvantaged households, above the district average (66.6%). Laketown High School was built on an "Academy Model," meaning that students are put into different tracks depending on their future career goals. Student demographics at Laketown High School were similar to district averages, with students identifying as 49.3% African American, 27.6% White (non-Hispanic), 17.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 5.9% Other. School reading proficiency for 2018-2019 measured at 12.3% (District: 37.2%, State: 44.5%) and math proficiency at 6.9% (District: 30.5%, State: 35.4%). Like the trends observable in the state and district at large, African American and Hispanic students fell far below their White peers in these testing categories.

Mr. Bowman was in his fourth year of teaching and taught at the same high school throughout his teaching career. Prior to teaching full time, he was a long-term sub in various schools for about a year. Mr. Bowman indicated that he became a teacher because he had a teacher as a sophomore in high school who told him that he would make a good educator. He was inspired by that teacher and other educators that he had in middle school and early high school. He remembered feeling they cared about him at a difficult time when he was really trying to come to terms with his identity and unsupportive home life. Mr. Bowman identified himself as a cis-gender, White gay man, who attempts to be an ally for all students. He grew up in what he defined as a "religious household," and noted that his life experiences have made him a "bleeding heart" as far as wanting to be an ally. Mr. Bowman expressed a belief in paying it forward, making

sure that he gives students the opportunity to be their best selves, just like he was given when he was growing up. Mr. Bowman said his primary goal has always been establishing equity by enacting structural changes to make things fairer for students of different backgrounds.

**Table 1**

*The Teacher Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Race/Gender Identification	School	Years Teaching in District	Subject Taught	Teacher Education/ Initial Certificate	Highest Level of Education
Ms. Emily Taylor	White, Female	Parkway High School	9	Social Studies	Traditional Certification, Graduate Level	M.Ed.
Ms. Stacey Carter	African American, Female	Redford Academy	5	Physical Ed. and Health	Traditional Certification, Undergraduate Level	M.Ed.
Ms. Camille Horton	White, Female	Summit High School	9	Science	Alternative Certification, Graduate Level	M.Ed.
Mr. Bard Bowman	White, Male	Laketown High	4	English	Traditional Certification, Undergraduate Level	M.Ed.

**Table 2**

*The Schools*

School	Middle or High	Number of Students	% Free/ Reduced Lunch	% Minority Enrollment	% Reading Proficiency	% Math Proficiency
Parkway High School	High	1,100	85.2%	80.2%	5.2%	4.5%



Redford Academy	Middle	800	88.7%	54.5%	25.1%	12.8%
Summit High School	High	670	79.3%	79.6%	13.0%	6.9%
Laketown High	High	1,000	83.1%	72.4%	12.3%	6.9%

### **Study Design**

Data collection for this qualitative case study was cyclical in nature, alternating between a series of interviews and self-reflections. I had planned to collect data over a three-month period at the beginning of the school year to get a better understanding of how relationships are formed and maintained. However, this timeline had to be pushed back because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to virtual learning in the district. Typically, the process for IRB approval in the district is a mere matter of days or weeks, but because the committee met less frequently due to COVID restrictions, the process for study approval took over three months. This pushed the start of the study to the second semester of school, instead of the beginning of the year. Therefore, I began with an initial interview with participants at the beginning of February (see Appendix A for the full research timeline). The first interview for this study invited teachers to discuss personal and professional demographics to get to know the teachers' individual characteristics and understand how they situated their narratives within a larger framework of self-perception.

After the initial interview, I provided participants with a series of self-reflection questions, and they were instructed to take notes related to what they were experiencing in their classrooms while building relationships with students (see Appendix C for self-reflection questions). Participants had a month to reflect and take notes, and then at the

beginning of the following month, I met with them to debrief their self-reflections. Because participants could choose their meeting dates, as further described in the next section, the interview times varied within a few weeks. So, some participants may have had their debrief interview at the end of a month, while another participant may not have been able to meet until the first week of the next month. This did not interfere with the study as all participants were able to meet before or after major breaks or events (i.e. returning to school in-person). This cycle continued until the end of the school year, as identified in Table 3 below with each completing four interviews and three self-reflections.

**Table 3**

*The Self-Reflection/Interview Cycle*

February 2021	February 2021	March 2021	March 2021	April 2021	May 2021	May/June 2021
Interview 1: Focused Life History	Self-reflection Cycle 1 over the month	Interview 2: Self-reflection 1 debrief	Self-reflection Cycle 2 over the month	Interview 3: Self-reflection 2 debrief	Self-reflection Cycle 3 over the month	Interview 4: Self-reflection 3 debrief

**Data Collection**

This study included three sources of data: interviews, teacher self-reflections, and classroom artifacts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the inability to do in-person research in schools, observations, a previous layer of data collection, was not an option. I had intended to observe each teacher in their classrooms as they were interacting with students. This would have provided an additional layer of data which could have allowed me to compare what teachers were perceiving with what I could see occurring in the

classroom. However, all observations were halted by the local school district, and because there were no guarantees that in-person studies would even be allowed in the next school year, the study needed to continue without observations as a data source.

All sources of data were collected in a manner that gave options to each participant and allowed for them to participate without adding an additional burden. This was a major requirement of the district IRB approval process, which demanded that the participants could not be inconvenienced in any way that may interfere with job performance. Participants were given the option to choose the platform that worked best for them (Google Meet, Zoom, etc.) but they were all comfortable with Microsoft Teams as that was the chosen platform for the district at the time. Interview audio only was recorded using Microsoft Teams. The interviews were also transcribed, and the participants had access to the transcripts for member checking. This allowed them to add anything additional that they wanted to in order to verify my conclusions and increase the trustworthiness of the study. Teachers were given the choice to record or write their self-reflections between interviews in the cycle. All the participants chose to type up their reflections in between interview cycles and share them with me through a secure Google Drive connection. Other artifacts were collected as identified by participants, including images of classroom materials and lesson plans and other resources used during virtual and in-person instruction.

## **Interviews**

As stated, the main source of data for this study were interviews. Data collection in studies using IPA typically consists of semi-structured interviews with a flexible interview schedule (Smith et al., 2009). The purpose of this flexibility being that the

participant has an “important stake” (p. 4) in the process as the flow of experiences is unique for each person. This aligned with the district’s requirements that the study not inconvenience teachers in any way during COVID-19. I conducted four interviews total with each teacher throughout the course of this study- one initial interview (February) and three interviews spaced throughout the semester as follow-ups to their individual self-reflections (March, April, May). My first interviews with these teachers occurred in February when teachers were still conducting classes virtually, and were audio recorded and transcribed in order to member check and clarify my analysis of the data. Because of the limitations required through social distancing, I conducted only virtual meetings with each teacher, reviewing their virtual settings and norms for the initial interview to acquaint myself with the setting of their classroom (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The initial interview was modeled off Seidman’s (2019) focused life history, part of the three-interview protocol and modified to suit the study as it progressed (see Appendix B for the focused life history interview protocol). Seidman’s interview methods were chosen because they are a phenomenological approach to in-depth interviewing, aligning to the IPA method. This approach allowed me to gain insight into each participant’s teaching philosophies and general expectations for how the relationship-building process should occur. Seidman (2019) argues that interviews provide a glimpse into “people’s stories” (p. 7), the telling of which provide insight into the consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987) of each person.

In the first interview, a focused life history, I asked each participant a variety of questions, including how they arrived at the teaching position they were currently serving in. I also asked them questions to determine if there were any significant events from

their childhood and young adult lives that brought them to teaching. This allowed me to put their experience into the larger framework of their life history up until the present time. Seidman (2019) argues that the focused life history helps to avoid dwelling on only oversimplified “Why” questions like “Why did you become a teacher?” Instead, the questions in the focused life history help participants to get to the deeper levels of “how” their experiences came to be throughout the varied cycles in their lives. These personal questions also helped me to see if there were similarities amongst the teachers’ previous experiences that would warrant their interest in teaching in a high-need school and taking part in a Diversity Literacy Program. As this conversation continued, I sought to gain insight into their teaching philosophies and general expectations for how the process of relationship-building should go. I investigated how each teacher described the way they planned to build relationships with students in order to understand the intentionality behind this process and the way these choices were situated within their broader worldview.

As part of this first interview, I also asked background questions about how each teacher identified racially, ethnically, and linguistically (see Appendix C for self-reflection guiding questions and interview protocol). I questioned them about their views on different communication styles in the classroom. This was necessary particularly when this information did not arise organically. I asked general questions about culture along with some more pointed questions about classroom success, digging into what they believed the process of building relationships should look like. This initial interview ranged from 1-2 hours of recorded conversation depending on the participant.

Following Seidman's (2019) protocol, the three self-reflection follow-up interviews in the series cycled over the course of the semester (March-May). Selecting various times convenient to the participants, I followed up on what I noticed in their self-reflections in the interviews focusing on both the details of their experience and reflecting on the meaning of their experience in the classroom. I also looked back to the focused life history in order to maintain attentiveness on what the participants discussed earlier in the interviews. All interviews were semi-structured and guided by the self-reflection prompts to allow for a more casual setting and were roughly an hour each. I also audio recorded these interview sessions and transcribed them so I could focus on asking follow-up questions without relying entirely on taking notes. These interviews both fleshed out the details of lived experiences and helped teachers reflect on the meanings laden in their self-reflections. Seidman argues that "lived experiences are our actions, our observations, our seeing, feeling, hearing. They are the events of our day that we often take for granted and normally do not call to mind" (p. 22). This type of reflection was consistent in the interviews with each participant, all of whom mentioned that they typically would not think this deeply about their actions without the self-reflection required by this study. At times I could tell they were actively thinking about their choices related to relationship-building while we were in conversation. This achieved a goal of Seidman's interview process which is to help reconstruct participant experience in order to assist in understanding the phenomena in question.

The interviews illuminated where there were connections between what the teachers believed about building relationships, their own lived experiences, and the reality of how they interacted with students in the classroom. For instance, I asked each

participant to flesh out their self-reflections, to discuss where in their lessons they felt they were conveying sentiments of high expectations and care to their students. We discussed these instances and the teachers explained to me in what ways they felt they supported positive relationship-building. Understandably, their sentiments of conveying support and care to students were constructed through reflection on times in their previous lived experiences when they felt these sentiments, too. We also discussed instances where they believed they had navigated cultural experiences, particularly through deep discussion of how they spoke to students and what they said, all based on their understanding of what their interactions looked and felt like. Participants reflected on whether any acknowledgement or navigation of varied cultural experiences had an impact on the interaction. In all my interviews I allowed time for more open-ended and probing questions to get a better sense of the teachers' holistic understanding of the process (Tesch, 1990).

Participants were asked to consistently think back to what they shared in the focused life histories and their experiences in subsequent interviews. Their attentiveness to the detail of the previous descriptions and experiences helped them review how they arrived where they are today. This process of describing experiences and making meaning (Vygotsky, 1987), coupled with the space to reflect on their practice throughout each self-reflection cycle allowed participants to dive deep into the active choices they make when building relationships with students. The use of Seidman's (2019) interview protocol also allowed for a flexible process when "life intervenes" (p. 25). This was necessary due to the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Maintaining flexible spacing between interviews allowed the participants to feel in control of their

time, an important quality of this study. Each interview took roughly an hour, with some interviews being as short as 45 minutes, and some as long as 2 hours.

### **Self-Reflection**

I alternated between interviews and self-reflections throughout the course of this study. In order to gain insight into how the teachers processed and made sense of the “contemporary phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37) of building positive relationships with students, I asked them to write at least weekly about their intentional processes. Self-reflection was a necessary part of building a critical teaching philosophy, as it allowed for teachers to reflect on qualities of their classrooms and their role as a cultural being within that space (Murrow, 2006). Teachers were invited to see reflection on their experiences as an “opportunity to change” (Butin, 2005) by reflecting on the process of relationship-building and noticing different “teacher moves” supporting this process. The teachers indicated that they spent roughly an hour each week completing self-reflections. There were some months where some of the participants indicated that they did not have much time to complete their self-reflections, and so they described their experiences to me during the interviews instead.

Because of research limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was only able to interview each teacher four times as allowed by local district policies, once for the focused life history and three follow-up interviews to their reflections. So as not to distract the teachers from their primary role of teaching, it was important that I gained insight into what they were doing in their classrooms through the semi-structured self-reflections. This processing of their experience of relationship-building was a necessary part of the IPA approach. Teachers reflected on their lessons after teaching, in addition to



providing other self-reflections as they desired. I asked participants to journal at least once per week on lessons, activities, and experiences with students, articulating what they intentionally did to build relationships. Again, so as not to distract the teachers from their duties, the interviews and self-reflections were scheduled to coincide with breaks in the school calendar where teachers were off duty, or during off hours in their schedules. I asked that they send me their self-reflections in the time between scheduled interviews, no later than two days before their interview so I had time to read their responses to be able to expand upon them during the interviews. They were given the freedom to type or record their reflections and send them to me electronically, and all teachers chose to type their reflections and share them with me through a password-protected Google Drive. This data source allowed for teachers to reflect on what they believed a “typical” day looked like.

Because this type of reflective self-analysis was focused heavily on the teachers’ perceptions of themselves as cultural beings, I modeled the protocol for this source off Ndura’s (2003) multicultural education reflective self-analysis. Ndura argues that teachers cannot fully appreciate their students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences if they do not investigate their own. This includes recognizing that culture and cultural diversity influence every facet of one’s experience. I guided teachers to describe their thoughts, beliefs, and “teacher moves” throughout their classes in line with the IPA approach (Smith et al., 2009), particularly through explaining their flow of life experiences. This helped to get a better sense of how their own cultural identities influenced what and how they were presenting to students, and how they navigated these identities to support students.

## **Data Analysis**

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that storytelling is a crucial part of CRT and Seidman's (2009) interview process regards storytelling as a "meaning-making process" (p. 7). This case study focused on the story that is told when teachers and students interact, particularly investigating the teacher choices and actions in the classroom that help build connections between educator and student. While the interviews occurred, I took detailed notes to begin data analysis. I transcribed all interviews, and then summarized my notes after each self-reflection-interview cycle to compare any themes or patterns that emerged at each new data collection. I used open coding to identify patterns, and content analysis to examine the language of the interviews and self-reflections, specifically by organizing the transcriptions into various categories (Weber, 1990). This included line-by-line coding according to pattern codes analysis as described by Miles et al. (2014).

Transcripts were first coded for instances where the teacher felt they (1) demonstrated a call for high expectations, (2) demonstrated care, and (3) honored or navigated students' cultural identities, including norms of conversation. These codes were chosen because these themes were identified in the literature as being key to the relationship-building process. During my interviews, I asked the teacher participants to identify where they saw instances where they demonstrated high expectations, care, and navigated cultural norms in their classrooms, and then compared these times with what I noticed in their reflections. Transcripts were coded again for any additional themes that emerged, and teachers were asked to reflect on any new themes in subsequent reflection interviews. Because teachers were discussing and reflecting on both their own

experiences with the themes and their relationship-building process with students, findings were organized into two major categories: Teacher self-perceptions and Teacher perceptions of students and the relationship-building process.

The IPA approach required that interview transcripts be reviewed in a case by case manner, so that the flow of lived experiences for each participant could be deeply described (Smith et al., 2009). IPA, in line with the story-telling quality of the interviews and self-reflections completed in this study, required turning data into narrative accounts. Key to these narrative accounts was analytic interpretation described in detail. This included verbatim accounts from participants so that the flow of experience for each was described through their own sense-making process. Hearing the voices of participants allowed for careful examination of the significance of experiences in the participants' lives. Through line-by-line coding, I continuously compared data in each individual teacher case, identifying patterns that emerged.

Foucault (1972) asserts that there is meaning and power in the social practice of discourse. Although I was not able to observe classroom conversations in this study, the teachers constantly reflected on conversations they had with their students while building relationships. Fairclough (1989) speaks to the idea that discourse is an area "where relations of power are actually exercised and enacted" (p. 43). He argues that "discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants" (p. 46). Gee (1996) posits that language is socially situated and therefore "norms" of conversation vary depending on the situation. Thus Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts' of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to

identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network,” or to signal that one is playing a socially meaningful “role” (Gee, 1996, p. 131). Cazden and Beck (2003) argue that “for children born into language communities outside the mainstream, taking on [classroom] roles and identities is crucial to mastering the Discourse of schooling” (p. 166). The power dynamic inherent in discourse is more prevalent in situations where teachers value their own process for relationship-building above their students’. Therefore, I paid close attention to how teachers described their interactions with students and made specific notes of when they indicated that their interactions aligned with or did not align with student cultural norms of conversation.

While I will go into the analysis in much greater detail in Chapter 4, I will briefly outline some emerging themes from the data analysis here. The first theme that emerged was teacher vulnerability. Another theme that emerged from the data, individualized attention, was identified in the literature review as more of a sub theme within the category of care. However, all teachers in the study indicated directly and indirectly that this was a necessary element of building positive relationships with students. Finally, a third theme emerged that undergirded the others. This theme revolved around a commitment to continued learning and staying up to date on topics related to social justice culturally responsive teaching in schools.

This study extended the literature on the relationship-building process by providing insight into how four teachers perceived the process with culturally diverse students. An unexpected finding that emerged was related to teacher flexibility and adaptability. I inadvertently caught the four participants in a period of flux when they were moving from entirely virtual teaching to a hybrid model that included seeing many

of their students in-person. This provided an unanticipated element to the study due to the ever-changing nature of school responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It provided nuance and contextualized relationship building, demonstrating how the teacher participants responded to a difficult situation. In the next chapters, I will describe my findings as they pertain to my research questions and emergent themes.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This qualitative study explored how four teachers thought about their own cultural identities and how they used these understandings to build positive relationships with students whose cultural experiences differed from their own. This study described the ways in which these teachers reported how they navigated their cultural differences to convey sentiments of high expectations and care to their students during the process of relationship-building. During the coding process described in Chapter 3, I first identified instances where the participants, as described during interviews, reported that they demonstrated high expectations, showed care, and navigated cultural differences, including norms of conversation, in their classrooms. Further analysis of the data led to additional themes that were grouped into two major categories. The first category of findings focused on the first research question, teacher self-perceptions of their own cultural identities in general and during the process of relationship-building. The second category focused on the second research question, the way teachers reported how they navigated cultural differences between themselves and their students in order to convey high expectations and care to their students when attempting to build positive relationships. All findings were organized under one of these two categories.

### **Teacher Self-Perceptions**

The findings in the first part of this chapter relate to teacher self-perceptions and align with the first research question, “How do four teachers with certificates in diversity literacy think about their own personal racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities during the

process of relationship-building?" The findings reflect the data collected from the four interviews and three self-reflection cycles. The responses to the introductory questions from each teacher's first interview, the focused life history (Seidman, 2019; Appendix A), crafted an image of each teacher as a cultural being and contextualized how they see themselves in relation to student identities and experiences. The focused life history questions allowed me to gain insight into each participant's teaching philosophies and general expectations for how the relationship-building process should occur. As they fit, I layered in pieces from follow-up interviews, self-reflections, and classroom artifacts to the responses from the focused life histories. For each finding I will describe the data from each teacher (case) individually, starting with Ms. Carter and continuing to Mr. Bowman, Ms. Taylor, and Ms. Horton. After a description of individual responses, I will describe cross-case findings.

### **Teacher Cultural Identities: Impact on Their Teaching Styles**

The teacher participants took an intersectional approach as they discussed the impact their cultural identities had on their teaching styles. They each parsed out different aspects of their own and student identities that were most salient as they related to specific situations. These included discussions of race, gender, sexual orientation, language, etc. Ms. Carter described her cultural identity, specifically her race and experience as an African American woman, as impacting her in many ways. Ms. Carter described feeling that she needs to consistently work at least twice as hard as her non-Black colleagues to prove that she is capable at her job. She also described needing to be careful about how she presents herself so that she is not stereotyped as an "angry Black

woman” or as a “loud ghetto Black woman.” The way others perceive her based on her race was salient for Ms. Carter.

Ms. Carter said that her experience as a Black woman growing up in a diverse school herself helped her relate to students. She said, “I definitely have the edge versus a teacher who comes from a community where everyone looks just like them. And so it helps me a lot.” As a physical education and health teacher, Ms. Carter used her own experiences to relate to and understand her students. She talked about how athletic experiences varied for her growing up as compared to her non-Black peers. For instance, an activity like swimming was different for her than for her White peers because of issues related to hair. She called upon her experiences as she planned her lessons, knowing that something like getting one’s hair wet or dirty is problematic for her Students of Color.

Mr. Bowman said that “there’s no doubt that my cultural identity makes dramatic impacts on my teaching style.” He described his classroom as a “shrine to diversity” with pride flags and other symbols to help students know that it is a welcoming environment for them. He described approaching his teaching through a lens of self-growth, including telling students that they are constantly in a process of working on themselves as human beings. Some of his goals as a teacher were to help students learn different things about the world and communicate with each other more effectively.

As the sponsor for the Gay-Straight-Trans Alliance (GSTA) at his school, Mr. Bowman described maintaining an open and inviting persona with students in that group. If asked, he would tell students that he identifies as a gay man. In general, he said that he does not openly express or talk about his identity except when the topic comes up, implementing a relationship boundary related to his personal life. In one of our



interviews, Mr. Bowman described a situation where a student spread a rumor about him related to his sexual identity. The student told other teachers and students that Mr. Bowman was very unprofessional, and “coming out” to all of his classes and “crying” to students to about his sexual orientation. Mr. Bowman relayed this story during an interview with the shock and confusion of this accusation still audible in his voice.

To remedy the situation, Mr. Bowman arranged a meeting with the student and his assistant principal. He asked the student why he would spread a rumor like that and told the student, “I can fully attest to the fact that my personal life has no influence on how well I’m going to teach you.” By the end of the conversation Mr. Bowman understood that “this is a 15-year-old kid” with obviously complicated emotions and feelings. After this meeting he had a very positive working relationship with the student and noted that the student said that he “loved his class” by the time the year was over.

Ms. Taylor described her cultural identity as something that certainly impacts her teaching. She felt that the cultural differences between her and her students caused “bigger problems” at her first teaching placement. At that time, she remembered struggling to find the words to describe the disconnect she was experiencing with her students. She said that she “didn’t even know” and that she “couldn’t even name it.” Ms. Taylor indicated that as a result of confusion she questioned her assumptions and beliefs to better understand the clash.

In particular, she began questioning her beliefs about the rules for communication that she held based on her “Protestant middle-class norms.” She explained that “things that I perceived as interrupting or disrespectful, um, I know that that was informed by like my, you know, my, my background.” Ms. Taylor shared a specific anecdote where

she questioned her linguistic identity. She described memories of African American students coming to her classroom, expressing themselves in a way that she viewed as “being mad and yelling.” She recalled that a few of the White students leaned over their desks, almost hyperventilating, indicating that they felt overwhelmed by the noise level and conversational style of their Black peers. She knew that the students’ reactions and her own had something to do with a cultural conflict related to race and norms of conversation. At the time she did not have the words to describe this or knowledge of concepts that would help her understand what was happening. This was one of the moments that compelled her to apply for the Diversity Literacy Program. She said that she is a much better teacher and advocate for her students now that she has learned more about cultural norms of conversation.

Ms. Horton described her cultural identity as a “White lady from Northern Indiana” as providing her with many opportunities including access to experiences like college and athletics. She noted that the racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of her students represent experiences entirely different from her education and personal upbringing. She said that from her first days of teaching she was immediately aware of how different she was from her students. She recognized that she needed to understand more about her presence in the classroom and took initiatives to show students her “authentic self.” Ms. Horton described authenticity as the key to helping students see who she really is beyond how they may perceive her. She mentioned multiple times that she comes from an experience of privilege that her students likely have not experienced. She reiterated that it is important to her that she does not hide where she comes from or what she has experienced, remaining authentic and true to herself instead of trying to be

someone she is not just to fit in with students. She articulated the belief that by being authentic, while also honoring and recognizing the diverse identities of students, she could be an effective teacher despite cultural differences.

For the three teachers who all self-identified as White, they recognized that their racial identities afforded them privileges and created barriers. All three teachers named their Whiteness as affording them various privileges within school and within their communities and lives. They named privileges that came with their Whiteness including things like safety, security, and access, specifically to things like a college education. Many of the privileges the teachers described were coupled with their distinctions as being middle class or “middle class-ish” in the case of Ms. Taylor. In this way the teachers recognized that race and class are often inextricably linked. In addition, for the White teachers, their racial background and financial standings seemed to be enmeshed. When asked if their cultural identities impacted their teaching style, all three of the White teachers indicated that they absolutely do. Ms. Carter, the only Teacher of Color in the study, indicated that her cultural identity was both an asset and a detriment to her experience. She believed that her race allowed her to connect more with her students who were also mostly of Color. On the other hand, unlike the White teachers, she was the only one to say that her cultural identity, particularly her race, created a dynamic where she felt threatened by stereotypes and an inequitable pressure to achieve at her job. She claimed that this impacts her teaching because she feels like she always needs to be one step ahead of everyone else and working twice as hard to be successful.

Each teacher identified specific dimensions of their identity to think through how their identities affect their relationships with students. Ms. Carter reflected on her

experiences as an African American woman and the way this impacted how she is perceived at her school by other faculty and administrators. For example, Ms. Taylor explicitly mentioned conversational norms as part of her cultural identity that impacts her teaching style. Specifically, she reflected on her experiences with language and conversational norms while teaching middle school, undoubtedly with some regret and hopes that she has learned a lot since then. Mr. Bowman was the only teacher who disclosed the impact his sexual orientation has on his teaching experience. Ms. Horton emphasized authenticity by explaining that while she recognized her Whiteness afforded her many privileges, it was important for her students to see her authentic self. She hinted that this was an identity that encompassed more than just race, but included interests, personality traits, beliefs, etc.

### **Teacher Concepts of “Respect” in the Classroom**

Each participant mentioned something in their interviews and reflections about the concept of “respect” in their classrooms. This was mostly in response to questions where they were directly asked about respect, although at times they brought up respect as it related to concepts like trust or understanding. The reciprocal nature of respect was key to all their discussions of respect. While the teachers were able to give examples of times when students in their classrooms felt respected or disrespected, none of them directly defined “respect.” Rather, they described respect as developed and negotiated between teachers and students throughout the course of the year. In this way respect is something to work toward rather than as something finite to grant. They also described respect as being related to one’s cultural identity.

Ms. Carter noted that respect goes both ways. She did not agree with what she called the “sage on a stage” model of teaching, where the teacher is up at the front of a room in an authoritative role, touting themselves as the giver of knowledge. She described respect as a two-way street where one must earn student respect first before expecting the same level of respect in return from them. During the first few days of class Ms. Carter implemented procedures and policies to earn students respect including the use of a restorative circle. The circles were designed for students to share experiences and get to know each other more. As part of the restorative process she asked students questions about themselves. The circles were also used when there was an issue in the classroom that needed to be discussed. During the exercise, Ms. Carter described taking notes to remember information about students’ lives in order to bring these details up later in conversation.

Ms. Carter described building respect as an ongoing process and said that it is her role to both give respect and expect respect from students. She mentioned that many of her students have trust issues or difficult home circumstances and that many of them have a hard time trusting adults. She said that a lot of her students have had experiences where “adults have mistreated them.” When asked in a later question about intervening during behavior issues, Ms. Carter indicated that if she sees a student being disrespected, she will step in and handle the situation. She did not give any specific examples here but talked generally about supporting students if they were being bullied. She placed a strong emphasis on the concept of respect in her classroom and made establishing a respectful environment an integral part of her relationship-building process.

Mr. Bowman explained that he starts each year by telling students that “of course” respect is important, telling students:

I know that like first day of school you've heard every single one of your teachers say, um, that their first rule or their only rule is to respect one another. And I say like, look, that's, I think that's excellent, but it's also kind of BS because like what respect looks like to you is not necessarily what respect looks like to me.

These discussions are designed to engage students in a conversation about what respect really looks like. He said that he does believe respect is culturally situated but that it is still important to define and observe to get all students on the same page. He described co-constructing with students as together they operationalize “respect” by telling students that even though everyone may have a different vision of what respect is, it is still his number one classroom non-negotiable. He pushed his students to arrive at a “real” definition of respect as a class community, knowing that they all probably have unique ideas of what respect means. He did not give specifics as to what descriptions students usually arrive at but said that the “real” definition they come up with together is implemented as a classroom norm and expectation.

Ms. Taylor echoes Mr. Bowman’s sentiments that respect is different for each student. It was important to her that she take the time each year to deepen her understanding of what students mean by “respect.” She mostly focused on descriptions of instances where students told her that they felt disrespected or that she disrespected them. When she asked students for more clarification in these situations, she was shocked by some of the instances where they described feeling disrespected. She came to understand that respect and disrespect were very subjective and that the terms were used in varied

ways by different students. For example, she said that for some students the term “disrespectful” applies to a lot of things, and that it is used as a type of slang to describe something that is unfortunate or annoying. For instance, she mentioned a time when a student said, “that’s disrespectful” when she offered them a pencil or said that the fact it was raining outside was “disrespectful.”

While Ms. Taylor understood that “disrespect” could be a slang term referring to a broader concept of something that is annoying, she still argued that it is important to listen to students when they describe feeling disrespected. She noted that she has observed other instances of disrespect that were more generally understood. These instances were typically accompanied by anger or a more heated disagreement. She identified instances that occurred between students from different cultures. For example, when her Somali, Nepali, and African American students have a disagreement it can get heated quickly if they feel some personal slight related to their culture has occurred. She came to view these instances where emotions and voices are raised to be more indicative of when students feel disrespected. While she did not explicitly say what it looks like for students to feel respected, she said that respect is the norm in her classroom. She said that when students feel cared about and not made to feel uncomfortable, there is respect.

Ms. Horton described a similar view of respect. She argued that respect should be an expectation but that it is not just going to be given without putting work into the relationship. She compared respect to a bank account; one must keep depositing experiences and instances of respect in order to develop something fruitful. Ms. Horton compared a lot of her teaching repertoire to being a good coach or team member. She said that respect comes from showing students that she and other teachers are “on their

team," which she further described as being willing to "call someone in." "Calling someone in" means that if Ms. Horton notices a student is disengaged or that they are not following the expectations of the class, she will always address it. For example, she might pull them aside and ask them what is going on. By creating a community with shared values about respect, Ms. Horton said she hopes that students see that they are part of a larger circle of respect and trust.

Ms. Carter and Ms. Horton explicitly stated that you must show respect to get respect. The other participants indicated this reciprocity through their explanations and examples but did not state it explicitly. All the teachers indicated that respect is a process that takes time and must be intentionally revisited, as well as a concept routinely evaluated over the course of the school year. When asked about respect, Ms. Taylor reflected differently than the other teachers; she dove first into what she believes occurs when students *do not* feel respected, which then helped her arrive at a description of what respect *does* mean. Ms. Carter also discussed what it looks like when students are disrespected but she shared a clearer vision than Ms. Taylor about what respect does mean. Unlike Ms. Taylor, describing disrespect was something Ms. Carter brought up later in discussions related to behavior management and not something she discussed when directly asked about respect. For example, she spoke about students feeling disrespected in games like basketball or during other activities that involved competition. Both Ms. Carter and Ms. Taylor said that feeling disrespected caused students to engage in behaviors like raising their voices or becoming agitated.



## **Teacher Concepts of High Expectations**

Teacher participants were asked to describe how they knew when an adult was conveying high expectations to them as a young person. This questioning helped to get a sense of how high expectations were situated in their cultures and experiences. When she was young, Ms. Carter understood high expectations were being conveyed to her when she got in trouble or was spoken to about not turning in assignments or doing them incorrectly or incompletely. She said that her teachers would sit down and talk with her about the task, and “stayed on me” by making sure she fixed the problem before it got bigger. She also said that her teachers would bring up any issues she was having in school with her mom during parent teacher conferences. If anything was ever lacking in her work or efforts in school, teachers communicated with her mom who then took over the situation and was “assertive, having authority over me.” Her mother played a major role in letting her know that she was capable of more and supported her through doing whatever needed to be done to maintain good grades.

For Mr. Bowman, when adults set high expectations for him as a young person, he sometimes viewed it as an uncomfortable experience. He recalled times when he produced work that was not up to par and felt upset because that work did not meet the expectations of the teacher who assigned it. He mentioned that he was always the student who wanted to “please the teacher” and it was an uncomfortable confrontation for him when a teacher expressed their displeasure with his work. Mr. Bowman indicated that the experiences were not always negative, and that his teachers were, for the most part, “warm” about their expectations. They communicated what they needed him to do to be more successful the next time. He specifically mentioned that he did not recall many

expectations for behavior, indicating that he linked high expectations to academic success and not behavior.

Ms. Taylor's responses about high expectations led her to reflect on her experience being "tracked" in schools. Tracking for Ms. Taylor meant placement into honors and AP courses for high achievers. This experience was something that made her feel like there were not very high expectations for her, because she did not believe she was significantly more capable than her peers. She felt that the teachers' standards in her higher-level classes were generally not very rigorous. At a few points in her academic career she encountered teachers who added a personal element to their expectations, speaking to her about their belief that she could achieve more. One teacher who did this was her eighth grade ELA teacher who was very focused on the writing process and required students to submit written work regularly. Ms. Taylor's teacher required constant revisions of her work and she remembered this feeling different from her experiences in other courses. In other classes, she said that she was not interested in making sure her work was done well or completed, saying "I was usually the kid, like I did it, here's my worksheet." But something was different in her ELA class where the teacher not only expected her to do the work but to do it correctly and with maximum effort.

Her ELA teacher would say things like, "this is good, but it ought to be better." She also used nonverbal communication to demonstrate her expectations by showing displeasure with facial expressions or proximity control. Ms. Taylor said that she thinks about this teacher when working with her own students. She described applying her experiences as a student of feeling pushed to success to how she demonstrates high

expectations for her students. She also expressed a belief that tracking systems often put high achieving students into classes where they are not set up for success. For instance, a student may be high achieving in math but a struggling reader. Nonetheless, the school may place the student in all AP classes despite challenges in English. Ms. Taylor felt this system was problematic based on her own experiences with it and what she saw in her school.

Ms. Horton's insight into what she believed about high expectations also stemmed from her experiences as a student. Her high school English teacher told the students at the start of the semester that they would know how to write a five-paragraph paper by the time the semester ended. To achieve this, the teacher made them write a paper every single week. The teacher's feedback, reading every single paper every time, was integral to Ms. Horton's sense of expectations for quality work. Her teacher always commented on the paper, and if she came to this teacher for support, it was always offered. Ms. Horton said, "I talked to her about [things] that I didn't talk to anybody about like a friend or parents." She made a connection between high expectations and a strong teacher-student relationship by saying that because the teacher made herself available for support, she found herself coming to her to just talk about her personal life.

All the teachers indicated that an important element in their understanding of high expectations as young people included wanting to please an adult or make them proud. Ms. Carter indicated that in addition to wanting to make her mother proud, she also wanted to make sure that she did not get in trouble and to avoid her mother "staying on her." All the participants described teachers or authority figures who held them to a standard and refused to let them drop below the expectations. This included making them

revise work until it was done correctly or reminding them that they were capable of more. In this way each participant believed that their teachers would not let them fail. None of them described adhering to high expectations as a negative experience, but instead as something that felt firm and reassuring. In all their experiences, the teacher or authority figure who set the expectation helped them to reach goals such as successful completion of a task or earning a high grade on an exam. All the teachers considered the way high expectations were conveyed to them when creating processes for relationship-building with their students. In the second part of the section, I describe how the teachers navigated student cultural differences while maintaining high expectations.

### **Teacher Concepts of Care**

When asked how she came to understand when someone was demonstrating care for her Ms. Carter reflected on an after-school program in fifth grade. She called the program “charm school” as it was essentially an etiquette club for girls to understand social concepts like how to set a table, how to eat properly, how to cross your legs in a dress, etc. The leader of the program was a parent who volunteered her time to teach the class. She saw how much this adult cared about the club and realized that the parent probably worked a full-time job and then took their time to come to the school to teach children who were not even her own. This had an impact on Ms. Carter because she felt like the parent was really putting the children’s needs and learning first, and she respected her for devoting her time and knowledge to them.

Ms. Carter also talked about an interaction with a counselor in her junior year of high school where she felt truly cared for. She was having a difficult time adjusting to the culture shock of transferring to an all girls’ Catholic school. She had a very low GPA and

was not adjusting well to the new school. Her counselor met with her and was dedicated to making sure that she was successful. The counselor recognized that there was a social element to why she was struggling to achieve and so she helped her find a group of friends. The counselor sat down with her to have one-on-one conversations and made sure that Ms. Carter knew she was always there to help her feel good about being at the new school.

The importance of a one-on-one element was something Mr. Bowman reiterated in his reflections on care. He indicated that you could tell someone cares about you when they go out of their way to ask you how you are doing or when they express that they are worried about you. This included an adult noticing when he was not acting like himself and checking in on him or offering him support. For Mr. Bowman, a big descriptor of someone showing care revolved around the individualized attention they give you, which allows for a more vulnerable interaction. He said that by having a moment alone with someone you can really feel comfortable expressing what is on your mind and connecting with that person more fully.

Ms. Taylor also discussed the need for care to be felt on an individual level. She described this as a “feeling of full attention.” As a teacher, she said that she recognizes how difficult it is to give a young person undivided attention when you have many students. She reflected on how spectacular those teachers and authority figures that gave her their full attention were, since she can see now how difficult that is. She described a feeling of trust and community emanating from those instances where her teachers would focus solely on her and her well-being. She called this an intentional process of creating a “vibe” where students know that they are being cared for and paid attention to.

Ms. Horton said that she felt cared for when her teachers would be excited to see or hear from her. She connected with those teachers who spent time getting to know her on a deep level. Listening was important to Ms. Horton as a student; she indicated multiple times that she knew teachers cared about her when they heard her out or brought up information that she discussed with them later. This showed her that they were listening to her and valued her input. She mentioned how important she felt when teachers would ask her about how she fared in her latest sports competition or how she was feeling after a torn ACL. Remembering these small details helped Ms. Horton feel as if she was the sole focus of the teacher, which in turn, made her feel uniquely cared for.

When the teacher participants were asked about how they came to understand when an adult or authority figure was demonstrating care to them, they spoke about previous experiences they had as students. A general commonality was that conversations that demonstrated care had to be on an individual level, where the young person felt like they were the sole focus of the conversation and teacher's attention. This meant that the teacher listened to them and brought up key parts of the conversation later to show that they remembered important facts about them. Their descriptions also included their teachers spending a significant amount of time with them. This individual element was something that they all mentioned intentionally including in their own processes of relationship-building because it was so impactful on them as young people.

### **New Learnings Influencing Teacher Beliefs**

Ms. Carter identified various learnings from her Diversity Literacy Program that impacted how she builds relationships with students. She mentioned educational strategies and new concepts that she learned in these courses and now implements in her

classroom. From one of her classes she recalled an image of two students standing on different sized boxes. Seeing this image and learning about the difference between equity and equality changed her teaching practice. In particular, she was able to use this concept to see the importance of incorporating tools for differentiation. For example, she began using different activities like stations that allow student choice and ownership of learning. She indicated that the courses where professors modeled the strategies were the most useful for her. When she could practice the strategy in her course it stuck with her more, and she was more likely to use it in her own classroom. Ms. Carter emphasized that she still reflects on her course materials and picks strategies from her courses to use routinely with students.

Other courses Ms. Carter took in the humanities, specifically those related to pan-African studies and women and gender studies, also impacted her beliefs and teaching practice. She mentioned one course where she learned about gender stereotypes and how they impact a person's experience. These new learnings helped her to more clearly understand the needs of her LGBTQ+ students, particularly those who were going through a transitional period or who were switching to their authentic names and pronouns. Ms. Carter focused on the importance of student names in many of her interviews. She discussed calling students by their authentic names and pronouns as an integral part of her relationship-building process. She made it a point to do this even when their name differed from what was listed on official school documents and records.

Mr. Bowman said that much of his educational foundation came from courses he took when pursuing his bachelor's degree, but that various courses in the Diversity Literacy Program were also important. A public schools in America course and an

African American English course were the most impactful. The public schools in America course was a foundational class designed to help students understand the framing for public schools. He said this class started the conversation within him that there were several educational inequities that needed to be addressed for him to be a successful teacher. One of those major inequities was standardized testing. Mr. Bowman reflected on a conversation he had with his class on biases found in standardized testing. One of his students brought up that he had heard tests like the ACT were skewed towards White, middle- and upper-class students. Although Mr. Bowman knew the research well from the readings assigned in his classes, he expressed hesitancy to confirm this belief for students because he did not want to create another source of anxiety for them. He said that "with the population of my school that can be pretty daunting to understand while you're about to engage with this test." After giving it thought, Mr. Bowman's response to students was to first let them know that yes, this is unfortunately how many tests are structured. He wanted to first make sure students were getting correct information. But then he wanted students to understand that despite test bias, they needed to keep going as so many structures (i.e. college admissions) rely on assessments. Mr. Bowman did not stop there, telling students:

We can disrupt that. Um, like let's try to do our best...and understand that, like, it's not going to change the entire rest of your life trajectory. Uh, if you do what you would perceive to be poorly. And then too, like if we continue to like, be loud about that then like, or about the issues of bias, then perhaps we can do something about it eventually.



It was not only the new knowledge regarding bias in standardized testing that Mr. Bowman found helpful, but it was also the ideas surrounding disrupting inequitable school systems that helped him during this conversation with students.

The African American Vernacular English course Mr. Bowman took helped him to see that students in America speak in different varieties and dialects. He realized that it was important for him to know about those distinctions to understand his students more fully. Especially as an English teacher, he felt that knowing about how students communicate was going to help him better support them in their reading and writing. Another course he took that was influential to him was focused on students experiencing poverty. Knowledge gleaned from this class helped him continue to understand the different experiences and perspectives of students in his classroom. He used this knowledge to build broader pictures of his students so that he could support them through issues that might result in educational setbacks.

For Ms. Taylor, the course she took on African American Vernacular English in schools had a profound impact on her. The class helped her rethink the way she sees herself, her students, and her instructional decisions. It helped her to see ways that she could “honor” students’ language practices and conversational norms to build better relationships. She said,

I need to understand, um, more about like subcultures within the Black community and like different registers and nonverbal communication and things like that, you know, like, uh, you know, a lot of the African Americans that I hung out with, they were, you know, they were middle-class, they were college educated or, you know, working in professional settings. I dunno, like maybe,

maybe, maybe they just used a different register when we were around our mixed race, peer groups, you know, I don't know.

The course made her question her previous experiences with People of Color and gave her a deeper understanding of the intersections between class, race, and language. In another course she was in, a fellow student remarked that they do not use terms like “Sir” or “Ma’am” because they felt like that was “slave language.” She had never heard of this before but reflected on this to better understand where the person was coming from. Because of her new knowledge from the AAE course, her mind had been broadened to ideas about linguistic diversity and what is considered respectful conversation. She was more open-minded to the student’s ideas and considered this thinking about “Sir” and “Ma’am” in her own classroom discourse.

Ms. Taylor also mentioned a course she took before the Diversity Literacy Program in her Master’s in the Art of Teaching (MAT) program. She said it was a cross-cultural competency course where “you read all the biggies”: Nieto, Ladson-Billings, and *White Teacher* (Paley, 1979). She said *White Teacher* is still a text that she thinks about frequently to this day:

Although old and somewhat dated that, that pierced me, like to my core. Like I remember like reading, like I thought that if I carried around, um, these, these, I think, I can't remember quite the quote, but like I thought if I carried around these suitcases that said ‘liberal’ on the outside, I didn't have to open the suitcase up and see what was in there.

Her emotion at that quote was palpable, and she is still amazed at how much she learned in that class. She mentioned that the professor was probably as impactful as the texts, if

not more. She felt like all the readings assigned really helped her process and learn, and that the professor's no-nonsense attitude encouraged her to do and be better. She recalled a time where she told the professor she was struggling with making lesson plans, and the professor told her to "put on her big girl pants" and just get the work done. She remembered thinking "Did she just say that?" before realizing that comment was the motivator she needed to sit down and work. Through her descriptions of the professor, it was clear that Ms. Taylor aims to emulate the "tough love" demeanor of a teacher who has both high expectations for students but supports them to get the job done. Ms. Taylor believed that her new learnings influenced both her beliefs and class practices.

Ms. Horton indicated that all the diversity literacy courses were influential for her and provided her with new knowledge. She said that they were impactful because they deepened her understanding of herself and her identity and made her realize how her experience related to issues of inclusion in the classroom. She reflected back on her first courses in her initial teacher certification program prior to the DLP and noted that those courses covered some of the same topics, but that as a 21 year old they did not "hit" the same way as they did in the Diversity Literacy Program. With multiple years of teaching under her belt, she was able to see the impact of the issues she was learning about and use her new knowledge to create change in her teaching.

Learning from a women and gender studies course on the feminization of poverty and the Black family was most influential for Ms. Horton. She said the course gave her:

Time to think about some historical pieces...why there are these wider structures, why there are systems, why there are the stereotypes in place. Um, cause that's never something that I've had to think about.

Learning more about the LGBTQ+ community, which is something she felt very unaware of, helped her to think about the intersections of her identity. She said,

Stuff that I literally wouldn't have ever known about. Um, I mean, well, maybe I would have known about, but like had a, uh, it was a, there were so many eye-opening things that I like academically learned about, but also just socially learned about.

Ms. Horton noted that in response to some charged incidents in her school and community, she was revisiting texts and learnings from the Diversity Literacy Program related to trans rights and supporting trans students in schools.

All the teachers overwhelmingly indicated that the experiences in the Diversity Literacy Program provided them with invaluable new knowledge. Earlier learnings in other programs related to diversity were also impactful. All the participants described using knowledge from the DLP in their classrooms. They reflected most on topics that changed the way that they thought about their students and their cultures. Ms. Carter was the only teacher that explicitly mentioned the courses providing her with specific strategies and not just new knowledge. The other teachers noted that they use knowledge from the courses in their classrooms, presumably to craft strategies and teaching processes, but did not say this explicitly. Ms. Horton was the only participant who noted that the timing of her courses in the Diversity Literacy Program was important to her understanding and retention of the topics. She had taken various diversity courses in a previous program when she was younger but did not feel like they were as useful for her. This was at least in part because she did not have any teaching experience to tie the concepts to.

## **Teacher Perceptions of Students and Navigation of the Relationship-Building Process**

Findings in this second part of the chapter focus on the teachers' perceptions of students and the relationship-building process. They align with the second research question, "In what ways do teachers describe how they navigate cultural differences to convey sentiments of high expectations and care to their students in order to build positive relationships?" The participants' responses focused on how they translate their unique identities into their relationship-building processes. The findings show how each of the four teachers perceived the students in their classrooms and how they describe their processes of navigating students' diverse cultural identities to build positive relationships. Responses include their beliefs on the relationship-building process generally, including their ideas of what an ideal student-teacher relationship should look like, in addition to specific strategies and techniques that they used. For each finding I will describe the individual teacher's related responses followed up by various cross-case findings.

### **Teacher Understandings of Diverse Student Cultural Identities**

All the teachers were asked to describe what they knew and understood about the diverse cultural identities of the students in their classrooms. Ms. Carter's reflection focused mostly on identities related to religion, including celebrations like holidays and birthdays, and traditional dress. She asserted that religious identity could have a big impact on the experience of students in her classroom. She mentioned specifically needing to know about students' religions because they relate to how they may choose to dress (or not dress) for her physical education and health classes. She specifically mentioned students wearing hijabs or shoes and attire that were not well-suited for

athletics. She described creating work arounds for these students because she would never expect them to change out of their traditional clothing for class. She did not give any specifics on what the dress option would be but made it a point to mention that they would not miss out on class if they could not change into gym clothes.

Mr. Bowman indicated that his school is very diverse overall, with different religions, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses represented. He said specifically that his school demographics consist of mostly Students of Color and White students of low socioeconomic status. He takes this further by saying there is a “large group of conservative White students who are in poverty, “hinting at political affiliation as a part of their identity. At his school there is also a very large immigrant and refugee population, with over 60 languages represented. Many students also identify as experiencing homelessness.

Ms. Taylor described her student population as “about half African American.” The other half of her school could be divided into White students and other Students of Color who identified as Asian, Latinx, etc. She touched on the concept of intersectionality, noting that “the African American experience in the United States is obviously not monolithic. In terms of, um, class status and just subcultures and, and, and things like that.” She acknowledged that she teaches a lot of “very well off African American students” and then some who are living in “extreme poverty.” Her definition of intersectionality consisted of what she termed “dimensions of diversity.” These dimensions reflected many differences such as class, experiences with the justice system (i.e. having an incarcerated parent), and experiences within the state care system (i.e. foster care). Although many of her students come from the same racial background, Ms.

Taylor said that these different dimensions impact their experiences overall. She also discussed trauma in the classroom and trauma responses as parts of students' cultural identities. She mentioned that her students' traumatic experiences have led them to be triggered by happenings at school and by other students.

Ms. Taylor also spoke about the high concentration of immigrant and refugee students at her school, saying:

You can't talk about like dimensions of diversity and not talk about like the, there are students from all over the world, um, and they are in all different stages of educational background and language attainment. Um, so we, we have so many students who will less, so after the last four years and the, the limits on refugee students, but certainly when, um, I arrived here, we had so many students who had no prior formal education, like, you know, SIFE kids. And so, I mean that, I mean, you're just teaching them how to do school at 17 years old.

Ms. Taylor indicated that supporting her Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) is especially challenging. She said that many of them have never been engaged in formal education before attending high school and come from war torn countries in Africa or Asia. She acknowledged that teaching them how to even sit at a desk or interact with other students, especially when they realize that other students in the school may be from rival ethnic groups, is particularly difficult. She indicated that many teachers do not understand these cultural nuances and assume that if students are from the same home country, they must be similar. To this Ms. Taylor said, "no, ma'am, you know, they, they see themselves as really different," something she has realized after frequent conversations with students. Ms. Taylor focused on the importance of opening herself up

to students, letting them know that she is prepared to listen if they want to tell her what life was like in the refugee camp or describe for her how their language is different from other students' in the class.

Ms. Taylor again tied her discussion of diversity to language, indicating that she tries to understand more about discrimination, particularly related to students who come from African nations, so she can get a sense of how they "handle their linguistic diversity." Ms. Taylor expressed that she is constantly working to understand her students' experiences to determine how she can best help them learn and achieve success. Ms. Taylor discussed the belief that she held prior to becoming a teacher that she would be able to serve her students by lifting their voices and helping them to advocate for and express themselves. She noted:

I really thought like me, a White lady was gonna roll up in and teach people like, raise their consciousness is like, whew, that's a little embarrassing to admit, but like, you know, like I, I have learned the longer that I teach that my students already have a consciousness.

Ms. Taylor grew to learn throughout her teaching experience that her students have a "consciousness," an understanding about themselves and their experiences of marginalization that is not impacted by her. She learned that she would connect more with students if she listened and followed their lead, instead of assuming they needed help or guidance.

Regarding her students' cultural identities, Ms. Horton said that "on a very base level, I know that [they are] incredibly different from mine." Most of her students are of a different race than her, and their households look very different than hers looked growing



up. As she mentioned before, she grew up in a middle class two-parent household where she was provided with many opportunities in school and beyond. She said that most of her students have lived in the same city their whole lives, and that they have traumas related to racism and low socioeconomic status that she will never fully understand. She said that because academics were always such an important part of her life, she struggles when students do not seem to value education. She did not blame students for their perceived disinterest in school but saw this lack of engagement as a barrier that she works to understand and overcome.

Ms. Horton also touched on the concept of linguistic diversity saying that students' use of their home vernacular can be shocking to some people, including herself. She said that when students speak in ways that are not part of her regular vernacular, she finds herself wondering "Why are we saying that?" She did not dive into any specifics here, but never indicated that she thought the students were wrong or incorrect for the way they speak. It seems more likely that she recognized there is a cultural mismatch and miscommunication, but that it does not seem to impact her classroom in a major way.

All the teachers presented a multifaceted view of their students' cultural identities. Ms. Carter spoke the most about her students' religious identities because traditional dress related to religious beliefs impacted how students participate in her health and physical education classes. Ms. Taylor and Ms. Horton discussed linguistic identities and identified that their students' cultural norms of conversation and home dialects and languages were much different from their own. Mr. Bowman spoke in the most general terms about his students' cultural identities and was the only teacher to directly bring up political affiliation (conservative) as a facet of students' cultural

identities. All the White teachers identified students' racial identities as being different from their own.

### **Teacher Recognitions of Personal Cultural Identities at Odds with Students'**

Following discussions about their own cultural identities the teacher participants were asked if there were any times where their identities were at odds with those of their students. Ms. Carter reflected on one situation directly related to race. The incident occurred when she was engaged in the Virtual Instruction Model (VIM). While she was meeting synchronously online with her students, someone put "Black Lives Matter" in the chat. She said that this was right after the U.S. Capitol riots on January 6th, 2021. In response, another student wrote "All Lives Matter." Before she knew it, students started jumping in and posting different color fist emojis or other emojis with different skin tones. She stopped the class and told her students that saying "All Lives Matter " could be offensive to some students in this class. The student who put that quote in the chat responded by saying that he did not believe in "Black Lives Matter" because they (African Americans) were the ones burning down and tearing up things. Another student noted that the U.S. Capitol riots were mostly attended by White insurrectionists and that only a few of those people were being arrested. The student was alluding to the idea that African Americans are often arrested or killed for their engagement in protests, whereas the White insurrectionists at the capital were not punished (at the time of the incident). Ms. Carter felt that her identity as an African American woman was directly clashing with what her White "All Lives Matter" student felt during this conversation. The conversation fizzled out in that case, but Ms. Carter indicated that it was not the only time that issues related to Black Lives Matter have come up in her classroom. She did not

elaborate or provide any additional instances, however. She said that whenever an issue related to race or discrimination comes up, she always stops the teaching of content to hear and address these matters. She affirmed that it is important to her that all students are heard even if she does not necessarily agree with what the student is saying.

Mr. Bowman recounted two instances where he felt his cultural identity was at odds with those of his students. The first was the incident described earlier in this section related to his identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. In response to the false accusations about him coming out dramatically to his students, Mr. Bowman arranged a meeting where he sat down with the student and the assistant principal. He shared his frustration at the situation and expressed hope that the incident could end in a positive relationship for them both. Mr. Bowman described his handling of the issue:

I approached the student and was like, Hey, I'm hearing like some weird things. Like, is there anything you want to talk to me about? And he was like, like, you know, I don't know what you're talking about, et cetera. I was like, look like, I don't really care how you feel about me personally. And I, I just need you to understand that, like, if we are going to continue to have a good, positive, like teacher, student relationship, that like, you gotta cut this out, dude. Like, it's not, it's not gonna, it's not going to make anything any better between us, if you're like lying to people about me. Um, and I can fully attest to the fact that like my personal life has no influence on how well I'm going to teach you. We gotta come to terms with like the I'm going to be a gay teacher and you are going to be a straight student. And we are going to learn from one another. Um, and shoot by

the end of the school year, like the kid was like, loved my class. Like he was doing all my work, et cetera. And the same cannot be said for other teachers.

Another incident described by Mr. Bowman was when a White student complained about the posters he had hanging up in his room. The student argued that she did not feel like her identity was represented in the posters and even took the issue all the way up to the principal. Mr. Bowman used this as a space to ask the student why she thought there were not more pictures of people who looked like her in the classroom. They ended up discussing privilege, and the reason for having posters that were not of predominantly White students. Mr. Bowman indicated that he heard her point and worked to include images that represented all students in his classroom. The next year he also moved the posters to a different spot in his classroom.

When asked if she had any experiences that stood out as moments where her cultural identity conflicted with those of her students, Ms. Taylor recounted an incident with an African American male student. She described an issue that took place during one of her "lunch split classes," a period where students attend class for half of the period, go to lunch, and then return. Ms. Taylor said that this class can feel very disjointed since there is a lot of transition throughout the period. The lack of structure causes students to act up at times. Ms. Taylor indicated that the class always needed a lot of redirection, and because this student was surrounded by a lot of friends from the football team, it could just get out of hand quickly. At the time of the incident, Ms. Taylor had a student teacher, who was also an African American male, and she noted that the students seemed to respond quite well to him when she felt the class was really off-task.

On one day, Ms. Taylor and the student teacher were redirecting this particular student a lot and at a certain point she could see that their critiques and proximity control “rubbed him the wrong way.” The student “blew up and yelled a homophobic slur” across the room. The student teacher took the student and walked him out of the classroom while Ms. Taylor attempted to get the rest of the room settled back down. She said that there were several LGBTQ+ students in the room and she could tell they were scared to speak up about how they were feeling. They were clearly upset by the level of anger in the student’s voice as he yelled the slurs repeatedly. She said, “students were trembling” and many of the refugee students were confused and unsure of what was happening.

Ms. Taylor wrote up the student for “hate speech” (what the offense qualified as in the district code of conduct) and upon his return to the classroom a few days later he screamed the slur again. Once again, the student was removed, and Ms. Taylor helped the students left behind in the classroom deal with what had been said. She said that during this incident all the students started looking at a student in the classroom who identifies as non-binary, waiting for them to speak up. Ms. Taylor set up a meeting with the principal, guidance counselor, the student who used the hate speech, and the student’s parents to discuss. The conversation did not go well, as the parents supported the student and indicated that they were religious fundamentalists who believed that if a student was “choosing to be gay” they had to learn to deal with the consequences of their choices. They said that it was not hate speech because hate speech only applies to racism and racial slurs.

Ultimately, the situation was not resolved for Ms. Taylor. The student switched schools and there was never any closure or repair of the relationship. Ms. Taylor said that

“it was one of the worst experiences I've had in teaching” because she felt like it was a huge clash of their dimensions of identity. Although she and her student teacher tried to handle it in a respectful way, the damage was done. She regretted not being able to reach the student and indicated that she felt he really needed emotional support and counseling, neither of which she was able to provide. She also reflected on how the situation may have impacted her student teacher, who was put in a difficult position. She explained:

He (the student teacher) was in a really difficult position because like, you know, he could sense that the parents didn't really respect me, you know, as, as, as a White female teacher, you know, but he had high expectations for respectful discourse in the classroom. Um, and they, they really kept to him, you know, like as a, as a Black young Black man, like, well, what can you do? And he's, and, you know, but, but he was going to hold the line that, you know, it was not permitted for students to use hate speech in the school. And, you know, and, and so he was put in a very difficult position that, you know, Black educators are often put into, you know, kind of like living in so many different, having to live in so many different worlds and wear so many different hats. And it's just, it just was a very, very bad situation for everyone.

Ms. Taylor's recollection of this incident showed that it impacted her a lot. This incident demonstrated a cultural mismatch that Ms. Taylor believed centered around race and sexual identity. Because she compared her experience with that of her African American student teacher, she was highly aware of how the situation impacted them differently.

When asked if there have been times when her cultural identity was at odds with her students' Ms. Horton indicated that there have been some minor issues. When asked a follow up question about what these incidents were, she could not describe anything specific. In later questions she described conflicts with students related to beliefs about schoolwork. These mismatches between herself and students related to dedication to course performance and turning in assignments. She felt that certain students were not committed to their schoolwork at the levels that she expected. She did not elaborate on whether there were demographic similarities between these students or any other group identifiers.

All the teachers indicated that they have experienced cultural mismatches that caused conflict between themselves and their students. Ms. Carter, Ms. Taylor, and Mr. Bowman described specific stories whereas Ms. Horton could not think of any specific scenarios. None of the teachers indicated that these incidents made them view their students in a negative light. For all of them, the cultural mismatches were instances where they felt they needed to work hard to get to the bottom of the issue in order to maintain or repair the relationship.

### **Issues of Diversity and Inclusion that Impact the Teaching Experience**

The teachers were asked to describe any issues related to diversity and inclusion that have impacted their teaching experiences. Ms. Carter noted that making sure students have a voice is the issue that most impacted her teaching and classroom management choices. She said that she wants students to know that if they speak up in class, they will never be made fun of, and that their opinion matters. Ms. Carter described feeling very protective when discovering that any student is feeling excluded or isolated. She said that

any issues related to bullying are handled swiftly in her classroom. Ms. Carter focused on the importance of providing space for students to speak up and share in restorative circles daily. She reiterated several times that giving students the opportunity to speak their minds is integral to building her classroom community. In these circles, students are asked simple questions like “Is there anything you want to share with the group?” and “Is anyone celebrating a birthday or a holiday this week?” All these questions were intended to help students talk about issues they’re experiencing. She explained:

I give them more of the opportunity to share with me what they want to share versus me, like pointing stuff out, because I don't want to embarrass anybody. So, I just kind of open it up if they, if there's anything that they want to share or share with their peers or relate to some kind of way.

This reiterated what Ms. Carter mentioned earlier, that one of her biggest goals as a teacher is to give students a voice and make them feel included. She said that she really prides herself on supporting students so that they feel heard, creating safe spaces where no one is bullied or teased for their unique identity. She added that she allows room for students to share what they want so she does not go into the restorative circles with an agenda or plan for what students will share. In this way, students lead the discussion and discuss only what is most important to them.

For Mr. Bowman, diversity issues related to visibility in the texts he assigns stood out to him the most. He advocated for issues that face his students such as LGBTQ+ rights, poverty, racism, and classism. He said that making sure students see themselves and their stories in the materials they are reading is integral to his mission as an educator. As an English teacher, Mr. Bowman argued for the idea of “disrupting” things, something



he has learned from the #DisruptTexts movement (Germán, 2020) and other professional development opportunities. He described being a disruptor as taking texts that may be otherwise out of date or seemingly unreachable for his students, like *The Crucible*, and making them connect to contemporary issues like LGBTQ+ rights and the experiences of People of Color. He said that he is transparent with students about the need to re-examine “classic” texts, recognizing that there is more to their own stories and experiences than what mainstream texts display. Mr. Bowman reiterated that he never wants his students to feel like “oh, look, there is another story about a poor Black kid, another story about an immigrant or whatever.” He discussed his belief in looking at texts through the perspectives of people of various cultural identities and had hopes of instilling a certain level of empathy in his students to increase understanding and inclusion in his classroom.

Mr. Bowman also made it a point to discuss how he celebrated different holidays and celebrations in his classroom. One of our interviews took place during February, and he said that “Black History Month is on my mind right now.” Making a big deal out of whatever the monthly or daily celebration is a big part of his classroom dynamic. He specifically mentioned Women’s History Month, Coming Out Day, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and World Aids Day as various celebrations he included throughout the year to make students feel noticed and welcome.

Ms. Taylor once again grounded her focus on issues of diversity and inclusion in language and conversational norms. Due to the demographics of her school, Ms. Taylor indicated that she has found an intense need to focus on supporting English Language Learners. She said that she wants to make sure that they have appropriate supports and scaffolds so that they can achieve at the same high levels as their peers. Ms. Taylor

reiterated that she does not want ELLs to feel as if they are just being given workbooks or menial assignments and noted that it is an ongoing struggle to support these students with their diverse language needs. She did, however, indicate that it is something she is growing in, and has been a huge area of focus for her in her studies.

Ms. Taylor consistently spoke to her desire to learn more and grow more in the areas where she is not the most knowledgeable. She recalled an instance where at a diversity training, someone told her that she was using cis-exclusive language when she referred to the group as you guys. She took that experience to heart, wondering if she had previously offended other students or colleagues inadvertently. She has worked diligently to clean up her language in that area and in the area of what she calls "Black slang." Until she began the Diversity Literacy Program and took a course in African American Vernacular English in schools, she did not realize she was appropriating AAVE in everyday language. She was not aware that the quotes or slang she was using from hip hop and movies came off as disrespectful to her Students of Color. She vowed to learn more and change these patterns of speech after a few students told her that they in fact did find her use of AAVE disrespectful. She realized "it's not my language," and tried to not use slang or mimic student speech going forward. She modeled for students the way that she might code switch from her own casual register to a more formal language in the classroom. She wants to make sure students know that she "has their back," and that requires her to use her words to "support and to help and to care."

Ms. Horton spoke about facing issues related to stereotypes, particularly those associated with poor or Black students. She said that she wants students to be the best versions of themselves, helping them to recognize that mainstream media and stereotypes

do not define who they really are. Ms. Horton indicated that she tries to find ways to help students focus on their goals of what they want to achieve beyond the classroom. She described helping them to see that they are in a place in their life where they can work through and understand who they really are. She admitted struggling with this interview question, feeling that there's so much to supporting students related to issues of diversity and inclusion.

All the teachers used their understanding of their students' diverse cultural identities as the catalyst for the issues of diversity and inclusion that they prioritized in their classrooms. All of them expressed a desire for students to feel included in the classroom environment. They also all reiterated their hopes for creating a space where students could express themselves genuinely. Ms. Carter and Ms. Horton talked the most about allowing students space to share their ideas and set goals for the future. Mr. Bowman and Ms. Taylor both talked about their professional development opportunities, in particular, how they have worked to learn more about issues of diversity and inclusion that impact the classroom. Ms. Horton and Mr. Bowman also spoke about working to dismantle stereotypes in their classrooms.

### **Process for Building Relationships**

All the participants were asked to describe what a student would experience at the beginning of the year in their classrooms. This question was designed to get a fuller picture of each teacher's intentional process for building relationships with students. For all the teachers, even Ms. Carter who teaches middle school, students rotated through their classes each semester. This meant that essentially there were two times per year (at the beginning of the year and halfway through the year in January) when they got new

students. I began collecting data during the beginning of the Winter 2021 semester (January), so teachers were just beginning to start the process with a new group of students when I first interviewed them. This was an important time to interview these teachers because they were just coming out of a semester with one group of students and coming into a new semester with a different group. This allowed the participants to reflect on how the process went during the first semester and how they were using what they learned to adjust their strategies.

Ms. Carter indicated that she starts every semester with new students with ice breaker games to get to know students, “sprinkled” with classroom expectations. Ice breakers included questions and games where students introduce themselves, noting nicknames or pronouns that they go by. Ms. Carter said that she is very focused on making sure she pronounces student names correctly. She has had students who are going through “gender changes where they’re taking different hormones” and so it is important to her that she makes note of any updates from students so that she can call them by their correct names and pronouns going forward. She said, “I cross out whatever is printed and put the name that they prefer.”

Ms. Carter said that it is important to mix in learning about procedures with ice breakers. She started the year by playing games and using a restorative circle to get students in appropriate seating positions on the gym floor. This allowed her to combine something fun (a game) with something practical (a seating chart). Within the restorative circle, she asked students questions about how they are feeling or what is new in their lives. When the district was doing virtual learning, Ms. Carter asked the students how they felt on a scale of 1-10 and had them put an emoji that represented their emotions for

the day in the chat. She set a goal of making sure that when they left, they could rate themselves at a higher number. She said, “If they come in at a two then my goal is to get them at an eight or higher before they leave.” She also made sure to tell them what the class will be like so that they will feel prepared and comfortable. She described to students how they can be successful in very explicit and measurable ways.

Integral to the relationship-building process for Ms. Carter is sharing pieces of herself and her identity with the students. This occurred both inside and outside of the restorative circle. She said that she will “put the content to the side” and share stories with them about her own life and experiences. She let students know that she is a therapeutic foster parent of teenagers ages 12-18 and sometimes her phone may go off. If it is her foster child’s school, she told students that she will have to take the call. She described knowing that this resonates with the students, many of whom do not live with their biological parents, or who are in foster care themselves. Ms. Carter has even had experiences where she has been called by agencies and case managers to foster some of her own students. She found it really flattering and an indication of the power of her relationship-building strategies that a student would want to be welcomed into her home and be cared for by her. She said that the restorative circle strategy helped her to gain students’ trust since they could see that she is someone who cares about them. A major goal in the early phases of the relationship-building process for Ms. Carter was for students to leave her class remembering that they were cared about and feeling like they received “lifelong advice that I hope that they remember”. As she was describing what she aims to do during the relationship-building process, Ms. Carter mentioned her eighth

grade English teacher again. She said that she aims to be like her by serving as someone that students remember, look up to, and hope to be like one day.

Mr. Bowman also described starting the year with ice breaker activities. He said that his English class is primarily focused on argumentation and they do a lot of work that involves agreeing and disagreeing. For students to be successful there, he argued that there must be a layer of trust that allows them to disagree appropriately with each other. The ice breakers he implemented were typically activities that are low stakes like a four corners strategy where he asked simple questions to get students to agree or disagree with a statement. He started the activity with simple questions like “what color is your favorite” and then moved up to more critical questions like “should people kneel during the national Anthem?” Mr. Bowman said that this progression gives students the opportunity to speak their minds while he monitors and demonstrates expectations for appropriate discussion. Appropriate discussion techniques including waiting your turn and listening to other students’ ideas. Mr. Bowman also said that this type of activity helps students to feel comfortable participating in class in the future. He recalled telling students, “Please ask a question! I want you to potentially be wrong because then I can help guide your thinking.” He said that he aims to build an environment where students can take risks and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts aloud.

Mr. Bowman also spent time at the beginning of the year making sure he knew all students' names and that the other students in the classroom knew each other’s names as well. To achieve this, he said he puts students into small groups so that they can share or write opinions in a more private setting while getting to know the members of their class community. If a student seems shy or nervous, he described asking them if he can

introduce them to the class, and make sure, again, that he is pronouncing their name correctly. He reiterated that he does not want any student to feel like they are “the new kid” or that anyone is staring at them.

Mr. Bowman worked diligently to set the tone in even the first week of school that he is going to be a “hardcore ally for groups that are marginalized.” This is evident in the classroom environment he sets up with diverse posters and sayings around the room designed to help students feel welcome. He argued that “if we're looking at things through an equity perspective, um, those are the kids that have to know that.” Mr. Bowman said that it is important to him that students know early in the year that he is someone they can come to with any issues they might have, and that he will be an open-minded listener and support.

Another strategy Mr. Bowman described using is a writer’s notebook. Students used the notebooks to write down information about themselves that they may not want to share aloud, and Mr. Bowman always read and responded to their writing. He said he would use a post-it note, or in the case of VIM, would make a comment on their electronic document. He kept his own notes of what students liked so that he could reference these things later with the student. A goal of this activity was to help students see that they can trust him because he kept their writer’s notebook private and cared enough to read their work and respond.

Ms. Taylor focused on getting to know students’ names and some key facts about them during the first few days of the semester. She said that this is always difficult, particularly because she has 140 or more students from all over the world. Ms. Taylor kept a spreadsheet with student names, pronunciations, and then facts about them like

“what kind of t-shirts they’re wearing, what artists they’re into, what bands they like, or what color Vans their shoes are.” She found that those “little things” helped her to get to know students more deeply because it opened avenues for conversation in the future.

Ms. Taylor also infused procedures and icebreakers into the relationship-building process. She discussed different principals she has had and the philosophies they held about the first few days of school or a new semester. There has always seemed to be a distinction between “content versus community.” She chose to focus on community building through content. For example, she provided students with early works on historical thinking and multiple perspectives, helping students to see that people have always seen things differently throughout history. This mirrored her descriptions of the type of community she wants to create in her classroom where all students feel their voices are valued. She tied these perspectives into the concept of “identity” to help students see that they all have different dimensions to their identities (racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, etc.) that influence how they see and experience things.

Ms. Taylor described sharing parts of herself with her students so they can get to know her better. She described herself as the teacher at her school that students feel is very “hype” or “extra” and said that it is a “dorky thing that I’m kind of known for.” Ms. Taylor described herself as having high energy and bringing enthusiasm to her classroom. She described these as qualities of her natural personality. She joked that students are often saying things like, “Why is this lady being so animated at 8 a.m.?” Ms. Taylor believed that expressing her personality and being enthusiastic about learning helps to create a feeling in her classroom like students are there “to be scholars” and that we are “not here to relax.” She decorated her classroom with plants, lighting from home,



beautiful art, and essential oils, imitating the environment that makes her feel most comfortable and excited about learning. By being her authentic self, she hoped that her genuine passion and comfortable space made her students feel at peace.

This desire for students to feel relaxed yet pushed towards success was a major element of Ms. Taylor's relationship-building process. She encouraged students to feel comfortable collaborating with each other by modeling the types of classroom discussion she expected from them. She also made it very clear from the beginning that while she is a fun person, she expected students to do work in her class. She believed this "sets the tone," and recognized that there are not a lot of opportunities for "do-overs" if students do not feel engaged at the beginning of the semester. To keep her classroom exciting and focused on the work she said that she constantly "reinvents the wheel" by pushing herself to attend professional development to learn new strategies for engagement. She reflected specifically on one professional development opportunity she had where she was taught intentional strategies for helping students consider their own dimensions of identity. She said,

You know, a lot of times students have only thought about like, well I'm a Black young woman or I am an Asian young man. Um, but just to consider the different dimensions that maybe they hadn't thought about and how that really influences them, um, and then, and talk about it, you know, um, and then just kind of, um, you know, establish, establishing norms of communication for when we talk about things that are, um, difficult.

Ms. Taylor said that this exploration of dimensions of identity is important because she wants even the first few days of school to be engaging and challenging for students. As I

will discuss further in the later section regarding maintaining high expectations, Ms. Taylor aimed to communicate in the first few days of class that students will be expected to work a lot in her class, but that they would always be pushed in ways that are designed to help them succeed.

Ms. Taylor continuously focused on her desire to help students “critically think about their own dimensions of identity.” She believed this not only helped to build community but created early habits and patterns so that students can get to know themselves and understand what helps them achieve and work best. Building engagement and interest in those first few weeks also helped students to trust her, as they learned that if they try hard in her class, it will be ok if they are not successful at first. She told them that she, and the rest of the class community, would always have their backs and would support them in their growth.

Ms. Horton started her relationship-building process by learning student names. She said this was especially hard for her to do at her school because they have a very transient population. This means that it was normal for her to have new students join her class throughout the semester while others flowed in and out sporadically. Ms. Horton kept notes with key details about each student to help her remember names and build conversation later. She reflected on her own teachers saying that “teachers that I looked up to listened to me and asked me questions.” She said that she aims to start each semester with a baseline of general student knowledge and then build from there.

Ms. Horton also used icebreakers and leaned into her personality by being goofy or silly with students. She noted that the goal of all her icebreakers and personalized connections was to “get students to trust me enough to try and push them.” This trust

included helping students see that “you're not going to let them fail or that if they do fail, you're going to be there to help them, um, and learn from whatever failures there might be.” She always wanted to appear “not cold” because she believed that a negative personality can be upsetting to students or make them feel uncomfortable. Ms. Horton said that she aims to make students trust her. Part of the trust stemmed from telling students up front that they would be working hard in her class but that she would be there for them to support them when they struggled. She believed in learning from failure and noted that mutual trust between herself and her students will help them both be successful.

All the teachers described the importance of learning student names and small facts about students. They all maintained some sort of system for making sure that they are pronouncing student names correctly throughout the semester and keeping track of small details. Mr. Bowman’s opening activities mimicked Ms. Carter’s as they both infused ice breaker strategies with practical classroom norms and procedures. Ms. Taylor and Ms. Carter spoke about being their authentic selves and hoping that by presenting a genuine “vibe” in the classroom students will feel comfortable and engaged. All the teachers spoke about sharing different pieces of themselves, whether that consisted of previous life experiences or details about their day-to-day lives that students may find interesting. All the teachers also set a framework for high expectations indicating that they will be working hard but never at the expense of students feeling encouraged or cared about. Table 4 summarizes some of the major commonalities across the teachers’ relationship-building processes, including examples they described.

**Table 4**

*Commonalities Across Teacher Relationship-Building Processes*

Strategy or process	Ice breakers combined with procedures	Learn student names and pronounce them correctly	Gather list of student likes and dislikes and bring them up in conversation	Revealing parts of oneself	Framework for high expectations
Examples	Restorative circle seating charts, high-interest four corners	Including pronouns and other identities	Clothing, music, shoes, interests, etc.	Likes, dislikes, beliefs, writer's notebook, identity, etc.	Level of support provided, workload, constant learning

**Describing Student-Teacher Relationships**

Participants were asked what they considered an “ideal” student-teacher relationship. This question was designed to get a better sense of what the teachers’ considered to be markers of successful relationships and relationship-building processes. This allowed me to see if they considered their processes and strategies successful. Ms. Carter responded that an ideal relationship needed to be “professional first and foremost.” She mentioned that there are too many relationships out there that are “unethical” and have “nasty stuff” going on. She explicitly stated that boundaries need to be set up and adhered to. These boundaries included not exchanging numbers with students or following each other on social media. She said,

It should be a relationship where the teacher is the source of knowledge and the student is open to that. But then at the same time, it’s a two-way street also because we can learn a lot from our students. So it’s keeping an open mind of,

um, you know, anything students that they have to share from their culture, from their background.

She tied her discussion of boundaries back to culture, showing that while there are some non-negotiables in the relationship she has with her students, she wants to make sure that they still are open and respectful.

Mr. Bowman discussed the idea of “mutual respect.” He argued that it is important that he and students have an understanding that they are all occupying a shared space. This meant that everyone needed to be respectful of each other’s boundaries. Mr. Bowman reiterated the belief that as the teacher, his goal is to provide students with a service, learning, that must be appreciated and understood. He told students:

You need to take something from my classroom, um, be it like the mastery of the standards, or just like a better understanding of them. Um, but also I'm, I'm here serving you. Um, that's really what I view, like my, my job as is like serving the student. And so like an ideal relationship would be one where like the student is appreciating that I'm trying to give them something.

Mr. Bowman recognized that this appreciation for learning is not always observed and that’s where relationships can get difficult. He said that if teachers do not recognize a need to pivot and try different strategies to get students to engage with the learning, relationships can fall apart. For Mr. Bowman, the lack of respect between student and teacher was a space created strained relationships.

Ms. Taylor pointed out that an ideal relationship needs to be “responsive.” She described responsiveness as teachers and students sharing ideas and experiences back and forth. Ms. Taylor argued that relationships are reflections of the identities of the people

involved in them. Because of this she mentioned that it is important to craft each relationship individually since the needs of each student are different. This belief applied to teachers as well; Ms. Taylor argued that relationships were going to look different if you are a young teacher versus an older teacher, and depending on other aspects of your identity, too (gender, racial, linguistic). These dimensions of identity were something she felt that teachers needed to consider when investigating themselves and their experiences in the relationship-building process.

Ms. Taylor also reflected on the need for teachers to be friendly but not too friendly with students. She also argued that relationships can be strained if the teacher is too far on the other side of the spectrum and appears as too cold or unfriendly to students. She has overheard teachers say things like, "I'm not here to make friends," which she felt was off-putting to students. Ms. Taylor expressed an underlying belief that many teachers struggle with setting up the boundary between being friends and being friendly, and this is often why some teachers shut themselves off from students in a hope to preserve their own feelings. Ms. Taylor argued that this can be a "defense mechanism," something that teachers may do when they do not feel comfortable examining difficult situations or trying new strategies to connect with students.

Ms. Horton agreed that there is a "fine line" in the relationship, and that many teachers flirt with the idea of being "too friendly." She argued that excessive friendliness can cause student teacher relationships to cross a line and be inappropriate. In a later interview, Ms. Horton embellished upon these ideas, saying that when teachers want students to like them too much, the relationship lines can be blurred. For instance, a teacher may lose sight of themselves as the responsible party or disciplinarian in the

classroom and lose control of the class because of their overwhelming desire for students to like them. She argued that there is a way to set boundaries and be a trusted person without getting to the point where you are more of a friend than a teacher to your students. The way to do this, according to Ms. Horton, was to make sure there is a “willingness to see from the other’s perspective or to work with each other.” This included a “mutual understanding of goals” and clarity for the student about what success looks like. She argued that this problem of being “too friendly” seemed to be a bigger issue for new teachers, who tend to confuse being “liked” by students with being trusted or respected.

There were various commonalities across how the four participants discussed their concepts of ideal student-teacher relationships. Common themes included maintaining a professional relationship with specific boundaries and the concept of a “two-way street” where students and teachers are both learning from each other. All the teachers indicated that these were necessary components of ideal student-teacher relationships and discussed variations within these themes that were integral to their success. Mr. Bowman used the term “mutual respect,” which I would argue is like Ms. Carter’s concept of a “two-way street” and Ms. Horton’s concept of a mutual understanding of goals. Ms. Taylor described the relationship as being “responsive” which reiterates the idea that relationships must be give and take.

### **Maintaining High Expectations**

All questions related to high expectations were open-ended so the participants could evaluate this concept through any lens. This led to conversations that were focused on holding students accountable to standards and learning in addition to discussions on

behavior expectations and safety. In this set of questions about high expectations teachers were also asked about what praise or holding students to high expectations might look like in their classrooms. They detailed their processes for positive reinforcement of high expectations, including specific conversations they might have with students when offering them praise.

For Ms. Carter, safety was a major goal of maintaining high expectations. Ms. Carter has students sit on the bleachers in the gym every day before class while she goes over what they are going to do that day and what the expectations are going to be for safety and success. She tied her expectations for a safe classroom to losing privileges like free play or basketball. She expressed an understanding that for many of her students, physical education is their favorite class and one of the few times in the day where they are allowed freedom of movement. She said that she constantly talks to students “about the time that was taken away from their physical activity and how it was unfair for them, the ones that were running around, how they were taking away time from the students that did want to come in and do the right thing.” Through this conversation Ms. Carter aimed to remind students that they are a team, a community, and even just a few students’ disruptions (running around) can ruin it (free play) for everyone else. She tied “doing the right thing” to her high expectations which provided an ethical or even moral framework for expectations.

Ms. Carter also identified the use of positive reinforcements as a large part of maintaining high expectations in her classroom. She described providing students with candy like Jolly Ranchers, and said she uses positive phone calls home to reinforce what she wants to see in her classroom. Students received rewards or positive praise for things



like being prepared, volunteering to read the learning target, or volunteering to help get equipment or to set up equipment. They were also rewarded for instructional success, such as kicking a homerun in kickball or succeeding in a badminton game. Basically, anything that she noticed a student doing right deserved praise and encouragement so the student will do it again in the future. She also set high expectations for students to take on tasks that they were not asked to do such as working with a shy or special needs student who may seem left out of the activity. Individualized side conversations were also a major tool used to reinforce high expectations to students. Ms. Carter spent a lot of time observing the students in the gym, and when she saw that something was “off” she would pull them to her individually and ask them what they were feeling, if something happened, or how she could help.

Mr. Bowman indicated that even during VIM he maintained the same expectations that he had for students before the pandemic. He described assigning the same amount of work and spending roughly the same amount of individualized time with each student as possible. His concept of high expectations included providing clear rubrics and exemplars for students so that they could be sure of how they were going to be evaluated. Establishing these expectations, he argued, allowed students to be clear about the end goal and helped them plan processes to reach quality final products. After students completed their work, Mr. Bowman made sure to give them consistent feedback tied to the rubric. HE allowed students to redo work that was incomplete or incorrect so that they would reach the set expectations.

For Ms. Taylor, maintaining high expectations was tied to always pushing for student growth. If you were a student in her classroom on the first day of school, she

would intentionally create an environment that was both comfortable and “hype.” For Ms. Taylor, this type of setting was designed to remind students that “we’re here to be scholars” and not to “relax.” Telling students that they are scholars was a through line when Ms. Taylor conveyed high expectations. She expected students to achieve at high levels while also inspiring them to trust that she will support them and do everything in her power to make sure they succeed. She was intentional about communicating that “this is a class where we work,” and reflected on other experiences her students may have had with previous teachers. She said,

I think sometimes, sometimes, uh, teachers, you know, they start real soft and then, uh, then the, then the teacher's like, no, we're going to write an essay. And the kids are like, what? I thought that he was cool, what happened? Um, so I try to communicate from the first day or two, like, we will actually work a lot in this class. Um, but you are so loved and you are so, so, so cared for and supported, but you will have to work a lot.

Ms. Taylor said that holding students to standards meant allowing them to be able to access “challenging” and “intellectually stimulating work” to “stretch their brains.” Ms. Taylor felt strongly about making sure that these challenging experiences were part of the curriculum for her English Language Learners. She constantly reiterated that it was her duty to make sure students have “support and scaffolds” so that they can achieve at levels like their English-proficient peers. She described her process for helping students reach goals as consisting of “growth,” “breakthroughs,” and “stick-to-itiveness.” She constantly praised persistence and called her students “history detectives.” This was designed to show them that learning is a process filled with many dead ends, wrong turns,

and incorrect assumptions. She described guiding students to believe that failures are areas for growth and that learning is something that takes time, willingness, and dedication. Ms. Taylor said that she even puts herself in situations to show students that she is comfortable being wrong or making a mistake in front of her supervisors. She said,

Even having like the assistant principal, if they're in there for like a walkthrough, or if they're in there to support a new teacher who, you know, is really struggling with management of their classroom, um, with problems, student behaviors, um, I think inviting them in for that, like, it can, it, it's funny to students where, where you're like, you know, Mr. So-and-so, could you help me?

Ms. Taylor demonstrated to students that even adults need to ask for help and that this is not something to be ashamed of.

Ms. Taylor also used positive praise to reinforce high expectations. She noted that her praise is always very focused on academic skills. A reflection of her upbeat personality, she said she might do something very dramatic to show how blown away she is by a student's work. She described phrasing her high expectations in a way that is humorous and lighthearted. For instance:

I might fall onto the floor and make myself look foolish with a student paper and I'll be like, dang, you won't read this claim! There are flame emojis coming off of this claim! And, you know, I will read the claim aloud and like, students will be like, Oh, that is very compelling.

Other times, she said she might hold up student work when a student "tears apart one of our sources or primary sources" so that other students can see them as an example.

Ms. Taylor connected with students by making a joke out of her tendency to cuss in class and used this to reinforce high expectations. She said,

I know I said I was trying to clean up my language, because I actually do have a little whiteboard that says bleep and I'll hold it up. And I'll say, so-and-so annotated the bleep- and I actually hold up where it says bleep- out of this and the kids will be like, let me see that. And I'll put it up on my doc camera and they'll be like, Whoa, that annotation is clean!

Individualizing the praise for achieving academic success was an important part of the process for Ms. Taylor. She described holding up work to have students look at it so there is an element of community praise. She also discussed making sure the praise was specific and tied to the work the student did. She said, "I never say stuff like good job, you know, like I never say things like, oh, you completed this like, completion is not adequate. That is not cause for praise." In some instances, however, she noted that recognizing her students are at different levels is important to how she reinforces achievement. She said for a few of her students, completing a handout might be "cause for celebration." She said,

Especially if a student maybe had been struggling and had experienced a lot of growth or some breakthroughs, or maybe just some stick-to-itiveness, I'll often I'll be silly, but I'll still be specific like, Oh, you know, like, so-and-so, you are my, you know, history detective MVP today. Like, thank you so much for, you know, and I might praise the, uh, persistence and recognize that, that they really stretched themselves. Like, oh, my word, like this text gave you grief and you

kept going back and you asked your, your neighbors and you use your resources and you crushed it.

While she was comfortable praising some struggling students for their effort, overall, she tried to have positive praise and reinforcement focused on academic skills that students were collectively or individually working on. Whether she was praising completion of work or success academically, she continuously used humor and always specifically called out the behavior they excelled at. If one of her shy students was successful, she had a conversation one-on-one with them so that they didn't feel uncomfortable. In general, she said that she tends to have louder instances of praise "to encourage the behavior among the other students." Interestingly she said, "I know we aren't supposed to do that," indicating that she was previously told not to encourage students in front of each other. She said that saying something like "I like the way so-and-so is sitting down with their book open" may be perceived as "shaming." She hoped by using this type of public praise to draw attention to students who were doing the right thing in order to inspire other students. Students could see what the desired skill was and then clearly know what everyone ought to be striving for.

Ms. Horton focused on repetition and constant reiteration of expectations. She created videos for her students so that they could feel connected to her and prepared to succeed once they returned from VIM. She never wanted them to feel scared or unsafe returning to school so she did everything in her power to prepare them for what may or may not happen. Ms. Horton very matter-of-factly told her students in these videos that if they had her before, or if they were coached by her, they should know that "we are going to talk about expectations every single day." Even though there was much uncertainty

with the COVID-19 pandemic, Ms. Horton described being flexible with due dates while maintaining a commitment to high levels of academic achievement. This was an important piece of her goal of holding students accountable. She said,

I expect them to work and I expect them to do things and I expect them to, um, you know, achieve for me. Um, but there's also how they do that. Might look a little bit different, um, especially like now. Um, and so it's, it's giving grace and like, I say that there's due dates, but nothing, nothing matters if you, whenever you turn it in is going to be just fine. I don't even mind if you turn it in on the last day.

She described a student who she had seen on her roster for the entirety of VIM but who had never turned in a single assignment. Upon her return to in-person classes, the student gave tremendous effort and worked every day. For Ms. Horton, the personal interaction of being back in the school building was what the student needed to be successful, so she did not hold her lack of virtual participation against her.

Ms. Horton saw holding high expectations as being “authentic” and maintaining “transparency” with students so that they could be clear about what they should do to be successful. She recalled a conversation she had with a student who she connected with in the hallway after the return to in-person instruction:

He's like, 'I did it, I'm out of here!' So I guess he finally finished some classes or finished what he needed to, to graduate. And he was reflecting, 'Man. I don't have to like, worry about all the work you made me do.' And I was like, I thought about that. I'm like, you know what, that's good, that means that I held him to an expectation. I held them to a high standard. I was going to make him work. This

wasn't going to be a, what did they call that in uh *Sister Act*? Like the bird class it's just fly right through it. I don't know. I really appreciated hearing that from a kid that a lot of people probably would've never believed would have gotten through this.

For Ms. Horton, seeing that her dedication to high expectations paid off, especially with a student who she felt was traditionally dismissed by other people, reaffirmed that her strategies were effective.

To maintain high expectations, Ms. Horton intentionally praised student effort. She said that she tried to focus on praising effort and not necessarily correctness. This included praising students who showed improvement like when they are “doing the right things or if they were not doing the right things or did not get something right last time, but they made a step in the right direction.” Ms. Horton kept praise and reinforcement of high expectations individualized because “praise is different for each kid because whatever each kid is doing or what their level is, is going to be different.” She continuously made it a point to find something that she could praise each student for in order to show them that she values and celebrates growth.

All the teachers expressed that there is a necessity to maintain high expectations for all students in order to provide equitable learning experiences. They also all agreed that they must maintain consistency with their expectations for them to be effective. Ms. Carter’s view of high expectations had a community element that was not as distinctly observed in the other teachers’ descriptions. This was likely because she teaches such a large number of students at one time: her gym hosts around 75 or more students during any given class period. So, having even just two students off task or doing something

unsafe could lead to major disruptions. In addition, all the teachers indicated a need to provide positive reinforcements to students, however their descriptions of what this looked like differed. For Mr. Bowman, Ms. Taylor, and Ms. Horton, positive reinforcements typically came in the form of positive praise or words of affirmation. These could even include phone calls home to parents. For Ms. Carter, likely because she is the only participant teaching middle school, positive reinforcements were much more tangible, including things like candy or prizes.

### **Demonstrating Care**

All the teachers were asked what it would look like in their classroom if they were intentionally demonstrating care to their students. For Ms. Carter, showing care began with something she noticed about a student. She said that she might say to a student, “you don’t seem to be happy today, is there anything you want to talk about?.” From there, she said she would treat each situation differently by going “off of the energy that they give.” She described paying attention to the student’s body language and, when needed, would sit with them for five minutes or so not saying anything. Then when students started divulging their issues to her, she reminded them that everyone has bad days and told them “I have bad days too.” She said that she tries to offer them a solution or determine what kind of support they have outside of school. If she got the sense that they do not have a support network beyond her classroom she would ask them if they would like support from the mental health counselor. She said that she always asks students first if they would be comfortable with her referring them to a counselor. If there was a more concrete issue like their water or electricity has been turned off at home, she took steps to help them get in touch with the community liaison who supports issues like that. She



reiterated that her support is individualized and that it is important for her to treat each student like an individual case so that they feel personally listened to. She said,

Whatever they tell me, I try to help. And then not only that I'll go back and I'll follow up and then I'll say, you know, how did that work out? Did you, were you able to get some shoes? Were you able? And follow up with them. That's important too.

For Ms. Carter, following up was a key part of showing students care. She made it a point to revisit the issue with the student in a few days and check that it was resolved. If it was not, then she helped them find another solution that worked better.

Mr. Bowman said that he relies on simple approaches like asking students “is everything ok?” or letting them know “I’m always here” if he gets the sense that something is going on. He said that he tells students,

If you want to let me know of anything that's like going on like a fab, uh, or if you want to like, talk to me about how I can help you out a little bit more, like, here's my planning period. This is my lunch period. Um, or like, you know, I'll be here until 3:30 today or that kind of thing. Um, I think for the most part, it's making myself available to a student.

For Mr. Bowman, it was important to find opportunities where he could meet with the student individually to show that he cares. He noted that there is also a distinctly personal element to where he will plan to meet with them. He said,

I'll usually try to find a place where the student will not feel vulnerable. Um, like I'm not going to just like pop down by their desk in front of another group of students during independent reading time. And, um, say like, Hey, how's

everything going on going at home. Um, but I'll, I'll try to set up an opportunity for me to have some one-on-one time with students.

Making himself available and meeting in a space where the student feels more comfortable were important to Mr. Bowman's process of demonstrating care.

Ms. Taylor said that the way she chooses to demonstrate care depends on each individual student. She described comparing her students to their "baseline," making a note of when students act outside of their normal behavior. If they seemed to be acting unlike their usual selves, Ms. Taylor used the information she gathered throughout the year about each student to have a conversation with them about something that they care about. If the student's behavior was causing them to be off task then she would tie their behavior to their goals. She posited that she might say something like:

I know you told me that you wanted to join the Coast Guard and I worry that, you know, or I, you know, I know you, you said to me, um, that it was really important to your, your auntie, that you are on the honor roll. So I might kind of center it into, into some sort of detail that the student had shared with me that I had worked hard to remember.

Ms. Taylor actively used the key details she knew about each student to make them feel cared about. It was important to her that students knew she addressed them on an individual level and that she is invested in their success and happiness.

Ms. Horton found it important to demonstrate care in a private way. She did not want to draw attention to students when they were feeling upset because she recognized that likely what is bothering them is something that they do not want all the other students to know about. She described "pulling up beside them, getting down on their

level” or times when she will “sit down at a chair next to a kid.” Proximity was an important key element for Ms. Horton’s demonstrations of care. She was frustrated with the onset of COVID because she was not able to incorporate this element anymore. Once she established a private space, she asked the student general questions like “Hey, what's going on?” showing that she notices that something is off. She said that she would reference how they normally act, saying things like, “You seem angry or you seem sad or you seem like you're usually doing your work today and you're not doing it today. What's going on?.” These short questions were designed so that she does not draw attention to the issue because she recognizes that some “kids are hypersensitive to that kind of thing.” In this way, Ms. Horton used the information she already knew about each student to determine how she should approach them when attempting to support them through a difficult feeling or situation.

All the teachers indicated that their demonstrations of care require them to understand a student’s “baseline” as Ms. Taylor calls it. It was important to all the participants to have a general understanding of how students normally act so they could sense when something is off. They all described noticing how students are feeling and making it a point to check in with them consistently. All the teachers also indicated an individualized element when talking about demonstrating care. It was important for all of them to connect with students in a physically safe space where other students would not be able to overhear the conversation, and where the student could be safe to express themselves. Ms. Carter specifically mentioned following up with the student to make sure their problem was resolved. The other teachers indicated, although did not state specifically, that they made it a consistent routine to check in with students.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative study described how four teachers understood their own cultural identities and how they used these understandings to build positive relationships with students whose cultural experiences differed from their own. Additionally, the findings identified how conveying high expectations and care were reported to impact the process of relationship-building. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do four teachers with certificates in diversity literacy think about their own personal racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities during the process of relationship-building?
2. In what ways do teachers describe how they navigate cultural differences to convey sentiments of high expectations and care to their students in order to build positive relationships?

Using the IPA approach to conduct a follow-up analysis of each participants' process of meaning-making related to relationship-building allowed me to "examine convergence and divergence" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3) in the sample. For example, by asking all the teachers about their beliefs on the concept of respect in the classroom, I was able to describe commonalities and differences across their views. I could then use their discussions of their learnings in the Diversity Literacy Program or other professional development to get a better sense of how they thought about these beliefs. IPA calls for analyzing an experience in many ways and through various lenses, including frameworks

like Critical Race Theory. This study looked at teacher perceptions of the relationship-building process with students while considering cultural identities.

Moreover, by looking through the lens of Critical Race Theory, this study described how teacher participants employed an element of critical reflection on the role their cultural identities played in their processes of relationship-building. Asking the teacher participants to think about their own cultural identities, particularly in the areas of high expectations and caring, prompted a deeper reflection of how the teachers described the ways they navigated their own experiences to make cross-cultural relationships function well with students whose cultural identities differed from theirs.

Using CRT as a framework informed how I thought about the critical nature of the teachers' self-reflections. There were several tenets of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) that were most pertinent to data analysis. Tenet one, the idea that race and racism are permanent, and that discrimination is a "normal" part of society (p. 7) was central to the teachers' descriptions of their own culturally-situated norms for building positive relationships with students. In several instances their descriptions of how they connected with the diverse personalities in their classrooms considered the effects of institutionalized and systemic racism or various "otherisms" (sexism, classism, etc.).

Tenet two of CRT, a challenge to dominant ideologies, was seen in scenarios where the participants expressed pushback towards lesson plans or school rules that they felt were not inclusive to all students. This second tenet ties into the third, interest convergence, which was observed when the teachers wrestled with themselves and their own choices. In some scenarios, the participants questioned whether their processes were promoting their own self-interests. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism (tenet five)

were lenses through which I reviewed the teachers' descriptions about students' multiple identities.

CRT's eighth tenet, a commitment to social justice, was the through line most obvious in the teachers' analysis of their relationship-building processes. Consideration of these tenets of CRT supported my thinking about when the participants were reflecting on their own cultural identities, learnings from the DLP, or another new knowledge to describe a situation. In many instances, the teachers described reflection on a tenet of CRT without calling it out by name. These hints at CRT across their reflections allowed me to review the data through that critical lens.

This section will describe how teachers thought about their own cultural identities during the relationship-building process in addition to the beliefs and strategies they described related to navigating student cultural identities to build positive relationships. I will include a discussion of any knowledge obtained from the Diversity Literacy Program or other professional development resources that influenced the participants' beliefs and practices. Finally, I will describe implications for future learning through teacher preparation programs and professional development.

### **Teacher Self-Perceptions**

The first research question asked how four teachers with certificates in diversity literacy think about their own personal racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities during the process of relationship-building? Although the interview protocol included specific questions about each of these identities, the teachers tended to lump aspects of their identities into what they referred to as "cultural identities." The teacher participants mostly took an intersectional approach, however, to varying degrees, they parsed out

aspects of their own and student identities that were most salient as they related to specific situations. I was not able to directly hear conversations between teachers and students, so I relied exclusively on participants' descriptions of their experiences.

### **Evolving and Intertwined**

The teachers' descriptions of their own cultural identities were closely aligned to the concept of a cultural identity as explained by Banks (2001) and Ndura (2004). Specifically, each participant tended to view their cultural identity as an "evolving phenomenon" (Ndura, 2004, p. 14), constantly being re-realized through interactions with their students and with the deeper theoretical and content knowledge gleaned from their various professional development opportunities and university courses. Throughout the interviews and self-reflections, all four teachers indicated some level of personal and professional growth around developing a more complex understanding of their students' cultural backgrounds and experiences by investigating their own. Their descriptions of ever-evolving perspectives about themselves and their students reflected Cabrera's (2018) argument that the "social world is not static, but is constructed by people with words, stories, and also silences" (p. 16).

Participants described their willingness to question their biases or beliefs when doing so translated into better relationships with their students. Ms. Taylor's reconsideration of her language patterns was a clear example of this. She was unaware that she was appropriating AAVE because she had experiences in her past that reinforced to her that it was acceptable to speak in this way. However, after her experience in the linguistics course, she began to question her experience and was open-minded to students who confirmed that her communication style felt disrespectful. She worked to reevaluate

her own cultural identity as it related to language in order to more effectively build positive relationships with her students.

This idea of reconsideration or renegotiation of identity aligned with Heidegger's vision of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as marked by "worldliness" and "intersubjectivity" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 17). The participants thought about their identities in these two ways because they were constantly describing their experiences in relation to the world at large and within the context of their relationships with their students. Vygotsky's (1978) vision of sociocultural theory also demonstrated that learning begins as an external, social process which becomes more internalized and individualized as learners grow. Sociocultural theory posited that learning is culturally situated. This concept helped support an understanding of how the participants developed their own cultural identities and compared them to those of their students.

A clear example of the intertwined and evolving nature of one's cultural identity was seen through Ms. Horton's realization that she had large gaps in her knowledge of the issues facing her LGBTQ+ students. Prior to taking classes in women and gender studies, stereotypes and systems of oppression related to gender and sexuality were things she never considered. The realization that she never had to think about this facet of her identity and her pivot to learn more about it in order to support her students showed that her understanding of her own identity evolved to respond to the needs of her students. Her sexual identity or gender expression were not things she considered to be salient features of her cultural identity, until she began seeing how unavoidable those features were for students who live outside the mythical norm (Lorde, 1984) of heteronormativity. In addition to the content knowledge which deepened her awareness of sexual identity



and gender expression, she began becoming more cognizant of issues in her school that had to do with supporting her trans and nonbinary students.

Ms. Horton's desire to learn more in order to support her students reflected Kleinfeld's (1975) findings about effective White teachers of Students of Color. Kleinfeld argued that one of the main reasons White teachers are considered ineffective is because they perpetuate hegemonic viewpoints and even "personify antagonistic values" (p. 304) of oppressive White culture. Ms. Horton, on the other hand, took a gap in her knowledge and identified it as an area for growth. She recognized that even though discrimination plaguing the LGBTQ+ community did not directly impact her; it was important for her to read up on the topic to better understand the experiences of her students.

This reflected Merleau-Ponty's (Smith et al., 2009) concept of "embodied perspective" within IPA. Embodied perspective looks at an experience through the lens of difference, recognizing that the perception of "other" reflects the way one sees themselves. In this case, Ms. Horton determined that her students' sexual and gender identities were not representative of her experience. The judgement associated with living outside of the heteronormative "norm" was something she personally "never had to think about before." Merleau-Ponty argues that one's experience belongs to their "embodied position" (p. 19) in the world, the way their physical body is perceived and analyzed by society. Through this perspective, although one will never fully understand another's experience, one can compare it to their own body-in-the-world experience. Ms. Horton's comparison led her to understand that although she does not personally experience

discrimination related to her sexuality or relationship status, it was important for her understand her students by learning more about and supporting their experiences.

All participants demonstrated a cognizance that there were overlapping aspects of their cultural identities, articulating a belief in the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality, in their descriptions, consisted of any of the identities they possessed, including race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, marital status, and sexual identity. Their discussions of their identities related to their students were framed as intersectional; they mentioned distinct differences between themselves and their students related to various aspects of their identities. For instance, Ms. Carter, the only Black teacher in this study, indicated that it is important for her to understand her own and her students' ethnic identities. As noted previously, Ms. Carter sought to learn about her own ancestry and invested in a DNA kit to learn where her family was from. This desire to learn about herself and her students beyond their racial identities was clearly important to Ms. Carter. She consistently ensured students were free to discuss their heritage and incorporated lessons reflecting students' identities into her unit on the Lunar New Year where students were able to share and teach other students about their ethnic heritages.

Ms. Taylor's focus on intersectionality extended to the activities she completed with her students on the first few days of school. She routinely took time to ask students questions about their backgrounds and invited discussions of what she referred to as "dimensions of diversity." Because she taught at a school with a high population of refugee and immigrant students, she also made distinctions between her students related to their countries of origin or ethnic identities. For example, she intentionally asked students about regional language dialects and worked to learn more about individual

student customs and cultures. Specifically, she discussed working to understand cultural conflicts between her students from different African countries, to know where there might be future issues between students. She described prompting other teachers to deepen their understanding of intersectionality. This was specifically related to helping other teachers see that students from the same country could be as different from each other as they are from students from a totally different country.

All the teachers saw their broader cultural identities as intertwined aspects situated within their racial identities. They described strategies related to ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic identities. These references tended to be situated within their racial identities. The teachers framed discussion of cultural identities in an intersectional way, hinting at tenet five of Critical Race Theory (intersectionality and anti-essentialism). They also all discussed the pervasiveness of race and racism in their classrooms (CRT tenet one), while also recognizing that race is only one component of people's lives (CRT tenet five). One example of this would be the way that Ms. Taylor thought about her linguistic identity as being situated in her experience as a White woman. Ms. Horton also started the description of her cultural identity off by saying that she saw herself as a "White woman from Northern Indiana," with all her other identities (socioeconomic, etc.) stemming from that description.

The teacher participants focused on how they felt their racial identities impacted their experience as teachers, particularly during the process of relationship-building. This was likely because racial identity is often the most visible difference between the teachers and their students, the feature of their identity that is obvious from the moment they meet students. Ms. Carter used her "centrality of experiential knowledge" (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2001) as an African American woman, harkening back to the seventh tenet of CRT, to connect with her Students of Color. She described listening to the voices of her Students of Color who identified as Muslim in order to maintain flexibility in her physical education classes. Her experience with feeling discriminated against for not wanting to participate in water sports due to her hair connected her with Muslim students who could not participate fully in some aspects of her class due to their traditional dress. She used her body-in-the-world experiences (Smith et al., 2009) to connect with her students by not questioning their choices and beliefs.

### **Different, But Good**

A common theme throughout the data was that all four teacher participants recognized differences within their identities that did not align with their students. This was most clearly observed in the White teachers' discussions of racial differences. They all expressed a similar understanding that many of their childhood and formative experiences were informed by normative White structures, what Inoue (2015), building off a term from Bourdieu (1977), refers to as a "White racial habitus" (p. 16). This term refers to a "historically organizing set of structures that structure social interactions and society" (p. 42). For the White teachers, the ways that they were taught about discipline, high expectations and caring were all situated in a White normative dynamic of which they were keenly aware. This also reflected Merleau-Ponty's (Smith et al., 2009) concept of "embodied perspective" within IPA.

Inoue (2015) argues that a White racial habitus can be seen in three spaces: discursively or linguistically, materially and bodily, and performatively. In this study I found evidence in the teachers' descriptions of themselves, particularly in their

descriptions of interactions with students that revealed parts of themselves, that they were especially aware of the normative White structures of society that they were either raised in or currently operated in. Many of these descriptions fit into Inuoe's three spaces. For instance, Ms. Taylor felt that she was informed by her background to think that her middle class, White, norms of conversation were correct, and that anything else was perceived as interrupting or disrespectful. This was evidenced through her anecdote about teaching middle school, where she felt overwhelmed by the linguistic styles of her African American students, to the point where she tried to quiet them down in favor of making sure the White students in her class felt comfortable.

This anecdote reflected what Okun & Jones (2001) describe as a trait of White supremacy culture, this idea of White students' "right to comfort" (Okun & Jones, 2001, as cited in Germán, 2020, p. 11). Ms. Taylor's most salient conflict with her White racial habitus was related to language. She knew it was not right that she was setting up structures where the comfort of White students was held in higher regard than the conversational norms and styles of her Students of Color. She recognized that this choice was causing problems in the way that she viewed students and connected with them. She spoke of this time before she began learning more about topics like language diversity and linguistic justice (Baker-Bell, 2017) as "cringy." She argued that her feelings about linguistic hierarchies were an embarrassing part of her past now that she has committed to learning more and doing better by changing her behaviors.

Ms. Taylor's growing cognizance of linguistic hierarchies reiterated the concept that there is no one "true" English, and further, no one "right" way to communicate with and connect to others. Culture and society have shaped a version of the "truth" about

Standard English and communication styles through adherence to “mythical norms” of language (Lorde, 1984). Mythical norms in the classroom include beliefs about how normative conversations should look, including instances like the “sage on the stage” construct of teaching, where the instructor is the font of knowledge who pours information into the minds of students. Inoue referred to this as a

White racial habitus, or a dominant white discourse, which we might for now understand as a set of linguistic codes and textual markers that are often not a part of the discourses of many Students of Color, working class students, and multilingual students, but is a part of many white, middle-class students’ discourses (p. 17).

In classroom situations where teachers do not understand how dominant White discourse has been normatized, students who veer from this type of speech could be seen as lacking or inferior. Kleinfeld (1975) identified silence as defiance in Eskimo cultures, whereas many teachers who do not understand important nuances between language varieties or cultural forms of language expression may incorrectly understand silence to represent student focus and attention. Ms. Taylor expressed an understanding that no one language or communication style should be prized over another because there is no such thing as a “master” or “true” English (Lyotard et al., 1984). This was something she admitted to learning over time, as it was not something she grew up understanding within her normative White experience.

Ms. Horton also spoke to how her “life experiences” differed from those of her students, particularly her past and current socioeconomic statuses. This was reflective of Inoue’s (2015) performative category of White racial habitus, demonstrated through ways

people are perceived as acting in society (in this case, related to money). It also spoke to embodied perspective in that it looked at social status through the lens of difference (Smith et al., 2009). Ms. Horton mentioned her upbringing affording her various things like a college education and access to resources like athletics. She saw these differences as being distinct from the experiences of most of her students. Ms. Horton also specifically mentioned developing a deeper understanding of her identities after her experiences in the Diversity Literacy Program. As previously mentioned, she began understanding more about the LGBTQ+ community and recognized that she needed to spend more time thinking about how something like sexual identity impacted students' classroom experiences.

Ms. Carter recognized and celebrated differences by asking students to share in restorative circles. For her, learning about students' identities was an important part of her content. She mentioned specifically needing to know about students' religion related to how they may choose to dress (or not dress) for PE. She described students wearing hijabs or shoes and attire that were not well-suited for athletics. Ms. Carter demonstrated critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) by identifying systems of oppression in her classroom (required dress) and seeking to change them. An element of criticality was also observed in her practices like proactive planning (asking students to share about their cultures and making lessons around that information) and frequent self-critique.

Mr. Bowman's incident with the student who spread a rumor about him indicated his understanding that differences do not inherently cause problems. He told the student, "I can fully attest to the fact that my personal life has no influence on how well I'm going to teach you." This displayed his belief that a perceived negative aspect of his personal

life was not going to have a negative impact on his ability to connect with his students. In this scenario, Mr. Bowman did not jump to a conclusion that the student was homophobic or that their relationship could not be positive because of this identity clash. He worked professionally to get to the bottom of the situation and was proud that it ended on such a positive note. HE hoped that the student learned an important lesson about relationship boundaries and respecting differences.

Although all the teachers recognized that they had cultural identities that were different from those of their students, they did not think about these differences as deficits. They also felt that in the same way that their own identities did not have to have a negative impact on how they will teach, that student identities did not have to have a negative impact on their ability to learn. Even when the teachers felt that their identities were at odds with those of their students, they still did not assume there could not be a relationship or that they would never see eye-to-eye with a student.

This belief in the value of students' cultural identities was reflective of Yosso's (2005) discussion of community cultural wealth. Yosso "conceptualizes community cultural wealth as a critical race theory (CRT) challenge to traditional interpretations of cultural capital" (p. 69). She argues that throughout history, People of Color have been viewed through a deficit lens, which looks at their traits and knowledge as "less than" or "incomplete." She connects this larger deficit perspective to the way Students of Color are viewed in many classrooms as lacking. Throughout the interviews and self-reflections, participants viewed their students' cultural differences as assets and not deficits. They used their unique knowledge bases to plan lessons, like in the case of Ms. Carter, who invited her student to present on the Lunar New Year. Ms. Taylor



consistently valued student experiences and linguistic varieties by making them part of her “getting to know you” lessons and by celebrating her students’ cultural capital.

Participants discussed how the ways they think about cultural differences impact their classrooms. They consistently discussed the concept of intersectionality, the idea that experiences are not monolithic even when there are cultural similarities between teachers and students. Similarly, the teachers all identified that their concepts of high expectations and care were framed by their cultural identities and experiences. They did not feel that the differences did not create a barrier in their ability to connect with students. These differences will be explored more specifically in the second half of this chapter.

### **Teacher Perceptions of Students and Navigation of Relationship-Building**

The second question investigated through this research study was “In what ways do teachers describe how they navigate cultural differences to convey sentiments of high expectations and care to their students in order to build positive relationships?” In many instances, the literature uses the two concepts (high expectations and care) interchangeably, demonstrating that the qualities are often inextricably linked. Unless noted specifically, I will describe the concepts separately as they relate to the findings.

### **Knowing Me, Knowing You**

All participants spoke of grounding themselves in a deep understanding of their own cultural identities as the first step in the process of positive relationship-building. This is a critical piece of IPA which said that a “phenomenological attitude involves and requires a reflexive move, as we turn our gaze...towards our perception” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). The teachers constantly kept coming back to their personal frames of

references, noting times when their experiences did not align with those of their students and discussing ways that they navigated those differences to build or maintain a positive relationship. Using these differences as a starting point, all the participants then crafted experiences to connect with and understand their students more fully.

There were a variety of intentional strategies that each of the teachers described enacting as during their process of relationship-building related to getting to know students and sharing parts of themselves. For each of the teachers, having some form of an ice breaker or “getting-to-know-you” activity was important to begin developing relationships with students. These ranged from simple questions designed to get students talking and engaged with one another to more active games that allowed students to move around. These activities were described by the teachers as purposeful avenues to learn student names and understand something unique about each student. In this way, they aimed to build trust and connection between themselves and their students. This echoed Noddings’ (1988) findings which indicated that “children will work harder for people they love and trust” (p. 10). Things (or strategies) like playing a game with students or asking them simple questions about themselves built love and trust.

The teachers’ intentional attempts to understand students on deeper levels showed that caring in the classroom also included engagement in students’ personal lives and experiences. Students in Howard’s (2001) study indicated that they could tell if a teacher cared about them when they ask questions about what is going on at home, trying to get a sense of the unique experiences of every student. Hollins and Spencer (1990) similarly found that African American elementary and secondary students indicated that when teachers were responsive to their personal lives, they felt more connected to the

classroom and expressed more positive sentiments and increased effort in their academics.

The participants enacted what Pollock (2017) described as “deep” culture talk. Looking at students in a “shallow” manner would consist of viewing cultural groups as similar or bound by certain characteristics. They described viewing each of their students as distinct individuals even when they were part of the same ethnic, religion, racial, or other group as a different student. Ms. Taylor spoke to this concept directly when she discussed other teachers’ perceptions of her refugee students. She argued that just because two students are from the same home country, it does not mean they have the same characteristics, understandings, and experiences. She recognized that these students could have been on very different sides of the conflict in their home countries and putting them together for assignments or tasks could pose larger problems. She “challenged nouns” (p. 176) as Pollock (2017) referred to it. For instance, when someone classified her students into groups like “Africans” or “Asians,” she encouraged the person to think about understanding the student as an individual instead of lumping them into a larger cultural identity that may not fit them.

Mr. Bowman similarly challenged “shallow” (Pollock, 2017) cultural reflections by bringing diverse concepts and readings into his English classroom. When allowed the opportunity he chooses contemporary novels and stories that portray a wide variety of experiences. Mr. Bowman demonstrated critical consciousness by saying that to combat stereotypes about a certain culture or group he will intentionally choose texts for his course that challenges the perceptions. When his curriculum was not as flexible, he described encouraging students to find personal connections in more outdated readings.

This included tying an older text like *The Crucible* to the Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ+ movements. This demonstrated the use of counterstory (CRT tenet seven) as a tool to allow students to analyze texts through the centrality of their own experiences (Martinez, 2020).

One of the major ways the participants described navigating diverse identities to build relationships was through their negotiation of the concept of “respect.” All the teachers used this idea of respect as a starting point to build foundational relationships with their students. Mr. Bowman described his process for fostering respect as “intentional” and one that he believed must involve all students. hooks (1994) described this strategy as using “cultural codes,” which are teaching strategies that promote multicultural learning through reflection on students as individuals. This allowed the teacher to learn what students consider to be important or truths. Mr. Bowman focused a lot on the classroom community, believing that most of his students must be engaged and feel respected for that respect to be reflected in the class overall. The participants’ viewed respect as being culturally situated and different depending on the student. Their descriptions of respect included an element of learning students’ cultural codes and sharing their own in order to create a space where student perspectives and identities were shared and validated.

Ms. Horton had a similar view of respect, arguing that it required putting work into the relationship. She compared respect to a bank account that must have routine deposits. As a coach, Ms. Horton saw building a classroom environment built on mutual respect as a community obligation, a space where students needed to be invited to engage and be “called in.” By creating a collective team environment in her classroom, Ms.

Horton helped students see that they are part of a larger circle of respect and trust. Ladson-Billings (1994) described the impact of “social power” (p. 160) in the classroom, arguing that when students feel valued and respected, they are more likely to be successful. Gay spoke of the concept of a “mutual aid society” (p. 110) which is a community of learners engaging in cooperative efforts. Ms. Taylor and Ms. Carter also indicated that creating an environment built on respect is a cooperative effort as well. Both discussed needing to give respect to students first in order to receive it, and that concept of respect must be revisited and reinforced throughout the school year. The negotiation of respect in the teachers’ classrooms was a community effort to include all students in the classroom environment.

Another intentional strategy the teachers enacted was to make their classrooms welcoming environments for students. Ms. Taylor decorated her classroom in an inviting way by bringing plants, lighting from home, beautiful art, and essential oils into her classroom. She imitated the environment that makes her feel most comfortable and excited about learning, hoping that her passion and comfortable space made her students feel at peace. She described crafting her classroom as a “yes space,” which meant that it was an environment that was proactive and positive. She explained that this meant having her classroom be inviting to students so that they knew where items are, what the rules were, and where they were able to move around freely. She said that because students were clear on the expectations, she didn’t have to spend time disciplining them for small issues like leaving their seat or not following masking protocols; they typically just followed the rules since they were so clear. This contributed to her classroom being a more positive and inviting space.

Mr. Bowman described his classroom as a “shrine to diversity” with pride flags and other decorations that he hoped would help students know that it is a welcoming environment for them. In one instance, Mr. Bowman’s choice of decor, posters representing diverse cultures, became a source of contention between himself and another student as described more fully in Chapter 4. Mr. Bowman’s choice to move the posters to a different spot in his room the next year demonstrated a desire to see the difference in opinion in this situation not as a deficit, but as a space where he and the student could come together and build a mutual understanding, with the goal of maintaining a positive relationship. He also considered the larger demographic landscape of his classroom and would not consider removing the posters entirely as they represented many of his students.

### **Teacher Vulnerability**

Expressing vulnerability emerged as a common theme throughout the teachers’ interviews and self-reflections. Vulnerability as described by participants was multifaceted and a necessary part of building positive relationships with students. Bullough (2005) argued that “vulnerability is part of teaching, teachers manage it differently, and these differences have profound importance for teachers and their development, students and their learning, and teacher educators and their practice” (p. 23). He described vulnerability as having several functions for educators. First, vulnerability can be viewed as a way of offsetting worry, allowing a teacher the possibility of being hurt, perhaps to cushion the inevitable blow of difficult school scenarios: a disgruntled conversation with a parent or an unpleasant interaction with an administrator. Ms. Taylor described the idea as a “defense mechanism,” something that

teachers enacted when they did not feel comfortable examining difficult situations or trying new strategies to connect with students. By maintaining a certain level of vulnerability, educators can prepare themselves for the constant pressures that come with the job. In many ways, the resilience that new teachers must overcome these pressures may have an impact on which teachers continue within the career. Being vulnerable, in this sense, might help teachers put the stressors of the job into perspective, and assist them in not getting too overwhelmed.

Bullough also argued that other teachers see vulnerability as a way to take risks in the classroom, and to give themselves a certain level of freedom to feel comfortable thwarting failure. If a teacher allowed themselves to be vulnerable during a lesson, they may be able to deal with issues that arise, for example, if students do not learn the material or they act out due to ineffective management strategies or lack of engagement, etc. For Bullough, vulnerability was experienced by teachers in a slightly negative way, as an unfortunate repercussion of a job that demanded a lot from various stakeholders. One of the major themes of his research on vulnerability indicated that many teachers may view vulnerability as a technique for self-preservation (p. 33).

In other literature, particularly related to Critical Race Theory (CRT) and anti-racist teaching, vulnerability can be seen in a more positive light, as a challenge to dominant ideologies and a way to maintain openness and avoid being defensive. As it pertains to CRT, vulnerability can be seen as a way to challenge a variety of school structures, including but not limited to rigid standards and content requirements and discipline policies. Vulnerability here was described as allowing oneself to be open to critique when assigning a “nontraditional” text outside of the Western Canon or teaching

a lesson on melanin and the biological factors that contribute to one's skin color instead of doing rote Punnett squares. One is opening themselves up to the possibility that their administration, or students, may not be supportive or engaged in the types of choices being made in the classroom. But part of the vulnerability was recognizing that when it comes to educational and institutional injustice, while procedures and regulations "claim neutrality" (Martinez, 2020, p. 11), this often meant "justifying a passing over of People of Color" (p. 11).

Okun & Jones (2001) described as a trait of White supremacy culture the idea of defensiveness which is counter to the concept of vulnerability (as cited in Germán, 2020, p. 11). Defensiveness in the classroom was described as policies and procedures geared towards intensive prevention policies like "three strikes and you're out," inflexible rules, aversion to suggestions, and denial of personal bias or mistakes. Vulnerability, on the other hand, appeared as teachers recognizing that power structures exist in their schools and communities, and working to make space for students to consider ideas outside of what is normative (Germán, 2020). It also looked like actively naming defensiveness as an issue in the classroom and encouraging students to be vulnerable and open to different perspectives as well. This was quite difficult for teachers to do because defensiveness is so ingrained in various teaching practices, including stringent rules and school-wide norms. In many ways, teachers may be afraid to be vulnerable for fear that they will relinquish power and be seen by their administration as ineffective.

In line with the tenets of CRT and anti-racist teaching, participants identified vulnerability not as a negative aspect of their teaching experience, but as one of the most powerful tools they leveraged while building relationships. They leaned more into the



possibilities that vulnerability could provide in the classroom. Specifically, they identified vulnerability as giving them a way to feel humanized and like they were opening themselves up to connection with students, instead of preserving themselves from the possibility of negative confrontation. For Mr. Bowman, someone showing care looked like individualized attention, which allowed for a more vulnerable interaction. By having a moment alone, he argued that you can really feel comfortable expressing what is on your mind and connecting with that person more fully.

The teacher participants were comfortable negotiating their power to build equitable and positive relationships with students. This is important because Bullough's (2005) research indicated that "the quest for self-protection in the face of vulnerability" can lead teachers to place the blame on students or factors outside of themselves when things do not go as planned. This quest for self-protection was directly aligned with Okun & Jones' (2001) concept of defensiveness, and can be seen as a way teachers, oftentimes White teachers, work to preserve their claims of neutrality and fairness. By leaning into the positive aspects of vulnerability, instead of using it to build a wall between themselves and students, participants demonstrated how openness to critique and change can be beneficial in the relationship-building process. This was also reflective of the concept of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), which requires frequent self-critique and an effort to dismantle systems of oppression.

Ms. Taylor described vulnerability as "modeling risk taking." She argued that this goes both ways: she was very open to being wrong and making mistakes and she expected that from her students as well. Palmer (2007) argued that "as we try to connect ourselves and our subjects with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects,

vulnerable to indifference, judgment, ridicule” (p. 17). For Ms. Taylor, risk-taking was a normal part of the classroom experience. She set up a classroom environment where there were constant reminders that everyone messes up, and that this does not mean you are less than, unintelligent, or always going to make mistakes. She extended this vulnerability beyond her classroom by inviting critique from her administrators.

This tied into Okun & Jones’ (2001) concept of perfectionism, which they argue is another trait of White supremacy culture. Too often, they explain, it is more common in classrooms to point out someone’s mistakes in a mocking way or to perceive mistakes as something deeper than just a simple slip up. Ms. Taylor directly combatted this perfectionist attitude by developing a culture of appreciation for where students were, including the mistakes they were making in their quest for knowledge and understanding. She reiterated Okun & Jones’ (2001) beliefs that it is important to “help students know that mistakes are expected and are opportunities for growth” (p. 13).

Ms. Horton said that she models vulnerability by owning up to mistakes. She contrasted this with “talking bad” about someone, indicating her belief that mistakes are normal and “seen as separate from the person not as defining traits” (Okun & Jones, 2001, as cited in Germán, 2020, p. 13). She discussed boundaries when speaking about vulnerability, tying together her beliefs that vulnerability is something that must be modeled with students, but that it does have some clear boundaries. For instance, she reiterated that she would not let vulnerability extend to extremely personal topics, mostly about herself. She was open to students sharing whatever they felt comfortable speaking about with her, but when it came to intimate details about her personal life, this moved from vulnerability to possible inappropriateness with students.

This concept of “inappropriateness” reiterated what Ms. Carter described as relationship boundaries that thwart “unethical” or “nasty stuff.” Ms. Horton said that she “screens” herself, and topics that make her feel uncomfortable (mostly related to personal relationships as she goes on to explain) she intentionally moves beyond. She also tied vulnerability to transparency and authenticity in many of her interviews and self-reflections. She articulated the belief that by being authentic, while also honoring and recognizing the diverse identities of students, she could be an effective teacher despite cultural differences.

Ms. Carter demonstrated vulnerability in her lesson planning. She kept reiterating that she was learning along with her students, and that when she put together topics based on cultural experiences like Black History Month or The Lunar New Year, she always let students know that she was a learner, too. She told students they would probably know more than her about some of the topics, and that they should feel comfortable interjecting or adding to the lessons. She noted that this is often exactly what students did, and this incorporation of student voice into the lessons made students feel more involved in the lesson and also created a safe space where even the teacher could be critiqued for being wrong about a topic. This, in turn, helped build relationships because it gave students permission to be wrong, to fail, as well. Chavez (2021) explained that this type of openness to listening to the voices of Students of Color in the classroom created a more empowering experience for students. This allowed for a shattering of the “matrix of silence” (p. 3) that so many Students of Color in schools routinely felt when they were not invited to share their experiences openly.

Palmer (2007) described this vulnerability by saying “Good teachers join self, and subject, and students in the fabric of life” (p. 11). Ms. Carter consistently credited the use of restorative circles and the inclusion of student voice as ways that she created spaces for trust and respect. Mr. Bowman also described vulnerability in his lesson planning through his use of “low stakes” and “opinion-based” writing. He gave students prompts with flexible parameters, allowing them to use their own distinct voices to answer questions such as How does fear drive decision-making? He explained that he goes into these prompts with no expectations other than students argue their points clearly and substantively. This commitment to the centrality of experiential knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) in Ms. Carter’s and Mr. Bowman’s teaching provided a way for students to be legitimate and authoritative sources on their experiences, instead of being told about their own cultures by someone in a position of power (Martinez, 2020).

Mr. Bowman’s English classroom functioned as a space for both himself and his students to exercise freedom in their writing processes. As opposed to typical writing workshops that cater “to (white) creativity, (white) imagination, and (white) autonomy on the page” (Chavez, 2021, p. 95), Mr. Bowman did not just allow, but encouraged his students to include personal anecdotes and experiences within their writing. Mr. Bowman’s writing prompts and activities were reflective of Chavez’ anti-racist writing model workshop, where students are able to “vent, and risk-take, and confess our fears, and riff off one another, and most of all wander” (p. 97). While he did not mention an explicit understanding of this type of workshop model, Mr. Bowman’s involvement with the #DisruptTexts movement (Germán, 2020) and his general understanding of anti-racist teaching practices from his diversity literacy courses were reflected in his classroom.

They were seen especially in the freedom of expression he allowed his students in their creative processes, in addition to the encouragement he gave students to question dominant ideologies in the Eurocentric texts they were required to read (CRT tenet two). This was reflective of Martinez' (2020) argument that a focus on inclusion and equity is important, but that "it is equally important to include the admission of critical self-reflection on privilege and to use this privilege to be an accomplice" (p. 17).

The type of vulnerability the teachers described in their interviews and self-reflections mirrored the "vulnerability as strength" framework that Shim (2020) outlined in her investigation of three White male teachers engaged in an antiracist project. Her study followed the three educators while they engaged in critical self-reflections and documented experiences related to Whiteness in their everyday lives. The study showed that as the participants investigated their Whiteness, these discoveries would help them be better teachers of Students of Color. The data from the study indicated that teachers who engage in critical self-reflection often experience sensations of vulnerability. In Shim's study, this expression of vulnerability was marked by feelings of self-doubt and emotions related to the participants' developing understanding of their privilege related to being White.

Shim (2020) discovered that when her participants continued to reflect on their feelings of vulnerability, they realized that these were not actually sentiments that made them feel weak. Conversely, participants explained that they found their vulnerability to be necessary, and that it was an indication that they were being honest with themselves. Shim noted that the participants were in the midst of a transition where they found "raced spaces" coupled with spaces for learning (p. 353). Coming to terms with their own

identities as White educators allowed the participants to take their vulnerability and move from a state of ambivalence towards issues related to race and racism, to a position more aligned to antiracist advocacy.

This type of understanding and movement towards vulnerability instead of away from it was something that the participants described learning in the Diversity Literacy Program. In this way, vulnerability was a specific trait identified by the participants as a requirement of an educator's social justice work. Bullough (2005) noted that for some teachers, "it feels good to be stretched and to gain in competence" (p. 33). This was the type of vulnerability participants described feeling when it came to being more competent in diversity literacy. For Ms. Horton in particular, she continued to express thankfulness for the program which allowed her to identify and fill gaps in her knowledge, most specifically related to LGBTQ+ issues. Ms. Horton displayed a clear cognizance that it is important for her as a teacher to reach out to find additional knowledge ("academically" and "socially") to add to her framework for her learning and understanding of diverse student identities.

### **Individualized Attention: Targeted Caring and High Expectations**

All participants recognized that their perspectives of high expectations and care differed from those of their students. This difference was never viewed as a deficit but as something that could be used to build relationships with students and develop classroom norms and systems. As mentioned previously, care and conveying high expectations are often found intertwined in the literature. Aligning with this, many of the teachers' descriptions of intentional strategies to demonstrate care also functioned to convey high expectations. A common thread among the teachers was that conveying high expectations

and care needed to be done in an individualized way to be the most effective. This looked like speaking with a student in a one-on-one situation or learning about how the student prefers to be interacted with and honoring this preference in interactions. This aligns with Tosolt's (2009) findings that sentiments of care were most effective when conveyed on a personal level.

One strategy discussed as an important part of teachers' relationship-building process was being intentional to learn student names and pronounce them correctly. The importance of knowing students' names appeared in the literature on culturally responsive teaching (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Kohli and Solórzano (2012) argue that viewed through the lens of Critical Race Theory, mispronunciation of student names in schools supports "a racial and cultural hierarchy of minority inferiority" (p. 2). Names are special markers of culture because they have family and cultural significance, and many students can trace their names back to ancestors or important figures in their family's history. When names are mispronounced in school, especially when the student has repeated their name several times and the teacher does not attempt to learn correct pronunciation, it brings the importance of the students' unique identity into question. In addition, it can be seen as a lack of care on the part of the teacher. Kohli and Solórzano argue that mispronouncing a child's name in school is often seen as "benign" (p. 5). Using CRT to look at the larger context of race and racism, this microaggression can have a "cumulative impact" (p. 5) on the way a student perceives themselves and the quality of care their teacher has for them.

Ms. Horton indicated that she was intentional about greeting each student at the door during the first week of school. During this time, she asked each student how to properly pronounce their name and looked for students who seemed lost or confused. Ms.

Taylor also placed an emphasis on calling a student by name, organizing the names of her 140 or more students into a spreadsheet with a printout of their picture and a small detail about them. This organization of details helped her get to know them superficially, but she used these simple noticings to invite further conversation to “know them on a deeper level.”

In the beginning phase of relationship-building, each teacher indicated that they intentionally took individualized notes about each student and brought up what they noticed over time to show interest in getting to know each student. Ms. Horton started by asking students general questions which helped her to find something to tether the students’ names to, to help her remember them quickly. For Ms. Horton, learning a small piece of information about a student bred a “spark of connection,” something she indicated was important to begin the relationship process between teacher and student.

When it came to maintaining high expectations in an individualized way, Ms. Taylor constantly reminded students that she loved them, but that they would have to work hard in her class. She did not allow for cutting corners, though many students come to her with low levels of English understanding. She said she believes it is on her as the teacher to create systems for high expectations with scaffolds so students can move to higher levels of understanding. In his conversation with the student who accused him of “coming out” to his classes, Mr. Bowman also demonstrated firm expectations for student success. He was blunt and straightforward with the student that he was not going to hide his identity or demonstrate less care for the students since they seemed to be at odds, but that he was going to be a good teacher, nonetheless. The effectiveness of this



conversation was evidenced by the outcome; the student clearly understood the situation better and became a high achiever in the class.

Ms. Taylor's efforts also display concepts of high help and high perfectionism as described by Ferguson (2008). In Ferguson's model, high perfectionism was the push for correct answers, and high help included a significant amount of work on the teacher's end spent making sure students met the expectations for correctness. For Ms. Taylor, many of her strategies contained very deliberate levels of scaffolding, where she showed students how to complete tasks step-by-step. This was particularly true when Ms. Taylor discussed the supports she provided for her English Language Learners. She discussed needing to "stretch their brains" by assigning them the same work as native English speakers, but with high help strategies like sentence starters, essay scaffolds, and translation tools as needed. She was clear with students that they were going to probably fail a few times before they get it right, but that this is part of growth. She expected them to eventually meet her expectations for success.

This model of high help and high perfectionism is like the experience Ms. Taylor described having with her eighth grade English teacher. She recounted in her focused life history that the teacher not only expected her to do the work, but to do it correctly and with maximum effort. The English teacher would often say things to her like, "this is good, but it ought to be better," a mantra similar to what Ms. Taylor reinforces with students.

Ms. Horton tied conveying care to building trust and providing support to her students. In particular, she saw building a strong relationship as foundational to her ability to maintain high expectations for her students. This enmeshment of care and high

expectations was reflective of caring as defined by Hayes et al. (1994). In their findings, African American students described positive interactions with their teachers in the areas of helping with academic work, encouraging success and positivity, and responding to individual needs. Ms. Horton's efforts mirrored this structure: she was creating a connection and then supporting students with their academic work to "build that mutual trust where like a kid knows that I'm, I'm there for their success and for them to, to succeed." Ferguson's (2008) high help high perfectionism model, demonstrated as effective in classrooms where Students of Color are more than 75 percent of the student body, posited that "any condition other than High Help with High Perfectionism was associated with a particularly large decline in student effort and persistence" (p. 3). Ms. Horton's descriptions of building mutual trust through consistent support and intentional focus on goals were in line with Ferguson's model.

Feedback was necessary for high help and several of the teachers described giving specific feedback to students. Ms. Taylor described incorporating a free write activity into social studies, similar to the tasks Mr. Bowman assigned students in English. She provided students with an image or a short text and encouraged them to "respond and then maybe think about something from their own life." Like Mr. Bowman, Ms. Taylor pushed back against a linear focus on "dominant discourse, which is informed by an unnamed white racial habitus" (Inoue, 2015, p. 16) by encouraging students to incorporate their voice into their writing. In terms of feedback, Ms. Taylor found that incorporating short writing activities coupled with immediate feedback encouraged students to complete more work correctly over time. She remarked that students "would look back and be like, dang, I wrote two paragraphs!" She reminded them that if they

could write two paragraphs today, what would stop them from writing more in the future? In this way, the high help (specific feedback) was often the impetus for space to encourage high perfectionism (writing more next time).

Slaughter-Defoe and Carlson (1996) discovered that students felt teachers really cared about them when they made themselves available, comforted them, and demonstrated concern about their life issues beyond the classroom. Ms. Carter held private side conversations with students who she perceived needed support. She said that she routinely asks students, “Is there something that happened? Are you feeling some type of way?” in order to get to the root cause of what was troubling them. Oftentimes, she found that issues related to their home lives including a lack of sleep was the reason. Duncan-Andrade (2007) argued that a truly equitable education required specific attention to the needs of a community through embracing the “sociocultural richness of the community as a resource, rather than as a barrier to be overcome” (p. 618). For Ms. Carter, engaging the community involved constantly checking in with students and giving them intentional time and space to reflect on their home experiences. Instead of seeing their issues at home as outside of her scope of support, Ms. Carter recognized that in many ways she could not teach students effectively if they did not feel safe and heard, reflecting the positive experiences she described, recounting that her teachers would frequently talk with her individually about anything she was struggling with. She recalled that they “stayed on me” by making sure she fixed the problem before it got bigger and appreciated that her teachers took the time to involve her mother in the conversation for additional support.

Ms. Horton also discussed the importance of individual expressions of care. She reflected on her own experiences, noting that she felt cared about when her teachers listened to her, and when they brought up information from conversations later. This demonstrated to her that they were not only listening, but that they *heard* her, and found her ideas and concerns important enough to return to later. Ms. Horton focused on an intense dedication to each students' interests and likes when building positive relationships. Mr. Bowman and Ms. Taylor also indicated that they felt cared about by teachers who gave them their full attention and asked them about experiences outside of the classroom. They said that these were specific strategies they used in their classrooms daily to connect with students.

### **Relationship Boundaries**

Participants indicated that a key component to their relationship-building processes was establishing clear boundaries with their students. Each noted a point when they needed to assert and clarify boundaries. Ms. Horton said that she did not feel comfortable with all conversations related to her personal relationships. Aultman et al. (2009) referred to this need for teachers to identify the “appropriate” boundary between what they disclosed about themselves to students and what they kept private as a communication boundary. They discussed the idea of a “professional transaction” (p. 6) which must be in balance for teachers to create a safe and comfortable class environment. Ms. Carter and Ms. Horton described a boundary related to personal relationships, particularly relating to their partners or anything that could be construed as related to sexual relationships. They insinuated this boundary by saying it was important not to get “*too personal*” (Ms. Carter) or “*too comfortable*” (Ms. Horton) with emphasis added.

Ms. Horton said that for many teachers, the professional versus friendly dynamic can be confusing, as they may equate students liking them with respecting their authority. Mr. Bowman felt comfortable using terms like “friends” or “friendly” to describe the relationships he had with his students. He discussed how he refers to all his students as “friends.” When pushed on this, he indicated that “friends” is a term of endearment, a way to avoid using gendered language to get the attention of his students (a replacement for something like “you guys,” “ladies,” etc.). In this way, he is not necessarily equating students to his actual friends but is using a general term to describe them as a group that he cares about.

Schutz (2014) described this relationship boundary between being “friends” versus “being friendly” as something teachers, especially new teachers, must identify. Mr. Bowman did not see the use of the term “friends” as removing his authority or control. He argued that this terminology works because of his personality and the inclusion of other tools he used to maintain his identity as the adult in the classroom. An interesting relationship boundary that emerged from Ms. Horton’s commentary is that at some point in her career she realized that it was not effective to consistently worry if students “liked” her or not. She saw this desire to be liked as being an issue with many new teachers; she argued that they often strive for a friendship with students and get offended when a student does not like them or their class. Ms. Horton came to an understanding that for her to hold high expectations there are inevitably going to be times when students are not happy with what she has assigned or required of them. For her, the boundary between “friends” and “friendly” was clear: she and her students are not friends, but she cares about them deeply. Based on her past and current experiences with

athletic coaching, her relationships mirrored the “mentor” role identified by Schutz (2014). This type of relationship boundary positioned the teacher in a role more akin to a parent or counselor, someone who had the best interest of the students at heart but is not afraid to insist on appropriate behavior and accountability.

Schutz (2014) described the type of realization Ms. Horton came to as part of a teacher’s ability to “read the room” (p. 7). Eventually, there came a time in a teacher’s career where they became more effective at thinking on their feet, part of which revolves around not taking student criticism or student misbehavior personally. I would argue that this ability also stemmed from a teacher’s understanding of diverse cultural identities, and one’s capacity to recognize that sometimes misunderstandings come from a disconnect and not a personal attack. This recognition of cultural misunderstandings was something teachers in the study reiterated as well.

### **Flexibility and Adaptability**

For all the participants, the COVID-19 pandemic required them to renegotiate standards and expectations with their students in order to create meaningful learning experiences. Each teacher maintained high expectations while working to be flexible and extend grace to students. In this way they further enmeshed care and high expectations by focusing on student needs without sacrificing learning. Participants also maintained the belief that part of being flexible and adaptable meant finding individualized supports for their students.

Mr. Bowman told students that he thought it was important to “revisit all of our standards, give every student an opportunity to, um, demonstrate mastery in each of those standards.” This demonstrated his adherence to high expectations in an individualized

way. It was important for Mr. Bowman to take time to check in on each student and provide them with an individualized plan for success by keeping detailed notes about which standards each student mastered and following up with them to ensure their success.

Ms. Taylor indicated that during the pandemic, “none of us really knew the right thing to do.” She remarked that she was “still full speed ahead teaching actual content” but that it had to be simplified due to the logistics of being virtual, particularly due to time restraints and not seeing students daily. Flexibility meant focus on “breadth rather than depth ” to maximize performance on the AP History exam. She indicated that information from the district related to high expectations for academic content retention seemed to be incongruent with other district communications. She noted that the school and district recommended a focus on social-emotional learning because of the stress of the pandemic. She agreed with the need for this focus but felt she could push both academic rigor and social-emotional support in her classroom. Ms. Horton’s administration had a similar sentiment towards the return to in-person learning, indicating that there needed to be a certain level of “grace” afforded students. She described flexibility with due dates with a commitment to work completion. She linked this to the concept of “authenticity,” and said she needed to be transparent and “real” with students. So, while she valued grace and flexible due dates, she was not willing to put aside learning. Instead, she scaffolded assignments and requirements so that students could keep track of their work and deadlines.

Participants each made note of a district initiative for student assessment. The district began a portfolio initiative in 2018 for students transitioning to middle, and high

school as well as 12th grade graduation. This Backpack or initiative, a type of portfolio, required students to create and upload artifacts to a digital platform, each item demonstrating what they had learned at different grade levels. The goal of the portfolio was for students to describe which assignments over the course of their learning career helped to prepare them for success in the future. The portfolio acknowledged success in five distinct areas, and students must gather artifacts to demonstrate proof of learning and growth in each area. This initiative required the teachers to be flexible in their assessments to meet the requirements laid out by the district.

As noted previously, Ms. Carter indicated that she lost much of the autonomy she normally had in the school's pursuit to support this portfolio initiative. Because she was covering classes instead of teaching physical education during the return to school period, she ended up supporting students who needed artifacts for their portfolio. This meant that she could not hold the high expectations for her course content as attention was diverted to this initiative. Nonetheless, she felt compelled to make sure students were committed to high expectations in this portfolio initiative, despite her obvious frustration at having been unable to teach her own content after the return to in-person classes.

All teachers also demonstrated a general flexibility to adapt their content to the needs of their students beyond the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. They all indicated a desire to teach to their students' interests. The teachers' focus on student interest demonstrated an element of interdisciplinarity, tenet six of Critical Race Theory, which focused on sharing the experiences of people through various content areas (Martinez, 2020). For instance, in Ms. Taylor's social studies classroom, she routinely incorporated current events and local news that she knew was important to students'



lives. As mentioned previously, Mr. Bowman made it a point to tie required readings to modern issues as well.

### **Diversity Literacy Program Learnings and a Commitment to Social Justice**

Participants indicated that engagement in the Diversity Literacy Program and a continued commitment to learning more about social justice and issues related to diversity were important to their success as educators. Tenet eight of Critical Race theory is a commitment to social justice, which is the through line in the teachers' discussion of their learning. Through the lens of this tenet of CRT, findings from this study illuminated how four teachers described the ways in which they used knowledge of their own cultural identities and those of their students to build positive relationships and explored the ways in which teachers aimed to transform the relationship-building process through deeper understanding of the power structures at play. Likewise, findings demonstrated how the teacher participants considered the effects of institutionalized and systemic racism or various "otherisms" (sexism, classism, etc.) on the relationship-building process. Much of their understanding of these concepts came from their experience in the Diversity Literacy Program or through other classes and professional development.

Kleinfeld (1975) argued that one of the main reasons White teachers are considered ineffective is because they perpetuate hegemonic viewpoints and even "personify antagonistic values" (p. 304) of oppressive White culture. Ms. Taylor brought up instances where she knew her understanding of different cultures was at a deficit, and she recognized that she needed additional knowledge and support. As described earlier in the middle school conversational styles example, she knew she needed to understand more about the way her students were communicating, and why it felt amiss to her. As

she indicated, an impetus for her enrollment in the Diversity Literacy Program was her realization that she was not effectively serving her Students of Color because of gaps in her own knowledge. By taking courses related to different varieties of English, she felt she was able to move herself towards a deeper understanding of her students' cultural identities and how these shaped their learning.

Mr. Bowman reported that his understanding of biases and inequities in education, like standardized testing, helped him to be more authentic and transparent with students. He was able to calm their fears while also providing them an avenue for “disrupting” systems of oppression. He did not shy away from confirming their beliefs about inequity, but instead, offered his allyship and support to challenge the status quo, demonstrating a level of critical consciousness. This also demonstrated his understanding of tenet one of Critical Race Theory, the idea that race and racism are permanent, and that discrimination is a “normal” part of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) noted that social justice must have a focus on both eliminating racism and other forms of discrimination, while aiming to empower minoritized groups. Mr. Bowman demonstrated critical consciousness pedagogy by being transparent with his students about discrimination in public schools, while also working with them to find practical ways to empower them to find success. This can also be seen through the lens of CRT (tenet two) which is a challenge to dominant ideologies. In this example, Mr. Bowman questioned policies and practices that aimed to be neutral but that he felt were grounded in “white supremacist beliefs and practices of meritocracy” (Martinez, 2020, p. 11).

Ford and Sassi (2014) demonstrated that a White teacher's approach to authority was similarly effective as a warm demander if certain other criteria are met. Importantly, White teachers must "prioritize interpersonal relationships, communicate in culturally congruent ways, link care with justice, develop a critical race consciousness, ally with students, and critique curriculum" (p. 39). The incident with his student who was uncomfortable with the multicultural posters in his classroom showed that Mr. Bowman was intentional about how he approached student/teacher conflicts. If a student indicated that they felt left out, he was willing to make changes to support them. However, if a student actively criticized someone's cultural identity, even his own, that matter was handled in a more direct way. This spoke to Mr. Bowman's self-identification as an "ally," and showed that he was both understanding and committed to social justice.

Ms. Taylor argued that many teachers seem to enter the career hoping that they can change their students for the better by helping them help themselves. This might look like a savior complex where they viewed student success as exclusively attributed to them. Over time Ms. Taylor realized that as a "White lady" she likely had unintentionally (and embarrassingly, as she noted) tried to make her consciousness (her White racial habitus) that of her students'. In this way, prior to her learning more about her students' cultural identities and realizing that they did not need to be fixed or steered in the "right" direction, aspects of her White performative identity obscured her understanding of the consciousness students already possessed.

Participants reflected on educators who made an impact on them when they were students. They sought to emulate these exceptional teachers but remained tied to the belief that they needed to adapt their instruction to meet the distinct needs of their

students. This reflection on their previous experiences as students and their cultural identities was an important finding. It indicated that the teachers modeled their teaching off what they had perceived to be successful when they were students, while renegotiating their cultural identities and experiences as young people to determine how they could best support their students. By combining what they enjoyed and experienced as students with their understanding of the diverse cultural needs of their students, the teachers enmeshed old and new in their classrooms.

All teachers articulated a commitment to social justice by their descriptions of engaging in classes and professional development throughout the school year and during their time off. The district required teachers to take at least 24 hours of professional development annually, but many of these hours were fulfilled by mandatory days or through school-based programs. All participants noted that they always accrue more than the required amount of professional development for the year, oftentimes even before the school year begins. They all indicated that they engage in these additional courses, many of which were on social justice topics, and learning opportunities on a volunteer basis out of their desire to be better and learn more.

In his professional development Mr. Bowman looked for opportunities to learn more about contemporary texts and became deeply interested in the #DisruptTexts movement (Germán, 2020). He also planned to attend an acceleration training in the summer that was designed to focus on class interventions for struggling students and had professional development scheduled to work with his content peers to build systems and standards-based content for the next year. This included training with a local community college on how to support students looking to earn remedial college credit. He said that

he volunteered for these trainings because he viewed himself as a teacher leader in his building, and even when he did not volunteer for something, he was usually asked by his administration to do it because they also viewed him as a leader.

Ms. Horton had signed up for several restorative justice professional development opportunities over the summer in addition to a few that were science specific. She was a member of a literacy cohort at her school and attended professional developments on literacy learning in different content areas. When asked if these were required trainings, she said that they were just sessions she signed up for based on what she found interesting or useful.

Ms. Taylor described pushing herself to attend professional development to learn new strategies for engagement. She reflected specifically on one professional development opportunity she had where she was taught intentional strategies for helping students consider their own dimensions of identity. When asked about her plans for the summer she discussed a professional development opportunity she was doing in order to teach a dual-credit Pan-African studies course in the upcoming year. She was also planning to attend the National Teachers for Black History Conference in addition to completing 12 hours of developing curriculum for a civics class. She was part of a district social studies cohort building a history curriculum about historically Black neighborhoods in the city.

Ms. Carter described needing to “keep up with what’s going on” and wanting to “learn new ideas and new practices, techniques, anything to help me.” In our last interview, she discussed using her summer to attend courses on best practices in her content area, restorative language, and technology. She planned to work at the local Boys

and Girls Club tutoring and taking students on outdoor adventures to local parks, the zoo, and aquarium. When asked why she chose to spend her summer this way instead of taking a break or relaxing, she said “I never had a problem with doing professional development. Any chance to learn from my peers and best practices, I’m going to take advantage of that.” This showed her commitment to bettering herself so that she has the best tools to further support her students.

Participants also indicated a desire to continue in their careers as educators. Some discussed wanting to move into administration, while others were looking into additional programs or opportunities for advancement. Mr. Bowman had plans to begin a second professional degree, one which would allow him to become an administrator with the goal to create change outside of his classroom. He also mentioned a vested interest in educational policy, with a potential interest in working within the school district or state offices. Ms. Carter was also looking into an assistant principal program. The other teachers indicated that they would be interested in a continuing degree, but that they were not quite sure what that would look like at this time.

### **Implications**

This study extended the literature on teachers’ intentional processes of building positive relationships with students with diverse cultural identities. It supported a need for ongoing learning and reflection with an expectation for changing practice. Specifically, findings demonstrated how care and conveying high expectations were key components of this process. This is important because research indicates that students who feel challenged and supported are more successful in school (Hayes et al., 1994; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Tosolt, 2009). Findings also provided a framework for

thinking about vulnerability, as part of the negotiation of power dynamics within the relationship-building process. This study also provided insight into how a group of four teachers described maintaining flexible processes for connecting with and challenging students during a global pandemic. The conclusions suggested that deeper knowledge of self, student cultures and experiences, and intentional relationship-building strategies were important tools for teachers to utilize in their classrooms. To gain access to and successfully implement these strategies and philosophies, it was important to reconsider teacher education courses and programs and professional development opportunities for teachers to include these. In this section I will also describe further research that this study implicates.

### **Teacher Education Programs**

All participants indicated that their practices were positively influenced by their new learnings in the Diversity Literacy Program. They expressed teacher humility at learning new information and constantly reiterated that they were learners in their experiences. They described an expectation that they should do something with their new knowledge, putting their learnings into practice. While this study was not designed to serve as an analysis of the DLP the data references participants' perspectives of how the content from the program shaped their teaching.

A limitation of this study was that the teachers were all part of the same degree cohort and came into the program, and therefore this study, with a certain level of interest in learning more about social justice and enacting culturally responsive strategies in their classrooms. This was a limitation because it cannot be assumed that most of the teaching force comes into the profession with an interest in social justice and culturally responsive

teaching. Therefore, the White teachers in this study may not be representative of the predominantly White teaching force at large. This study demonstrated that the participants had a willingness and desire to increase their knowledge related to anti-racist, equitable education and implemented what they learned in the program after they graduated.

This finding was important because it provided insight into how programs like the DPL could be expanded. First, program organizers could consider the use of peer or administrator recommendations to help identify participants to apply who might otherwise not express interest. This might help in the matter of engaging more teachers who may not readily express a willingness to engage in diversity work like the program entails. By creating a system of “calling in” as Ms. Horton refers to it as, more teachers may feel a sense of belonging in their district and schools. Darling-Hammond (2015) demonstrated that countries where teachers felt that their profession was valued had higher levels of student achievement. In addition, these nations also tended to invest in more “high-quality” (p. 4) professional learning. Perhaps the correlation between being valued and engaging in high quality professional learning could have a positive impact on some teachers who are hesitant to engage in this type of learning. By being “called in” by someone they know, they may be more likely to participate in a program that feels outside of their comfort zone.

Another possible addition to programs like the DLP could be an element of mentorship related to what the teachers are learning in their classes. For instance, perhaps teachers in these types of programs could be required to commit to mentoring a student teacher or a new teacher in their school in the years when they are enrolled in the



program and/or for a certain period of time afterward. This could increase the impact of the program by opening space for at least twice as many teachers to be well-versed in the concepts teachers are learning. It could also help to advertise these types of programs to teachers who do not self-select to do them on their own, perhaps enticing them to apply in later years. It could also open an additional avenue for self-reflection, where participants could evaluate their own processes for educating and supporting their colleagues.

Other policy recommendations include changes for reworking content around diversity literacy in preservice and inservice teacher education courses and when this content is taught in the sequence. This includes rethinking teaching of concepts related to diversity including content on building relationships with students. Many teacher education programs incorporate content related to multicultural students (Bennett, 2012), however Cochran-Smith et al. (2015) argue that much of the content is not sufficient to make fundamental changes in the thinking of preservice and inservice educators. Vavrus (2017) argued for greater capacity building for teachers through implementation of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy was defined by Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003) as an active process that required teachers to investigate their assumptions and beliefs on topics like political and historical claims and social justice.

To implement critical pedagogy in teacher education programs, candidates and practicing teachers need readings and learning experiences designed to move them away from perpetuating deficit perspectives about students. Exposing teachers to concepts like the White Savior Industrial Complex (Cole, 2012) is one strategy to unpack existing deficit perspectives. Many teachers go into the profession believing that their “good

heart” and “good intentions” (Aronson, 2017, p. 39) are enough to make them successful teachers of Students of Color. However, this type of thinking can lead to dysconscious racism (King, 1991) where one has a distorted view of race and racism that does not allow them to acknowledge their own privileges or hand in systems of oppression. Moving beyond this type of thinking is especially difficult for teachers when many courses promote deficit-framing scholars like Payne (2005) and Jensen (2009) who describe students and Communities of Color as lacking. To ensure that outdated and debunked scholarship is not being perpetuated in these programs, review processes should be implemented to routinely review syllabi and course materials.

In condensed preparation programs like the alternative certification program Ms. Horton was a part of, teachers are working full time while earning their degree. Like Ms. Horton mentioned in her interviews, it can be hard to focus on diversity concepts when you are trying to learn basic teaching skills like lesson planning. In this way, basic pedagogy concepts and diversity literacy may appear as different skills instead of aligned. Ms. Horton said that she did not feel like the diversity information “hit” in her original M.A.T. program because she was only 21 and teaching full time while earning her degree. What she was learning in her courses she was immediately applying in her classroom the next day. In such a frantic and stressful situation, it is not surprising that many teachers dismiss the diversity concepts as “extra” and focus on what they consider more immediate needs like designing assessments and grading. Ms. Horton said that “four or five years of teaching under my belt, working in a school, and also just growing up” caused the DLP to be more impactful.

To support this notion of teaching as a career-long learning process, programs, along with state and district level certification entities like the EPSB in Kentucky, should explore continuous learning requirements that specifically attend to a commitment to social justice. For example, maybe within three years of teachers' initial certification, they would have to take a certain number of diversity-focused courses as a condition of retaining their certification. This would allow teachers to have time to gain classroom experience before they revisit topics related to equity and inclusion.

Teacher preparation should also maintain a commitment to diversity standards. For example, educator preparation programs must adhere to the *InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards and Learning Professions for Teachers* in creating and aligning their syllabi (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013). Programs should focus on the standards and sub-standards related to supporting diverse learners in their classes for preservice and inservice teachers. This might require deeper alignment between these standards and course syllabi and increased and up-to-date training for university staff.

To better meet these diversity standards, more education programs should both ensure diversity concepts in course content and experiences in programs as well as through other disciplines. For instance, preservice and inservice educators could be required to take a certain number of courses in the humanities or sociology to complement their regular education courses. Taking diverse courses like this used to be a norm in education programs but was removed in favor of more focus on strategies and classroom management. Course options, like those in the Diversity Literacy Program, related to pan-African studies, women and gender studies, history, and philosophy can expand their knowledge of content and of inequities and systems of oppression.

Preservice teachers and early career teachers could then apply understandings from these courses to their lesson planning and classroom structures to build solid foundations. This would also reinforce the idea that diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential to effective pedagogy and not “extra” components or afterthoughts.

As an adjunct faculty member of a teacher preparation program, this study has led me to reconsider content and delivery of diversity concepts in the courses I teach. I plan to include a more salient element of critical reflection in my courses, which includes promoting an awareness of self and personal identity. This might look like frequent journaling or discussions on what is going on in teachers’ classrooms. I especially plan to revisit the materials we use to make sure none of them are perpetuating deficit perspectives. Further, I will instruct students on the dangers of the deficit perspective or to help them recognize it in their practices as well as school and district communications and policies.

I want to invite students to engage in a “pedagogy of possibility” (Simon, 1987, p. 372) described by Simon as “an educational practice whose fundamental purpose is to expand what it is to be human and contribute to the establishment of a just and compassionate community” (p. 372). Enhancing their critical consciousness will push them to see where and how their biases are standing in the way of supporting students’ success while developing candidates’ asset-based pedagogies (López, 2017) which more effectively support historically marginalized students and Students of Color (Morris, 2017). By focusing on students’ cultural identities as essential elements of concepts like quality lesson planning and equitable assessment design, teachers can serve as cultural

workers who “contest dominant forms of cultural production ” as they work to develop a pedagogy of possibility (Simon, 1992, p. 39).

### **Teacher Professional Development**

Because this study focused more on new learnings and experiences from the Diversity Literacy Program than outside professional development, this study gleaned only a few implications related to this topic. The teachers described how there was often a disconnect between theory (their learning in the DLP and beyond) and the practices implemented in their buildings. In the future, participants in programs like the DLP could be invited to be more active in district professional development design and delivery. For example, in the district where the teachers work there were policies and professional development opportunities created and enacted for racial equity. With knowledge from their diversity literacy course experiences, members of the program could offer special sessions drawing from their experiences and learning. This could help to not only broaden the reach of the program, but also serve as “calling in” new teachers to engage in practices that support diverse learners.

When asked about their plans for the summer, all the teachers indicated that they had very robust plans for professional development. Most of these were through outside organizations or at national conferences. Some of the professional development opportunities included content knowledge, restorative justice, bullying prevention, literacy, curriculum development, and technology. Very few were school or district-sponsored, indicating that they were committed to staying on the cutting edge of what is happening in the broader educational community.

The next focus addresses what the findings demonstrate about professional development generally. First, teachers should have more time to reflect as a part of their professional development experiences. An important feature of meaningful teacher learning was the dedicated time to sit with what they learned and think. For example, the participants critically reflected on themselves and their experiences related to their cultural identities. Furthermore, their new learnings about social structures and systems of oppression that impact their students fostered deeper considerations about their classrooms and instructional choices.

Something else to consider when designing professional development is the interaction educators have with individuals outside of the profession. Several participants made remarks about things they learned from other students in their DLP courses. Ms. Taylor in particular spoke about how one of her classmates dismissed the use of “Sir” and “Ma'am” as “slave language.” This was something she had never thought about before, and although it was not directly taught to her through the coursework, the exposure to different people and ways of thinking helped her consider something new. Therefore, it would be helpful if teachers were required to attend professional development with others who are not teachers to provide exposure to content and perspectives that differ from their own.

### **Future Research**

This study implicated future research in the areas of advanced and preservice teacher education programs, professional development, and district policies. While the scope of this research did not include an intensive focus on district policies, it would be informative to look at how these participants, or future participants, view and utilize

district policies. For instance, are any of these teachers participating in or leading professional development using the knowledge and skills they obtained in the Diversity Literacy Program? Are they contributing to work on district policies or part of advocacy groups?

Extending the current study or future research, the participants might explore if they are consistently attending and/or conducting professional development based on what they have learned and purport to value around relationship building and high expectations. Mr. Bowman presented his final project to his principal, and some of his ideas and findings were used to structure school-wide strategies for discipline and behavior management. The participants said that they are often asked to provide professional development or lead school initiatives based on their diversity literacy knowledge and continued learning opportunities. Ms. Horton was part of a larger team at her school involved in a program designed to increase literacy practices across content areas. She routinely led professional development at staff meetings and trainings throughout the school year. Perhaps in addition to a required mentorship component of programs like the DLP, there could be a required professional development component. This would require teachers in these programs to share their learning in more formalized district-sanctioned learning spaces.

Several of the professional opportunities described by the teacher participants did provide additional compensation. The participants did not describe this compensation as a reason for attending professional development. Darling-Hammond (2015) found that when teachers feel valued in their careers, student engagement is likely to go up. Linking value to compensation, it would be worthwhile to investigate if the tuition remission from

the DLP and payment from professional development opportunities led to a desire for continued learning.

These implications question how preservice and inservice teachers can be supported to continue to learn and grow. In particular, how can teacher educators and professional development create a space where teachers want to learn and understand more about equitable educational practices, particularly with a teaching force that is predominantly White and does not personally benefit from the elimination of systems of oppression? For the teachers in this study, it seemed that they already came to the Diversity Literacy Program with a desire to learn more and be better. But what about teachers who may not be looking for programs like this one? How do teacher educators and administrators engage teachers who seem otherwise content with their initial certifications and degrees in continuing coursework or professional development?

Another question this study raised is how to retain teachers like those in this study who have a desire to learn more and become leaders in their building and district. Is the goal to keep them in the classroom, or to encourage them to be administrators or officials who oversee and educate other groups of teachers? The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated teacher shortages in high-need areas and generally across schools in the United States (Cardona, 2021). The United States Department of Education pointed to three key areas for teacher retention in a recent letter to school leaders: increased wages for school staff, hiring and maintaining quality substitute teachers, and increased support for educator and staff well-being.

Teacher well-being was not an overall focus of this research, although at various times in our interviews the teacher participants expressed frustration about district and



school policies. Most notably, Ms. Carter was very upset by her school's treatment of her and closure of her classroom during the pandemic and VIM. Future research could explore whether there is any correlation between teacher well-being and ability to form positive relationships with students, or between teacher well-being and commitment to social justice and professional growth.

A limitation of this study was that there was not a control or comparison group to look at to determine what teachers who *are not* using intentional strategies to build positive relationships with diverse students do. Perhaps a larger district-wide study of professional development opportunities for teachers participating in continuing education could answer some of the questions about how to engage all teachers in a commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusion. This might look like interviewing teachers who consistently attend professional development beyond the required hours to see if this has an impact on their ability to build positive relationships with students might provide evidence needed

### **Final Statement**

This multiple case study using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Alase, 2017) described how four teachers perceived the process of relationship-building with students who were culturally different from them. Centered around the concepts of high expectations and care, this study discussed how teacher participants considered and reconsidered their own cultural identities in efforts to build individualized relationships with students. This study identified strategies that could be used to help other educators navigate cultural differences and build positive relationships

with students and highlighted the importance of teacher self-reflection. It also identified implications for future teacher education programs and professional development.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Research Timeline

Note: This timeline has been loosely structured to allow for teachers to complete interviews during school breaks so as not to interfere with teaching duties.

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Interview and Self-Reflection Cycle</b>	<b>Connection to Research Questions</b>
January 2021 (proposed date September 2020)	Initial Interview: Focused Life History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Personal experiences, linguistic history, classroom norms, procedures for building relationships based on care/high expectations, expectations and beliefs</li></ul>
February-March 2021	Self-Reflection 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Setting up classroom structures that convey sentiments of high expectations and caring, navigating racial, ethnic, and linguistic at the start of the semester</li><li>● Reflect on expectations and beliefs</li></ul>
March 2021 (proposed date October 2020)	Follow- Up Interview 1	

March-April 2021	Self-Reflection 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strengthening relationships: How do these relationships build as you get to know one another?</li> <li>● Reflection on reality of expectations and beliefs</li> </ul>
April 2021 (proposed date November 2020)	Follow- Up Interview 2	
April- May 2021	Self-Reflection 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Maintaining student-teacher relationships: How did you continue a focus on high expectations and caring? What have you learned from this reflective process?</li> <li>● Reflection on reality of expectations and beliefs</li> </ul>
May-June 2021 (proposed date December 2020)	Follow- Up Interview 3	

## Appendix B

### Teacher Interview 1: Focused Life History

#### Personal Inventory:

1. How do you identify yourself as a cultural being (racially, ethnically, linguistically, etc.)?
2. How has your cultural identity (race, ethnicity, language, etc.) impacted you as a person?
3. What was your experience like as a student?
4. What types of relationships did you have with your teachers?
5. How did you come to understand when an adult or authority figure was conveying high expectations to you? What did it look like for them to want you to do your best?
6. How did you come to understand when an adult or authority figure was demonstrating care and concern to you? What do these concepts look like to you?

#### Teaching History and Beliefs on Classroom Concepts:

1. Tell me about your teaching history.
2. Why did you get into teaching?
3. Do you think your cultural identity (race, ethnicity, language, etc.) impacts your teaching style?
4. What issues of diversity or inclusion are most important to you in the classroom?
5. What are your beliefs on the concept of respect in the classroom?
6. What courses have you taken that have influenced your beliefs?

Teacher Understanding of Diverse Identities:

1. What is your general understanding of the cultural identities of the students in your classroom and school?
2. Have there been times when your cultural identity has been at odds with those of your students? What happened?

Building Relationships:

1. Suppose it was my first day as a student in your classroom. What would I experience?
2. What strategies do you use to build relationships with students, and why have you chosen these strategies?
3. When you enact these strategies, what do you hope to get out of them or achieve?
4. Describe what you think the ideal student-teacher relationship is like.
5. How do you intentionally plan lessons to build relationships with students? What do these look like?
6. What other factors do you believe are key to building relationships with students?

Classroom Norms of Communication:

1. What is your biggest classroom behavior problem? Describe a typical conversation you would have with a student while disciplining them.
2. What do you typically praise students for? Describe a typical conversation you would have with a student while praising them.

3. Describe a typical conversation you would have with a student intended to demonstrate high expectations.
4. Describe a typical conversation you would have with a student intended to demonstrate care or concern.

## Appendix C

### Self-Reflection Guiding Questions and Interview Protocol:

1. What did you do intentionally in your lessons to build positive relationships with students?
2. How did you determine if students are connecting with you, and if you are building a positive relationship?
3. Where in your lesson(s) did you believe you were conveying high expectations to your students?
4. Where in your lesson(s) did you believe you were conveying care and concern to your students?
5. What were student reactions to your process of relationship-building? Did you experience any setbacks?
6. Were there any instances where you felt you really connected with a student or where your relationship was strengthened?
7. Were there any instances where you tried everything in your repertoire of strategies, and you still didn't connect with a student?
8. Were there any instances in the lesson where you think your cultural identity and those of your students were at odds? What was happening in that situation?



## CURRICULUM VITA

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### EDUCATION

Master's Student, M.A. English, Middlebury College, Bread Loaf School of English,  
Anticipated completion, July 2023

Ph.D., Curriculum and Instruction, University of Louisville, Completed May 2022

Certificate, Diversity Literacy, University of Louisville, Completed May 2015

M.Ed., Teacher Leadership, University of Louisville, Completed May 2015

M.A.T., University of Louisville, Completed May 2013

B.A., Religion and Portuguese, Middlebury College, Completed May 2011

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2020-present Curriculum developer, Equus Workforce Solutions

2018-2020 Academic instructional coach, Georgia Chaffee TAPP

2018-present Adjunct professor, The University of Louisville

- 2016-2018      Teacher, sixth grade language arts, Robert Frost Sixth Grade Academy, Louisville, KY
- 2016-2018      Professional development coordinator, Summer Institute, Teach Kentucky, Louisville, KY
- 2011-2015      Teacher, sixth grade language arts, Stuart Middle School, Louisville, KY

## **WORKSHOPS AND PRESENTATIONS**

### ***2021***

Teacher perception of the process of building relationships with students. University of Louisville Spring Research Conference. Louisville, KY March, 2021.

Racial Equity Institute's Racial Equity Facilitator Training. February, 2021.

Teachers' navigation of linguistic diversity in building purposeful and positive relationships with students. AMLE November, 2021.

Coaching assistant and proposal reviewer, NCTE 2021.

Emerging scholar review board, *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*.

### ***2020***

Coaching assistant and proposal reviewer, NCTE 2020.

### ***2019***

Coaching assistant and proposal reviewer, NCTE 2019.

Proposal reviewer, Teacher leadership summit, Teach to Lead, 2019

### ***2018***

Mark, S.L, Constantin, G., Alexander, O. Culturally-responsive science education: Restructuring science in interdisciplinary contexts. Poster session: NARST, March, 2018.

Mark, S.L, Constantin, G., Alexander, O. It got me back to science and now I want to be a plant scientist: Arts-integrated science engagement for middle school girls. Submission for publication: *Research in Science Education*, August, 2018.

Javits-Frasier Scholar, National Association for Gifted Children, Minneapolis, MN, November, 2018.

**2017**

“The future of language is yours”: Exposing the young adolescent reader to Toni Morrison. Submission for publication: *NCTE, Voices from the Middle*, April 2017.

Metacognition and thinking strategies for all learners. Collaborative Center for Community Literacy Share Fair, Louisville, KY, April, 2017.

**2016**

TPGES, the CIF and data management in priority schools. Teach Kentucky Summer Institute, Louisville, KY, June 2016.

**2015**

Learning through talking across the contents: Accountable talk and other useful strategies. Collaborative Center for Community Literacy Share Fair, Louisville, KY, March, 2015.

Honoring diversity in the classroom. Teach Kentucky Summer Institute, Louisville, KY, June, 2015

I can't teach her in middle school: Using the complex texts of Toni Morrison to challenge students and affirm diversity in the classroom, 2015 NCTE Annual Convention, Minneapolis, MN, November, 2015.

From Vermont to Kentucky and back. Bread Loaf Teacher Network Meeting, Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury, VT, June 2015.

**2014**

Accountable talk: Strategies for facilitating discourse between young adolescent learners from all backgrounds, 41st Annual Conference for Middle Level Education, Nashville, TN, November, 2014.

A clinical model of education for priority school teachers. Teach to Lead: Kentucky Teacher Leadership Summit, Louisville, KY, December, 2014.