

Handling the cultural divide: Discussing unfamiliar territory in the classroom

By: Mikayla Ekwel

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Abstract

This research explores the vast possibilities and benefits offered to students by teachers utilizing culturally relevant teaching practices, materials, and language in the classroom. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate the positive affect culturally aware teaching practices and pedagogy can have on students of non-dominant minority backgrounds, as well as those of dominant cultural backgrounds. The purpose of this research also, is to explore how discussing sensitive subject matter in the classroom should be handled and executed when it is approached by a child or teacher. Data were recorded for this study over the course of six weeks using transcribed audio-recorded interviews with staff members, and observational field notes recorded in follow up observations of each staff member. Data were analyzed for what strategies and methods veteran instructors have chosen to use in their classrooms relevant to cultural sensitivity, and how the use of those methods and strategies affected classroom rapport, respect, and successes.

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Introduction

With such a critical presidential election happening in our country's history, it was only natural that our teachers responsible for the upper elementary grade levels in the building planned a mock election for our students to participate in to see what it is really like to vote. The students buzz about the room, discussing what they know about both presidential candidates, and sharing their like or disgust for Mr. Trump and Mrs. Clinton.

“Trump better not win; I hate him he's racist! He wants to send us all back to Africa!”

“Hillary is going to stop all the white cops from shooting black men; I want her to win!”

“Trump hates all of us. He's so racist and mean.”

“Hillary is going to end racism; everyone should vote for her!”

I listen to these shocking, yet justified comments come from every corner of the classroom. I look at the children's general education teacher, waiting to see how she will handle them without causing an uproar.

“Guys, now let's be real here. Mr. Trump cannot send black people back to Africa. We can't believe everything we see on Facebook and the Internet. No president can do that to people. Just like Hillary can't stop cops from shooting anyone, or stop people from supporting racism. Remember not every police officer is evil, and not every person on this Earth is racist. The police we see on TV and the people who make terrible comments about black men and women are the ones the media wants us to see, because black and white crimes are a very hot topic right now.”

I am amazed at the flawlessness of the interpersonal skills this woman possesses as she freely speaks to her students about this difficult topic, and I wonder: how does she dare to approach

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such sensitive topics with a classroom that is 80% African American children? Does she not fear her students going home and telling their parents what was discussed in class? I begin to think to myself, how do we as educators of all kinds handle each of our minority students' comments and questions during a time such as this? Our country is experiencing such an unusual and stressful time, and of course, students in classrooms around the world need to talk about it. They need to be reassured that they are safe, valued, and loved despite the fact that a man who has expressed incredibly racist beliefs will soon be running their country. I begin to think even more, and the questions continue to flow into my mind like a waterfall, steady and continuous.

What would I do if a child asked me why Donald Trump was able to run for president in the middle of Social Studies class? What do I do if a child asks me why racism is still such a problem in our world during an ELA lesson? How do I respond to a student who wishes to understand hate crimes, and violence in our local community? How do I approach such sensitive subject matter that I myself have such little knowledge of, because I am a white, middle class woman who has never experienced the racially driven prejudices that my students face in my 23 years on Earth? Moreover, most importantly, how do I even begin to approach such a conversation in a way that is a comfortable, respectful, and cultural learning experience for every student?

Topic and Research Problem

The concept of systematic racism still being present in today's public education system seems, to many, so impossible and ridiculous, being that it is the year 2017. Many will ask themselves, how can we possibly have not progressed past this? Unfortunately, the answer is not as simple as just moving past age-old practices. Systematic practices such as these have been implanted into the minds of Caucasian men, women, and children for centuries. In his book *Racism and*

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Education: Coincidence Or Conspiracy? David Gillborn (2008) discusses why the possibility of eliminating systematic racism from the minds of educators is not so easy:

I was trying to highlight how deeply rooted *Whiteness* is throughout the education system. What I mean is that it's not as simple as a conspiracy. If race inequality was the result of a few Whites getting together and deciding to stick it to Black kids we could expose the plot and do away with it. But there is no conscious plot; there doesn't need to be because White people learn to act and think in ways that have *exactly* the same outcomes, but they do it almost automatically. (p. 9).

What this quote touches on is the precise reason why systematic racism and prejudice is so incredibly difficult to eliminate from public education. We, as modern day educators, are fighting against something that has been perpetuated for so long, it is almost like combating an invisible force that seems impossible to destroy. What matters regarding this concept however, is that we make our colleagues, and our students aware that racial inequality is far from invisible, and that we as teachers are fully aware that it still exists. This can sometimes be an uncomfortable process; to inform our non-dominant minority students that they still, in 2017, are going to experience educational and societal disadvantages due to their skin color.

What is not uncomfortable however, is providing our students this information to insure they make a conscious effort every day to combat the invisible enemy that is systematic racism. As urban educators, it is our duty to arm our non-dominant minority students with the knowledge needed to push past those societal barriers, and to shatter all of the world's expectations for what they will achieve. We must teach them not to become so caught up in the hatred and violence that is spreading like wildfire, and to rage against the ancient systems perpetuating "whiteness" in the classroom using their intellect, and peaceful, quiet but deadly motivation for an equal and balanced educational system.

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The amount of civil unrest that is present amongst not only the African American community on a national scale, but amongst non-dominant minority students of Hispanic, Muslim, and other various ethnic backgrounds as well is currently one of epidemic level within our nation. It is only natural that students who identify with these cultural groups will discuss these feelings of frustration and anger as they occur to their peers when they arrive at school. The prevalent levels of racism and hatred that currently exist between minority groups, law enforcement officers, politicians, and other various authority figures of Caucasian descent not only in our local community, but also within our country as a whole, are impossible to ignore. This, along with how these events will affect the children I teach, makes it transparently clear that learning how to communicate with students about such prevalent societal topics like these and many others, is a critical skill for all educators to obtain.

Working in a low-income, urban environment presents teachers and support staff with an entirely new world of conflicts and situations that teachers in many other districts may not be familiar with. Many Caucasian teachers are often faced with the responsibility of talking to their boys and girls of non-dominant, minority backgrounds about critical societal and racially charged issues that seem to be present everywhere we look in 2017. These issues can span anywhere from racism and hate crimes, to violence in the local communities and homes of students, to tragedy striking families and loved ones. So many things exist in our world today that students are never taught about in school because many consider the subject matter “too sensitive” or “difficult”. In turn, we release them into the world armed with nothing but knowledge of the core subjects our state deems important for them to learn, and no concept of how to grapple with the uglier sides of life. It is critical that we as educators allow our students to

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witness us breaking away from racially driven societal norms, and show that they no longer need to fear their educational opportunities being diminished due to the color of their skin.

Thankfully, we now live in a world where children are given so many more opportunities to discover and express who they are fully, without fear of judgment or criticism from peers. However, the possibility that what these children may share may make other students uncomfortable, confused, or angry is all too real. Our African American students, our students who identify with any category of LGBTQ, our Muslim, Indian, and Native American students, our Catholic, Jewish, and Hispanic students are now all fortunate enough to be present in a generation that will allow them to share their cultural heritage, language, style, and personal preferences within the educational environment. Providing students with the opportunity to be engrossed in a multicultural learning environment will not only allow them to grow as individuals, but will provide them the opportunity to form a tight knit and caring community with their classmates. Banks and Mcgee Banks (2009) share their thoughts on this concept:

Multicultural education is an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school. (p. 1).

This quote demonstrates the core pieces needed to construct a culturally relevant teaching environment. It is not simply a beautiful idea that we can just execute with no thought. Its purpose is to completely reshape centuries of age-old education, and to provide each of our students the opportunity to become more aware and awakened than generations before them. Our goal as educators is to produce not just incredible students, but incredible people, and the multicultural educational model is the key to doing just that (Banks & Mcgee Banks, 2009).

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We often think as teachers we have been educated well on how to handle just about anything that students can present to us in the classroom, no matter where their lives began. We read so much scholarly literature, so many articles, books, and blog posts about creating respectful, diverse learning communities, and we think we have it just about figured out.

However, when we are faced with children who currently experience, or have experienced life events so drastically different from what we as Caucasian, dominant majority adults understand, that preparation we thought we possessed can sometimes head right out the door. More importantly, we must think of how we can take the negative or difficult experiences encountered by our students that involve concepts like systematic racism, prejudice, and educational disadvantage, and turn them into an opportunity for all of the students in our classroom to become more knowledgeable about the world they live in, and how they as powerful individuals, can combat societal expectations.

Many scholars, like Dr. Muhammed of the University of Illinois, believe a goal of this nature can be achieved through literacy and a shared love of writing and expression. We want to find every opportunity possible to allow students to freely write, hear, and read academic content that is fully connected to what they deal with when they exit our doors both individually, and as a group. This form of learning provides students with the power to not only speak their minds, but to come into school every day knowing their voices are respected and heard. As Muhammed (2012) spoke about the children she worked with through her culturally driven literacy study she stated when discussing her students biggest conceptual understandings:

Literary pursuits are specific literacy actions and experiences that are both individual and collaborative. Although an ultimate literary pursuit was writing and publication, other acts of literacy were practiced concurrently. These acts led to liberation and empowerment and included reading, discussion, lectures, peer critique, and debating. (p. 206).

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This study provides concrete examples of how relating core academic subjects to our students' personal experiences can be highly beneficial to not only them as learners, but to their understanding of their identity in the public education system. Any activity performed in the classroom that can provide our minority students with the opportunity to feel empowered, safe, and heard is one that every educator should take the time to implement. Not only do activities like these provide students with the opportunity to display the positive traits they possess within themselves, vastly improving their self-esteem and relationships with those who teach them, but allows all children regardless of their background to come together for the sole purpose of learning.

Rationale

Seeing my students present their teachers with such deep and heart wrenching questions inspired me to develop a greater knowledge of how I can always insure I am at the ready when a child presents me with an opportunity to talk about the scarier aspects of life. Finding ways to insure I am responding appropriately to both academic and personal inquiries, along with the interpersonal needs of every child I am responsible for educating, is necessary for me to become fully successful in my career. As a first year teacher, in a heavily urban and poverty-stricken district, a research project of this nature just seemed beautifully logical.

It has been shown that those who are dedicated enough to develop a culturally responsive pedagogical approach not only open the door for excellent student and teacher rapport, but construct a sensitive, thoughtful, and respectful learning environment for all children. Brown (2004) states when discussing culturally responsive teaching in action:

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Culturally responsive teaching involves purposely responding to the needs of the many culturally and ethnically diverse learners in classrooms. It involves implementing specifically student-oriented instructional processes as well as choosing and delivering ethnically and culturally relevant curricula. Culturally responsive teachers use communication processes that reflect students' values and beliefs held about learning, the responsibilities of teachers, and the roles of students in school settings. (p. 268).

Culturally sensitive teaching involves so much more than many educators realize. This is often the reason why it is placed on the back of the "To-Do" shelf with the other 100 things elementary teachers must complete in a day. However, as Brown has clearly stated, to use culturally responsive methods and materials is to not only improve communication with students of any cultural path, but shows students that the beliefs and values they hold near and dear to their hearts are represented fairly, and openly in their learning environment. Brown also makes it a point to state that curriculum choices for teachers with ethnically diverse student populations in their classroom should in fact, be culturally relevant (Brown, 2004).

This in particular, is precisely what I seek to understand in my study. How can we make excellent pedagogical choices to achieve a goal of this nature, while also addressing the critical issues our students wish to understand? What materials and literature are best to use to insure we are hitting on topics that are not only important to our students right now in 2017, but are important to us as U.S citizens, and as educators?

Purpose

My purpose in this project was to discover how educators like myself, can use particular strategies, literature, and methods in their classrooms to best discuss culturally specific unrest and violence, while also constructing a learning environment for students that is culturally responsive and respectful. This path of study incorporated the discussion of current events that

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are presently occurring not only within minority groups and social groups, but also to all students within our nation who have been affected by crime, violence, and political decisions. My goal in this study was to not only equip myself with the communicative skills necessary to navigate conversations of this nature, but to also arm myself with the proper literature and curricular materials that will allow my students to construct critical personal connections between what they see in their own world, and what they learn in the classroom.

Matsko and Hammerness (2013) discuss how this exact type of connection from classroom to home life needs to be made with the following statement, indicating that it requires a great deal of modern cultural knowledge and awareness on the urban educators part to be fully effective in the classroom; “Urban schools tend to serve concentrations of students whose experiences with and orientations toward schooling are often different from and sometimes in conflict with mainstream assumptions and attitudes toward schooling (Chou & Tozer, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999)” (p. 4).

This approach to culturally sensitive and cognizant teaching proves that educators, particularly within the urban environment, are responsible for not only educating their students, but also providing a learning environment for them that is safe, open, and respectful and does not follow typical classroom norms. This idea of differentiating ones approach when teaching and communicating with students of the urban population to better serve them in the classroom is precisely what has driven me to pursue my study. The goal of culturally sensitive teaching and discussion in the classroom is not only to create an environment where a group of diverse students can come together, despite their differences, for the purpose of learning. It is also to insure teachers are providing every child with the sounding board many of them desperately need

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to openly discuss the struggles they face outside of the classroom walls, and the chance to turn these struggles into educational connections that tie directly to what they are learning.

Research Questions

How might educators sensitively and thoughtfully explore societal concerns and student experiences related to modern day social and cultural events that incorporate critical topics such as race, religion, lifestyle preferences, and socioeconomic status in the classroom?

What ways can be considered most beneficial for us as educators to use culturally relatable/relevant literature, discussion, and curricula in the classroom when a child experiences unfamiliar tragedy, crime, or violence related to their ethnic community, home, or country on a national scale?

Review of Literature

The following review of literature highlights the key points of constructing a culturally sensitive classroom that takes all students' needs and diverse backgrounds into consideration. Research on culturally relevant pedagogy and implementing the strategies associated with these ideas are included. Responding appropriately to children who are struggling with experiences that are unfamiliar to the educator in the room, as well as how to best incorporate academic material into those discussions, is also discussed. This review takes an in depth look at social constructivist theory, and how this framework ties directly to the various elements of responding to culturally sensitive subject matter in the classroom.

What Does it Take to be Culturally Sensitive in the Classroom?

Many teachers I have witnessed in the field often times forget that as educational professionals, we are so much more than just robots responsible for spitting knowledge out at students. We are often like caretakers, guardians, and become so much more than just educators to the students we teach. Brown (2004) sums up this concept perfectly; “Gaining students’ cooperation in urban classrooms involves establishing a classroom atmosphere in which teachers are aware of and address students’ cultural and ethnic needs as well as their social, emotional, and cognitive needs” (p. 267). It is for this reason that we must make a full, conscientious effort to incorporate all of the needs of all of every student, every day that we step in front of them.

Not only are we responsible for tailoring our instruction to insure that all styles of learning are considered in our lessons, but we as teachers are responsible for monitoring and responding to the emotional and social struggles children within the urban school environment encounter on a regular basis (Brown, 2004). Should we not do so, it is like asking a person to build a brick wall with a thorn in their side. How can we expect them to do the job well, if we do not provide them with all the necessary materials and support to be comfortable and confident in their environment?

The concept of creating a culturally sensitive classroom like this, also factors in the idea that there must be enough teachers who are willing to commit to such a serious undertaking. These teachers must possess the experience needed to respond appropriately to the various needs of the non-dominant minority, and cultural groupings represented in their classrooms. In the urban environment, this can often be an incredibly difficult task to accomplish, due to the difficult, emotional circumstances staff encounter every day between their students and parents. Often,

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this is a deal breaking factor for many potentially new staff members whom are considering where they would like to land professionally. Crosby (1999) states:

The teacher turnover rate in the urban schools is much higher than in the suburban schools. . . The result is that urban schools, especially those in the inner cities, are often staffed largely by newly hired or uncertified teachers. These teachers, who were trained to teach students from middle class families and who often come from middle class families themselves, now find themselves engulfed by minority students, immigrants, and other students from low income families—students whose values and experiences are very different from their own. (p. 302).

This shows that not only has it become increasingly more difficult for low-income schools and districts to keep their most experienced staff for extended periods, but explains how we are providing a disservice to students by swapping staff out constantly and providing them with no continuity, or opportunity to build relationships with their teachers. It is only those who are adept and experienced enough with being an educator in the urban school setting who can provide student populations with such high levels of diversity and need with all they require in school to become successful, and powerful human beings.

We cannot expect that the newest staff members in an urban district who are in the process of learning how to best educate students that experience hardships we as adults can most likely not even imagine, can also construct the perfect culturally responsive environment and teaching style during their first year in the classroom (Crosby, 1999). This idea then begs the question, what can we offer to all of our staff (regardless of their experience level) to insure they are provided with the best materials, options, support, and resources to construct the culturally relevant, pedagogical style that is necessary to take all students to their furthest potential in just one school year? (Crosby, 1999)

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Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP)

The most recent scholarly research discusses urban educators adopting what is referred to as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom. This concept will be referenced using the acronym CRP for the purpose of this review. According to Brown and Cooper (2011), when attempting to grapple with what the core of CRP is, "...teachers need to be non-judgmental and inclusive of cultural backgrounds of their students in order to be effective facilitators of learning in the classroom" (p. 66). The key term found in this definition is of course, inclusive. It is our job to insure whether we are simply talking with our class, or learning a new and foreign concept, that we are taking every child's cultural pathway and learning needs into consideration as we teach. Providing the opportunity for every learning modality and style to be utilized in the classroom is a guaranteed way to insure much larger, more abundant successes for all of our students, regardless of their background and heritage.

For many decades, scholars have continued to find certifiable reasoning behind why constructing a solid connection between school, the home, and cultural community life is so critical to the success of ethnically diverse students. This applies more particularly to those in low-income or poverty-stricken districts (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In reference to "culturally congruent teaching", Ladson-Billings (2009) states that, "a variety of sociolinguists have suggested that utilizing culturally relevant language and discussion in the classroom that relates to children's home experiences, provides a far stronger possibility for students to experience academic success" (p. 159). How can we possibly expect that the students we teach will ever apply what they learn with us in the classroom to their real lives, if we do not make it relatable to what they experience every day at home?

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One critical stipulation that must be made about CRP, however, is that its intent is not to focus on racial boundaries and borders between teachers and students in the classroom. Brown and Cooper (2011) express this important concept in stating, “While CRP focuses on the importance of culture in schooling, it does not focus on race and racism as they relate to the socio-historical pattern of schooling in the U.S” (p. 66). It is so important to insure that while we initiate the process of creating a classroom that is more considerate of all ethnic groupings represented in our student population, we do not ever do so in a way that will force students to feel that there are racially segregated themes present in their learning environment. Culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy do not incorporate racial division. For this reason, it is critical that we never allow this professional learning process to become focused on segregating or dividing our students.

CRP is also about so much more than becoming sensitive and aware of our students’ needs to provide them with opportunities to become successful. Adopting CRP within the classroom also provides students within non-dominant, culturally diverse groupings with ample opportunities to feel empowered and capable, despite the social constructs and restrictions they have grown up experiencing (Brown & Cooper, 2011). These social expectations we see throughout the world telling children of various minority backgrounds what they are and are not capable of in terms of jobs, education, and life milestones may, or may not have diminished their ideas of what they can pursue in their future endeavors. However, the importance of providing learning experiences that will allow students to strive toward these goals regardless of what society tells them they can expect to achieve in life remains the same. Brown and Cooper (2011) provide the following structured CRP framework for educators that are beginning to utilize culturally relevant practices in the classroom:

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CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

Identity and Achievement: Identity development, cultural heritage, multiple perspectives, affirmation of diversity, public validation of home-community cultures

Equity and Excellence: Dispositions, incorporate multicultural curriculum content, equal access, high expectations for all

Developmental Appropriateness: Learning styles, teaching styles, cultural variation in psychological needs: motivation, morale, engagement, and collaboration

Teaching Whole Child: Skill development in cultural context, bridge home, school, and community, learning outcomes, supportive learning communities, empower students

Student Teacher Relationships: Caring, relationships, interaction, classroom atmosphere (p. 72).

This modern day research from Brown and Cooper (2011) suggests that by adopting CRP, we not only insure student successes regardless of cultural background by tailoring our own instruction to their needs, but also are opening the door to individual student empowerment and excellence, identity development, and skyrocketing self-esteem. Through CRP, we are encouraging students to challenge societal expectations of their race and culture through multidimensional learning experiences, and to begin developing awareness of cultures vastly different from their own in the process. As teachers utilizing these principles, we are creating the ideal learning environment for all students and educators alike, leading to a school year smothered in successes big and small.

Of course constructing a culturally sensitive classroom requires a great deal of effort outside of the classroom on the part of staff, as well, regardless of what goals they have in mind for their class. Proper training, professional development, and abundant experience quickly become necessary to insure staff are equipped with the tools and knowledge to adopt and execute CRP successfully. Dyce and Owusu-Ansah (2016) took the opportunity to conduct a cultural diversity master class where teachers of Caucasian descent were exposed to diversity training and

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information tied to prevalent student demographics present within their building. The main conclusions drawn from Dyce and Owusu-Ansah (2016) were demonstrated best by the following statement: "...teachers not only taught with cultural relevance in mind but also adopted a philosophy of education that incorporates social reconstructionism and transformative learning, viewing themselves as social justice advocates for children and families" (pg. 1).

This study not only hits on what can be considered one of the most effective teaching models in existence to promote cultural sensitivity and awareness, but also discusses the importance of allowing your students to transform through their year of learning with you. Dyce and Owusu-Ansah (2016) also touch on the ways in which social constructivism and transformative learning go hand and hand when promoting the development of a culturally aware learning community. Transformational Learning Theory, a framework originally developed by Jack Mezirow in 1991, is described as a two-sided learning model that incorporates both instrumental and communicative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Both of these forms of learning incorporate a great deal of communicating needs, desires, and struggles, along with examining the reasons for various cause and effect relationships (Mezirow, 1991).

The social constructivist framework also centers its effectiveness on communication, and students being able to speak openly about their learning and thinking. These two learning models, placed alongside a pedagogical structure like CRP provides students with abundant opportunities to discuss, share, and explore their feelings and questions regarding what it means to be a culturally sensitive person in the year 2017. These three frameworks serve as a triple threat for an educator attempting to construct an effective, respectful, multi-cultural community in his or her classroom, and allows students to not only love learning more about the backgrounds of the students in their class, but about themselves as independent human beings.

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Dyce and Owusu-Ansah (2016) also stress the importance of viewing oneself as a cultural, and social advocate for students. This is an attitude and responsibility that all educators must take on to establish trust and respect amongst their class, as well as assure their students that they will always hold their best interest at heart. Not only are you to insure that your classroom and state requirements are fulfilled, but that all of the cultural, social, physical, and cognitive needs of students are met. This sometimes means going to bat for the children we teach and speaking firmly about their needs to administration, parents, or other staff (Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016). Though this may not always be the easiest thing to do as professionals, however, providing for your students a dependable figure of authority that they can run to when they require “adult back-up” is critical to their academic and social success (Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016).

Regardless of the end goal in creating an open, diverse, and vulnerable classroom community with the students in your classroom that will be consistently maintained throughout the year, the need for students to talk and share the best and worst of what they experience in school, and in the outside world, will never disappear. Setting the standard for how difficult or critical subject matter will be discussed in the classroom, while also attending to the needs of every student is a concept and precedent that must be established from the first day students walk in the door in September (Brown & Cooper, 2011). Students need to know the respectful and appropriate way to engage in such difficult discussions, whether they are speaking directly to other students, requesting assistance from staff, or inquiring directly to a teacher (Brown & Cooper, 2011).

These aforementioned concepts of CRP and establishing successful interpersonal relationships amongst both students and staff do of course fall under culturally sensitive and congruent teaching practices, but are much more specific in what is required from all classroom teachers to be executed successfully. Giving students the solid knowledge and guarantee that

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their teacher will always be a safe and trusted sounding board for them, no matter how ugly it may be, but will not tolerate disrespect along with that notion, is necessary to forward their success as learners, as well as their respect and trust in authority figures. This is particularly appropriate within urban districts where many students are experiencing high levels of poverty, perhaps homelessness, violence in their home, violence being committed against them as children, or community level violence or crime that personally affects them.

Responding to High Priority Subject Matter in the Classroom, and Becoming Culturally Aware

Despite the seemingly flawless system of culturally sensitive teaching and pedagogy that scholars have developed, there are still of course those times where teachers are forced to tackle a conversation among their students that is less than comfortable, that must also be addressed right there in the moment. Whether it is an age old practice children are unfamiliar with that we encounter in a read-aloud that takes place in a different time period, a history lesson that touches on the violence of the Civil Rights era, or a child comparing our recent presidential election to his or her own personal views, we eventually will need to take a moment to discuss subject matter with students that is socially or culturally critical. As teachers, it is expected that we can decipher when these moments are appropriate to build on and discuss, as well as how to do so. In doing so, we are also expected to keep the interpersonal needs of our entire class in mind. Morris and Mims (1999) state in their professional study of cultural sensitivity:

...the most important thing for a teacher to be able to do is to recognize a teachable multicultural moment when it is encountered. This may happen when reading and studying about different countries, or when interesting facts in science are discussed, or when mathematical terminology differs and language study helps students to understand cultural changes. But taking advantage of the 'moment' a teacher can emphasize the relevance and importance of an event or activity. (p. 29).

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This statement hits on several of the most critical contributions educators within highly diverse districts can make to class discussions about sensitive subject matter. Not only must a teacher be able to recognize when to “seize the moment” as highly important topics arise, but must be able to do so flawlessly across all subject matters as each moment occurs. Discussing cultural events and issues, specifically those that are encountered by our non-dominant minority students, can happen at any time, and during any lesson. For this reason, it is important to learn as teachers how to not only address those conversations with ease and minimal discomfort, but to also construct a teachable and educational moment that every child in the room can learn from, despite its negative connotation. We set an example for our students in this way, by showing them the mature and appropriate way to respond to a question or statement that may cause some nervousness in the room, but also maintaining a culturally sensitive and respectful demeanor.

Morris and Mims (1999) touch on the idea of placing students in charge of their own personal learning environment and discussions with classmates when appropriate, a significant contribution to a culturally respectful classroom. This means not leaving everything that your students do in school up to only you, and providing them with choices in how they approach their own learning and discovery (Morris & Mims, 1999). For some districts, this could mean providing non-dominant minority students consistent exposure to knowledge and activities that allow them to feel empowered and important in the educational world. To others, this could mean getting students to a point where they understand and appreciate cultures outside of their own, along with those outside of the United States.

With this in mind, as the teacher in the room, how can we bring our students to a place where they not only view one another as equal, but also are capable of interacting with each of their

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classmates respectfully and sensitively? Muriel Saville-Troike (1978) provides a poetic and heartfelt response to this exact question:

Man is a cultural animal. All of us in one way or another are products of our culture, and many of our behaviors, values, and goals are culturally determined. Our task is to explore how the positive and humanistic aspects of this force can be maximized in education, how it can be used to further our goals and enhance the opportunities of both teachers and students to develop to their full potentials, and how the potentially distorting effect of cultural conditioning (which can result in stereotyping and in prejudice) may be minimized. Because we are human, we can never hope to be culture-free in teaching and evaluating our students, but we can at least attempt to be culture-fair by being sensitive to our own biases and by recognizing that cultural differences do not represent deficiencies. (p. 3).

This statement brings us right to the heart of what culturally sensitive classroom communities look like. Providing opportunities not only for students to better themselves as learners and people, but also for staff to perfect their craft in a way that will positively affect countless amounts of children. This statement also ties into the concept of taking advantage of the moments where multicultural conversation and inquiry can be built upon, discussed, and tied to key academic understandings, as well as providing opportunities for growth and awareness to all, students and teachers alike. Allowing children to represent where they hail from, while educating their classmates about those unfamiliar cultures along the way, is an invaluable educational experience. With multicultural conversation and learning sprinkled into daily classroom routines, the dream of constructing a diverse, worldly, and culturally colorful learning environment can be achieved.

Connections to Social Constructivism

At the end of the day, the question remains how does all of this culturally relevant content relate to scholarly theory? In the teachings of Social Constructivism, originating from the ideas of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1978), children's best learning occurs when they are engaged in

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hands-on activities and meaningful discussions with both peers and educators. According to Vygotsky (1978), children learn to share their thoughts openly, and to wonder and discover through engaging and thoughtful activities appropriate for their age range, while also learning the critical importance of verbal communication within the academic setting. This learned communication occurs through children's interaction with the world around them, and with others creating a two level, learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). This form of dual communication is first learned through a child's individual experience. This indicates what children see, hear, and experience on their own. The second level of communication is formed through the peer group and adult interaction children experience on a daily basis. This in turn, allows children to become better communicators overall as they progress through their educational journey (Vygotsky, 1978).

Through culturally sensitive teaching and pedagogy, we are not only encouraging these teachings, but are also providing our students with the opportunity to expand their Zone of Proximal Development, another Vygotskian concept. The Zone of Proximal Development (or ZPD for short) as described by De Marsico, Sterbini, and Temperini (2013), is also a two level process. The first layer of this process being what a child's current knowledge of a topic or task is and what they currently can do. The second layer or "zone of proximal development" is what the child could become capable of doing regarding that same task with the guidance of a more knowledgeable individual (De Marsico, Sterbini, & Temperini, 2013, p. 12). The Zone of Proximal Development model is also identified as the "learning by doing" teaching approach (De Marsico, Sterbini, & Temperini, 2013), and allows elementary educators to provide their students with the opportunity to experience a wide variety of educational experiences. Through this

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teaching model, students also are able to utilize various learning modalities that will present them with a great deal more of worldly knowledge than other seated, traditional teaching styles.

Through culturally relevant teaching practices, we allow students to expand their ZPD in a number of ways (Santamaria, 2009). Perhaps students in an elementary class prior to this school year were fearful to speak to children of a different race, or became nervous around children that did not speak English exceptionally well. Maybe the African American and Hispanic students in an elementary classroom prior to this year, were taught to hate white people by their parents, and therefore made the learning environment extremely tense and awkward for the other students in that classroom. Perhaps even, one may encounter a child who is highly sensitive to discussions in history class about war due to his or her personal experiences with what guns are capable of doing to people, and to a family.

All of these concepts and beliefs combined together relate back to a child's ZPD. These are all things our students struggle with or did not have enough knowledge about to conquer on their own. With our assistance and the implementation of cultural sensitivity in the classroom, we have in turn expanded students' ZPD concerning the world they live in, as well as respecting others that are different from them in ways they could have never done alone (Santamaria, 2009). This is something many educators' hope to achieve within the confines of one school year, and to many urban educators nationwide, this may be the most critical goal they achieve in a school year, in regards to the social development of their class. Being able to expand a child's knowledge base so much so that they develop a greater and worldlier knowledge of their peers and the world around them should be considered an incredible social success in any classroom (Santamaria, 2009).

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Constructing a culturally sensitive and aware classroom through CRP, and the Social Constructivist framework, does indeed involve a give and take relationship between students and teachers. We as teachers provide students with the tools, strategies, and knowledge they require to become culturally aware and sensitive to their peers. Students then provide us with the opportunity to perfect our teaching craft within highly diverse student populations, and they allow us to open their eyes to what respecting those different from them can look like. Not only do we expand students' abilities to understand their modern day environment, but we also provide them with social, emotional, and academic opportunities to become improved learners, communicators, and people. Though CRP is no easy undertaking it is an educated and well-researched decision to make it the central focus of any daily classroom routine.

Methodology

This study focused on elementary instructors' pedagogical approaches to culturally sensitive subject matter in the classroom. When referencing what it means to be a culturally sensitive teacher in the urban environment, elementary educator Maria Cantu (2008), shares this definition:

A culturally-sensitive teacher is one that is aware of and addresses the students' cultural and ethnic needs as well as their social, emotional, and cognitive needs in order to obtain the students' cooperation. Urban classrooms can present many challenges for teachers due to many factors. (p. 1).

This study focused on the methods and strategies veteran teachers have used during their many years in the field when approaching a situation where a child or teacher must begin a discussion on a critical, violent, or societally prevalent topic (whether it relates to present day, or a previous era) in an open class discussion or lesson. The data collection took place over a period of 6 weeks and incorporated several collection methods. The data were collected utilizing one-

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on-one interviews with the selected staff members, which were audio-recorded, and later transcribed into a formal written document. Observational field notes of instructors' pedagogical choices in the classroom during normal instructional hours were also included.

Participants

The participants in this study were selected because they have completed five or more years of teaching in an urban, low-income district. The group of staff members selected was made up of 10 participants, all of whom are Caucasian, with the exception of one educator who is of Hispanic descent. All educators identify English as their primary language, with the exception of one educator who identifies Spanish as her primary language, but is also fluent in English. Each of the teachers selected for this study come from middle-class socioeconomic status. The participants of this study cover a wide variety of subjects and grade levels in the building, ranging from art and speech, to general education teaching and reading intervention. Participants range from 35-55 years of age, and are female.

Three of the ten participants in this study are considered support staff within the building. One covers speech services for the lower grade levels, while the other is a reading intervention teacher for Kindergarten, first, and second grade. Both ladies have been in the district for over a decade. The third participant is a speech pathologist who is responsible for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students and has been teaching for just over five years. The fourth and fifth participants of this study are both Kindergarten teachers, one who is new to the district, and one that has been teaching in this district for over two decades. The sixth and seventh participants in this study are both first grade teachers who have been in the district for over a decade. The eighth, ninth, and tenth participants of this study are all general education teachers who have vast amounts of

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experience at every elementary age level, two of which retired just last year after over two decades in the district, and one who is considering retirement in the next two years.

Setting

The setting for this study is various elementary classrooms in a K-6 urban school in western New York. The environment is very welcoming and cozy; with many forms of student art work on the walls along with a great deal of seasonal displays placed out in the halls by various teachers. All classrooms involved in this study are organized into groups, where the children sit at tables of 2-3 or more depending on the instructors' preference. The school is strongly rooted in inquiry learning, and so group seating is required in all classrooms to encourage student discussion. Teachers all have one large desk placed in a corner of the room of their choosing, and many choose a particular decorative theme to follow for the entire school year, that is cohesive through their entire classroom.

The district within which this school is included is one of abundant diversity within the student population. As a district, our students are comprised of 60.1% African American/Black, 25.6% Hispanic, 10.2% White, and 4.1% Asian/Native American/East Indian/Other. 84% of our students are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, 16.5% are identified as special needs students, 10% with limited English proficiency. Our district is comprised of students who speak over 87 different languages. 22% of the schools within our district are at 90% poverty rate or higher, which is the highest poverty rate among New York State, when compared to the other larger districts in the area (School website, 2016).

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Positionality

Who I am as a person affects my role as a teacher researcher in the classroom. In using my race, class, gender, education, and my own core beliefs and morals as a framework, it will help me in developing a critical lens within my research. I am a white, non-religious, middle class woman in my 20's with a domestic partner whom I have shared my life with for just under two years. Both of my parents have completed some undergraduate study from Monroe Community College. My mother received an Associate's degree in Criminal Justice, while my father who has been in the military for 17 years, completed various college courses throughout his career. My mother was a medical examiner for Monroe County for 16 years and is now a high school security guard, while my father works for a technical assistance and production company and leads his own unit of soldiers in the Army Reserves.

I graduated from the College at Brockport with a Bachelor's degree in Arts for Children and a minor in Music, and received my initial teaching certification in Childhood Education grades 1-6, along with Students with Disabilities grades 1-6. I am currently a first year teacher, working as a Special Education Consultant teacher in a low-income, urban district and push in to both Kindergarten and 4th grade classrooms, while also conducting my own resource room lessons once a day for 40 minutes. English is my primary language, though I do speak a considerable amount of Spanish from my five years of studying it in middle and high school. I am a current graduate student in the Literacy B-12 MSED program, due to graduate in August of 2017.

Methods of Data Collection

As the participant observer, I was able to observe how each individual instructor who participated in my study chose to create a culturally sensitive learning environment for her

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students. I was also able to observe how each instructor chose to respond to high priority subject matter that students brought up in conversation, or sensitive subject matter that had to be addressed due to its direct relation to academic content. I was able to reflect upon each experience I witnessed, and consider what pedagogical choices I may, or may not adapt and utilize in my own classroom in the near future. I was also able to closely study how each instructor, particularly those of Caucasian descent, chose to go about forming respectful and open interpersonal relationships with their non-dominant minority students through sensitive and fearless discussion, and how this creates a more productive learning environment for the class as a whole.

Data for this study were collected through one-on-one interviews (Appendix A) with each consenting instructor, which were later transcribed into password protected word documents. These interviews functioned as a baseline for me to get to know each instructor, and how they go about approaching this aspect of interpersonal interaction with their students. This concept also goes along with their feelings about approaching and addressing negative or sensitive information brought to them by their students, or vice versa. These interviews also provided me with valuable perspective about my study as a whole. Each interview allowed me to listen to the experiences and advice of veteran teachers that have encountered situations or discussions just like what I am looking to learn more about. Also, each interview traveled in a different conversational direction depending on the information each teacher could offer me about this particular subject matter, allowing this study to become one of varied and balanced viewpoints.

These interviews provided me with a set of expectations for what I will most likely see in each follow up observation after each interview had concluded. Data for this study were also collected using observational field notes that I constructed during regular instructional periods.

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The data I collected was strictly related to teacher behavior only, and included no information about individual students. Through these field notes, I collected information on how each teacher responds to various interactions with students regarding sensitive subject matter within the classroom. I also took notice of each instructor's effort to create culturally sensitive rapport with their students as they go about their typical school day (includes things such as classroom environment, children's artwork, discussions and commentary, etc.).

Trustworthiness of this study was achieved through informed consent on the part of all participants, and through the review of my academic advisor to insure my study is not influenced by personal bias. The trustworthiness of this study was also established through the process and practice of data triangulation (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003). The data collected were used to determine the necessary findings for my research utilizing multiple methods, including audiotaped interviews and observational field notes of each instructors' classroom demeanor to check for consistent themes found amongst all information gathered.

Procedures

I began my research process by sending out a staff recruitment email to ask the initial permission of teachers I wished to collect data from, should they be interested in contributing to my research. Based on their answers, I then visited classrooms to conduct one-on-one interviews with each staff member beginning on January 30th, 2017 over the course of 6 weeks, once I had received all consenting staff members' emails back stating they were willing to participate.

Each interview was audio-recorded as it occurred, then later transcribed into an interview template I designed using a pseudonym for each teacher (Appendix A). Each audio recording was destroyed immediately after each instructor's response was recorded onto the computer.

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Each computer file was then printed and placed in an individual manila folder in my office, using a key protected file cabinet. After completing this process, I then took observational field notes using a double journal entry form I constructed (Appendix B) to record what I witnessed each instructor doing within her daily teaching routine that related directly to my research questions. Each observation was conducted within the same week that particular instructor interviewed with me. In these follow-up observations, I recorded each interaction I witnessed my selected participants having with their students that pertained to cultural sensitivity. I noted their language use, tone of their voice, and body language that I observed as they spoke to each child.

In my follow-up observations, I also recorded notes within my double journal relating to the environment within which each instructor was teaching. I noted things such as student artwork hanging on the walls relating to their heritage and background, cultural flags and objects within the classroom, global items and maps, as well as any items the instructor had contributed to the classroom that touched on their own cultural background and origin.

Analysis

I used the process of data triangulation and coding to analyze and interpret my two forms of data for this study. After each interview and follow-up observation were completed, I began to examine in detail the interview responses each instructor provided me with. I first read each interview back to myself, recalling the body language and tone each teacher chose to use while speaking with me regarding each question, and how this differed from person to person. I also compared these factors to what I witnessed in each instructors follow-up observation, and noted if there were any major differences between their interview statements, and their actual teaching practices. I then began to color code each hand-written interview to mark where I was noticing similarities amongst staff members' answers. I utilized a pink highlighter to mark questions that

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multiple participants had answered in the same, or a very similar way, and then utilized a blue highlighter to mark responses that were unique to that particular interview, or showed an anomaly in my data as a whole.

I followed this same coding procedure when examining my follow-up observations. I noted using my pink highlighter, what instructors did in their daily teaching routine that was the same as other participants, and noted in blue anything that was unique to just that participant. I compared these similarities and differences within each interview to then determine if the answers about cultural sensitivity in the classroom matched up with each instructor's pedagogical choices when interacting with their students.

After completing this color-coding in full, I then examined each interview again. I placed my interviews side by side, and looked at them all laid out together, writing on a sticky note which interview questions provoked similar responses from all of the participants. I then looked at this list once it was completed, and went back to just those particular questions, examining what overarching themes were present within these similar responses. Based on these key questions that were presenting a great deal of similarity from person to person, I then began to jot down some basic notes on what themes I saw emerging in a separate notebook. In this notebook, I also recorded my notes and thinking about each observation I conducted, and how this matched up with each participants interview responses.

On the next page, I jotted down questions in my notebook that I wished to pose to myself as I examined my data that would allow me to fully analyze and interpret the information. I wanted to record these questions while they were fresh in my head to encourage myself to think further about what each participant stated, how they behaved in the classroom with their students, as well as how these two forms or data overlapped in comparison to one another. What specific

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questions had each participant answered in the same way? What could be responsible for these similarities? Were the responses each participant gave consistent with what I witnessed in the classroom? How could I turn these major ideas and noticing's into key findings that would best explain to my readers what thoughts were most common amongst my participants about cultural sensitivity? Using the same color-coding procedure, I then highlighted in yellow the major themes that I felt were appearing most predominantly based on both the interview and follow-up observation data of each participant. I highlighted within my notes the overarching, main ideas I felt were capturing my interest the most, and would use these same concepts to develop the specific findings discussed within my analysis.

Findings

I was able to discover several major themes within my data through the triangulation and coding process. Over a period of six weeks, I was able to find that instructors within the urban school setting had incredibly similar views about how to approach culturally sensitive situations in the classroom, as well as how to discuss negative subject matter with children as it appears in open classroom discussion. Each of my participants had several recommendations for how to incorporate literature into a discussion of tragic or violent events in a child's life, as well as how to provide families with those same literary resources when something negative occurs at home. Each instructor also shared very similar views about how through literacy and curricular resources, the cultural divide between Caucasian teachers and non-dominant minority students can be bridged.

Finding One: Various staff members in the building should be properly trained to talk with, and assist children experiencing trauma, death, or any type of negative event in their life and serve as a "second base" when a classroom teacher is unsure how to proceed.

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Every one of my participants stated nearly the same idea about having properly trained staff members available in the building when referencing the following interview question: *How can I best execute a conversation of this nature in an educational format to insure it is a cultural learning experience for every child? Can you provide me with an example of when you needed to sensitively approach a situation of this nature in the classroom?*

The idea of staff being “properly trained” would most likely sound a bit strange when thinking of educational professionals and how many years of schooling they are required to complete to be able to teach children. The point that eight of my ten participants made regarding this issue was having well trained, knowledgeable staff readily available in the building that children who are experiencing culturally connected trauma or struggles can come to when their emotions are too much to contain. Several of my participants stressed the importance of social workers in elementary buildings, while others shared how critical they believe it is to have a fully involved school psychologist, or additional support staff available throughout the day for students to go to.

One such excerpt regarding staff preparedness was provided to me by Wendy, an elementary teacher who has been in the field for over twenty years. In her interview, she shared how critical she believes it is for every educator, regardless of their role, to build strong, interpersonal relationships with students to insure they always have a safe person to run to when they are struggling:

“It is vital that we put forth the time and effort to develop relationships where children trust us and feel they can confide in us. When these relationships are established, it is more likely that the children will open up about difficult events that they may be experiencing, such as poverty, neglect, parental incarceration, abuse, and domestic violence.”

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Reading interventionist Sue also shared her feelings regarding how to insure staff are prepared to handle children struggling with incredibly difficult events at home, and what conversational tactics are best to use in sensitive situations like these:

“I always make sure to first validate the child’s feelings before doing anything. You want them to know that what they feel is completely okay and normal. Also, despite your real feelings as an adult, you want to normalize the situation they are describing to insure they do not feel like an outcast. I also believe conversations like these should always be handled privately with only the child and staff member one on one. Everyone’s perspective is different, so you don’t always want to speak on sensitive issues in front of a group of kids as they could take your response the wrong way based on their own beliefs. You also need to remember you won’t always be equipped to handle every subject that a kid can bring up now a days. There always needs to be another person on hand that you can contact when you’re unsure how to proceed.”

However, what was most interesting about this question is that very few of my participants appeared to think of themselves as “properly trained” to handle children experiencing culturally related negativity in their lives. Every instructor discussed the concept of having a “second base” staff member that classroom teachers can send their struggling students to. Each participant discussed having someone available for students outside of their home classroom that can talk them down, and have the difficult conversations with them that are necessary to calm them while the rest of the class goes about their day.

In several of my follow-up observations, I was actually able to witness this concept of sending children to an alternate location first hand, but in a much different format than what I expected to see. In this building, every classroom teacher has a “buddy classroom” that children are sent to when they choose to break the rules, are continuously disrespectful to their instructor, or when they refuse to follow directions. This is the child’s known “second base” location when they cannot seem to control their feelings or impulses in their home classroom.

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What was most interesting about witnessing this protocol being put into action were the apparent reasons behind each teacher sending a child out of the room to “collect themselves”. One of my participants, a fourth grade general education teacher named Angela, sent a child out of the room when he was visibly upset, and completely refusing to do his work. This child threw what many would qualify as a tantrum, stomping his feet, tossing his paper around, and yelling rather loudly about how he could not do the assignment without help. My participant expressed to the child that if he does not understand an assignment, he needs to advocate for himself, and raise his hand to gain her attention.

His tantrum like behavior continued, and so my participant chose to send the child to his “buddy classroom” location across the hall. This process took over five minutes to be executed successfully, as the child did not wish to go across the hall, and attempted to argue and claim he would get himself in order. The child was now creating a massive distraction for the other students, and so my participant finally raised her voice and told the child he is to leave her classroom now before she called someone to remove him. He finally trudged himself to the door, as slowly as possible, and made his way across the hall. At no point during this event did my participant choose to ask the child what was ailing him so much to cause this behavior, or what she could do to potentially alleviate the problem, or negative feelings he was experiencing.

So, the question remains, what do my participants feel should be done first before sending a child to their “second base” location? According to Jackie Mader (2015), a recent panel discussion in Washington, D.C shared that urban educators adopting this “ill equipped” attitude is now far too common throughout modern day public schools.

Although most teachers are likely to encounter students dealing with problems like domestic violence, the loss of a family member, homelessness or drug addictions, Labbe said that current teacher preparation programs don’t teach strategies to help teachers

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identify signs of trauma and how to make a student feel safe. “It’s not always the students who are acting up. Sometimes it’s the students who have shut down,” ... (p. 1).

It is clear that educators in the urban environment often do not feel they are capable of properly responding to children experiencing cultural negativity in their lives, or strong, overpowering emotions in the classroom. This lack of confidence was displayed by my fourth grade participant sending her child out of the room, as well as several of my other participants following this same disciplinary protocol when a child is behaving poorly, but has not made the motivation for his or her behavior clear.

One of my participants, Stacey, who provides speech pathologist services in the building, gave this statement regarding sending children to a well-trained staff member when they are dealing with something of a traumatic or negative nature at home:

“There needs to be multiple support systems put in place for kids that deal with this kind of thing. All of the staff in any building need to be educated on these types of negative issues. The more educated staff are on modern day concerns and conflicts that their kids face, the better the kids responses will be. There should always be someone to send them to when we cannot seem to be of any help to that child. Kids are not always willing to open up to just anyone.”

In this excerpt, Stacey echoed what the majority of my participants had already stated when discussing how to handle a child when he or she loses their composure during the regular school day. She believed all staff should be educated on issues of this nature, but that every individual staff member should also have a second choice teacher they can call on when they are unsure what to say or do for an emotional child. Stacey shared in her excerpt also, that children are not always “willing to open up to just anyone”, and so a second base location and teacher is necessary to have in place in every classroom. This in turn proves that she herself (along with

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eight of my remaining participants) does not always feel prepared or equipped to deal with a child experiencing these types of negative events.

Several of my participants when asked this same question about how to best respond to a child experiencing a culturally sensitive or traumatic event, also shared strategies they attempt to use before sending a child to someone else they feel is better equipped to speak on the matter. Several of my participants mentioned utilizing YouTube and other educational videos as a resource when they are truly unsure how to proceed with a child is an excellent way to make a conversation like this a learning moment for all of the students in their class. One of the general education teachers, Jeannie, shared an incredible moment she could recall from her many years in her Kindergarten classroom, where she chose to pull up a video to respond to a highly traumatic event that a child had recently experienced at home due to gang affiliated violence:

“A few years back I had a little girl in my class that actually was home when her father was killed. There was a knock at their door, and this little girl was holding her father’s hand, standing there right next to him. He answered the door, and her uncle was standing there with a gun in his hand. She held her father’s hand as he was shot right in front of her eyes, and kept holding it until the police got there. She was four at the time this happened, but she came into my class with this being common knowledge about her. She was in therapy multiple times a week, but you would never even know that something so horrible had happened to her. Kids really are so incredibly resilient. The first time she became emotional about her Dad, it was during our study of Martin Luther King. I was surprised because she had never talked about it out loud before, but knew I had to respond with something that would make the other kids understand why this was important to talk about. I pulled up a video on YouTube about what it’s like to lose someone you love, and how that can make us feel after it happens. I wish I could remember what it was called. It was good! Even though the video would seem too hokey to an adult, it worked really well for this age group. I think they all came away that day understanding why it was important to talk about it when someone passes away, especially under those circumstances.”

This story in its entirety relates directly back to expanding students’ ZPD through discussion of the events that are occurring with another child in their class. Jeannie showed in her story that by taking something so awful that was happening to this one student, and making this an

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opportunity for all of her students to learn and share about the sad events that have occurred in their lives, she made something incredible occur. She not only opened their eyes to the struggles of others in the classroom, creating a culturally relevant and respectful classroom community, but also created a safe, open space where her students would now know they can truly speak to her about anything (Tomlinson, 2003).

One of my other participants, speech pathologist Nicki, also shared some things she tends to gravitate towards when a child approaches very difficult or sensitive subject matter during speech pull out sessions. Because Nicki is considered support staff and the precise time periods she spends with her students is legally necessary, she often cannot just send a child out of the room to provide a better resource for their struggles.

“I always listen to the child’s full story first so they can get all of their thoughts and emotions out at once. I think that as a teacher you need to have the full picture before you can accurately respond in a way that is beneficial to what that child is dealing with. I also like to turn the conversation towards the child and ask them, ‘Well, what do you think about this?’ I think allowing them to really give their opinion and deeper thoughts on what they experienced is really important. Giving them that voice to express not only how they feel, but also what it’s doing to them as a student trying to function in school is something they usually don’t get at home, so it’s critical for us to provide that outlet. I also like to follow up these conversations with culturally driven illustrations and images. I think visual examples can be really powerful and thought provoking at the elementary level, and the images often spark my entire group to share their opinions about how the child that is struggling can cope. Building that sense of peer community especially for at-risk kids is so critical.”

It is critical to examine the ways in which Nicki’s approach to expanding children’s ZPD relates directly to Jeannie’s approach in the classroom. The data collected for both of these participants shows a strong tie to visual imagery and literature to support students struggling with culturally charged negativity in their lives. Both participants shared their belief on the power of visuals for children at the elementary level, and how this often opens up a classroom wide discussion that is beneficial to all who participate (Tomlinson, 2003).

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Finding Two: Role-play at the elementary age level can be incredibly cathartic for students experiencing traumatic events, and can allow the teacher to learn more about the issue in an appropriate way that will not shock or frighten other students.

Two of the participants who took part in this study, a veteran Kindergarten teacher and a first, second, and third grade reading specialist, shared their feelings about allowing children to role-play difficult situations out in the classroom. Both of these participants shared that they feel allowing children who are experiencing trauma or negative events in their home environment can benefit greatly from acting out these scenarios in class with the assistance of an adult, or another willing child volunteer so they are not forced to keep their emotions bottled up inside. The following interview question from my study prompted these responses from both participants:

What methods and strategies have you previously (or currently) utilized in the classroom that assist well with handling difficult subject matter when students bring it up in discussion? Can you provide an example?

Reading specialist Sue began to discuss how she has had multiple children in her twenty plus years in the field come to reading intervention meetings with some incredibly upsetting stories and situations. She made the clear stipulation that if the story the child wishes to share involves sexually explicit material, references to drugs, or any type of illegal activity, she does not allow it to be discussed openly in front of other children, but asks the child politely to save their thoughts for a time where she can speak to them privately. She followed this statement up with the following anecdotes regarding role-play, and how the use of this strategy can also be fully connected to literature the child is currently reading:

“I think these types of issues are best discussed during morning meeting time with the kids. Most of the groups I pull I have for only about 40 minutes, so we can’t take the entire time to talk.

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However, if it is something I can see is really affecting the child's ability to focus, and their willingness to work, then I take the time needed to address it. This usually means taking the first 10 minutes of our meeting to share out what happened over the weekend, what's bothering them, and what kind of help they need to make this day easier for them. What I like to do if it's applicable, is ask the kids to think about this tough thing he or she is dealing with, and think about a character in their reading that connects to that. I ask them well how would so and so feel about this? Why don't you tell me, or show me. This allows the child to make an educational connection to literature they are reading in school, while also giving them that emotional outlet they need to share what is tugging at their heart and their mind. Sometimes I have just the affected child act out how they feel their character would deal with the scenario, and sometimes I ask another child that can relate to what this student is going through to join in the role-play. It really creates this incredible sense of community within such a small classroom, and it really gets the kids thinking about others instead of just themselves. There are a lot of amazing ways these discussions can turn into miniature literature circles, and really provide some incredible opportunities for rich, meaningful discussion."

The other participant who shared her feelings on role-play in the classroom, June, gave the following insights about how acting out scary or difficult situations can work in a Kindergarten setting:

"I think role-play at this age is so critical for us as educators to really get the full idea of what these kids are coming to school seeing and hearing behind closed doors. Kids in Kindergarten repeat so much of what they see and hear, and sometimes it's so difficult to tell what is fact and what is just their imaginations. I think role-play allows them to really show what they experience on a daily basis, and what situations actually bother them emotionally that they want to express to another adult but don't know how to. I don't ever have the kids act as their parents because that's opening us up to an entire world of language we don't want being said in a Kindergarten classroom, but I do allow the children to act out what they see happen in their homes, what they see in their neighborhood, along with interactions between their siblings and themselves, or interactions between their parents and themselves. I do monitor it rather closely, and if some type of language or subject matter comes up that is totally inappropriate for the other children to hear, I just very casually say 'That's enough for today let's head back to our seats.' When those more sensitive subjects come up, that's when I pull the child aside during a private time where we can discuss the matter in full without worrying about the other children."

The idea of role-play to promote healthy and productive discussion of emotions and struggles is a critical strategy for early childhood educators to utilize when a child cannot seem to find the right words to express how deeply they are hurting. Often when these negative situations occur at home, or within the child's cultural community, we see them displayed as challenging, disruptive

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behaviors that seem to come with no rationale. Kathy Griffen (2014), an active early childhood professional, shares this statement when discussing why role-play can become so critical to the social and emotional health of your students:

Role play different scenarios that arise which lead to negative feelings. Use puppets to show how to handle conflict and being upset, mad, or angry. Include suggestions for how to "cool down" or find a quiet place to gain composure. It is also important to help a student with challenging behavior re-enter the classroom community. Learning how to overcome these emotions and find acceptable ways for engaging in play and classroom activities is equally as hard. Model acceptance of the child as they re-enter. (p. 2).

This statement in its entirety applies more so to the younger grade levels on the elementary spectrum, however, is equally important in terms of how we as instructors can help children become a working part of the classroom community again after something critical happens. Often as educators we only consider how to deal with the here, now, and in the moment classroom events. We do not always consider the later moments that are equally critical when considering our students' long-term needs. We handle things as they come up, and as they are put in front of us in the best way we know how, and do not always take the time to think about what will be necessary for a child to successfully re-acclimate to the classroom climate and routine after seeing or experiencing something horrendous (Griffen, 2014).

Finding Three: Culturally relatable literature that discusses common events in urban students' lives is best to use to bridge cultural gaps between a teacher and student, as well as promote family support for the child.

This finding connects to the following interview question:

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What forms of literature are best to use to bridge the cultural divide between a Caucasian teacher and an African American student when an event occurs in a students' life that the educator is not familiar or experienced with? What is your reasoning for your answer?

The variety with which my participants chose to respond regarding this subject matter was incredibly intriguing. Many of my participants responded with similar ideas and suggestions when considering culturally relevant literature, while several others offered unique responses that I had not yet encountered.

One particular participant, Renee, who is a first grade teacher in the building discussed a very specific piece of literature she has used repeatedly in her classroom to educate her children about the important of cultural diversity, and why hating others that are different from us is foolish, and unacceptable.

“My top pick for teaching cultural sensitivity is the Sneetches by Dr. Seuss (Seuss, 1961). I’ve used it for I don’t even know how many years at this grade level, and it works beautifully. In the story, there are two groups of Sneetches, one group with yellow stars on their bellies, and one group with no stars. They hate each other at first because the star wearing Sneetches think they are better than everyone else. The kids learn by the end of the book when the Sneetches finally realize how ridiculous they’ve been, that no person deserves to be treated differently because of their appearance. The visuals that Seuss gives you in that book really stick with the kids, and it’s an idea that I can reference over and over because they have that consistent visual reminder. It’s a simple idea at first, but it truly does carry with them through the grade levels as they age and they learn the true, deeper meaning of cultural sensitivity.”

Renee was the only participant out of the ten I interviewed who could provide me with a specific resource to utilize when relating literature to culturally responsive teaching. The other nine offered rather generic responses, and did not specify any particular book or resource they have enjoyed using in their own classroom for this purpose. The most common responses I received from my other nine participants touched on various ideas related to using literature in the classroom that involve culturally specific situations urban children would be most familiar

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with. This includes things like historical books that discuss assassinations, fictional stories that discuss the death of a family member or friend, as well as literature that discusses culturally driven violence and death.

An example of this practice being put into action was nicely explained by veteran teacher Wendy. In the classroom, she chooses to not only use literature for providing cultural and emotional learning experiences that sometimes involve the negative events in students' lives, but also, uses that literature as an opportunity for children in the room who can relate directly to the material being discussed to become "experts", and share with the class how an event like this happens in real life.

"I find it so simple to turn to a child who may share the same ethnicity or experience as what we are reading about and ask them to be our 'expert' and discuss most importantly their everyday life, in addition to the wonderful unique traditions and customs in which they participate. I always attempt to highlight the positive cultural aspects even when the material being discussed is not exactly positive. It is critical to make every child feel proud and unashamed of their cultural background, and even if this means sometimes including some negative or uncharted subject matter in a class discussion, then so be it. Allowing them to become experts and teach the rest of the class how the events described in our literature actually occur in the real world not only provides meaningful learning for the rest of the children, but allows that child to openly share and express their thoughts in a way that is safe and healthy."

Aside from Wendy, the majority of my participants focused on providing children with literary resources that discuss the various stages and aspects of death and grief, as unfortunately, in the urban environment, the death of a close friend or family member is far from uncommon.

When asked about this particular topic Jeannie, one of my Kindergarten interviewees, shared the following:

"I always keep books in my room for the kids to have free access to that discuss the death of a parent or grandparent, and what it means to grieve for someone. I also keep brochures available in my room at all times that I send the kids home with when they are experiencing something tragic or psychologically damaging that they can share with the parents. My goal in doing this is to provide an opportunity for the parents to discuss the hard things with their child, whatever

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they may be, and to open up that door of communication so the child is not holding everything they feel inside. At the end of the day, it is the parent's job to monitor their child's emotional health when something this serious happens, because we can only offer them so much in the classroom. I also feel it's critical for the parent to be more involved in this type of situation, as there are most likely a great deal of cultural anecdotes and understanding that we can't offer as white teachers."

Jeannie was one of two participants in my study who chose to discuss providing the families of their students with take home resources that can benefit them as a unit. Through the practice of providing literature to poverty stricken and struggling families, we not only show that we care about their needs and are willing to lend a hand outside of the classroom, but we open the door to excellent parent and teacher communication. For children experiencing any form of violence or negativity in their home, constructing this bond with parents is critical. Through literature we create the opportunity to show children's families that even though we may not understand their experiences and background, we are trying to, and will do all we can to support their child.

Finding Four: Normalizing culturally centered negativity and trauma in the lives of urban children is critical to their emotional and social wellness in the classroom.

Another response that I found to be frequently shared by my participants was the idea of normalizing culturally related negativity or violence in the classroom for the sake of our students. We are fully aware as dominant majority educators coming into the urban classroom from completely different walks of life than our children, that there is a great deal of information they will offer us about their lives that we will have difficulty relating to. However, what is most critical regarding this matter is to insure that our children do not recognize that their lives being surrounded by these things is not normal.

It is our responsibility as classroom teachers to put systems in place that will in fact, normalize these occurrences and subjects, regardless of whether they actually can be considered

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normal or not. We can never allow our students to know that their lives, as thought of by others, can be considered “unhealthy” or “scary”, as this completely closes the door to possible healthy communication between teacher and student, as well as sets our students up to feel like outcasts in the classroom. Tracy, a first grade teacher who also contributed to my study, shared these exact thoughts regarding her own personal memories of working with children experiencing great difficulty at home:

“Because these kids experience things so far beyond our comprehension and experience level, I have always found it best to continue to place them at the same standard as their classmates when it comes to classroom expectations and rules. I feel if I allow one kid who is dealing with hardship at home some slack with their work and effort, the others who are also struggling will expect the same, and then it becomes a huge power struggle. I never allow my students to use their home life as an excuse for why their work isn’t done, or why they’re not able to give me 100% that day. Because, in the real world, no employer or professor will allow a kid to slack off because their dad is in jail, or their mom is a drug addict, or because they aren’t sleeping enough at night because they share a room with two other siblings in a one bedroom apartment. I don’t ever want my students to view their crappy circumstances as a crutch or an excuse. My philosophy is okay, if this is your normal, then we have to somehow fit schoolwork into that normal. I remember one time I had a kid tell me the reason his homework wasn’t done was because they traveled several hours to go visit his father in prison. I looked at him and said, ‘If you know you’re going to make that drive every week, or every other week, wouldn’t it be wise for you to bring something to do on the car ride?’ He shook his head, and I followed it up with, ‘Then next time you bring your homework and a pencil, and you do it on the ride down to see dad. Use your time wisely.’ I’ve always felt holding them to the same expectation I would a child coming from a solid family pushes them to work harder, and rise above the hand of the cards the world has dealt to them. I think it teaches them that life-long lesson that you can overcome anything no matter how terrible it is, and you will feel that much more accomplished knowing you had to push past obstacles that others didn’t.”

Another participant who contributed to my study Jennifer, a Kindergarten teacher new to the district, also shared her feelings on normalizing sensitive subject matter in the classroom, but in a much different way:

“I always try to find a story that can make something negative and scary seem a little more normal. For the young ones especially, it is so hard to make them not panic when something difficult happens, as they are so young and so inexperienced. They have no idea how to handle those more intense emotions, or how to tell an adult how deeply they are struggling. I find that

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using a story as a conversation starter often gets them not only to open up about harder things, but encourages a community conversation that will offer them the support they need from the other children. When the other children share that similar things happen at their house, that child feels far less terrified and panicked, and is more willing to discuss how the event has made them feel which makes my job as a teacher far easier.”

Though what Jennifer and Tracey discussed in their interviews about normalizing traumatic events in children’s lives may seem strange from the outside looking in, their approach is one that is supported by a variety of scholars. Kristen Olson (2009) for example, after conducting her own research study using 100 students as data points, shared this insight regarding holding every child to the same standard, regardless of their circumstances at home:

Also, hold your child or your student to very high standards because you believe it is possible for them to grow into it. My interviewees said that it was that teacher who believed they could do so much more than they thought possible of themselves who really began to change the way they saw the world and their own place in it. Having someone in your life who holds you to high standards and believes you can achieve is so critical. Teachers need to do that too. Holding a kid to high standards is actually saying to them “I believe you can do more than you think you can,” so you shouldn’t be worried that they’ll be frustrated by not being able to meet the goal. (p. 54).

As teachers, we naturally have a soft spot for that child in our class that we know is struggling just to make it to school with a smile on his or her face in the morning. We feel badly for them, and sympathize with them when life is unkind and unfair to them, and it is incredibly difficult not to offer these children a free pass when something particularly awful occurs to them, their family, or to their cultural community.

However, if we provide them with a cop out because their lives are less than ideal, not only are we setting them up to believe the rest of the world will always feel badly for them and offer the same excuse, but that they should not reach for more because they just aren’t capable of greater things (Olson, 2009). Those students that we meet that break our hearts with their

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incredibly emotional stories, are also the students we will be responsible for pushing the hardest in every single task they complete in the classroom. Pushing the limits of these children not only teaches them that the world will not slow down for a sad story, but that they are more than just a tragic tale and can accomplish far more than what the world has told them they can.

Finding Five: Culturally charged conversations must be student led and not heavily manipulated by staff anecdotes.

All but two of the participants within my study touched on culturally relevant conversations being almost entirely student led. I was able to observe a conversation of this nature in one of my follow-up observations of my fourth grade participant, Angela and her students. During the buildings acknowledgement of Black Lives Matter day, Angela's students were given a short essay to write explaining to the reader the exact definitions of prejudice, stereotyping, and racism, and to provide examples of each. In this essay, the students were also expected to provide one sentence in each paragraph proving why these stereotypes and prejudices are incorrect and foolish.

Before creating their essays however, the students participated in an open classroom discussion of what types of stereotypes and prejudices they have heard being shared in the outside world, and how hearing those things made them feel. Angela began the discussion by providing her students with dictionary definitions of stereotype, prejudice, and racism so they would be clear on the differences between each term. She provided one example of each, and even shared a personal story about her past that applied to the conversation to get the children really thinking. After she had finished her story, she opened the floor up entirely to the class, and told them she wanted to hear their thoughts and feelings regarding the same types of situations.

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The children were hesitant to discuss such touchy topics at first, as the first several seconds of this discussion were rather quiet. A male student in Angela's class finally raised his hand and shared that in his neighborhood, he has heard adults say that all white people are racist against African American people. He followed this statement by expressing that he knows that this is not true, because several of the teachers in his school building are white, and he knows they have no problem with black people.

This conversation then sparked another child to raise her hand. This female student shared that she once heard a person say that Asian people cannot see because of the shape of their eyes. Angela took this moment to direct the students' attention to the one Asian child in their class, and asked "Joey, can you see me okay from over there?" The child of course shook his head yes, and Angela responded with, "Ah, isn't that interesting? So I think this proves how ridiculous stereotypes are doesn't it guys?" The children of course let out a very loud "Yes!" This conversation continued on for about another twenty minutes, with the children discussing negative concepts ranging from black people loving fried chicken and watermelon, to white cops hating all black men, to white women being fearful to walk past black men at night time, and even Hispanic people all being thieves.

What was so incredible about this conversation was that Angela barely had to speak or offer any type of guidance during this open discussion. The children fed off each other's ideas, assisting each other in figuring out what stereotypes were true and justified, which ones were not, and how we as people should feel when we hear another person spew negative statements like this outside of school. The children shared how they felt after hearing this kind of anger from others, what they believed about each statement, and how they know in their hearts that

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every single stereotype, prejudice, and form of racism being discussed was untrue, and more importantly, unfair.

Angela shared several thoughts in her interview prior to this observation regarding how she felt this activity and discussion would benefit her students, and why it is so important for them to have the experience of engaging in sensitive cultural discussions:

“It always amazes me what the kids will admit and talk about when they’re given that freedom to just talk amongst themselves about something so serious. They get very brave and are willing to admit to their own feelings about topics that really are not even discussed often amongst adults for fear of insulting someone. They become very candid, and we as teachers really get the chance to know them on a much deeper, personal level. Their classmates get to know them far better as well. I think discussions like these can be incredibly cathartic especially for the kids that are struggling with really hard things outside of school. We can’t force them to talk about the things that are hurting them, but when we open up an opportunity like this for the class to just casually chat and support each other with non-judgmental conversation, often they wind up talking about them anyways.”

Fellow participant Wendy also shared her feelings on providing students opportunities to become more culturally and emotionally aware through meaningful conversation. Wendy however, adds herself into the equation when conducting discussions of this nature with her students:

“I have found that sharing lunch with students provides a wonderful opportunity to converse. Opportunities can be formal or informal. Again, it comes down to knowing your students. What works with one child or one class can be completely different for another child or another class. I have had a tremendous amount of sensitive conversations. Sometimes I begin the conversation privately, or sometimes I will share a book with the class to open up a conversation as a way of affirming for that student that what they shared with me is important and valuable to discuss with their classmates as well. Of course the child always can take the option of remaining anonymous in these situations as well.”

The importance of providing students with this level of cultural and societal awareness has been discussed in a variety of ways amongst scholarly authors. Most of these authors however,

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emphasize the critical nature of providing students with modeled statements and thoughts prior to opening the floor to an open classroom discussion. As much as we need to allow students to openly share with one another, and construct conversations of their own, we as the instructor in the room have a responsibility to provide them with examples of how to do so properly first.

“This cognitive leadership, coupled with the instructor’s facilitative or managerial role, is vital to difficult subject matter discussions. Such discussions are stressful in a face-to-face environment, and they involve additional complicating factors....” (Higbee & Ferguson, 2006, p. 2).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover the ways in which educators like myself can use particular strategies, literature, and methods in their classrooms to best discuss culturally specific unrest and violence, while also constructing a learning environment for students that is culturally responsive and respectful. This study centered around the following research questions:

How might educators sensitively and thoughtfully explore societal concerns and student experiences related to modern day social and cultural events that incorporate critical topics such as race, religion, lifestyle preferences, and socioeconomic status in the classroom?

What ways can be considered most beneficial for us as educators to use culturally relatable/relevant literature, discussion, and curricula in the classroom when a child experiences unfamiliar tragedy, crime, or violence related to their ethnic community, home, or country on a national scale?

During this six week study, I found that staff members had a great deal of similar opinions on how the cultural divide between non-dominant minority students and dominant majority educators can be bridged through the use of literary practices and discussion. I also discovered

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several anomalies in the data originating from several key staff members. The data were in no way limited to staff members of a specific race, socioeconomic status, or cultural background.

Data analysis revealed that educators in the urban environment believe being properly and adequately trained to deal with children who are experiencing culturally driven trauma or negativity is key to their overall success in school (Tomlinson, 2013). Elias Kourkoutas and Theodoros Giovazolias (2015) support this concept solidly stating the following regarding teacher preparedness when working with a child that has experienced, or is experiencing trauma:

Teachers increasingly face many challenges in a wide range of areas, mainly in those related to their students' behavioral problems and psychological well-being. Evidence shows that teachers can effectively assist students at risk or with difficulties, when they are adequately guided and supported by well-trained school counselors. Hence, the need for more holistic and systemic school-based interventions for children at risk and their families, as well as specialized assistance for teachers is advocated by many authors. (Kourkoutas & Giovazolias, 2015, p. 1).

Along with the participants of my study, Kourkoutas and Giovazolias (2015) emphasize the importance that school counselors hold when it comes to providing proper professional development for teachers regarding the social and emotional wellness of their students. Teachers do not always possess the psychological and mental training required to adequately calm and converse with a child handling something horrendous that school psychologists do. This in turn requires building psychologists to insure that these needs are being met when a classroom teacher is unsure how to proceed.

Data analysis also showed that staff members believe very strongly in the use of role-play at the elementary level to allow students to better express their emotions and needs in a safe way, while also providing a cultural learning experience for every child in the classroom (Griffen,

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2014). Isenberg and Jalongo (2006) describe the importance of play related expression of negative feelings at the elementary level with a real-life classroom example:

Pretend play allows them to think out loud about experiences charged with both pleasant and unpleasant feelings. A good example is Alexander, a 4-year-old whose dog was recently hit by a car. In his dramatic play in the pet hospital, his teacher heard him say to another child, 'I'm sad because the car hurt my dog.' (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2006, p. 2).

In this example, we see a child expressing their sad and uncomfortable feelings about the death of a family pet, which is a common event in young children's lives, and is most often their first experience with death and grief. However, for children affected by poverty, violence, and culturally related death, this type of activity would look far different. This does not however, erase or change its importance to a struggling student. Providing children with opportunities like these to fully express their feelings in an open classroom discussion; to go through the situations they experience step by step provides them not only with the opportunity to cope and deal with the negative emotions, but to receive support and reassurance from their peers that they are not alone and that they will be supported when they come to school.

Finally, data analysis showed that urban educators believe the best literary resources to use when attempting to respond to a child that is experiencing negativity at home or in their ethnic community, is that which includes common and relatable cultural events that can be discussed through student led conversation. This concept also touches on the idea of normalizing cultural violence and negativity with students to insure they do not experience feelings of isolation or panic (Olsen, 2009). Diana Hodge (2014), manager of academic library services at University of South Australia, discusses this concept in relation to teaching at the adolescent level describing

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the educational practice of “bibliotherapy” and how it can be applied to all students of any age level:

The advocates of bibliotherapy, the use of books for therapy, would argue that reading novels can help young people to understand social and emotional problems and develop insight into themselves. Bibliotherapy is based on the reader’s identification with the characters or situation, their emotional engagement with the characters, insight when the character resolves their problem and the reader’s realization that they are not alone and can also find solutions to their challenges. Reading novels dealing with social and personal problems is a safe way to bring these issues into focus and give adolescents a chance to talk about their own experiences or relate their own lives to what others have gone through. (Hodge, 2014, p. 3).

Though this discussion centers more around the social and emotional needs of students of the adolescent age level, these concepts can be utilized for children at any age. The use of culturally accurate literature not only opens up discussions about darker themes in a safe and non-threatening way in the classroom, but encourages students to view their life struggles from the perspective of another character, avoiding feelings of loneliness and hopelessness (Hodge, 2014).

Conclusions

Students at risk of violence or trauma in their own personal environment, both in the home and within their community, must be provided with multiple staff resources to properly cope and acclimate to classroom expectations

The data collected within this study clearly demonstrated the importance of providing students with multiple trusted staff members they can speak to when they are overcome with the emotions and struggles of their home environment. Staff members expressed that not every child will respond the same way to everyone, and so alternate locations and teachers must be put in place when all other options have been exhausted. “...progressive educators have contended that ‘students will care about schools that care about them’ and that students will work harder to

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achieve academically in a context of safety, connection, and shared purpose” (Noddings 1996, p. 2). These types of social and emotional resources are critical to the academic success of every child. By providing opportunities for our students to speak to whomever they feel most comfortable when they are emotionally distraught, we not only show them that their mental and emotional wellness is top priority, but that they can always feel safe and heard when they come to school.

Cohen (2006) supports this concept when referencing those who choose to ignore or not prioritize the social and emotional needs of the students they teach; “...social, emotional, ethical, and academic education is a human right that all students are entitled to...ignoring this amounts to a social injustice” (Cohen, 2006, p. 1). Should we ignore the emotional needs of our students, we prove to them that their struggles and frustrations not only are unimportant, but also that we as their teachers have no desire to get to know them as people outside of the classroom. A child feeling this way cannot possibly allow for consistent academic and social strides throughout the school year.

Various forms of literacy provide a powerful opening for necessary student sharing and discussion

My analysis showed that children are provided with invaluable and unique cultural learning experiences through discussions and lessons centered around grade level literature. The choices available within these discussions and lessons are endless, and can come in the form of book driven discussions, peer led discussions, literature and character studies, as well as various writing activities and prompts. Teachers are able to navigate through an abundant variety of resources to support their individual students’ diverse cultural needs and backgrounds, while also

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providing their entire class with invaluable perspective about the world around them, outside of their own realm of knowledge.

What is most critical for urban educators is to locate literature that not only allows students to better relate to academic subject matter, but provides them an opportunity to deeply analyze the more difficult and traumatic parts of their lives. These literary experiences allow students to make academic sense of their own version of “normal”. We want to not only encourage them to connect their own life experiences to the academic content we present them with, but to ask questions that stretch far beyond the classroom, and inquire as to how the literature they read connects to the outside world.

Rather than settle for readymade answers, inquiry urges learners to reach beyond information and experience to seek an explanation, to ask why, and to consider what if. Learners, however, need to remain anchored in their own life experiences in order to generatively reach beyond themselves to create productive tension between current understandings and new experiences. Tension and the state of being off balance during inquiry are the driving forces that compel learners to move forward, particularly when supported by a collaborative community. (Dewey, 1938, p. 13).

As Dewey so eloquently states here, putting our students into a position where they are forced to think beyond the text they are hearing and reading, and to consider how the story can relate to the real world is what creates true connection and meaningful cultural learning experiences. Through inquiry and literary questioning, we allow our students the opportunity to connect the harder aspects of their lives to classroom curricula in a calm and safe way, as well as make sense of their own home and community environment, avoiding feelings of abnormality, panic, or inadequacy. Student driven inquiry based off of classroom literature and discussion also provides students with the opportunity to discuss, share, and debate with one another and not just their instructor. These meaningful and text driven discussions amongst students lead to a more caring,

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more open, and honest classroom community where each child feels completely comfortable sharing their thoughts, ideas, and personal text-to-self connections.

Implications for students

Students within the urban environment are provided with invaluable learning experiences through the use of culturally relatable literature and discussion

Many educators would agree that discussing things like race relations, gang and gun related violence, domestic abuse, and childhood neglect are not subjects that should enter into the classroom under any circumstances. However, as evidence has clearly shown, children being forced to be silent regarding these subjects not only inhibits their abilities to be a productive citizen within their classroom community, but also damages their potential to grow both socially and emotionally. As educators in the urban setting, a portion of the responsibility we have to our students involves setting these culturally charged conversations up in such a way that our students feel safe, heard, and cared for. Also, this process involves setting this conversations up in a way that the discussion can become an eye-opening, culturally enriched learning experience for every child in the room with the support of appropriate curricular and literary resources. Gay (2002) shares the following insight on why it is equally critical for both teachers and students to engage in culturally relevant discussion pertaining to classroom curricula and literature:

In order to help teachers gain confidence and develop their identities as experts in the field, teacher educators should construct methods assignments that invite their students to scrutinize ‘issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender’ and those which help them incorporate and interrogate ‘multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives’. (p. 108).

This quote gets right to the heart of why providing students with meaningful cultural learning and discussion opportunities is so critical to their academic success. Gay describes how

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providing students with assignments that allow them to examine world and societal issues from various perspectives and levels of knowledge, drastically improves students abilities to empathize with others different from them, as well as build connections between the world they live in and the texts they read in school (Gay, 2002). We want and need our students to put themselves in the shoes of children of varying skin colors, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds to truly grow not only as individuals but also as learners. These experiences allow students to gain a knowledge base about the world they live in that is completely invaluable to their educational journey, and is critical to their future success in peer, family, and spousal relationships.

Implications for teachers

Staff responsibilities in the urban classroom come with hardships educators are not always prepared for in the moment

Often times when we sign on to teach in a district crippled by poverty, we cannot always fathom what that crippling weight will come with when it comes to our students. We picture sad, magazine cover children that simply want our love, comfort because they are hungry, and do not have a suitable bed to sleep in at night. We do not always come prepared to handle the little boy so angry that he does not have a father to come home to every day that he throws furniture when he gets a question wrong in math. We do not always expect to teach the little girl with a history of abuse who is so afraid of men that when a male teacher walks by, she bursts into hysterical tears and shrieks.

As teachers within the poverty-stricken setting, we are often times forced to stray away from traditional classroom routines and discussions, and take a moment to talk to our students in depth

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about the more mature aspects of the real world. We are expected to not just talk about the subject matter that is drastically affecting our students every day, but grapple with how to continue upholding our high expectations for each of them despite these damaging factors. Eric Hougan (2017) shares his real world take on exactly how urban educators should compare poverty charged conversations to real life experiences when they are approaching one such conversation with their class:

A successful business never enters into a new market without first learning about their potential customers. From market to market, the business will adapt, changing to the needs of their customers. This paradigm must also apply to education. Yes, poverty sucks. I have been teaching in a high-poverty school for many years and I have seen its ugly impact on my students. Students come to my class hungry from not having dinner or breakfast, tired from having to work the night shift to support their families, frustrated from not having a safe or quiet place to study, and violated from being put in unsafe situations. There are ways to address this, meanwhile maintaining high expectations for the students. (p. 1).

As educational professionals, we are fortunate to have access to the resources necessary to support these conversations in an appropriate, inclusive, and realistic way. We are also fortunate enough to be able to provide these same conversational resources to our parents and families, to insure our students continue to be emotionally supported and cared for outside of the classroom walls.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include both time and number of participants. Due to time constraints, this research was conducted in 6 weeks and only included the insights of city school staff members from the selected building. To further expand the value of this analysis, a future study would need to be conducted with a much larger pool of participants from various urban

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areas. I was also the sole researcher conducting this study, which left only my interpretation of the data collected.

Suggestions for future research

Based on the results of this study, I will continue to research and further educate myself on ways in which dominant majority educators can bridge cultural gaps between themselves, and their non-dominant minority students. Through the knowledge I have gained and will continue to gain, I will be able to provide my students with culturally relevant instruction that will not only benefit them academically, but socially and emotionally. I will continue to find opportunities to connect academic discussion to critical cultural and societal subjects with my students, in ways that will expand their perspective of both their own cultural background, and the backgrounds of their peers. I will also continue to gather evidence supporting the need for culturally relevant pedagogy in every classroom both urban and suburban, and advocate for these practices being put into place as I gain more leadership of the professional capacity in my district.

Overall significance

The significance of this study lies within the concept of attending to any and all needs of our students. This concept includes providing a well-rounded and meaningful educational experience to each child that enters our classroom, while taking on the responsibility of attending to the deeper emotional, social, and mental needs of all. More specifically in the urban environment, as professionals we are required to seek out the necessary training and curricular resources needed to best support these needs in way that is culturally relevant and sensitive to diverse student populations. By allowing our students to express how they view the world around them, as well as how they view their role in the public education system based on their personal experiences

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with modern day society, we provide them with the platform to continue achieving their ever-expanding academic and personal goals for the remainder of their educational journey.

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Appendix A

This interview will also include follow up questions to allow me to further understand your initial response

- 1. How can we best utilize culturally relatable literature and language to insure our students never feel isolated for experiencing difficult events at home or within their ethnic community?**

- 2. What forms of literature are best to use to bridge the cultural divide between a Caucasian teacher and African American student when an event occurs in a student's life that the educator is not familiar or experienced with? What is your reasoning behind your answer?**

- 3. How can I best execute a conversation of this nature in an educational format to insure it is a cultural learning experience for every child? Can you provide me with an example of when you needed to sensitively approach a situation of this nature in the classroom?**

- 4. What methods and strategies have you previously (or currently) utilized in the classroom that assist well with handling difficult subject matter when students bring it up in discussion? Provide an example?**

- 5. Do you plan ahead of time for conversational moments like these? Which approach do you feel is more beneficial for students, pre-planned or on the fly?**

- 6. Do you recommend any scholarly literature that supports the ideals we have discussed? Why do you recommend it?**

Appendix B

Observations	Interpretations

Student responses to instructor's decisions/comments

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