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Culturally Relevant Education for Rural Schools: Creating Relevancy in Rural America

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CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION FOR RURAL SCHOOLS: CREATING RELEVANCY IN RURAL AMERICA

Joshua J. Anderson, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2016

In this dissertation, I investigate the ways in which culturally relevant pedagogy is conceptualized and implemented by two secondary English Language Arts educators in one school district with a strong sense of rural identity. Culturally relevant pedagogy is considered by many professionals in the field of education to be an effective philosophy to inform instructional practices for narrowing the achievement gap of historically marginalized groups (Cummins, 1990; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2000). A careful review of the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy reveals the discourse surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy has largely been dominated by urban voices (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Esposito & Swain, 2009; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 1996). This study aims to fill the void in the current literature on culturally relevant pedagogy by lending a voice to rural secondary English educators dedicated to a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Utilizing Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy as the basis to inform their instruction, the rural secondary English educators in this study highlight "the ways" they conceive and illustrate culturally relevant practices within their specific rural teaching contexts. This study extends previous research on culturally relevant pedagogy by offering detailed professional teaching profiles, including important influences on the

development of the educators' critical pedagogy. In addition, this research examines the educators' critical conceptions of three major components of culturally relevant pedagogy as originally identified by Ladson-Billings (1994): 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. This study triangulates the participants' reflections with field observations and course document analysis in order to better understand how two rural ELA educators adopt and adapt Ladson-Billings' original conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy to address the needs of their students.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION FOR RURAL SCHOOLS:
CREATING RELEVANCY IN RURAL AMERICA

by

Joshua J. Anderson

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: One Beginning Teacher’s Journey.....	3
Statement of the Problem.....	11
Purpose of This Study.....	13
Chapter Overviews.....	15
II. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	17
Understanding Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....	18
The Criticality of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....	20
The Culture Within Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....	29
Understanding Rurality.....	31
The Problematic Definitions of Rurality.....	32
The Rural Context.....	35
The Relevancy of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Rural Schools.....	38
Place-Conscious Approaches to English Language Arts Instruction.....	39
Multicultural Approaches To English Language Arts Instruction.....	46
Chapter II Conclusion.....	55

Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

III.	METHODOLOGY.....	57
	Guiding Questions and Sub-questions.....	58
	The Case Study.....	59
	Sampling.....	62
	The Participants.....	66
	Jason.....	66
	Stacey.....	67
	The Interviews.....	69
	Observations.....	74
	Document Assessment.....	76
	Data Analysis and Theoretical Framework.....	77
	Chapter III Conclusion.....	79
IV.	CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY: CRITICAL CONCEPTIONS AND ILLUSTRATIONS.....	81
	The Professional Teaching Profiles.....	82
	Personal and Professional Journeys.....	86
	Current Teaching Contexts.....	87
	Philosophical Influences on Teaching Secondary English Language Arts.....	90
	Jason.....	92
	Jason’s Personal and Professional Journey.....	92

Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

Jason's Current Teaching Context.....	96
Philosophical Influences on Jason's Teaching of Secondary English Language Arts.....	100
Stacey.....	104
Stacey's Personal and Professional Journey.....	104
Stacey's Current Teaching Context.....	109
Philosophical Influences on Stacey's Teaching of Secondary English Language Arts.....	113
Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Illustrations of its Practice.....	117
Personal Definitions and Understandings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....	120
Critical Conceptions of Self and Others.....	121
Jason's Critical Conceptions of Self and Others.....	122
Stacey's Critical Conceptions of Self and Others.....	128
Critical Conceptions of Social Interactions with Others.....	133
Jason's Critical Conceptions of Social Interactions with Others.....	134
Stacey's Critical Conceptions of Social Interactions with Others.....	139
Critical Conceptions of Knowledge Construction.....	146
Jason's Critical Conceptions of Knowledge Construction.....	147
Stacey's Critical Conceptions of Knowledge Construction.....	155
Chapter IV Conclusion.....	162

Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

V.	IMPLICATIONS.....	172
	A Review of This Study.....	172
	Key Findings.....	176
	How Do Teachers, Specifically Rural Teachers, Define the Concept of Culturally Relevant Education?.....	177
	How Do Teachers Demonstrate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy With Their Choice of Instructional Method?.....	181
	Resulting Questions and Potential Future Studies.....	187
	Concluding Thoughts.....	190
	REFERENCES.....	192
	APPENDIX	
	Human Subjects International Review Board Approval Letter.....	202

LIST OF FIGURES

1. NCES's Urban-Centric Locale Categories.....	33
2. Professional Teaching Profiles: Meeting Educators Where They Are.....	83
3. Jason and Stacey's Classroom Demographics.....	87
4. Three Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Its Practice.....	118
5. Jason's Classroom Configuration.....	137
6. Stacey's Classroom Configuration.....	144
7. Freshmen English "Reading Friend".....	148
8. Educator's Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....	182

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Culturally relevant pedagogy utilizes the prior knowledge, experiences, and backgrounds of students to not only inform lesson instruction but also provide educational equality for students from diverse ethnic, social-class, gender, and religious groups. The research field of rural education has experienced a recent renaissance with its continued emphasis on place-conscious methods of reading and writing instruction. Place-conscious methods of reading and writing instruction are popular in rural communities because of the pedagogies connection to the natural world, a sentiment echoed by many individuals living in rural spaces (Gruenewald, 2003a). Place-conscious education provides the framework to explore the relationships among the students of a community with an emphasis on their relationship to the natural world to prepare them to participate in the democratic processes of creating and sustaining their local lives and local soil (Gruenewald, 2003b).

Despite this resurgence in the field of rural education research in the United States, there has been a lack of attention paid to urban teachers use of place-conscious methods of reading and writing instruction because of the pedagogy's emphasis on ecological and rural contexts. At the same time, rural teachers in predominantly homogeneous communities working within the critical self-reflexive frameworks of critical pedagogies developed in urban settings like culturally relevant pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003a; Schade Eckert & Alsup, 2015). In response to the growing need for a pedagogy that recognizes the cultural diversity of America's students, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) coined the term culturally relevant pedagogy to describe "a pedagogy that

empowers students intellectually, social, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 17). At the center of both of these pedagogies is the recognition that learning is best accomplished when students’ lived experiences and cultural referents are acknowledge and affirmed in the classroom. However, today’s rural educators find themselves at a crossroads.

A result of advances in transportation, information, and telecommunication has been a change to the social, political, and cultural scenery of our world (Gibson & Rojas, 2006). This change has occurred in urban and rural spaces. Certain rural communities and individuals still exhibit traditional cultural values while others have adopted the cultural beliefs and practices of urban and suburban communities. Gibson and Rojas (2006) insist that as a result, of the transitory nature of 21st Century America, some rural communities are beginning to be made up of people from different communities who have their own backgrounds and experiences. Moreover, rural communities are also experiencing a dramatic increase in cultural and linguistic diversity (Whitfield, Klug, & Whitney, 2007). As a result, rural ELA educators have sought alternatives to traditional modernists and place-conscious pedagogies.

Culturally relevant pedagogy responds to the needs of culturally diverse students. In the face of a changing rural landscape, culturally relevant pedagogy believes in a shared social consciousness and its practices help to ensure the inclusion of all students’ unique cultural perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This case study examines how two secondary English teachers in a predominantly ethnically homogenous rural school district put culturally relevant pedagogy into practice. Through an analysis of the context-specific inquiry processes of the teacher-participants, this study addresses the

complications and advantages culturally relevant pedagogy presents and offers recommendations for teachers in other rural contexts considering the implementation of culturally relevant educational theory.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: One Beginning Teacher's Journey

In *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Geneva Gay (2000) warns teachers about the dangers of a mindset that believes “good teaching is transcendent; it is identical for all students and under all circumstances” (p. 21). Like many first-year teachers, I leaned on what *I knew* and taught with a confidence that my teaching techniques would work for all of my students. I only wish I had read Gay's book before I entered my first year of teaching. It certainly would have saved me many nights laying awake in frustration. More importantly, it would have provided me the insight I needed to help my struggling students.

First-year English teachers enter the classroom with the same responsibilities as their veteran peers. They are responsible for lesson planning, responding to students' work, grading, communicating with parents/guardians, and first-year teachers are often assigned committee memberships and extra-curricular responsibilities. In his portrait of the teaching profession, Dan Lortie (2002) laments first-year teachers are unfortunately tasked with these duties having very little teaching experience, limited content knowledge, and a developing instructional skillset. In response, teacher preparation programs provide preservice English teachers with methods courses in the teaching of writing, the teaching of literature, and classroom management. Preservice English teachers study Shakespeare, poetry, and young adult literature. They engage complex theoretical structures in hypothetical classroom settings. A lucky few will have field

experiences during their teacher preparation program prior to a student teaching. An even smaller percentage of these preservice teachers will go on to do more than observe the classroom practices of veteran teachers during these field experiences. Thrust into the spotlight during student teaching, preservice teachers often describe their experiences as a baptism by fire. Depending on the level of support and opportunities provided by university faculty and student teaching mentors, first-year English teachers frequently enter the profession with minds full of relatively unpracticed pedagogical theories and potentially irrelevant content knowledge.

Ten years ago, I was one of these first-year English teachers. I graduated from a public university in the north woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. At the time, the secondary English program was demonstrably the most difficult and demanding program of study at the university, and it had the most rigid academic standards of any program offered. I felt confident in my skills and knowledge. I quickly gained employment as a secondary English teacher in a small rural school district in southwest Wisconsin. My teacher preparation program had given me the tools necessary to engage my students in the subject matter *I* thought would be of interest to them and provide them the necessary skills to become successful in life. Looking back, I may have been too confident.

What my teacher preparation program could not prepare me for was something that did not involve an understanding of comma splices or unpacking the symbolism of the tattered yellow wallpaper; it could not prepare me for the complexities of the students before me. This rural community was very different from the rural village I grew up in as a child. The majority of my students came from agrarian backgrounds. Future Farmers of America and 4-H were prominent programs in our school. Even those students who

lived in the villages' limits – those who did not live on a farm – often worked for local farmers and participated in these programs. Those students who did go onto college often sought degrees in agri-business, animal science, agricultural education, soil and crop science, and conservation justice. While I grew up in a rural village, the majority of employed adults found work in neighboring communities as businesswomen, teachers, healthcare professionals, and in the service industry – careers not necessarily related to local farming practices.

Additionally, I was teaching in a high school with 45% free and reduced lunch. The percentage of families living at or below the poverty level astonished me. Growing up in a rural resort community on the shores of Lake Michigan, poverty existed, but it never rose to such a level. Socioeconomics and professions aside, one of the biggest differences I found was the lack of parental involvement in my students' lives. My mother and father, a registered nurse and middle school teacher respectively, held my sister and I to high expectations. The majority of my classmates parents held similar expectations and thirty-six of my graduating class of forty-two went on to attend a two or four-year university. But during my first parent-teacher conference, I sat in my classroom for three hours and only saw eight parents. Of course, these were parents of A-students. This apparent apathy on behalf of the parents was reflected in many of my students' attitudes and actions in the classroom.

The expectations some of my students had for themselves were saddening. Cochran-Smith (2003) acknowledges many of our students walk through the doorway contemplating “poverty, joblessness, low expectations, boredom, peer pressure, disaffection, lost opportunity, substance abuse, alienation, family disintegration, and,

particularly for those who are poor or marginalized, the utter lack of prospects for the future” (p. 372). I was aware such issues existed, but my methods courses coupled with my limited student teaching experience could not prepare me for the disheartened and disenfranchised students I would see in my classroom.

One young man in particular, a senior, during my first year of teaching stands out. He spent the majority of the school year quietly sitting in the back corner of my classroom earning Cs and Ds. He was never a distraction to his peers, and he was always friendly with me. Halfway through the first semester I asked him what he planned to do the following year after graduating high school. He told me his plan was to get enough credits to graduate and then apply for government assistance just like his parents. I was dumbfounded by his admission. I asked him if he had ever thought about going to college or entering trade school. He said why bother when the government would give him everything he needed. Unfortunately, he was not alone in his indifference, and I felt like we had failed him and other students who shared similar beliefs.

After a long and difficult first year, I spent my summer researching new pedagogies and instructional methods. Forget what they tell you, teachers never get summers off. In search of theories and authentic applications for instruction, I stumbled upon Ladson-Billings’ (1994) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. Despite the fact we were teaching in very different contexts, Ladson-Billings’ message resonated with me. For the first time, I understood the need to take into account my students’ interests and knowledge funds if I was going to help them successfully navigate their present and potential future needs. Banks et al. (2005) encourages beginning English teachers to recognize “the different experiences and

academic needs of a wide range of students as they plan and teach” (p. 233). This can be a difficult task for even the most veteran among us, let alone a first-year English teacher. I quickly realized this knowledge of my students not only involved “getting to know” my students, but it also required me to work closely with support staff and invest in professional development teams with veteran teachers more familiar with the community and students we served.

Scholars in the fields of education, teacher education, and cultural relevance agree good teaching requires professional proficiency combined with personal connections to our students. Gay (2000) defines the culturally responsive teaching as the practice of using students’ “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles ... to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). Similar to Ladson-Billings’ description of culturally relevant pedagogy, Gay’s culturally responsive teaching seeks to empower students through a curriculum designed to meet their needs. Personal connections with students are developed through our deep understanding of adolescent development, an acknowledgment of the lived experiences of our students, and a mindfulness that all students are capable of learning (Banks, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Gomez et al., 2004). At the beginning of my teaching career, a recognition of the latter – personal connection – was missing from my teaching inventory. Ladson-Billings’ (1994) argues, “it is *the way we teach* that profoundly affects the way the students perceive the content of that curriculum” (p. 13). Making personal connections with our students, especially when our classrooms are filled with the kinds of diversity we find today is a great starting point, but effective culturally relevant practice requires educators to reflect on three critical conceptions of their

pedagogy and practice: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction (Ladson-Billings, 1994). After my first year on the job, I recognized I needed to address my own cultural assumptions about rural culture. Furthermore, I needed to understand how my assumptions shaped my interactions with students and what that meant in terms of their educational success.

As I prepared for my second year, I rededicated my efforts and developed lessons to be more inclusive of the needs, interests, and cultural referents of my students. I reached out to our librarians, and I was able to put together a classroom library of young adult literature based upon the books my students had chosen to read during Silent Sustained Reading periods the previous year. I used my students' lives as a heuristic to organically design new writing assignments that would appeal to their concerns and cultural referents. Poetry units were constructed with an emphasis on place. Creative nonfiction lessons capitalized on my students' personal narratives as a means to access themes in the literature we read. Since a large portion of this community's cultural identity was formed by its connection to agriculture, I knew I would have to design a curriculum that included this aspect of their culture. Eventually, I partnered with Amy, a biology teacher, to design several cross-curricular unit plans that utilized our students' cultural referents.

We primarily taught in an agrarian rural community, and many of our students either operated farms of their own, worked on farms, or had friends and family members who lived on farms. Amy approached me with an idea of working together on an ecology project. She was preparing a unit centered on the ecosystem found within

southwest Wisconsin, but she wanted to engage her students beyond her previously designed lessons. We agreed to focus on the ecological consciousness described by Aldo Leopold (1949) in *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold, a native Wisconsinite, espouses an ecological conservatism that heavily criticizes industrial, mechanized farming, and he warns readers of the potential implications of unethical farming and hunting practices (Leopold, 1949).

While the students were in Amy's class, they went out into the field to observe the local ecosystem and conduct field experiments on water and soil samples. When students walked into my classroom they engaged in creative writing assignments like poetry and personal narratives. They also wrote persuasive letters to legislators responsible for creating bills and farming practices with negative affects on the local community. The students' own interests and research inspired each assignment.

The following year, Amy and I were approached by one of the history teachers, Aaron, who wanted to get in on the cross-curricular planning. Thanks to some creative financing, we were able to buy enough copies of *A Sand County Almanac* to have several class sets. All three of us taught courses at the sophomore level, so our rosters overlapped and we were able to synchronize our readings. Aaron contributed additional historical context to the unit, and he incorporated lessons centered on the consolidation of local farms by industrial farming corporations, utilizing newspaper articles, personal narratives, and the oral histories of community members. Similar partnerships followed, and the level of engagement on behalf of our students increased tenfold.

In order to help prepare tomorrow's teachers to develop a supportive attitude toward all students and a belief that all students can learn, English educators and

researchers in education have come to understand the importance of a culturally relevant education (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). We have also learned, either through our own trial and error or that of our former students now in the field, the type of effective teachings described by Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2010) take time to develop. This can be a difficult process for prospective English teachers just as it was during my first year on the job. How can we as English teacher educators better prepare our students for the realities they face in their future classrooms? Where can future English teachers turn to find the knowledge and skillsets required to celebrate and incorporate the wealth of student diversity within their classroom practices?

Recalling my first few years as a secondary English teacher, I recognize I was always seeking practical applications of the complex theories and pedagogies I had discussed during my undergraduate courses. I made the mistake of seeking “what” I should teach instead of looking at examples of “the way” I should approach instruction. At the time, I did not realize how context-specific, how subjective, teaching narratives are in educational texts. This subjectivity is entirely unavoidable because of the nature of teaching. Every community, school, classroom, and student is unique. As a veteran teacher I recognize this uniqueness has a tendency to change on a daily or hourly basis. The subjective nature of teaching requires us to recognize our pasts and presents to make sense of the world. Glesne (1999) believes when you accept your subjectivity:

You learn more about your own values, attitudes, beliefs, interests, and needs.

You learn that your subjectivity is the basis for the story that you are able to tell.

It is a strength on which you build. It makes you who you are as a person and as a researcher, equipping you with perspectives and insights that shape all that you do

as researcher, from the selection of topic clear through to the emphasis you make in your writing. (p. 109)

Beginning teachers and their students must be encouraged to acknowledge their subjectivities, their identities, in order to develop an empowering pedagogy of relevance.

Knowing who we are as people, understanding the contexts in which we teach, and questioning our knowledge and assumptions are important considerations if we are to successfully implement culturally relevant pedagogy into practice. Once we look beyond the content of our courses, and critically examine the methods of our instruction, we will then move toward the critical social consciousness so many of us envision. Over the past few decades, teachers looking to engage and empower their students have turned to various incarnations of culturally relevant pedagogy. The subjective nature of culturally relevant educational practices is what makes it such a powerful pedagogy, but this subjectivity is also problematic.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to fill the void in the current literature on culturally relevant pedagogy by lending a voice to rural secondary English educators dedicated to a philosophy of culturally relevant and its practice. A careful review of the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy reveals the discourse surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy has largely been dominated by urban voices. Previous studies have analyzed the culturally relevant practices of effective teachers who teach African American students in primarily urban settings (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Other studies have examined the reflective practices of preservice teachers on their beliefs and assumptions about race and culture (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Gay, 2001; Sleeter, 1996, 2005).

Educators committed to the philosophy of culturally relevant pedagogy realize its practices are specific to the cultural settings in which they teach, but previous studies related to culturally relevant pedagogy have been primarily placed in urban or suburban contexts. Rural contexts, on the other hand, have been largely overlooked by the research on culturally relevant pedagogy.

Cultures are social constructs that are specific to contexts, and diverse cultures can be found in rural contexts. Schade Eckert and Alsup (2015) argue:

Even though many rural schools may seem homogenous, they likely serve a student population coming from diverse backgrounds such as farming, ranching, living on Indian reservations or tribal communities, living in Hutterite or Amish communities, migrant workers, the retired affluent, or even low-wage laborers who are all, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, often marginalized when compared to more affluent ‘town’ (i.e., suburban) students. (4)

For these reasons, any discussion of culture must include rural cultures and any discussions of culturally relevant pedagogy must include rural voices.

In order to fill this void in the literature, the following questions were formed to guide this research project: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? The following sub-questions were considered when exploring the projects guiding questions:

- What are the critical features of culturally relevant pedagogy and its practice?
- How do teachers in rural schools connect such a philosophy to reading and writing instruction?

- What factors do teachers consider during their decision making process on whether or not to use culturally relevant education?
- How do teachers perceptions of self and students influence their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy?
- What goals do rural practitioners of culturally relevant pedagogy express as having for their students?

Although there is no one, overarching method of culturally relevant instruction this does not mean that past, present, and future research on culturally relevant practices is irrelevant. English teachers and English teacher educators need additional research in a variety of cultural contexts to better inform their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and the changing methods of its practice.

This study is concerned with the “the way” rural secondary ELA educators conceive culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrate its practice. Utilizing Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant pedagogy as the basis to inform their instruction, the rural secondary English educators in this study highlight “the way” they conceive and illustrate culturally relevant practices within their specific rural teaching contexts. More specifically, this research examines the educators’ critical conceptions of three major components of culturally relevant pedagogy as originally identified by Ladson-Billings (1994): 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction.

Purpose of This Study

The primary purpose of this case study is to critically examine conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of classroom practices of the two educators

involved in order to further current understanding of how culturally relevant pedagogy is put into practice in the secondary English classrooms of America's rural schools. Culturally relevant pedagogy is considered by many professionals in the field of education to be an effective philosophy to inform instructional practices for narrowing the achievement gap of historically marginalized groups (Cummins, 1990; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2000). The marginalization of American youth is not limited to urban or suburban contexts. If beginning and veteran teachers in either rural or urban schools are to adopt this transformative philosophy of instruction, more examples of culturally relevant pedagogy being put into practice need to be highlighted in academic journals and books.

This study will build on the previous research of Ladson-Billings' (1994) original study by examining the critical conceptions of two rural secondary ELA educators dedicated to culturally relevant pedagogy. Using the framework provided by Ladson-Billings (1994), the educators were asked to reflect on three critical conceptions of their pedagogy and practice: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. Triangulating their reflections with participant observations and course document analysis will reveal insights into how two rural ELA educators promote the three critical components of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy (academic excellence for all students, the fostering of cultural competence, and the development of a critical social consciousness) (1994, 1995a).

Chapter Overviews

Chapter Two: A Review of the Literature begins with an exploration of culturally relevant pedagogy with a focus on its criticality and commitment to transcending negative effects of dominant cultural groups. The literature review then turns its attention to what it means to be rural. Historical and societal influences on rural communities are discussed. Finally, Chapter Two places culturally relevant pedagogy within a rural school context by considering similar research in the fields of place-conscious and multicultural education.

Chapter Three, “Methodology,” leads with a discussion of Ladson-Billings’ (1994) three critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy directing this study: 1) how educators conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. The chapter proceeds to address the guiding questions and sub-questions of this study prior to offering a detailed rationale and description of the selection of the educators involved in this case study. Participant profiles are also featured in this chapter, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the methods of data analysis, which includes the triangulation of interviews, participant observations, and document examination.

Chapter Four, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Conceptions and Illustrations” opens with series of in-depth professional teaching profiles of the educators involved in this study. These professional teaching profiles triangulate the educators’ personal and professional histories, current teaching contexts, and philosophical influences on teaching secondary English Language Arts in an attempt to establish how these educators came to adopt and adapt a culturally relevant pedagogy of their own. After a careful examination

of the research participants' professional teaching profiles, Chapter Four discusses the participants' conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings' (1994) research serves as the basis for this examination of the participants' critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. In addition to the critical discussion and analysis of the participants' conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, the chapter provides illustrations of the educator's culturally relevant practices (social interactions, methods of instruction, course content, etc.) in order to promote the kind of student empowerment culturally relevant pedagogy advocates.

Chapter Five, titled "Implications," discusses key findings as it relates to the major questions this study seeks to answer, and it offers important theoretical implications to those in fields of teacher education and English education. This includes K-12 teachers, pre-service teachers, and administrators who are considering adopting a culturally relevant pedagogy to enhance their teaching practices, particularly those educators working in or with rural schools. Chapter Five concludes with a conversation of future research possibilities based on the results of this study.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The nation's movement toward globalization has dramatically increased our need for culturally relevant pedagogy. Emerging technologies in transportation, information, and telecommunications have brought together people from different cities, states, and even countries. The result is a change to the social, political, and cultural scenery of our world (Gibson & Rojas, 2006). These advances in technology have now brought together rural and urban spaces more than ever before. Urban and suburban cultural norms have found their way into the homes of rural children through high-speed Internet connections and digital high-definition television programming. Gibson and Rojas (2006) argue rural students continue to find themselves migrating to urban centers to pursue college degrees and employment opportunities. An education based on the study of cultural beliefs and values can lead rural students to a greater understanding and acceptance of the differences they will encounter on a daily basis. A culturally relevant pedagogy has the power to promote an understanding of these differences and empower students to create positive social change within their communities.

Rural educators are familiar with place-conscious approaches to education. Similar to culturally relevant pedagogy, place-conscious education begins with the lived experiences of students and the relevant issues in their lives. When place-conscious teachers construct their courses to meet and address their students' lives, those students are better able to engage in a deeper understanding of local history, literature, politics, biology, etc. The research in this chapter highlights important connections and distinctions between these two similar pedagogies that are often used in distinct contexts

– culturally relevant education in urban schools and place-conscious education in rural schools.

The following literature review reemphasizes the criticality of culturally relevant pedagogy in order to provide a foundation for its use in the rural secondary English classroom. The literature review also examines important historical and societal influences on rural spaces in an attempt to address the important question of what constitutes rurality. Finally, this literature review highlights the potential implementation of a culturally relevant pedagogy in rural American schools by looking at similar, relevant research related to previous curricular movements in rural ELA classrooms, which includes place-conscious and multicultural education approaches to ELA instruction.

Understanding Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Researchers both inside and outside the fields of education and teacher education blame the current American education system for its failure to provide preservice teachers and veteran teachers with the requisite knowledge to successfully teach students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b, 1998; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). While America's diversity has grown exponentially over the past few decades, many K-12 school districts and teacher preparation programs have failed in their attempts to address this change. Alternative course offerings, new curriculum maps, multicultural texts, and other strategies to address diversity are often seen as ancillary to the core of the teacher education curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994 1995a; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). This failure to acknowledge the role of culture at both the university and K-12 levels may partially explain the

achievement gap we see in students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Irvine, 1990, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a). The dramatic changes in the American landscape over the past few decades have lead scholars, researchers, and educators to find new methods of instruction to ensure an equal education for all students.

In response to the growing need for a pedagogy that recognizes the cultural diversity of America's students, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) coined the term culturally relevant pedagogy to describe "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, social, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 17). Ladson-Billings argues the transformative agenda of culturally relevant pedagogy is two-fold: it challenges traditional views of teaching and learning; and it develops a social consciousness among students in order to confront various forms of societal oppression (1994). In her profile of five elementary school teachers, Ladson-Billings (1994) as identifies the common traits of successful teaching practices and effective learning environments that lead to improved educational equality for African American students. She saw teachers who held high expectations for their students, and she witnessed the collective efforts of teachers and students to promote both cultural and academic excellence.

Over the last thirty years, scholars in the fields of sociology, education, and English education have been concerned about the achievement gap between historically marginalized students and their culturally-normative suburban peers (Erickson, 1987; Gay 2002, Jordan, 1985; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The increasing diversity found in K-12 public schools has had a substantial impact on both teaching and learning. Durden (2008) argues teaching and learning are more effective when connected to the cultural

referents of students: “social cultural theory views learning as culturally mediated. Therefore, looking through the lens of the child requires teachers to implement a curriculum and instructional practices that are culturally sensitive and relative to the child’s experience” (p. 410). Culturally relevant pedagogy provides teachers with the tools necessary to bridge this gap.

Since the publication of Ladson-Billings’ (1994) *Dreamkeepers*, culturally relevant pedagogy has become a commonplace phrase within the field of education. Culturally relevant pedagogy is often used interchangeably with the theoretical works of other scholars that have come to serve as the foundations of culturally relevant pedagogy. Compatible instruction, culturally congruent instruction, and culturally appropriate instruction, are all terms one often hears in culturally relevant discourse (Au & Jordan, 1981; Jordan, 1985; Mohatt & Erickson, 1981). At the heart of each of these pedagogies is a commitment by teachers to incorporate aspects of students’ lives. However, place-conscious education and those pedagogical models listed above often fail to acknowledge the criticality and self-reflective teacher practices found in Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant pedagogy.

The Criticality of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In her fight to provide students from historically marginalized groups an equal educational experience, Ladson-Billings (1994) sought a pedagogy to disrupt assimilationist teachings, the forms of instruction that encourage students to fit into the existing dominant social culture, she found in many urban public schools. Ladson-Billings’ (1994) construction of culturally relevant pedagogy is similar to Giroux and

Simon's (1989) concept of critical pedagogy that encourages students to recognize and celebrate differences while empowering social action:

Pedagogy refers to a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. It can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular "moral character." As both a political and practical activity, it attempts to influence the occurrence and qualities of experiences. When one practices pedagogy, one acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world in particular ways. (p. 239)

Critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy include students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds in course content. The difference between the two is critical pedagogy seeks to help *individuals* critique and change the world while culturally relevant pedagogy encourages action by the *group* based on a similar understanding of experiences, cultures, and society.

Teachers play an integral role in the development of their students' cultural awareness and social activism. At its core "a culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of student-teacher relationships, the curriculum, schooling, and society" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 483). In order to problematize their teaching, ELA teachers must be mindful of their roles and responsibilities in promoting three components of culturally relevant pedagogy: (1) academic excellence for all students; (2) the fostering of cultural competence; and (3) the development of the critical social consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a).

Teachers need to critique what they do or do not do in the classroom to promote these three components within a world that is awash with social inequities.

Culturally relevant pedagogy requires educators to engage in active self-reflexive practices to promote educational equality for all students, particularly students from historically marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As educators, we are expected to be aware of the choices we make when it comes to questions about instructional materials, curricular mandates, and the educational goals we establish for the next generation of critically engaged citizens.

In regards to student achievement, Ladson-Billings (1994) argues teachers who practice culturally relevant methods of instruction must examine three critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and its practice: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. These critical conceptions established by Ladson-Billings serve as the guiding framework for this study. Rural educators' conceptions of these three critical areas enable them to work toward culturally relevant pedagogy's goals of student empowerment and disrupting the status quo.

In facilitating student success, the teachers in Ladson-Billings' (1994) study view their teaching as an art form. As cultural organizers, the teachers in Ladson-Billings' study affirm and celebrate the cultural backgrounds of their African American students in order to facilitate high academic achievement. Cultivating a classroom community of learners requires that teachers and students embrace and affirm diversity (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b, 2000; Nieto, 1999). ELA teachers and teacher educators devoted to culturally relevant pedagogy treat their students and their students' communities as

valuable resources, possessing knowledge and experiences that can help students learn (Ladson-Billings, 1994). They do not view and treat both for what they lack. Culturally relevant teacher believe their students and the communities they serve are not people and places that need to be enriched or fixed.

As orchestrators of social contexts for learning, ELA teachers and teacher educators must recognize the influence their students' cultures have on learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Successful culturally relevant teachers acquaint themselves with students' lives beyond their classroom walls. These educators benefit from an understanding of how students' attitudes, social relationships, communities, and families can contribute to the development of knowledge construction (Tucker, et al., 2005). Additionally, teachers practicing culturally relevant pedagogy recognize the importance their own cultural identities have in shaping their conception and inaction of culturally relevant teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Research indicates successful teachers of culturally diverse students consider the implications of the social construction of their identities in combination with the identities of their student. Liggett (2008) argues teachers must recognize their identity has "cultural orientations that shape the ways in which they think about values, beliefs, communication style (modes of politeness/formality), historical perspectives, art, music, family, rituals (graduation, sport team rallies), rites of passages (notable birthdays), and other social group activities" (p. 397). A critical understanding of how one's own cultural memberships and how these memberships have shaped one's personal history is an important consideration to make when implementing culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994). When teachers see themselves as cultural beings with their own

assumptions and beliefs about diversity, they are able to better improve their culturally relevant practices through and understanding of how their cultural understanding can affect student's behavior, beliefs, and learning (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clark, 2003). This cultural understanding is better known as cultural competence.

Howard (2007) defines cultural competence as an ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences through an understanding of how culture and cultural memberships affect one's beliefs and interactions with others. Fostering cultural competence as conceived by Ladson-Billings (1994) "uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture" (p. 17). This study is concerned with this particular understanding of cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy's aim to transcend the dominant culture to breakdown societal barriers. In an attempt to breakdown these barriers, Ares (2006) insists culturally relevant pedagogy, unlike more traditional approaches to education, asks students and teachers to question their understanding of social construction such as: morality, culture, language, and privilege. In order to accomplish this aim, teachers and students must participate in open dialogues like those posed by Paulo Freire.

Freire (1970) contends people can only become agents within their world through open dialogues that "recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded" (p. 14). Freire's vision of education involves people working with each other to construct knowledge and make a difference in the world rather than one person, a teacher, enacting knowledge on another, the student (1970). Open dialogues guide educators and students to the complex

construction of the third critical component of culturally relevant pedagogy, critical consciousness.

As cultural mediators, ELA teachers and teacher educators must provide opportunities for preservice teachers and secondary students to engage in critical dialogue about diversity. Ladson-Billings' (1994) culturally relevant pedagogy calls upon a form of critical consciousness that encourages us to learn from our teaching and from our students. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), Freire explains critical consciousness as a pedagogy that engages learners in questioning the nature of their historical and social situation. Freire (1973) describes this approach as reading the world. When we invite our students and ourselves to question our historical and social situations, we participate in the socially conscious, self-reflexive practices Ladson-Billings envisions. A commitment to a series of open and honest dialogues with our students involving sometimes difficult and emotional topics is central to critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1973). The open dialogues involved in culturally relevant pedagogy challenge ELA teachers to reconsider the traditional classroom hierarchies that have historically overlooked many of our students.

For Pollock (2008), cultural competency acknowledges, "human beings forge responses to actual schools and educators in real time and in ongoing interactions with actual educators and actual school opportunities" (p. 372). Authentic learning environments and relevant instructional practices promote learning for all students. When interacting with students from diverse backgrounds, Howard (2007) identifies three factors as having a positive affect on student learning: 1) feelings of belonging; 2) trust in people around them; 3) their belief that teachers value their intellectual

competence. Central to these three factors are teacher's conceptions of knowledge and how knowledge construction influences the relationships with their students.

In an attempt to engage these critical issues, beginning teachers and those new to culturally relevant methods of instruction typically focus their attention on content integration instead of beliefs about knowledge construction, assuming that by altering the curriculum they will provide the necessary framework to critically examine social hierarchies and power structures within their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1994). A focus on the content alone problematizes culturally relevant education by limiting its reach through a failure to acknowledge how instructional methods impact the critical aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1994) argues:

Much of the purported reforms and the debate about our schools focuses on curriculum: What should we teach? Whose version of history should we offer? What priority should different subject matters be given? But it is *the way we teach* that profoundly affects the way the students perceive the content of that curriculum. (13)

Culturally relevant pedagogy's emphasis on "the way" we teach versus "what" we teach, reinforces what many of us already understand to be true – knowledge is a social construction. The content of our courses does not matter if we see our students as blank slates waiting to be inscribed with knowledge.

Ares (2006) argues knowledge is constructed organically, and culturally relevant teachers believe teaching "captures the sense that [learning] processes build on prior experience and foster students' communities' dynamics, flexible knowledge and skills that support success in future activity" (p. 3). This belief in knowledge construction

helps students feel like they belong to a community of learners who support and believe in them. Culturally relevant teachers who have adopted similar beliefs about knowledge continually question and challenge how their teaching practices enable this social construction of knowledge.

Teachers who wish to enact academic excellence for all students might pose and address the following questions when they consider “the way” their instructional practices reflect the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy: How and for whom does the environment of my classroom enable academic excellence? Who defines academic excellence, and how? How does the curriculum align with the experiences of students who excel and those who do not? However, from my experience as a secondary English teacher and a university teacher educator, these important conversations are often drowned out by discussions less relevant to the success of our students.

While public officials and administrators are concerned with talks of standardized test preparation, student retention efforts, highly qualified statuses, race to the top monies, and other issues impacting the bottom line, teachers dedicated to culturally relevant pedagogy realize these matters pale in comparison to the issues culturally relevant instruction addresses. Culturally relevant pedagogy encourages us to look beyond standards-based instructional initiatives of the “common” skills and understandings all students should be able to demonstrate in order to critically examine the hidden curriculum and power hierarchies found within our communities, schools, and classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Following the success of Ladson-Billings’ (1994) work with culturally relevant teaching, many ELA teachers have adopted a critical pedagogy that affirms and

celebrates students' cultures. During a Leadership Policy Summit in 2007, the Conference on English Education (CEE) created a committee of English educators whose focus was to address the rising needs of ELA teachers to implement culturally relevant educational practices and to consider the context of their students' lives to approach reading and writing instruction. The committee established a position statement: "Supporting Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners in English Education." Although each of the eight beliefs for supporting linguistically and cultural diverse learners applies to this discussion, the first two beliefs are of great importance:

1) Teachers and teacher educators must respect all learners and themselves as individuals with culturally defined identities. 2) Students bring funds of knowledge to their learning communities, and, recognizing this, teachers and teacher educators must incorporate this knowledge and experience into classroom practice (CEE, 2007).

Unfortunately, teachers often couch this acceptance of students' lives within the confines of the dominant cultural group. Parsons (2003) argues teachers may select cultural referents they believe to be relevant to their students' lives but mistakenly teach these referents from a dominant cultural perspective. In doing so, Parson acknowledges teachers mistakenly teach students how to assimilate into the dominant cultural perspective, marginalizing the students' culture in the process. Some scholars contend assimilation is a necessary process for students from non-dominate cultural groups if they are to find success in life. Au and Mason's (1983) competing cultural systems approach to cultural understanding and Irvine's (1990) interpersonal dimensions of setting framework are two cultural approaches to education that encourage students to

comprehend the world in ways that help them conform to the dominate culture. These teaching practices rely on the modification of students' behavior and rote learning exercises, particularly for students from historically marginalized populations (Delpit, 1992, 1995; Wink, 2005).

Those of us who work from the beliefs and tenants of culturally relevant pedagogy understand the importance of our students' cultures to their learning. Our students come to us from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. Their cultural referents may or may not be reflected within the walls of our school buildings and they may or may not align with the norms of the dominant school and community cultures. With all of this in mind, we must take a moment to address what culturally relevant pedagogy means when it refers to culture.

The Culture Within Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Numerous definitions of culture exist. Cole (1995) explains competing definitions of culture are not necessarily definitions. Rather, cultural theorists construct definitions of culture in order to address phenomenon and these definitions are dependent upon who is proposing the definitions and for what purposes. For example, Super (1987) notes definitions of culture fluctuate between complex structures that can include knowledge, beliefs, art, laws, and customs of members belonging to a shared community or society and narrower notions of culture that limit culture to the shared experiences of individuals based upon ethnicity or race. Scholars in education and multicultural education warn against latter definitions of culture. These limited definitions fail to recognize the complexities of culture through an assumption that all members of an ethnic group share the same cultural referents (Nieto 2004; Yeo 1999). As a result of these vastly different

definitions or theories of culture, a number of conceptions about culture have taken shape over the years.

Culturally relevant educators lean toward more complex conceptions of culture resulting in an understanding that culture is created through a series of cultural practices and beliefs over a period of time (Gay, 2001). These beliefs and practices are interpreted by individuals through interactions with other individuals from their own cultural communities as well as individuals from other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994). If we refer back to Ladson-Billings' (1994) second critical element of culturally relevant pedagogy – fostering cultural competence – three conceptions of culture become apparent: (1) culture is the primary vehicle through which people negotiate personal interactions (Cole, 1998); (2) these navigations occur as the result of a person's repetitive practices within a cultural community (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003); (3) these practices can be responsive to change while others may be so deeply rooted in that they are resistant or slow to change (Lee, 2002). While each of these conceptions of culture are theoretically distinct, the concepts compliment and build upon one another to create a more informed understanding of culture according to the criticality posed by culturally relevant educators.

Our students bring their own cultural referents to our classrooms, and our classrooms and schools may or may not reflect our students' cultures. Teachers will never find a one-size-fits-all curriculum model for culturally relevant pedagogy because of the context-specific nature of culture. However, if we hope to answer Ladson-Billings' (1994) call for a paradigm shift of what we assume and believe to be good

teaching, we must learn from teachers dedicated to the critical self-reflexive educational practices of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Teachers who empower their students intellectually and socially can be found in schools and communities around the United States, and that includes teachers working in rural school districts. The notion of culturally relevant pedagogy has been largely discussed in urban settings; however, culturally relevant teaching is just as important for teachers working in culturally homogenous rural schools. Before we examine the relevancy of culturally relevant pedagogy in rural schools, it is important to gain an understanding of rural spaces.

Understanding Rurality

My self-identification as a person connected to rural areas and my history as a teacher of rural students has led me to critically examine how those in the field of education acknowledge rural spaces and rural people. I am particularly concerned that English education scholarship on culturally relevant pedagogy tends to ignore or dismiss rural students and communities in favor of more urban and suburban centric populations. Urban and suburban education has come to prevail in education discourse across the United States and with it scholars have used America's cities as the focal point for scholarship in the field (Esposito & Swain, 2009; Love & Kruger, 2005; Ryan, 2006). As a result, curriculum designs and teaching materials reflect urban-centric idealism, focusing primarily on the needs of urban and suburban students.

Teachers working in rural schools often find themselves alone in their professional development pursuits. Culturally relevant or multicultural teaching materials generally lack the context-specific needs of rural educators. In an analysis of

multicultural textbooks, Aram Ayalon (2004) identifies the role of rural culture in teacher American textbooks. Ayalon concludes rural issues are rarely addressed, and when issues of rurality surface, they are viewed through an urban-centric lens and often include stereotypes of rural life (2004). Although researchers and scholars in rural education have amassed a wealth of materials pertaining to reading and writing instruction in rural schools, there is a dearth of literature involving culturally relevant pedagogy in rural school settings. We must begin with an understanding of rurality in order to fill this void in both rural education scholarship and mainstream English education research. An understanding of rurality begins by answering the following questions: What is rurality? Why is rural education so important?

The Problematic Definitions of Rurality

Though a seemingly simple question, the answer to “what is rural” is not an easy one. Rural is defined in different ways depending on who is providing the definition.

Many people have definitions for rural, but seldom do these definitions agree.

Historically speaking, federal agencies have used three major classification systems in an attempt to define rural spaces: Beale Codes; Metro Status Codes; Locale Codes. Each of the three classification systems examines geographic locations in determining urban and rural spaces, and two of the three consider population size and density. In 2006, The National Center for Education Statistics, hereafter referred to as NCES, recognized the limitations of previous attempts to define rural and urban spaces and designed a new classification system in conjunction with the Census Bureau.

The new classification system has four major categories – city, suburban, town, and rural. Each major category is subdivided into three categories. Cities and suburbs

are subdivided according to size – large, midsize, and small. Towns and rural spaces are subdivided by distance – fringe, distant, and remote. (See Figure 1. NCES’s Urban-Centric Locale Categories (2006) below). Under the new classification system an urban area (UA) is considered a densely populated area of 50,000 or more people. These UAs can comprise a single city or a group of cities, and county lines do not restrict them. UAs can be comprised of more than one city and also include the densely settled surrounding area – urban fringe (NCES, 2006).

Locale	Definition
City	
Large	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000
Suburb	
Large	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more
Midsize	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000
Small	Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000
Town	
Fringe	Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area
Distant	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area
Remote	Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area
Rural	
Fringe	Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster
Distant	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster
Remote	Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster

Figure 1. NCES’s Urban-Centric Locale Categories (2006)

Outside of UAs, any incorporated place or census designated place (CDP) with at least 2,500 people is defined as urban cluster, and anything else is defined as rural (NCES, 2006). In “In the National Interest: Defining Rural and Urban Correctly in Research and Public Policy,” Andrew Isserman (2005) notes, the demographic problem of “the rural” arose in part from “the separation of territory into town or country, urban or rural, lead[ing] us to define rural as homogeneous with respect to being not urban” (465). In other words, for a long time we have simply not been able to see rural areas as anything other than “other.”

In *Literacy Teaching and Learning in Rural Communities: Problematizing Stereotypes, Challenging Myths*, Schade Eckert and Alsup (2015) note “any homogenous signifier such as ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ sets up a false dichotomy of otherness, categorizing and diminishing communities and essentializing the breadth of experiences and ways of living that flourish in unique settings” (p. 2). This ‘false dichotomy of otherness’ still exists in the newly defined classification system. While these new categories provide additional context to define urban and rural spaces, they still differentiate rural spaces from the cities, suburbs, and towns of America. The three latter categories all fall under the designation of urban areas. Rural spaces are left on the outside looking in. The NCES’s system does not even bother to hide the urban influence on the classifications, using the term ‘urban-centric’ in its classification title. Of course, rural communities have grown accustomed to these oversights.

At its core, rural people and rural places have been used as a definition of exclusion. Isserman (2005) argues “‘rural’ is used in...overlapping and often contradictory ways, always defined by what it is not – not urban, not metropolitan” (p.

466). The use of population density and proximity to UAs problematizes the definitions of rural and urban because as they fail to acknowledge the rural/urban continuum and the diversity that exists among these communities. As a result, individuals in rural communities find themselves on the figurative and literal margins of society. What is troubling is rural schools serve a significant portion of America's public school students, and these children are often an afterthought.

Using the US Census Bureau's Urban-Centric Locale Categories, as of the 2013-2014 school year, 27,264 or 28 percent of America's 98,271 public elementary and secondary schools are considered rural (United States Census Bureau, 2014). This 28 percent of America's public schools serve 9,132,607 students. So, according to the US Census Bureau, roughly 19 percent of America's school-age children attend a rural school (USCB, 2014). Rural education scholars find these numbers quite staggering considering the exclusion of rural voices in the decision making processing involving educational policies (Howley & Howley, 2004; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). To better understand rural spaces, we must look beyond numbers and geography because at its core, rurality is not a number or geographic location. It is a marker of identity.

The Rural Context

Although rural communities and rural people often admit to having a strong connection to the natural world, the reality is 'rural' cannot be defined by geography or federal census demographics alone. In a critique on rural education research, Howley (2009) notes "the meanings of rural lives and communities are what make rural education research *rural* – not a geographic boundary, low population density, or remoteness" (p. 2). Rural is a culture unto itself. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2012) describe rural as

“a marker of identity, regardless of demographic criteria or current location. People may self-identify as rural or identify others as rural, and by so doing invoke a complex chain of associations and ideologies” (p. 7). Thus, individuals living in communities defined as urban can self-identify as rural, and consequently, people living in rural areas may reject their rural status and self-identify as suburban or urban. I have personally experienced both sides of this rural/urban identity fluidity.

As a young man, I grew up in a community in the northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan. On all accounts, we would be described as rural. I lived on the outskirts of a village located more than 25 miles from any UA with a population less than 1000 people. By the time I was a senior in high school, my graduating class totaled 42 students, including two foreign exchange students. It was the sort of town where one knew almost everybody, and last names carried with them reputations and expectations.

When I was growing up, the world was a much smaller place. We got our news from the daily paper, high-speed Internet was non-existent, and the former-five (ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, and Fox) were the typical programming on television. Despite our relative geographic isolation in northern Michigan, societal connotations of rurality that found their way into our television sets and radio programming were often disparaging. Hummon (1990), asserts mainstream American ideology paints a picture of rural people and places to be simpler, less likely to change, and more “direct, personal, and comprehensible” than urban locales (p. 50). Examples of rural people on television – *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *Hee Haw* – either illustrated this idyllic image of rural landscapes and/or highlighted stereotypes of rural people as hayseed, country bumpkins. What is frustrating is

contemporary television programs have not improved urban America's conception of rural spaces by continuing to convey similar messages about rural life.

This inundation of negative images and connotations of rurality affect many rural youth. I was one of these rural youth who heard the message, and that message was very clear. If you wanted to improve you life, it meant leaving your small town for the modernity of the big city. Carr and Kefalas (2010) describe the "hollowing out" of America's rural communities as having reached a tipping point and many small towns have either disappeared or on the verge of disappearance. The authors argue, for many rural communities, the final nail in the coffin often comes when there is not enough children to keep local schools open, forcing the hands of rural communities to consolidate and in the process lose their cultural epicenter (2010).

In 1896, the infamous Committee of Twelve proposed rural schools should consolidate to a more centralized school system in order to remedy their wasteful spending and inferior teaching practices. The centralization, bureaucratization, and professionalization has been so effective over the past 120 years that both urban and rural schools have fallen victim to a relatively uniform model of schooling. Over the past century these educational reforms have been proven inadequate and unresponsive to local concerns. The urban reforms of the past century have continually pushed a global agenda that encourages America's rural youth to leave their communities to attend universities in urban centers, never to return to their birthplaces with their newfound skills and knowledge.

Despite the nations' movement toward urbanity, many rural communities have continued to thrive. Gibson and Rojas (2006) argue the result of advances in

transportation, information, and telecommunication is a change to the social, political, and cultural scenery of our world. Certain rural communities and individuals still exhibit traditional cultural values while others have adopted the cultural beliefs and practices of urban and suburban communities. Young (1990) posits one reason for this is in this postmodern society, rural communities are beginning to be made up of replaced persons who come from different communities and have their own backgrounds and experiences. With this in mind, any study of a rural or an urban school must allow for the careful analysis of the culture(s) present. In response to the dynamic nature of communities and their culture(s), educators have turned to culturally relevant pedagogy to provide students with authentic and appropriate learning opportunities.

The Relevancy of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Rural Schools

Culturally relevant education can be used in the ELA classroom to motivate and inspire an emerging generation of writers. Our work as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers demonstrates the need for socially relevant pedagogical practices in order to develop and support our young emerging writers in and beyond our classrooms. In *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) seeks to “examine the concept of culturally relevant teaching and how it can improve the education lives of African American students...[and] that this research will find broad applicability and be seen as useful for teaching students of any race or ethnicity” (14). If culturally relevant pedagogy is to take hold in rural communities, approaches to culturally relevant education must be inclusive of all cultures, and that includes rural culture.

Culturally relevant pedagogy asks us to critically examine the context-specific nature of our historical and social situations (Ladson-Billings, 1994); however,

discussions of cultural relevancy in the fields of teacher education and English education rarely address the diversity found in rural schools. Johnson et al. (2014) note “growth in rural school enrollment continues to outpace non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and rural schools continue to grow more complex with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and students with special needs” (p. 28). The national narrative, despite evidence to the contrary, wants tell a story of rural schools and rural communities as being homogenous. Those of us who have lived and taught in rural communities recognize the growing diversity found within our rural schools.

A review of the literature on teachers in rural school contexts quickly reveals rural schools and rural communities are far from homogenous (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell 2007, 2012; Schade Eckert & Alsup 2015; Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010). If we are to disrupt this false narrative, more research needs to be conducted in rural contexts and any research involving cultural relevance must acknowledge the work being done in rural schools. An exploration of recent reforms to reading and writing instruction in rural schools will highlight the relevancy of adopting a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Place-Conscious Approaches to English Language Arts Instruction

Nearly 100 years ago, Ellwood Cubberley (1914) published *Rural Life and Education: A Study of the Rural-School Problem as a Phase of the Rural-Life Problem*, his problematic assessment of the state and needs of rural schools. Cubberley (1914) suggested at the beginning of the 20th century, rural schools had lost their importance to the communities they served. He argued rural schools lagged behind their urban counterparts. They lacked qualified teachers, forward thinking administrators, updated course materials, and proper buildings (Cubberley, 1914). In his assessment, Cubberley

argued for a rural school reform that focused on consolidating rural schools to save money and provide a better organization for rural schools in order to prepare rural students for life in an increasingly urban society (1914). Powerful voices in rural sociology and rural education the likes of Berry (1987), Dewey (1922), Gruenewald (2003a, 2003b), Gruenewald and Smith (2008), Haas (1990), and Theobald (1997) and critical educators like Giroux (1983) and Freire (1970, 1973) have fought these consolidation reform patterns and false claims that rural schools are no longer the cultural epicenter of rural communities as they once were by promoting critical place-conscious pedagogies.

Place-conscious pedagogy has been known by a variety of names: place-based education, indigenous knowledge education, and community-based education. Place-conscious education allows teachers and their students the opportunity to explore the relationships among individuals of a community with an emphasis on their connection to the natural world. This critical examination helps prepare students to participate in the democratic processes of creating and sustaining their local lives and local soil (Gruenewald, 2003b). Historically, research in rural education has been closely linked to place-conscious methods of instruction. Noted cultural critic Wendell Berry (1987) argues if a community is to survive, it must hold its local soil and local memory in place. Following a century or urban-centric educational reforms and America's push toward globalization with its advances in transportation, telecommunication, and mechanization, it is natural rural communities experienced declines in population. Place-conscious education makes a direct correlation between education and the well being of place

(Gruenewald, 2003a). This, according to Bishop (2004), makes place-conscious methods of instruction relevant to rural schools.

Similar to Ladson-Billings' (1994) goals for culturally relevant education, place-conscious methods of instruction provide a pedagogical base for the close examination of one's self and one's local community. Theobald's (1997) seminal work, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* provides a case for a curriculum of place as a means for changing social and cultural directions and solving many social problems. Place-conscious approaches to reading and writing instruction have long involved the engagement of teachers and students with their local communities, their region, and the immediate issues that frame their daily lives.

Place-conscious education begins with the key questions and issues that trouble local communities. When teachers construct their courses with these key questions and issues in mind, students are able to engage in a deeper understanding of local history, literature, politics, and biology. The cross-curricular unit I described in Chapter One on southwest Wisconsin's ecosystem is a perfect example of the potential of place-conscious methods of instruction. While they conducted field experiments in biology class with Amy and learned about laws impacting their local land with Aaron, the students and I read literature on conservation and wrote poems and essays.

Place-conscious educational practices are utilized in rural contexts because they typically emphasize the importance of the local community and the land, two aspects important to the development of rural identity. The education my students received was in no way a parochial education, strictly limited by their village boundaries. The units were first designed to engage students with their local place, learning about humanities,

politics, and biology; however, these lessons also worked toward widening our students understanding of their place within society. Gruenewald and Smith (2008) explain:

When [place-conscious] education is implemented in ways that truly conjoin school with community and provide opportunities for democratic participation and leadership, children are given the chance to partake in the collective process of creating the sustainable and just world that must come to replace the world of discrimination and waste that has begun to unravel around us now. (p. 346)

This greater understanding of one's place within widening communities similar to culturally relevant pedagogy and what Theobald characterizes in place-conscious education as the intradependence of human life.

Theobald (1997) coined the term intradependence to contrast with the traditional rugged individualism of American settlers and the contemporary examination of interdependence between people. Gruenewald (2003b) describes place-conscious education as a framework to explore the relationships among people of a community and the community's relationship to the natural world. Designing a curriculum centered on local politics, history, biology and literature allowed us to show our students how their lives and consolidated communities were intradependent. Students witnessed first-hand how unethical farming practices within one community such as polluting local rivers with fertilizers impacted the water quality of communities downstream. Like culturally relevant pedagogy, place-conscious pedagogy involves more than just an inclusion of students' personal lives to instruction; it considers how social relationships and relationships to place shape meaning (Brooke, 2003).

In "Leaving Home: Circumstances Afflicting Rural America During the Last

Decade and Their Impact on Public Education,” Haas (1990) establishes five key issues intradependent place-conscious education must address if students are to develop the skills and understanding to live well in a given locale: place, civic involvement, worth, connection, and belonging. A critical inquiry of these five issues establishes a complex web of intradependent relationships between people and place that provide students with the ability to live well in any community (Haas 1990). Those of us who understand and participate in the cultural and natural relationships that define our communities are examples of Haas’ concept of living well. Schools that offer place-conscious forms of education provide them with the local knowledge and experience to help shape their communities.

The idea of place-conscious education should be familiar to ELA teachers. In the 1960s and 1970s America’s ELA classrooms underwent a sweeping social turn to writing instruction with a renewed emphasis on the writing process and students’ funds of knowledge. During this time, writing instruction encouraged students to write from their own experiences and interests. In *Writing without Teachers*, Peter Elbow (1973) stresses the lives of our students should be at the center of the writing process. Elbow (1973) advocates a two-step writing process – creating and critiquing. For Elbow, good writing comes from one’s self. Young writers benefit from writing about what they know – their lived experiences and familiar surroundings (Elbow, 1973). Elbow is not alone in his claim on the effectiveness of place-conscious approaches to writing instruction.

In the early 1980s, place-conscious approaches to writing instruction continued to reshape the ELA classroom. In *Lessons From a Child on the Teaching and Learning of Writing*, Lucy Calkins (1983) emphasizes the importance of place-conscious education in

the development of student writing. Calkins reimagines the ELA classroom to give students the opportunity to participate in peer conferencing during the revision stages of the writing process (1983). These peer conferences allow students to critically examine the choices they make as writers, improving their skills and knowledge as writers. The peer conferences Calkins (1983) describes have become a staple of most writing classrooms across America today. Calkins also describes approaches to ELA instruction that promote making the familiar unfamiliar in order for students to see what is occurring before their eyes (1983). Calkins asks teachers and students to challenge their assumptions about themselves and others through open dialogue in order to promote a critical consciousness necessary to engage in meaningful discussions about identity, culture, and community (1983).

The discourse communities described by Paulo Freire (1973) compliment the open dialogue processes proposed by Calkins (1983) and student-centered funds of knowledge recommended by Elbow (1973). For Freire (1973), discourse communities allow individuals to come together to and develop a relevant curriculum for literacy instruction. According to Freire (1973), central to the success of a discourse community is the shared experiences and beliefs of those involved. Today's English teachers and teacher educators need to develop a deeper knowledge of what is being taught. More importantly, today's teachers must critically examine how the content is being taught and for the benefit of whom.

Teachers who implement place-conscious approaches to ELA instruction like those described by Calkins (1983), Elbow (1973), and Freire (1973) highlight the situatedness of reading and writing instruction. The English teacher's classroom should

encourage students to share their personal experiences and interests. Reading and writing assignments should activate and challenge students' prior knowledge and assumptions to help them interpret their world. Students benefit from a classroom that reflects the world they experience on a daily basis compared to the imagined worlds of others. Place-conscious approaches to writing recognize writing has context and an understanding of this context helps students produce better writing.

NCTE's (2012) *Standards for Initial Preparation* acknowledges the importance of writing instruction that increases motivation and active student engagement through a response to the context-based needs of diverse students. In keeping with the critical conscious work of Freire (1973) reading and writing instruction ought to provide our students with a means of critically engaging with the world in which they live. Such instructional methods empower students to understand, question, and even influence change within their communities. Linda Christensen (2009) encourages teachers to design curriculums that focus on timely, relevant issues students face on a daily basis. By writing about and discussing these important moral, social, and political issues, students construct knowledge through an examination of topics relevant to them (Christensen, 2009).

Writing instruction with an eye on place helps answer the questions: How can students create rather than regurgitate knowledge that matters to them? How can they interact meaningfully with the community around them? Not many of us would deny the impact and appropriateness of a place-conscious approaches to reading and writing instruction in rural schools. English teachers utilizing forms of place-conscious education use the local histories, literature, environments, and cultural referents of the

communities they serve to help students construct knowledge. The primary value of place-conscious education lies in the intradependence of people and place. Students learn and experience the value they hold for others in their communities and how their communities are connected to the greater regions in which they live (Theobald, 1997). Rural students in particular benefit from place-conscious education because of its power to overcome the isolation and marginalization experienced by many rural students as a result of the increasing movement toward urbanization.

Multicultural Approaches To English Language Arts Instruction

As a result of a century of urban-centric reform, many English teachers in rural schools were suddenly met with the curricular task of implementing multicultural approaches to reading and writing instruction during the 1970s and 1980s. Teachers in rural schools met resistance to this new curricular reform advocating for multicultural approaches to ELA instruction. Secondary English teachers working in today's culturally homogenous rural communities may still find students, parents, administrators, and fellow faculty members who are opposed to such curricular changes; however, a review of the literature reveals the importance of multicultural approaches to ELA instruction even in communities perceived to be culturally homogenous.

Proponents of multicultural education advocate a pluralist form of education for all children (C. Banks, 2004; J. Banks, 1995; Banks & Banks, 2001; Sleeter & Grant 2007). Emerging from the struggle of historically marginalized people, especially ethnic minorities, the field of multicultural education seeks to reduce prejudice and discrimination against individuals and groups of individuals. Sleeter (1996, 2005) describes multicultural education as a sustained effort to work toward social justice by

affecting the distribution of power between different cultural groups. At the center of multicultural education's foundation is the belief that schools play an integral role in transforming society to bring an end to social injustices.

As previously noted, teachers in seemingly homogenous schools, especially those in rural communities, may meet resistance when discussing multicultural approaches to education. This is often the result of a misunderstanding on the part of students, teachers, administrators, or parents. Sometimes it is the result of resistance to the urban normativity and reform rural schools have fought over the past century. Sadly, it is sometimes the result of an uninformed, narrow mindset of individuals within a community. More often than not, certain culturally homogenous rural communities see little relevance in the application of the nation's movement toward multicultural education because they define culture in the narrowest of terms and they overlook the prejudice reduction facet of multicultural education.

In response to those who oppose multicultural education, Gay (2001) argues although there are different approaches to the concept of multicultural education, multicultural education is not limited to those who simply appear different than us. Nieto (2004) argues that when diversity is narrowly defined by race or ethnic differences, the term fails to consider the complex diversities of gender, social class, sexuality, physical ability, and other differences. Yeo (1999) contends both critics and proponents of multicultural education who possess such a limited understanding of culture may develop a perception that multicultural education is not relevant for schools serving ethnically homogenous communities.

Within the past few decades, scholars and researchers in multicultural education

have developed a high level of agreement about the goals of the field. Banks and Banks (2001) define multicultural education as is a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students, which incorporates content, principles, and theories related to the study of historically marginalized groups. These goals sound very similar to those outlined by advocates of both place-conscious and culturally relevant methods of instruction. Multicultural education scholars and researchers agree changes need to be made for multicultural education to be implemented successfully. Significant changes to curriculum design, teaching materials, beliefs and teachers and administrators, and school climate must take occur if teachers hope to level the education playing field for all students (Banks, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). To provide teachers the tools necessary to level the playing field, teacher preparation programs must also reconsider their curriculum design.

For many preservice teacher candidates, multicultural education courses are an elective taken once during a four-year degree. Phuntsog (1999) suggests multicultural education courses simply attempt to promote skills and knowledge to address the growing achievement gap between students of color and white students. This one-off approach to multicultural education does not allow preservice teacher candidates much opportunity to consider their own beliefs of diverse cultures, teaching diverse students, and the learning of diverse students (Phuntsog, 1999). The information in multicultural courses are often not included in discussion taking place in general education courses or advanced methods courses in ELA. If teacher education programs are to prepare preservice teacher candidates to enter an increasingly diverse world, the programs must focus on wholesale changes to the curriculum and instruction. As Nieto (2004) suggests:

Multicultural education permeates the schools' curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 205)

In order to provide educators with better-informed methods of instruction, Banks (1995) utilizes five dimensions to frame his approach to multicultural education: content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture. Content integration focuses on teachers' use of examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups. Banks (1995) warns that far too often beginning teachers or those inexperienced with multicultural education begin and end their multicultural inclusion at content integration. In doing so, they problematize culturally relevant education by limiting its reach through a failure to acknowledge the curriculum's impact on the construction of knowledge. If educators wish to provide students with the opportunity to construct knowledge, the content they integrate into their curriculum must be authentic and relevant while also exposing students to cultures outside of their own (Banks, 1995).

When we emphasize the knowledge construction dimension we provide students with opportunities to understand how knowledge is created and influenced by individuals within society. Despite many teachers' best effort to engage students in the process of knowledge construction, the curriculums they implement and the content they teach only allow for students to memorize and regurgitate the knowledge previously created by

others (Banks, 1995). Multicultural approaches in the ELA classroom include a variety of perspectives and literature reflecting the cultural experiences of student. These approaches also encourage interactions with these cultural referents. Therefore, if the knowledge construction Banks envisions is to take place within the classroom, authentic methods of instruction must also take place.

John Dewey (1922) noticed this disconnect between schools and the world long before Banks arrived at his five dimensions of multicultural education. Dewey suggests many students often feel detached from their educational experience because students are primarily drawn to actual experiences rather than to ideas about experiences (1922). In other words, learning should include lessons designed to address the immediate questions and concerns of students while incorporating as many authentic audiences as possible. English teachers must provide students with opportunities to discuss topics relevant to their students' lives and incorporate writing projects that encourage addressing authentic audiences outside of the classroom.

Researchers and scholars in the fields of education and English education argue that valuable knowledge for most children is knowledge that is directly related to their lives and cultures. In a collection of essays from rural elementary and secondary teachers, Brooke (2003) asserts educational practices that consider such realities are successful because students feel that their work directly contributes to the betterment of their communities. Urban schools generally serve a number of communities with a variety of cultures represented. Similarly, rural schools often serve numerous communities, spanning great distances which can include many different cultures.

Rural communities have their own unique histories and cultures. As a result of the continued efforts of 100 years of rural school consolidation, the people of rural communities have come to understand the importance of working together with parents, teachers, and administrator from other communities in centralized school locales. This being said, educators need to view multicultural education as a movement toward inclusivity of all people and cultures. Such a mindset not only promotes the thoughtful examination of cultures unfamiliar to teachers and students alike, but it also leads to critical investigations of the beliefs and assumptions students and teachers have in regards to their own cultures.

Banks' (1995) third dimension, prejudice reduction, identifies student attitudes toward different cultural groups and suggests strategies to help students develop more democratic attitudes and values. However, even the most well-intentioned efforts can become problematic. Penniman (2009) warns against three common mistakes teachers make when introducing multicultural literature: tokenism, exoticism, and universalism. According to Penniman, English teachers need to emphasize to their students that no single work can represent a whole people or nation, and failure to do so runs the risk of creating a token approach to reading and writing instruction (2009). Just as there is no single approach to reading and writing instruction, English teachers and their students should be reminded no single author can speak for an entire cultural group. The authors of the texts we include in our classrooms can only speak to their lived experiences and perceptions within a cultural group.

It is often easier for students and teachers to look at what they in common with people from diverse circumstances and universalize their lived experiences.

Unfortunately, a failure to acknowledge differences in cultural practices and beliefs leads to an oversimplification of cultures. Bizzell and Herzberg (1995) warn educators to avoid universal approaches to multicultural education. In an attempt to create empathy, this approach has a tendency to produce collections of readings that focus on painful experiences, depicting marginalized populations as victims, and students who are not members of the cultural group(s) depicted or those who have limited understanding and experience with people from the cultural group(s) may feel such texts are irrelevant to their education to the point where they reject the texts' message of acceptance (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1995). More importantly, students who are members of the cultural group(s) may become embarrassed by classroom discussions, especially if they are looked to as the lone representative of the cultural group in question (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1995).

In addition Banks (1995) argues against what he describes as the contributions approach of focusing on heroes and holidays and the additive approach of simply adding works by authors of historically marginalized groups to the existing curriculum. Both approaches to reading and writing instruction preserve the status quo, reinforcing the perspectives of the mainstream culture (Banks, 1995). These approaches are more concerned with "what" we teach rather than "the way" we teach the material. More radical approaches to multicultural education, according to Banks (1995), are the transformative approach's focus on social justice concerns and the social action approach of including community service or political action projects to our classroom instruction. These approaches to multicultural education are closely aligned with the place-conscious approaches of Donehower et al. (2007, 2012), Hass (1990), Theobald (1997), and others.

All take into account local interests to provide students opportunities to enact positive social change within their communities.

Banks' (1995) equity pedagogy dimension exists when teachers modify their teaching in ways that facilitate the academic achievement of students from racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse groups. Such methods of instruction require us to implement a variety of teaching styles consistent with the diversity of learning styles found within our classrooms. This dimension does not simply ask English teachers to help students learn to read and write within the traditional canon to fit into society, but it encourages an inquiry-based method of instruction to promote a critical awareness of the assumptions and paradigms of the dominant culture (Banks, 1995). An education for equity provides students the skills necessary to become agents for social change.

Finally, Banks's (1995) concept of an empowering school culture and social structure is one that is carefully structured through an examination of the various cultures that exist within our schools. The reflective nature of most writing classrooms makes them an ideal site for students and teachers to conduct such an examination. An empowering school culture and organization as described by Banks (1995) is created when the culture and organization of our schools are transformed in ways that enable students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and gender groups to experience educational equality and equitable social status. The successful implementation of Banks' fifth dimension requires the commitment of all teachers and administrators. The attitudes, beliefs, and actions of teachers and administrators must support equality for all students through the adoption of instructional styles and methods for differentiated learning, the reduction of prejudicial assumptions, the promotion of social knowledge

construction, and the implementation of materials and curriculum maps substantiated by multicultural education (Banks, 1995).

Banks' (1995) five dimensions of multicultural education can certainly guide our understanding and application of culturally relevant education. Each dimension begins with a careful examination of the cultural climate of a school with a focus on the immediate context and needs of the students. Teachers dedicated to culturally relevant pedagogy address the cultural needs of the students and in a greater sense those communities the school serves. In doing so, teachers not only prepare students to be successful in the classroom and society through a complex criticism of knowledge construction, educational systems, identity, and culture.

Culturally relevant education is an important consideration for teachers working in rural schools. If culturally relevant education is to become a reality in schools in both rural and urban communities perceived to be culturally homogenous, culture and cultural understanding must be recognized and integrated on a daily basis. For many rural students, an understanding of culture is best learned first through an understanding of their own culture and for years this has been carried out by teachers dedicated to place-conscious approaches to education. Multicultural approaches to ELA instruction can provide rural students a seat at the cultural table. If English teachers want to affect positive change within the rural communities they teach, they should not stop there.

Culturally relevant pedagogy merges the recognition and inclusion of community in curricular design espoused by proponents of place-conscious education with the cultural awareness of multicultural approaches to education to empower students intellectually, socially, and politically. Culturally relevant pedagogy offers rural students

the opportunities to see themselves as individuals living in a larger society beyond their village limits and rural culture belonging to the multicultural conversation. A culturally relevant pedagogy does not abandon the importance of place, nor does it ignore the diversity of cultures within our classrooms. On the contrary, culturally relevant pedagogy allows ELA teachers to account for the lived and cultural experiences of their students while simultaneously promoting opportunities to acknowledge differences and create spaces in which students can celebrate, confront, and contend with differences.

Chapter II Conclusion

Chapter Two: A Review of the Literature has emphasized the critical components of culturally relevant pedagogy in order to provide a foundation for its use in the rural secondary English classroom. Culturally relevant teachers exam three critical conceptions of their pedagogy and practice: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive the construction of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Additionally, this literature review examined important historical, societal, and educational influences on rural schools in an attempt to address the important questions of what constitutes rurality and whether or not culturally relevant education has a place in rural school settings. A comparison of previous educational movements in rural education – place-conscious education and multicultural education – helped to reinforce the relevance of culturally relevant teaching practices in rural schools.

The following chapter, Chapter Three, will provide a detailed description of this study, including a rationale for the selection of its participants and brief descriptions of the individuals involved. Chapter Three will also describe the qualitative methodology

employed to conduct this case study of rural teachers conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice inside the secondary English classroom. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the methods of data collection (interviews, participant observations, and document analysis) and a description of the theoretical framework guiding this case study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three outlines the details of this case study, a study intended to offer a thorough illustration of what culturally relevant pedagogy looks like in practice in one rural high school's English classrooms. I chose to conduct a case study in order to provide an authentic account of rural secondary English teachers' conceptions and illustrations of culturally relevant pedagogy. These teachers served a diverse population of rural students with a range of cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic differences.

The purpose of this study was to critically examine two secondary English teachers within the same high school. In doing so, this study aimed to further the current understanding of how culturally relevant educators conceptualize and implement their pedagogy within a rural context. Both of the study's participants identified themselves as operating within the tenants of culturally pedagogy. In her study of the beliefs and behaviors of culturally relevant teachers, Ladson-Billings (1994) concluded successful teachers of students of diverse backgrounds could be identified by the following three critical conceptions of their pedagogy and practice: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. Both participants acknowledged their participation with the National Writing Project as having had an influence on their professional development toward embracing a culturally relevant pedagogy. There they fostered a belief that educators are responsible for challenging their students understanding of the world, and they believed a curriculum relevant to the lives of their students was the best method for reaching this aim.

What follows is a discussion of this study's guiding questions and sub-questions and a description and rationale for choosing a single site to conduct this case study. Additionally, Chapter Three explains this project's sampling process, delivers a brief description of the study's participants, and explains the various methods of data collection which include the following: participant-observation of rural teachers' application of culturally relevant pedagogy; a series of three open-ended interviews with the participant teachers; and a careful analysis of lesson plans, sample units, assignment sheets, and other documents created by the participants reflecting their interpretation and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. In order to explore the complexities of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy, I have developed the following guiding questions and sub-questions.

Guiding Questions and Sub-questions

This study probed into how two rural teachers' critical conceptions of self, students, culture, and learning informed their decisions to adopt culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as how their teaching context influenced their practice. The literature review in Chapter Two helped contextualize culturally relevant pedagogy within the frameworks of English education and teacher education scholarship. As previously described, the aim of culturally relevant pedagogy is to promote a method of instruction that enables all student to achieve high academic success through social, emotional, political, and cultural empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1994). While several exemplars of culturally relevant pedagogy have been identified in urban school settings, similar examples in rural schools are not as prevalent. This information led to the following guiding questions of this study: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the

concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? To explore these overarching questions, the following sub-questions were considered:

- What are the critical features of culturally relevant pedagogy and its practice?
- How do teachers in rural schools connect such a philosophy to reading and writing instruction?
- What factors do teachers consider during their decision making process on whether or not to use culturally relevant education?
- How do teachers' perceptions of self and students influence their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy?
- What goals do rural practitioners of culturally relevant pedagogy express as having for their students?

It became evident, following a careful examination of these questions that the primary aim of this study was to provide both a theoretical understanding of and a practical reference for the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in a rural secondary English classroom. The theoretical underpinnings of this study remain true to the original critical conceptions of Ladson-Billings (1994).

The Case Study

I conducted a case study of two secondary English teachers who taught a variety of literature and writing courses across multiple grade levels. I chose to conduct a case study because it allowed me to examine multiple perspectives on culturally relevant pedagogy in a singular, rural context. Creswell (2007) states, “a case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (case) or

multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case-based themes” (73). This case study included observations of the teachers’ classroom practices, a series of three open-ended interviews, and analysis of lesson plans, sample units, assignment sheets, and other documents. Combined, these documents, interviews, and observations provided me insight into the influence the participants’ teaching contexts, individual experiences, cultural understandings, and the courses and students they taught had on their interpretation and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The decision to use a case study methodology to frame this research was influenced by the need to provide an in-depth analysis of the individual practices and pedagogies to two highly respected veteran secondary English teachers. The case study methodology allowed for an examination of multiple perspectives on culturally relevant teaching within one high school across grade levels. This then permitted me to analyze the findings to reveal the differences and commonalties of the participants involving the complexities of relationships between their individual experiences, professional backgrounds, teaching contexts, critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, and the courses and students they taught. Creswell (2007) notes “in a case study, a specific case is examined, often with the intent of examining an issue with the case illustrating the complexity of the issue” (p. 93). In this particular study, the issue was culturally relevant pedagogy, and the case(s) were the two rural secondary English teachers conceptions and illustrations of culturally relevant practices in ELA classrooms. Furthermore, Creswell explains that case studies “allow for multiple sources of information, such as interviews

and document analysis” (2007, p. 73). I used both of these sources of information to inform this study in addition to my observations to triangulate the data.

The case study design allowed me to observe the teaching practices of two accomplished secondary English teachers within a single high school, Middlebury High School¹, as it related to their application of cultural relevant pedagogy. I chose to observe the practices of teachers in a single school building because I wanted to provide an accurate account of the issue within a specific cultural context. Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman (2011) posit, “Studies focusing on society and culture in a group, a program, or an organization typically espouse some form of case study as a strategy. This entails immersion in the setting and rests on both the researcher’s and the participants’ worldviews” (p. 93). Because rural communities vary greatly and rural communities shape the cultures and the individuals within these communities, I thought it would be beneficial to restrict the scope of this study to one community in order to provide an in-depth analysis. A case study involving a singular site allows researchers to “take the reader into the setting with a vividness and detail not typically present in more analytical reporting formats” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 164). The observations and interviews of the teacher participants along with an analysis of their instructional documents afforded a level of detail that more traditional quantitative research could not provide.

In defense of single research site, Marshall and Rossman (2011) further explain, “Case studies may be of a single person...or of one organization...where a typical or representative example was selected for long-term participant observation. Sampling

¹ All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants

² The name of National Writing Project affiliate has been changed in order to ensure the

over time in the same site reveals roles, interactions, and sentiments” (p. 103). Using a single site to conduct the research for this study allowed me to observe the participants over a three-month period of time, taking notes on the educators’ instructional methods and interactions with students. If I were to have conducted this research in multiple communities within the a similar time frame, this study would not have been able to offer its current level of “vividness and detail.” Maintaining a single site for my research afforded me the opportunity to critically examine the participants’ conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and to observe illustrations of these conceptions in their daily instructional practice.

Sampling

During the summer of 2013, I had the privilege of participating in the Great Lakes Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute² (hereafter referred to as GLWP), a chapter of the National Writing Project. The GLWP is an organization of teachers ranging from kindergarten to the university level in all academic disciplines, dedicated to improving the teaching and use of writing in the classroom. My experience at GLWP not only influenced my writing instruction, but it also helped foster relationships with local public school teachers. I met several teachers dedicated to rural education and many others interested in cultural studies approaches to writing instruction.

The participants for this study were chosen using both purposeful and convenience sampling. Purposeful and convenience sampling are samples that “can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem” and “saves time and money” respectively (Creswell, 2007, p. 125; Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 111). While

² The name of National Writing Project affiliate has been changed in order to ensure the anonymity of this study’s participants.

the case study participants I selected shared a similar teaching context (working within the same high school) they were selected because of their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Each of the participants differs in their conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy as a result of these varying backgrounds and experiences. The first preliminary criterion for this study was the need to find a community with a strong sense of rural identity.

Middlebury's district website promotes a rural identity in its description of the village of Middlebury and surrounding areas as a "picturesque countryside ... filled with vineyards, orchards, and many small lakes and rivers."³ The district's use of this decidedly non-urban description of the community it serves highlights the bond between place and identity. A defining characteristic of rural communities is their close connection to place (Brooke, 2003; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012; Theobald, 1997). Conversations with students and educators confirmed the community's strong rural identity.

Middlebury High School serves a small community of 3,400 people in southwest Michigan. Interestingly, government surveys conducted by the US Census Bureau would technically classify Middlebury as a distant town rather than the rural designation the district promotes. In order to qualify as a distant rural school, Middlebury would need to have a population of less than 2,500. However, the literature review reveals rurality cannot be defined by demographics or geography alone. One should think of the rural-urban relationship as a dynamic continuum, one that relies on the self-identification of the individuals within these communities more so than census data. A second preliminary

³ This information is not cited because doing so would compromise the protection of those involved by potentially revealing their identities.

criterion for participant selection was a self-described commitment to culturally relevant instruction.

The participants of this study shared a belief in the power of culturally relevant pedagogy based upon their experiences working with professional organizations like the GLWP. Despite working in a school district that is 96 percent Caucasian, both teachers recognized the importance of a pedagogy that empowers students to improve their communities and society through enhanced social, emotional, political, and cultural understanding. Not only did the participants encourage reading and writing instruction that promoted cultural competency, but they also encouraged students to critically engage with the worlds around them in order to transcend educational, societal, and political ideologies that have led to the historical oppression of others.

The third preliminary criterion for selection was that the participants were veteran teachers within their community. Marshall and Rossman (2011) encouraged case study participants to be “individuals considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well-informed in an organization or community...selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research and for their perspective on, for example, an organization, a community, or specialized field” (p. 155). The participants of this study had over thirty years of combined teaching experience within their school district. They were involved in extracurricular coaching and mentorship, and by assuming leadership roles on curriculum design teams and professional learning communities they were respected by their colleagues and administrators.

The sampling for this project was one of convenience because both participants were willing to cooperate with the study despite their schools’ lack of an official rural

designation. They were also willing to conduct interviews outside of school sometimes over the phone to accommodate my schedule and to save time having to travel back and forth from Middlebury.

Early in my sampling search, I exhausted several of my GLWP connections. One GLWP participant had moved on from his position as a secondary English teacher. Several of the teachers did not believe they actively implemented culturally relevant practices in their reading and writing instruction. In other instances, I was unable to find cases where teachers had the necessary autonomy required to carryout the work of culturally relevant pedagogy despite their philosophical alignment with culturally relevant pedagogy.

In order to assist my sampling process, I relied on recommendations and referrals from local teacher education professionals. One of the referrals led me to Jason, a veteran teacher of twelve years working in a rural school district. Jason was enthusiastic about his potential involvement in this study, and he volunteered to help recruit his fellow colleagues by gauging their levels of interest. He also had personal knowledge of his colleagues' instructional methods, which helped narrow the search process. This method of subject recruitment is known as a "snowball" technique. The involvement of one participant encourages others to join the study. In this case, Jason introduced me to three other educators who were interested in potentially participating in this study.

Following several informal conversations with Jason, I held an informative meeting with all interested educators. During this informative meeting, I outlined my research goals and statement of problem. I also established the previously mentioned criteria for participation. Out of the four educators who attended the meeting, two

teachers were willing to volunteer as study participants. The following section briefly describes the educators involved in this study.

The Participants

Jason

The first participant, Jason, just finished his twelfth year of teaching at Middlebury High School. During his time at Middlebury, Jason has taught grades nine through twelve; however, Jason's most recent teaching context placed him in the ninth and twelfth grade classrooms. He taught two sections of ninth grade English, two sections of senior English, and a section of AP Language and Composition. Jason also has served on the school's professional development team for several years. He played an instrumental role in the professional development of the teachers at Middlebury High School by introducing the faculty and administration to the GLWP.

Jason's career path to becoming a professional secondary English teacher could be described as non-traditional. After graduating high school, which spanned two states and three separate high schools, Jason spent several years as a cook, and he traveled throughout the United States. Jason pursued his post-secondary education at the age of 26 and earned degrees in English and Spanish. During his summers, he worked with a program on campus to help underprivileged urban and suburban students prepare for higher education by receiving instruction in science, math, literature, and composition. Jason followed that up with a year teaching English in Tokyo, Japan. Upon returning from Japan, he earned his teaching certifications in English and Spanish. During that time, he also worked as a coordinator for a community-based outreach program designed to provide students in local elementary schools and their families educational and life-

skills opportunities. Although Jason believed that living in various places throughout the United States and the world helped him relate to students from diverse backgrounds, he also admitted that it took time to form relationships with the students and communities in each locale.

During an interview, Jason declared his passion for working with culturally diverse and low-income students was the result of his own experiences as a child:

I grew up very poor ... and we lived all over the place. My mom and my step-dad lived in government housing for like fifteen years. I was kind all over the place. I went to three different high schools in two different states. Anyway, a lot of those experiences were pretty primary in terms of my desire to learn and teach. My grandma also preached to me “You know Jason you have to get an education.

They can never take away your education.”

As a culturally relevant educator, Jason understood the importance his lived experiences and his students’ lived experiences had in the development of their critical conceptions of others and how social interactions with others in the classroom and life impacted learning.

Stacey

The second participant, Stacey, concluded her tenth year as a full-time secondary English teacher at Middlebury High School. Stacey had taught at all four grade levels at Middlebury High School, but she found herself teaching English to sophomore and junior students during the time of this study. She taught two sections of English 10, two sections of American Literature, and two sections of World Literature (Honors 11).

Similar, to Jason, Stacey's path to becoming a professional English teacher was non-traditional.

During her time as an undergraduate student and even while working as a business professional, Stacey found the time to coach competitive cheerleading in a rural community thirty-five miles north of Middlebury. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in business, she spent five years working in the transportation industry before taking time off professionally to be an at-home mother. Eventually, Stacey returned to college in her mid-thirties to pursue her teaching degree. She cited her love for coaching and literature as a driving force for pushing her toward a career as a secondary English educator.

After several long-term subbing positions, Stacey was hired at Middlebury High School. She served in the Guidance Office as the At-Risk Coordinator where she "work[ed] with students who were in danger of failing for one reason or another, and made sure they had their credits to graduate." Shortly thereafter, Stacey was offered a full-time position as an English teacher. Stacey attributed the influence of her mentors from high school – teachers and coaches who made learning both fun and educational – as having ignited her passion for coaching and teaching. As a secondary English teacher, she believed education and entertainment are inseparable:

Jason and I talk all the time that I put on a show for five hours a day because if you're not entertaining – and you can go around the school and ask the kids – and you can know your content inside and out, but if you can't get the kids attention and you can't relate to them and if most kids can't relate with you, you're not going to be able to teach them, especially this age.

Stacey's instructional practices were not only entertaining, but they were also illustrative of the kinds of practices successful teachers of culturally relevant pedagogy implement into their daily lessons.

In an interview, Stacey revealed that she believed teachers must be lifelong learners, and this learning does not always come from books. Stacey described that she must "learn from students because they bring in different perspectives, especially as I get old and they get younger. Their perspective on the world is completely different than mine." Her recognition of her students as a source of valuable knowledge and its inclusion in the classroom is an important step toward the adoption of a culturally relevant pedagogy. In addition, Stacey continually pressed the traditional notions of the roles students and teachers play in the construction of knowledge. Stacey often called upon her students to teach lessons, lead discussions, and identify information within the literature that was relevant to their learning. Chapter Four will discuss both Stacey and Jason's critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and provide illustrations of their practice in greater detail.

The Interviews

This study utilized three methods of data collection: open-ended interviews, participant observations, and documents analysis (syllabi, lesson plans, assignment sheets, etc.). I conducted a series of three one-on-one open-ended interviews. The interviews were thematically organized because I was interested in not only what secondary English teachers in rural schools were doing to implement culturally relevant pedagogy, but I was also interested in why these teachers, in a predominantly ethnically homogenous community, were using culturally relevant instruction.

A thematic organization of the interviews was required in order to examine how the participants' teaching contexts, individual experiences, cultural understandings, and the courses and students they taught influenced their interpretation and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Marshall and Rossman (2011) recommend a methodology of "three in-depth interviews....The first focuses on past experience with the phenomenon of interest; the second focuses on present experience; and the third joins these two narratives to describe the individual's essential experience with the phenomenon" (p. 148). This thematic organization provided participants opportunities to share their experiences and thoughts on a number of issues that influenced their decision making process to include culturally relevant instruction. My interviews followed this general outline, but they were loosely structured to encourage participants to share as much of their experiences with culturally relevant pedagogy as possible.

The first open-ended interview I conducted was designed to establish the participants' previous experiences with culturally relevant pedagogy. These initial interviews were conducted prior to my observations. I was primarily interested in how the participants perceived the three critical conception of culturally relevant pedagogy as identified by Ladson-Billings (1994). I was also interested in how the participants' critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy were shaped by their current teaching contexts and previous personal and professional journeys.

A protocol for the first set of interviews was designed to maintain focus on the aforementioned topics. The following is a sample of questions/prompts from the interview protocol:

- Critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy: 1) How do you define culture? 2) How do you define culturally relevant pedagogy? 3) How do you conceive yourself and others? 4) How do you conceive your social interactions with others? 5) How do you conceive the construction of knowledge?
- Teaching context: 1) Please describe the cultural representation of your school, and specifically your classroom. 2) Does the context that you teach in support your goals as a teacher who has adopted culturally relevant pedagogy? 3) How do your courses meet the needs of the students in your classroom?
- Philosophical beliefs about the intersection of culturally relevant secondary ELA: 1) In general, what are your guiding beliefs about teaching and learning? 2) When did you first learn about culturally relevant pedagogy?
- Personal/Professional journey: 1) What influenced you to become a teacher, and by extension an English Teacher? 2) Can you please summarize your teaching journey, the professional experiences you have had as a teacher?

These in-depth interviews addressed one major aim of this project. The participating teachers' responses provided an understanding of how their experiences, philosophical influences, and teaching contexts informed their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. Evidence of the educators' conceptions of culturally relevant content began to support the pedagogy's relevance in a rural school setting. However, further questions needed to be asked of the participants if I was to understand how the participants put culturally relevant pedagogy into practice. The participants'

responses during this first set of interviews helped inform the second set of interview questions.

The second set of interviews focused on “the way” culturally relevant pedagogy was put into practice. These interviews took place during the time I observed the teacher participants. Although the educators provided many examples of the content they thought aligned with culturally relevant pedagogy, the second set of interviews also questioned the participants methods of instruction. Similar to the first set of interviews, an interview protocol for the second set of interviews was designed to maintain focus on the aforementioned topics. The following is a sample of questions/prompts from the interview protocol:

- Illustrations of culturally relevant practices: 1) On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very little and 10 being very much, how comfortable are you with using culturally relevant practices in your reading and writing courses? 2) What culturally relevant practices do you use in your classroom? 3) How often do you use culturally relevant practices in your classroom? 4) Culturally relevant pedagogy is meant to empower students to disrupt the status quo, how do your instructional practices encourage this form of empowerment?
- Culturally relevant course content: 1) What materials do you incorporate into your courses that reflect the criticality of culturally relevant pedagogy? 2) What led you to choose those particular materials? 3) How do these materials reflect/respond to the cultural referents of your students? 4) What are the major learning outcomes you have for your students in these courses? 5) How

are these learning outcomes connected to culturally relevant pedagogy? 6)

What are the distinguishing characteristics of your courses?

This set of interview questions certainly addressed the important questions of how and why the interviewees designed their courses around a culturally relevant pedagogy. The responses of the participants revealed their individual influences and motivations for doing what they do in planning their courses and what types of work students do within these contexts. But one final interview was required to complete the methodology described by Marshall and Rossman (2011).

I conducted the third set of interviews after I had completed my observations. These final interviews were concerned with the participants' reflections on their overall experiences during the three-month observation and their considerations for future implementations of culturally relevant practices. The following is a sample of questions/prompts from the interview protocol:

- Reflections on the use of culturally relevant pedagogy: 1) What instructional practices do you believe benefitted the students the most? 2) What instructional practices do you think could benefit from additional attention to culturally relevant methods of instruction? 3) What students benefited from your use of culturally relevant methods of instruction? 4) What are the biggest benefits to using culturally relevant instruction in literature and writing courses for you and your students?
- Considerations for the future: 1) What kinds of changes would you make to your course or your instructional practices to more closely align with the criticality of culturally relevant pedagogy? 2) You have a very active PLC in

your school district, how might you encourage your colleagues to adopt culturally relevant educational practices? 3) What advice can you give to teachers or teacher educators looking to adopt culturally relevant instruction in their classrooms?

In order to maintain a focus on the primary aims of the study, the design of the interview protocols were meant to ensure uniformity between interviewees across all three sets of interviews. All of the interviews conducted during this study were digitally recorded for accuracy and transferred to an electronic software program for transcription and coding. Prior to the beginning of each interview I reminded the participants they did not have to answer any of the questions for any reason without fear of prejudice or penalty by me.

I also made a concerted effort to remain objective during the interview process so as not to influence the educators' responses. Although I brought a predetermined list of questions for the participants to answer, I felt it necessary to leave the interviews open-ended so the participants could freely answer the questions and allow for follow-up questions. In doing so, the interviews took on an organic nature, which promoted the sort of social consciousness that is at the heart of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Observations

Another important aspect of this case study was the three-month long observation of the educators in their classrooms. Both of the participants were very welcoming to my presence in their classroom. As a participant observer, I was there to take notes on the participants' instructional practices and interactions with students. Prior to the start of my research, I conducted some informal observations to build trust and familiarity with

the educators and their students. Once I officially began my observations, I was in the participants' classrooms two-to-three times per week during this three-month period.

Qualitative research involving case studies relies heavily upon observation. Marshall and Rossman (2011) note observations are used to “discover complex interactions in natural social settings” and these observations are a “fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative inquiry” (p. 140). For this study, I relied on observations of the participants to provide a detailed portrait of culturally relevant educational practices within a rural context.

During class observations I took field notes in which I recorded how the participating teachers interacted with their students – what they said, what questions they asked, what guiding prompts they used in their instruction. Marshall and Rossman (2011) explain how the observation process begins as an “open-ended entry [in which] the researcher is able to discover the recurring patterns of behavior and relationships” (p. 139). Once I was able to establish these “recurring patterns of behavior and relationships,” I was able to focus my observations and develop a specific protocol to aid in taking field notes.

Prior to the beginning of each observation period, I recorded the name of who I was observing and the course at the top of my notes. Following this information I wrote down the agenda for the day along with any applicable lesson objectives. In order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of everyone involved according to HSIRB protocol, I used pseudonyms in place of the educators' names, and when students responded to the teachers' prompts, I used an alphabetical system to keep track of responses. I jotted down detailed notes describing what took place during the class

period, and I also used my field notes to write down my own reflections, paying attention to emerging codes that connected critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy with classroom practices.

Document Assessment

In addition to observations and interviews, I also collected course materials from the participants to triangulate my data. The teacher participants involved in this study willingly shared course documents like syllabi, lesson plans, assignment sheets, and major project handouts. The two educators also provided me grading rubrics and samples of student work. As a collection, these documents helped to further my understanding of the participants' critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and how both they and the students engaged in culturally relevant instruction. These course documents were more than generic lesson plans and assignments a teacher might find on the Internet or in the pages of a basal reader. These documents reflected the educators' pedagogies as informed by their professional experiences, personal backgrounds, conceptions of culture, and teaching contexts.

While keeping a close eye on this study's guiding questions, I noticed several themes emerge from the data. I focused on the commonalities and difference between the teacher participants pertaining to their conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice. These themes became a major focus of the study because they revealed how veteran teachers in a rural high school approached culturally relevant methods of instruction within an ELA classroom. The emerging themes also exposed patterns in how the participants' personal backgrounds and professional experiences guided their critical approaches to ELA education.

Data Analysis and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the conceptions and classroom practices of the participants involved to further current understandings of how culturally relevant pedagogy is put into practice in the secondary English classrooms of a rural American school. In order to further Ladson-Billings' (1994) original research on culturally relevant pedagogy, I used her theoretical framework to guide this study. Under examination are the educators' three critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. The data gathered during this study not only revealed influences affecting the educators, but it also highlighted their different approaches to culturally relevant education. For instance, Jason relied on his ability to relate the content of his courses to his students' lives through his gift of storytelling. Whether or not Jason taught content specific to his students' rural culture, he actively incorporated material to challenge his students' cultural competencies and their beliefs on social issues. On the other hand, Stacey actively incorporated her students' lived experiences as a heuristic for engaging them in discussions. In both instances, Jason and Stacey were keenly aware of how their own identities and beliefs influenced their interactions with students in the classroom and their decision to include certain content in the classroom.

This study also addressed how these educators arrived at their current teaching contexts and their philosophical beliefs in addition to their three critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. The professional teaching profiles in Chapter Four illuminate important insights into how the educators' personal and professional histories

influenced their beliefs about ELA instruction. These educator's experiences significantly shaped their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly their conceptions and social interactions with others. Jason's experiences during his youth and his work with underprivileged children during his time in college made him keenly aware of the struggles his students from low-income families faced. Stacey's previous mentors, teachers, and coaches encouraged her to make teaching fun and educational by getting to know her students on a personal level.

While I looked through my field notes, listened to and transcribed my interviews and observations, and sifted through "piles" of electronic documents, I used open-coding to analyze the information. As these codes emerged, I collected evidence of culturally relevant practices and catalogued them under three major categories: conceptions of others; social interactions with others; construction of knowledge. As the codes within these major categories emerged, I color coded and catalogued the evidence to find common practices between the teacher participants' instructional practices and interactions with students. Not only did I look for shared practices, but I also accounted for how the educators' classroom practices differed. This coding process allowed me to identify pertinent information to analyze in an attempt to answer this study's primary questions: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method?

The data analysis focused on the following: teacher profiles (personal and professional histories, current teaching contexts, philosophical influences on teaching secondary ELA); critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy (how they conceive

themselves and their students, how they conceive their social interactions with others, how they conceive knowledge construction); and illustrations of their individual applications of culturally relevant education within their daily instruction (manifestations of previous conceptions, curriculum design, course content, etc.). While each of the elements were intended to be distinct, the data collected during this study was often categorized under multiple strands. For instance, data that highlighted a teacher's critical conceptions of knowledge often revealed important findings related to illustrations of culturally relevant pedagogy. For instance, Stacey's implementation of non-traditional methods of student-led instruction adhered to her belief that knowledge is socially constructed. Her students were not there to be filled with knowledge. Stacey expected her students to take ownership of the material and lead discussions. This interdependence among the thematic strands is reflective of the nature of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Chapter III Conclusion

The previous three chapters have attempted to emphasize the context-specific nature of culturally relevant pedagogy. Chapter Three has outlined the specific methodology I followed while conducting research for this project. Participants for this study were chosen based on several criteria: belief in the power of culturally relevant pedagogy; veteran status as a secondary English teacher in their community; current teaching context placing them within a school setting with a strong sense of rural identity. I relied on professional contacts within the GLWP community and references from English teacher educators to identify potential participants.

The data analysis process was not only helpful in identifying relevant information, but it also helped exclude unnecessary data from the document analysis, participant-

observations, and interviews. In representing the findings of this study, my goal was to “present an in-depth picture of the cases using narrative and figures” (Creswell, 2007, p. 157). I believe the professional teaching profiles and the critical conceptions of the educators culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice go a long way toward answering this study’s guiding questions: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? Chapter Four will provide a detailed depiction of two rural secondary English teachers’ critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice implementation within their specific teaching contexts.

CHAPTER IV

CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY: CRITICAL CONCEPTIONS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter Four opens with the professional teaching profiles of two rural secondary ELA educators. I constructed these professional teaching profiles using three major categories: personal and professional journeys, current teaching contexts, and philosophical influences on teaching secondary ELA. The two rural secondary ELA educators in this study, both veteran classroom teachers with more than twenty years of combined experience at Middlebury High School, presented unique personal and professional histories through a series of three interviews, which provide great insight into the influences on their culturally relevant teaching philosophy and educational practice.

This chapter then proceeds to examine the two educators' critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and highlights illustrations of its practice in their rural teaching context using the three broad propositions Ladson-Billings (1994) identified in her work on culturally relevant pedagogy: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. I used my notes and transcripts from participant observations and the educators' course documents (syllabi, assignment sheets, lesson plans, etc.) to identify whether or not the educators' culturally relevant practices reinforced their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the common key features and the unique features of both educators' critical

conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice in their classrooms.

The Professional Teaching Profiles

During this project, I learned about the guiding conceptions and observed the professional practices of two rural secondary ELA educators – Stacey and Jason – at Middlebury High School. In doing so, I concentrated on how these educators conceived and illustrated the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy within their classrooms. But before I observed their practices, I wanted to better understand how these educators arrived in their current teaching contexts and what critical aspects of their personal and professional lives influenced their teaching philosophies and educational practices.

According to Ladson-Billings (1994), “Much of the purported reforms and the debate about our schools focuses on curriculum: What should we teach? Whose version of history should we offer? What priority should different subject matters be given? But it is *the way we teach* that profoundly affects the way the students perceive the content of that curriculum” (p. 13). “The way” rural secondary ELA educators relate to and educate their students using cultural referents is central to the aims of this study. However, if we are to better understand “the ways” in which rural secondary ELA educators relate and educate their students, we must first begin to better understand how it is that they have arrived in their current teaching contexts and what influences have helped to shape their beliefs about ELA instruction and culturally relevant pedagogy.

I constructed the following professional teaching profiles through a series of three interviews, during which time I was able to learn about the educators’ personal and professional journeys, current teaching contexts, and philosophical influences on teaching

secondary ELA. The figure below highlights the framework I used to construct the professional teaching profiles. These professional teaching profiles provide great insight into “the ways” these two rural educators conceive culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrate its practices.

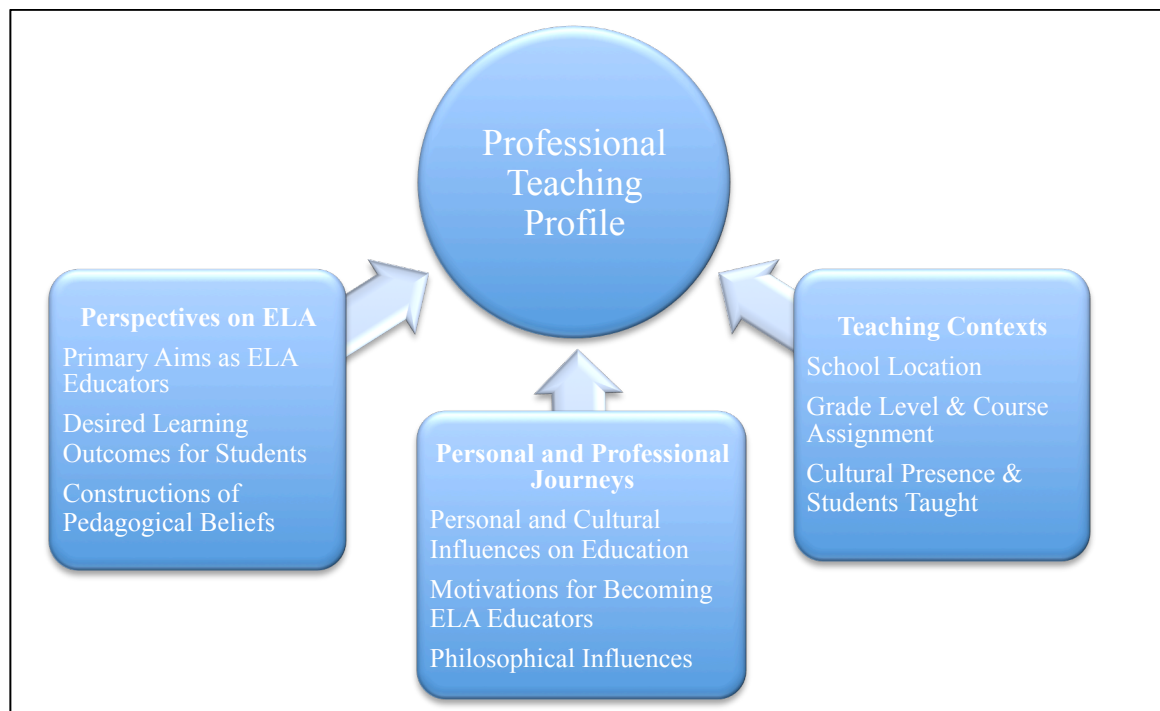


Figure 2. Professional Teaching Profiles: Meeting Educators Where They Are

Jason and Stacey’s personal and professional journeys highlighted how they became secondary ELA educators. Both attributed unique personal experiences in school and in life as motivating factors for becoming ELA educators. Furthermore, their professional journeys extenuated the ways in which they illustrated culturally relevant practices, particularly in their interactions with their students and the local community. It was not only important to consider the professional backgrounds of the participants when constructing these profiles, but it was also beneficial to include a discussion of their teaching context at the time of this study. Because culture is a fluid, ever-changing social

construction, shaped by groups of individuals, “the ways” these educators illustrate culturally relevant practices is certainly, in part, determined by the context in which they find themselves.

These professional teaching profiles helped establish the foundation for the subsequent section, “Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Illustrations of Its Practice,” where I discuss how the information presented in these professional teaching profiles influenced the educators’ critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and by extension their illustrations of its practice in the rural secondary ELA classroom.

Before I relay these individual educators’ stories, I would like to familiarize readers with who these educators are as a whole. Collectively, Stacey and Jason were dedicated to the teaching of ELA. Both were active leaders within their school district. One of the critical conceptions of culturally relevant is how educators conceive their social interactions with others. This includes interactions with students and the broader community. Jason and Stacey have served the students of Middlebury as teachers, coaches, and advisors for various classes and organizations such as the competitive cheer team, the wrestling team, and the National Honor Society. They have also served as members of several professional committees such as the Professional Development Staff, Teachers for Change, and the School Improvement Team. Additionally, Stacey and Jason credit their involvement in GLWP, an affiliate of the National Writing Project, as having had a significant influence on their professional development as secondary ELA educators.

During my observations and interviews with these educators, I became interested in learning how their personal and professional journeys informed their teaching philosophies and their approaches to culturally relevant education. Of particular interest to readers is the fact that despite attending the same university for their teaching degrees and sharing a teaching context at Middlebury High School for the past decade, these two secondary ELA educators approached their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy with very different teaching practices in their classrooms.

Jason's critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy led him to a belief that at the heart of culture is language. Jason taught with an eye on language, always referencing the worlds his students encountered in the classroom and in life through their interactions with the language(s) present within those worlds. Jason attributed his undergraduate work in linguistics and his love for languages (especially English, Spanish, and Japanese) as having had a tremendous influence on his conception of culturally relevant pedagogy and the practices he chose to implement.

Stacey's critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy emphasized the importance of social interactions and the building of learning communities. She believed it was imperative to meet her students where they were in life both academically and socially when they walk through her classroom door. Stacey attributed her own educational experiences and the valuable professional development sessions her school district provided as having had influenced her philosophies on teaching secondary ELA.

Prior to an in-depth discussion of Stacey and Jason's professional teaching profiles, I would like to briefly describe the three components that constitute these

profiles: personal and professional journeys; current teaching contexts; and philosophical influences on teaching secondary ELA.

Personal and Professional Journeys

Although you can categorize both Jason and Stacey's path toward becoming teachers as nontraditional, they arrived in the secondary English classroom in very different ways. Jason attributed the experiences of his youth as a "primary influence" on his desire to become a teacher. He admitted he spent most of his youth in a rough neighborhood, but his mother's work ethic and his grandmother's expectations for him to attend college were driving forces in his life.

After he graduated from high school, Jason spent eight years as a professional cook before he decided to attend college to pursue dual degrees in English and Spanish. He worked for various educational organizations both on and off campus during his summers as an undergraduate student. Following graduation, he taught English abroad in Tokyo, Japan for an entire year. Jason returned to the United States to earn his teaching certifications in secondary English education and Spanish after which time he started working at Middlebury High School

Stacey has been a lifelong sports fan, and she gave credit to her former high school coaches as having had a tremendous influence on her decision to become a teacher. Although she did not originally attend college to be an ELA educator, Stacey's passion for sports and coaching steered her toward taking on a number of coaching roles during her college years. Stacey finished her undergraduate studies with a business degree and spent five years in the transportation industry prior to stepping away from her career to be an at-home mother. Eventually, Stacey wanted to return to work, and her

passion for coaching spurred her desire to pursue a teaching certification in secondary English education.

These educators navigated very distinct personal and professional journeys to become educators. Their narratives are critical to this study’s investigation because culturally relevant pedagogy relies on the critical, self-reflective practices of educators. Ladson-Billings (1995b) argues that at its core “culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of student-teacher relationships, the curriculum, schooling, and society” (p. 483). Stacey and Jason’s critical examination of self helps us as English educators to understand the influences on their decisions to become secondary ELA educators, as well as understand their rationale behind adopting a culturally relevant pedagogy for their rural context.

Current Teaching Contexts

Stacey and Jason share a teaching context at Middlebury High School; however, the courses they have taught and the diverse sets of students in their classrooms unquestionably influenced their culturally relevant practices. The following figure underlines the diversity of learners within these educators’ courses.

	Classroom Size	Student Gender		Student Ethnicity					ELLs	IEP or 504
		Male	Female	Caucasian	African American	Hispanic	American Indian	Other		
Jason’s Freshmen English	30	16	14	27	1	3	0	0	1	1
Jason’s AP L & C	21	7	14	17	0	1	2	1	1	0
Stacey’s English 10	29	13	16	25	3	0	0	1	0	3
Stacey’s English 11	29	17	12	27	0	1	0	1	0	7

Figure 3. Jason and Stacey’s Classroom Demographics

Although Jason and Stacey taught in the same school building and their students are primarily Caucasian, the figure above shows the presence of diverse learners in their classrooms. Ethnic diversity existed in each of the classrooms I observed. Stacey and Jason identified having Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian American students in their courses. Additionally, Jason had two English language learners (hereafter referred to as ELL), one from Georgia and another from India. Stacey revealed that she did have an ELL in her English 10 classroom at the beginning of the school year, but that student had since moved on from Middlebury. The diversity of learners in Stacey and Jason's classrooms was not limited to ethnicity or nationality.

Stacey's English 11 class had a rather high number of students with IEPs or 504s compared to her other courses. She admitted to feeling "overwhelmed" at times trying to meet the diverse needs of her students even though she had the benefit of a teaching assistant in her classroom. Stacey elaborated on her feelings as she described her commitment to her students:

Learning about who your students are and where they come from is hard work, but if I'm going to help my students, I need to get to know them. Beyond the recommendations of the IEP or 504, the lives of my students play an important role in their educational experience. I know it did for me.

Stacey's recognition of the impact her students' lives had on their learning is but one example of the influence culturally relevant pedagogy had on Stacey's approaches to secondary ELA instruction.

Despite teaching the same number of courses and the same number of honors/AP courses, Jason had a relatively low number of students with special needs in his

classrooms. However, Jason highlighted an important distinction between the students in his general courses versus the students in his honors/AP courses:

Depending on what I'm teaching and whom I'm teaching whether it is ninth grade or twelfth grade college prep versus twelfth grade AP, there is going to be some pretty big socioeconomic discrepancies, which also of course equate to cultural discrepancies.

Jason described that the majority of the students in his classrooms came from poorer rural backgrounds and they "make up a huge part of the culture of our school." However, the students in his AP Language and Composition course tend to come from the more affluent subdivisions surrounding Middlebury:

With AP you are going to have some of the higher socioeconomic kids...and [it is] an unfair representation of the kids that live in the plats. We have more kids that live on farms, but more of my AP students come from the plats.

Jason recognized there was a connection between his student's socioeconomic status and their learning in the classroom. Additionally, Jason associated his students' economic status with their cultural upbringing. He categorized those students with agrarian backgrounds, the majority of the students who attended Middlebury, as coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds compared to their peers who lived within the town of Middlebury and its surrounding subdivisions.

Jason and Stacey's responses during our interviews helped to shed light on the diverse conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice, even within a singular site. A further examination of both Stacey and Jason's critical

conceptions of self and their students is explored later in this chapter in the section titled “Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Illustrations of Its Practice.”

Philosophical Influences on Teaching Secondary English Language Arts

The philosophical influences on Jason and Stacey’s teaching of secondary ELA are important because their beliefs informed their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and its impact on learning. In turn, these conceptions served as the basis to inform their illustrations of culturally relevant practice. The guiding questions of this study ask: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? In order to better understand the answers to these questions, we must first examine how these educators’ philosophical influences on teaching ELA guide their conceptions and illustrations of culturally relevant education.

Just as Stacey and Jason’s diverse personal and professional journeys have brought them to their current teaching contexts, the philosophical influences on their teaching of secondary ELA were equally disparate. Jason believed his job, as a secondary English educator, was to develop a well-educated, literate citizenry. Jason wanted his students to be able to “have the ability to function critically in society, which means that they can view, that they can look at texts or images and that they can interpret those in the multiple ways that things can be interpreted: culturally, racially, politically, religiously, philosophically, historically.” Jason focused on language and texts as he encouraged his students to think about the significance their impact had on society.

Stacey believed that it was her job to make learning fun and relatable for her students. Stacy attributed the philosophical influences of Freire (1970) and Ladson-Billings (1994) to her understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. Stacey's courses reflected the socially conscious community of learners critical educators advocate:

I believe as a teacher you always have to be learning. You learn from your students, and you have to constantly be changing your craft...I learn from students because they bring in different perspectives, especially as I get older and they get younger. Their perspective on the world is completely different than mine, and I think it really helps to understand where they are coming from and where they want to go.

Stacey's approaches to ELA instruction emphasized the importance of community building and a belief that her students brought with them valuable funds of knowledge that they could share with one another in order to gain a better understanding of the world.

Even though Stacey and Jason shared in Ladson-Billings' (1994, 1995a) common beliefs about effective culturally relevant teachers – academic excellence for all students, the fostering of cultural competence, and the development of the critical and social consciousness – they exhibited varying philosophies about how to best empower their students. Their personal and professional journeys combined with their philosophies on ELA education and the diverse students they served in their individual teaching contexts all influenced Jason and Stacey's approaches to secondary ELA instruction. The following professional teaching profiles offer readers the backdrop necessary to better

understand whom these educators are and why they have chosen to adopt a culturally relevant pedagogy to inform their teaching practices.

Jason

Jason's Personal and Professional Journey

Jason's journey to becoming a secondary ELA educator was not a straightforward path. Indeed, Jason acknowledged he was surprised that he had become a teacher considering some of the difficult obstacles he had to overcome. When I asked Jason to describe his background he was a little hesitant to reveal his past. However, over the course of this study, Jason began to open up more and more about his past. During one conversation, he confessed his youth was defined by a lack of money: "I grew up very poor ... and we lived all over the place. My mom and my step-dad lived in government housing for like fifteen years. I was kind all over the place."

He went on to describe the nomadic nature of his childhood. Prior to the marriage of his mother to his step-dad, Jason and his mother left Metropolis and found themselves in New Mexico:

When I was five we hitchhiked across the country. We lived in...New Mexico. We lived in teepees. My mom had this Indian American boyfriend who was a Vietnam veteran, and I didn't know any different; it was just what we did. But we dug our own holes to go to the bathroom, and we took showers or baths in the river. I got my own water out of like a spring. We had a wood-burning stove inside the teepee that I could, even at 5 and 6 years old, that I could start my own fire. I walked to school.... When we moved back to Metropolis, like I said, we lived in the student ghetto for years. We lived all over the place.... I lived in the

north side of Metropolis. Later on my mother got married when I was in sixth grade to a man, and they moved into Washington Grove, which is government housing. And they lived there for 15 years. Washington Grove is not the roughest, but the Southside of Metropolis is. And that is where I spent a lot my time.

Jason depicted his youth as a life of competing identities. The life he and his mother lived was quite different from that of his paternal grandparents. Jason clearly delineated the socioeconomic distinctions between his and his mother's lives compared to the lives of his paternal grandparents:

My mother, was not college educated until she was 53. She went back to school then but before that she cleaned house for twenty-some odd years. She worked very hard, but she was also pretty wild. She dated outside of her race. She had black boyfriends when I was growing up. It was pretty controversial back then. She was also kinda a hippie. I mean we lived in teepees. My dad was kinda a hippie, too, and he didn't go to college. But my grandpa was college educated, and my grandma always placed an emphasis on college. My grandparents were wealthy. Well not wealthy, but I thought they were wealthy. Looking back now I would say they were kinda upper-middle class. They weren't one percenters or anything like that. I would spend all summer with them. I would spend Christmases with them. They spoke to me and interacted with me in ways that educated folks interact with people, and they always expected and preached that I would go to college. My grandma also preached to me "You know Jason you have to get an education. They can never take away your education." So, I kinda

had a mix of influences in that sense. In that I kinda had this appreciation for college given to me early on, but not through the traditional way of parents, but through my grandparents. I had these dueling identities I guess. Those were always very important experiences for me in terms of thinking about becoming a teacher. This love for knowledge, and a love for the world.

Despite the positive influences in his life, Jason explained the struggles he faced during his time in high school. Once again, he focused on how his upbringing and socioeconomic status impacted his understanding of the world and his experiences in it:

I went to Metropolis Christian my freshman year. That didn't work out too well. I didn't fit in with Dutch people; although, I ended up marrying a Dutch girl, who went to Metropolis Christian. Because we were poor and Dutch folks ran Metropolis, and I had no idea. I had no idea, no clue. Those dueling experiences of living with folks, with poor folks, and folks of color at Washington Grove and then going to this rich kid school...I ended up leaving. So I went to Metropolis South for two years and a lot of bad stuff happened. I had a buddy who almost murdered someone and I was with him. He went to prison and I had a big old lawsuit against me. My dad tried to commit suicide multiple times my junior year. There were lots of drugs. We were kinda involved in what I guess you would call street culture. I had one friend get murdered, and I had multiple friends get put away. So I knew there was bad stuff. I actually lived on my own for a while as a junior. I lived with some friends, and I lived with my cousin. So it was either I figure something out or go that way. So I left. I chose to go to my grandparents and get stuff together. I rode a Greyhound bus with two pairs of shorts, a pair of

shoes, a pair of house slippers and a couple of tee-shirts, and a 40oz of Mickey's brew – on a Greyhound bus from Metropolis to Alabama. My grandma came and got me and I graduated in Alabama. I went from a 1.0 GPA to like a 3.3. All of those experiences, without a doubt, 100% are a part of how I teach. None of those experiences are removed from my pedagogy.

Jason confessed it took a long time to get his life back on track, and it was a difficult road. He credited his love of food and travel to turning his world around: "I started cooking pretty early on. Later on I cooked and worked all over the country. Then I worked my way up to fine-dining experiences."

Eventually, Jason decided it was time for him to pursue another career path and he went to college: "At 26 years old I went back to [college] and got an English degree – English and Spanish." During this time, Jason worked as an instructional aide at Metropolis Academy, a charter school in Metropolis, which primarily served urban and suburban African American youth. It was then, that Jason's "love for knowledge" and "love for the world" met his passion for education.

Following graduation, Jason spent a year teaching English in Tokyo, Japan. He valued his experience abroad and commented that he "was able to learn just as much from my students as they did from me. I took my year abroad to be an opportunity for me to learn another language and immerse myself in another culture." When Jason returned from Japan, he went back to college to earn his teaching certifications in English and Spanish. In order to put himself through college, Jason worked at a community outreach center in a suburb of Metropolis as a program coordinator: "I was in all eight elementary schools, coordinating community-based education for kids and adults,

stranger-danger education, and some nutritional education.” Additionally, Jason worked for a student intervention program on campus, which targeted low-income students from local high schools to provide them opportunities to pursue and succeed in college.

At the center of all of Jason’s experiences was his commitment to help students from similar low socioeconomic backgrounds as himself find their path in life and a betterment of the local community through educational opportunities. Upon graduation, Jason was hired at Middlebury High School where he has taught for the last twelve years.

Jason’s Current Teaching Context

At the conclusion of this study, Jason had just finished his twelfth year as a secondary ELA educator at Middlebury High School. Jason taught five periods a day. His schedule consisted of two sections of freshman English, two sections of senior college prep English, and a section of AP Language and Composition. In addition to his role as a teacher, Jason had also coached several sports within his local communities, and he served as a co-director of his local National Writing Project affiliate, the Great Lakes Writing Project.

Middlebury is a small village located approximately twenty miles from the urban-center of Metropolis. Middlebury could be described by its strong sense of rural identity. Although government census data would categorize Middlebury as a small town, this village of 3,400 people is proud of its agrarian traditions. Informal conversations with teachers, staff members, and administrators revealed a consensus of beliefs about the rural designation of Middlebury. The majority of students either lived or worked on farms, and the influence of their cultural backgrounds could be felt inside of the classrooms.

When I asked Jason to describe the students in his courses he was quick to highlight the socioeconomic differences of his students and how that compared to their representation in his various classrooms:

Depending on what I'm teaching and whom I'm teaching whether it is ninth grade or twelfth grade college prep versus twelfth grade AP, there is going to be some pretty big socioeconomic discrepancies, which also of course equates to cultural discrepancies. With AP you are going to have some of the higher socioeconomic kids...and [it is] an unfair representation of the kids that live in the plats. We have more kids that live on farms, but more of my AP students come from the plats.

These "plats" were the subdivision developments found around the town of Middlebury. Jason conceded that his categorization of students sounded "rather dichotomists" but he concluded that whether his students came from town or from out on the farm, he has found over the past twelve years that "the students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be the ones in [his] advanced courses." This troubled Jason, not only because of his belief that all students can and should learn in his classrooms, but because he, himself, was once a struggling student from a low-socioeconomic background.

When I asked Jason why he thought these trends existed, he did not have a conclusive answer. To better understand why these differences might exist, I asked Jason to describe his courses and his approaches to teaching his various students at multiple grade levels. Jason went on at length when asked to describe his AP Language and Composition course:

A college is an intellectual and academic community in which ideas are exchanged at a high level. My AP course is designed to prepare students for this exchange. This is where some of my students and parents get confused. AP is not about getting students out of college classes, but it is a preparation for students to engage in college level thought and discourse both written and oral. Of course, concurrent with this goal is my belief in educating a literate citizenry. In terms of preparation for college this means they must be comfortable in summarizing, including paraphrasing and using direct quotes properly, analyzing, debating, and synthesizing.

But Jason extended his preparation of students beyond the walls of classroom and into the worlds they engaged on a daily basis. He advocated for a socially conscious approach to learning that required his students to critically engage with social issues.

Jason began the school year with a discussion of societies social norms and power dynamics by reading Satrapi's (2004) *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. Jason defended his decision to begin the semester with these two texts:

As a high school teacher I am always faced with the reality that I need to balance federal, state, and local demands with the needs of my students. I'm luck that I have been given quite a bit of academic freedom here at Middlebury. However, when it comes to AP Language and Composition, it is my job to prepare my students for college and that test at the end of the year. There are texts that I have to teach, but I supplement a lot. At the heart of what we are doing is we are trying to meet kids where they are and deal with their very specific kinds of worlds and

give them relevant information even if they don't understand that it is relevant information.

Following *Persepolis*, his students read essays, articles, and novels by Mike Rose, Maya Angelou, David Sedaris, Andrew Sullivan, Amy Tan, Gloria Anzaldua, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alexandra Curley, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. At the center of each of these works is an examination of society, culture, and education, the same sort of critical examination culturally relevant pedagogy espouses.

Jason constructed his Freshman English course in a similar fashion. He admitted the content of his courses are AP-centric because he believed that he must push his students beyond traditional grade-level expectations in order to overcome life's obstacles:

I've been lucky to experiment with how to do this in AP and made a lot of mistakes. It just became kinda of natural fit to try to start playing with this thing through my AP class and then translating it into the other classes that I teach as the need comes up. So I'm able to talk to my freshmen and they are going to be able to reflect same conversations my AP kids are having, even though they may not attack it with the same level of complexity or sophistication because they are not going to have read all of the essays that I mentioned and the authors that I mentioned. Instead, [the students] are just going to deal with [the authors' and their own] ideas. At the heart of what we're doing is always critical thinking, deconstructing what is happening.

When asked what made his classroom different from those of his colleagues and other secondary English educators that he knows, Jason responded:

I can tell you that none of my freshmen colleagues in other departments participant in an explicit examination of culture or race. They may cover these topics in a kinda broad way. My colleagues do a great job, but this requires a lot of forethought. And these are ideas that again, I'm sure many of my colleagues are familiar with, but they're not addressing, and their not addressing explicitly, which I am for sure. So I address explicitly in my Freshman English through a process where we look at the linguistics of England and the United Kingdom and talk about the linguistics of the United States in order to understand the creation, the kind of creation of cultures and race.

In the end, Jason endeavored to create a classroom curriculum that valued all of his students where they were in their academic journeys and equip them with ways of critically engaging with their world and the worlds around them. These ideals are central to his critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and his perspective on teaching secondary ELA.

Philosophical Influences on Jason's Teaching of Secondary English Language Arts

When asked to reflect on his professional journey, Jason explained in great detail the influences of his parents and grandparents, as well as the various mentorships and related education positions he had held during his years in college had on his path toward becoming a secondary ELA educator. Jason indicated that his undergraduate coursework in English and Spanish linguistics played a huge part in his philosophy on teaching secondary ELA. He articulated, "Language is a reflection of the culture." When Jason engaged his students in discussions about language and dialects he did so with an understanding that "all of these conversations really exist in the spheres of society and

culture.” In addition to the influences of his linguistics studies, Jason credited several theorists as having inspired him:

If you came up through English education in the 90s and early 2000s you were doing something with Paulo Freire and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The thing about Paulo Freire that always intrigued me was that it wasn't social consciousness for the sake of social consciousness, although that was the primary thing, but it was education. It was actual learning. I'm going to teach you how to read. So it was very technical. That's the way I teach as well. I'm very much interested in the technical components of language - The structures of language for example and the rhetorical features and the linguistic features. Linguistic features equal the culture. Paulo Freire was huge in terms of that.

Central to Jason's philosophy of teaching secondary ELA was his acknowledgment that “inherent cultural biases are brought to light through the language that we choose and the way we choose to use language.” To help better understand the ways in which he and his students used language and the implications of its use, Jason turned to professional organizations – namely the National Writing Project – to provide him guidance.

For the past ten years, Jason has been involved in the GLWP, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. The GLWP's focus on teacher leadership and teachers as writers was what Jason found appealing:

I use Great Lakes as my summer improving grounds. I go back every year and I try to focus on some element of my classroom. It has helped me establish and tighten up a lot of the things I try to do. So, class discussion for example. I really struggled with leading discussions about literature. I was able to go to Great

Lakes and learn from other teachers and English educators about leading discussion. My courses tend to be more composition based, so the year we focused on the art of the research paper, I spent quite a few months researching, examining, teaching, and helping to teach other teachers how to teach the research paper and integrate research into their writing. It is a place where we can go and learn from each other.

Jason's perceptions of the National Writing Project were reflected in his own classroom. He admitted on several occasions that he tried to "learn just as much from his students just as they do from [him]." Both teacher and student come to the table with something to learn and something to teach.

That National Writing Project's focus on "teacher writers, teachers of writers, and teacher of other writers" were principles that Jason carried forward in his own pedagogy. He reflected on how he used creative writing to engage his students:

Being able to understand how to tap into your own creative juices and how to translate that into an academic sense and how to translate that into an academic sense to your students - those experiences with Great Lakes are unrivaled, literally unrivaled. It is very technical, personal and technical at the same time.

Jason told me the how several very well established, expert local secondary ELA educators influenced him. In the end, it was not only their personal, one-on-one feedback, that Jason appreciated so much, but it was also "their technical knowledge about writing. And in the end, writing always involves the world. You can never take out the world from writing." This recognition of the connection writing had to the world,

led Jason to discover the culturally relevant works of Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2000).

He mentioned that he did not learn about culturally relevant pedagogy at the GLWP; however, he believed he would not have learned about the pedagogy had he not attended GLWP. Jason expressed that “good PD doesn’t end when the professional development ends. You are supposed to take it with you, expand on it, and use it in your classroom. That’s what I did.” Although he worked in a very different context than Ladson-Billings, Jason believed that there was “still power in embracing my students’ lives in my classroom.” Illustrations of Jason’s culturally relevant practice are provided in the section titled “Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Illustrations of Its Practice.”

Since he started attending GLWP in 2006, Jason encouraged other educators in his department to attend the summer institute as well as teachers from the math, science, and history departments. Jason reflected further on his experiences with the Writing Project stating that it had allowed the teaching staff at Middlebury High School to “get on the same pedagogical page. A lot of these conversations take place during the summer and we are able to take those experiences into our classrooms and tie the same stuff, at least from a technical perspective into our teaching.” Jason hoped to bring additional teachers from the middle school and elementary school to the GLWP in the future to strengthen the schools vision for preparing students. In his final statement about his experiences at the GLWP, Jason said, “I would absolutely not be the teacher I am today without the GLWP.”

Jason took all of his personal, academic, and professional background into account when he defined his overall perspective of being a secondary English educator:

My primary job is to educate my students as literate citizens. That is my job.

When they walk out of my classroom they have the ability to function critically in society, which means that they can view, that they can look at texts or images and that they can interpret those in the multiple ways that things can be interpreted: culturally, racially, politically, religiously, philosophically, historically. All of these ways are ways to do interpretation, so I take it very seriously that my job is to give students those tools to analyze the world around them. And so, the world around us in this classroom is our textbook. That's the way I teach.

Jason adopted and adapted these philosophies of Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2000) to work within his teaching context at Middlebury High School. Jason also gave credit to his involvement with the Great Lakes Writing Project as having had a significant impact on his teaching philosophy. He used all of these experiences and frameworks to build an informed and literate citizenry of critical thinkers capable of examining the world through multiple perspectives.

Stacey

Stacey's Personal and Professional Journey

Stacey grew up in a small town located thirty-three miles north of Middlebury. Her hometown and Middlebury were very similar in terms of size, population density, and distance from Metropolis. Her passion for reading was engrained at a very early age, and she credited her mother for her love of literature:

I grew up in a house where all my mom did was read. We did not watch TV. She would read five to ten books a week, and that was when she was a stay-at-home mom. So, my mom just read all day long. So that's what I saw my mom doing, so I just got into books. My mom would share books that she like at my age, so she introduced me to Nancy Drew, which I didn't like as much as my mom did. But I read the Nancy Drew books she gave me. In third or fourth grade I really got into Judy Bloom. I loved her stories.

In explaining why she enjoyed Judy Bloom over Nancy Drew, Stacy said that it was because Judy Bloom's books were more relatable to her at the time she read them:

She was one of the first authors that I really remember getting hooked on. I remember *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, and as somebody who was in third or fourth grade it was the same sorts of experiences that I was going through. And just the way she writes her books I think draws readers in.

Although Stacey was not aware of it at the time, the appeal of texts she found relatable or relevant to her life would later serve as a theoretical underpinning to her own pedagogical beliefs about teaching ELA.

Stacey's passion for reading waned during her middle school and high school years. She said that she did not have time to read for fun until long after college. However, Stacey was left with several positive impressions when it came to learning and sports from her high school teachers and coaches:

It goes back to a lot of my high school teachers because that staff was very similar to our staff right now. They did things together outside of school. We knew that they liked one another and so when you went into class you also knew what was

going on. You knew what everybody else was teaching in the building. They had a strong sense of community, and that is what we have been building toward over the past five or six years here at Middlebury.

Reflecting on her educational experiences in high school, Stacey identified two teachers who stood out because of their interactions with students. She described a business teacher from high school who had a profound impact on the ways she currently interacts with her students:

She was fantastic. To this day she has a great sense of humor. She had a way with kids, especially the boys where all they wanted was to talk about things not related to class and she would just nicely put them back into their place, but she didn't stand their and scream her head off at them. She would joke with them, and politely get them back on task. She treated us like adults, and it was still fun.

Teachers' notions of how they interact with others are one of the three critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994). For Stacey, this meant treating her students like the young adults they were. While she clearly delineated her role as a teacher and their role as students, they both engaged in friendly banter and Stacey released educational responsibilities to her students when she knew they were capable of handling such responsibilities. An examination of Stacey's interactions with her students and her gradual release of responsibility can be found in "Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Illustrations of Its Practice."

Stacey mentioned another influential teacher was her high school history teacher. She said the most appealing aspect of his teaching was that he made learning fun:

Everybody loved him. We played games. We played Hollywood Squares. We played Jeopardy, but we were learning about government. He was so entertaining, and I know that is what I enjoyed. I believe if I enjoy something then my students are most likely going to enjoy it.

She confessed that when she was in school she would not engage in her classes unless she was having fun or found the information useful. Furthermore, when it came to teaching, Stacey believed that having fun in classroom was paramount: “If I’m not having fun, then I don’t think my kids are going to have fun. You need to remain positive because those fifty minutes might be the only positivity in that kids life.”

Similar to Jason, Stacey found her passion for teaching later in life. After graduating high school, she attended her local university and earned a business degree. However, Stacey’s love for sports found an outlet during her college years in the form of coaching competitive cheer:

So, before I became I teacher I started coaching when I was in college, and I loved working with kids. My first coaching job was at a very small high school, with maybe two-hundred kids total in the whole school. So, I got involved with their homecoming activities and I coached cheer. I just really enjoyed working with high school students.

She attributed her love of coaching to her high school cheerleading coach, a young woman whom possessed similar qualities to Stacey’s business and history teachers. After graduating college with her business degree, she took a job in the transportation industry, but she continued to work with students as a competitive cheerleading coach.

Stacey stepped away from her career after five years on the job to become an at-home mother. It was then that Stacey rekindled her passion for reading. She read novels by Danielle Steel, John Grisham, and Michael Crichton. She joked, “They weren’t the classics, but I enjoyed them nonetheless.” Eventually, Stacey decided it was time for her to return to work, but she did not want to return to her previous career:

My kids were getting older, and I knew I had to go back to work full-time. So I thought if I had to go back to work the one thing that I loved the most was coaching. So, the career that goes the best with that is teaching.

However, teaching secondary ELA was not her first choice: “If I had it my way, I would probably teach government. I love government.” As a mother of two in her mid-thirties, a part of Stacey’s decision to earn teaching degree in secondary ELA was financially based: “When we looked at my transcripts, I had so many English classes that we just decided that English was the best place for me to go without making it a lot more time and money.” She spent a year substitute teaching at a local middle school and was hired at Middlebury as the At-Risk Coordinator. It did not take long for Stacey to find her way into the ELA classroom. After only two months on the job, a teacher retired and Stacey was given the opportunity to have a class of her own.

Stacey remembered her first year of teaching at Middlebury well: “I was teaching five classes a day like I do now, but I only had 120 students compared to the 150 or so I have today.” Like most first-year educators, Stacey jumped at the chance to take on additional duties. She took over as the competitive and sideline cheer coach and became a class advisor during her first year on the job.

She recalled another important moment from her first year of teaching that influenced her pedagogy, which was a belief that learning must be relevant and fun:

I inherited an inherited an English 10 course that was a hodgepodge of readings and writing assignments. The man I took over for, God bless his heart. He was very old school. I don't use a primary textbook in my classes, but he had this older textbook and he would follow it page-by-page. If it said to do these vocabulary exercises and write these paragraphs, he would have the students do it. When I took over I looked at his old syllabus and lesson plans. I called an old mentor of mine and told her that I was going to go insane if I had to teach like that. She told me to make it my own.

Stacey acknowledged she knew little about curriculum development or various pedagogical approaches to ELA instruction during her first few years of teaching. However, her own educational experiences had built into her a desire to make her classes as enjoyable and relevant to her students as her teachers had done for her.

Stacey's Current Teaching Context

At the conclusion of this study, Stacey finished her tenth year of teaching secondary ELA at Middlebury High School. Similar to her colleague, Jason, Stacey taught five periods a day. She had two sections of English 10, two sections of English 11, and a section of Honors English 11. Stacey also supervised a "Flex" class during the middle of the day. This "Flex" course was designed to provide students additional time in the classroom of a subject area in which they struggled. Students were free to move between "Flex" classrooms if they needed help in one of their other courses or needed to make up a missed test or quiz. Stacey has been an active member of the Middlebury

community coaching several sports, and she has also held numerous professional roles at Middlebury High School. She was also the school district's ELA Chair, the School Improvement Co-Chair, and a member of Teachers for Change at the time of this study.

Teachers for Change was originally conceived to identify where the students of Middlebury were struggling academically and provide solutions that might help them overcome these academic struggles. Middlebury's "Flex" program was one solution the high school had chosen to implement. Reflecting on the impetus of the "Flex" program, Stacey remembered:

Since I'm the lead on the Data Analysis team, I began to notice student trends over an extended period of time. We wanted to provide students struggling in certain subject areas with an intervention program of sorts. We needed to come up with a way to fix some problems that didn't require any money or resources because we don't have any.

Stacey and her colleagues at Middlebury were extremely resourceful by carving out time from the students' hour-long lunch period to form the "Flex" classroom. The entire high school actively engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy's belief of addressing students' real-time issues and concerns by developing a form of intervention that would benefit all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Stacey acknowledged there were some initial growing pains when they first started the "Flex" program.

In her recollection of the first few years of "Flex," Stacey recalled, "We made the mistake of placing everybody who struggled in a subject area in the same classroom." She admitted her fellow teachers felt overwhelmed during those first few years, so they decided to place upper-classmen in the "Flex" classrooms as mentors: "It worked a lot

better once we got some students in the classrooms that had taken the classes, excelled in those classes, and knew what the teachers expect out of the students.” Over the years, the “Flex” program continued to evolve.

In addition to its original intention of providing intervention to address the needs of the students, the “Flex” program has also focused on improving the school’s environment with team building exercises and games. Stacey described the current state of “Flex”:

We are trying to build cohorts in these classrooms. We keep students together by grade level with the exception of our mentors, and we want them to get to know and work with some of their classmates that they might not otherwise do during the day. It’s gone a long way to improving our students academic success and the overall school culture.

Stacey’s attention to the impact social relationships had on learning established her as a culturally relevant educator. Further conceptions and illustrations of Stacey’s interactions with others can be found in the subsection titled “Stacey’s Critical Conceptions of Social Interactions with Others.”

The curriculum of Stacey’s English 11 course focused on American Literature. The content of the course was arranged by literary periods. For the first time in their high school careers, students focused on literary periods, and they were introduced to Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Modernism, and Realism. Stacey taught a variety of literature including poetry, novels, and short stories. She emphasized the historical, political, societal, and economic issues of the time periods and how these issues influenced the authors and the works.

English 10 had a heavy emphasis on British literature, although Stacey was careful not to call it a British literature course. The students read works by Shakespeare, Golding, and Orwell to name a few. She wanted to expose her students to a variety of genres, so they read a drama, three novels, a number of short stories, and poems. These texts were rotated from year to year to provide both Stacey and her students fresh material, and she acknowledged that she has the freedom to teach them in any order she desired. Unlike English 11, English 10 did not present the information in a chronological order. Again, the course introduced students to the historical, political, societal, and economic issues influencing these works. However, these courses will experience a complete overall in the coming years.

Stacey told me the curriculum from English 11 was going to move down to tenth grade and English 11 was going to officially become a British literature course. She bemoaned the states' decision to move away from the ACT to the SAT as the reason behind the curriculum redesign:

We were looking at how the SAT was different from the ACT. One thing they stressed was a lot of the reading was going to come from American literature and the founding documents. Currently, we teach American literature and those foundational documents in eleventh grade, so by the time the kids take their SAT, they've only really had a few months of that material. We think that by shifting this around we will be able to expose them to the kinds of readings.

As an ELA educator and the district's ELA Chair, Stacey felt the pull between designing curriculum to meet the needs of her students and preparing them for high stakes state mandated tests. She mentioned she was able to enjoy enough academic freedom to select

texts and assignments that her students would hopefully find relatable, but she said it was also important to prepare those same students, especially those with aspirations to attend college, for the high stakes tests.

Philosophical Influences on Stacey's Teaching of Secondary English Language Arts

In reflecting on her personal and professional journeys as well as her teaching context, Stacey made a series of important insights about what had influenced her philosophy on teaching secondary ELA. Stacey's beliefs about teaching and learning were largely shaped by her own educational experiences:

I think learning needs to be fun. The teachers I learned the most from, whether it was in high school or in college, were the teachers that I went to their class and I enjoyed being there because of their personalities.

Stacey credited her former coaches and teachers' abilities to interact with students as having a deep impact on her learning: "If you have a good personality, and it's fun, I'll sit through a math class, which I hate. But if you can make it fun, who doesn't want that?" For Stacey, students "tend to remember that information more because it doesn't feel like they are working. School isn't a job, it should be relatable and fun." Stacey's classrooms were full of laughter. It was evident that she focused a lot of her energy on establishing a classroom environment where students felt comfortable expressing ideas while also having fun:

Jason and I talk all the time that I put on a show for five hours a day because if you're not entertaining – and you can go around the school and ask the kids – if you only know your content inside and out, but if you can't get the kids' attention

and you can't relate to them, you're not going to be able to teach them, especially this age.

Stacey told her students that if she made a mistake or said something funny to laugh because she was going to laugh at herself. She explained, "Far too often, teachers and students take school way too seriously. Don't get me wrong, education is an important, serious matter, but why can't it be fun?" Stacey's beliefs about teaching and learning do not begin and end on the "stage of entertainment."

Stacey disrupted the traditional teacher-student relationship during her daily interactions with her students. She made a concerted effort to befriend her students in hopes of breaking down barriers and creating a more socially conscious learning community:

I believe as a teacher you always have to be learning. You learn from your students, and you have to constantly be changing your craft because otherwise it gets old for the kids and it also gets old for you. I learn from students because they bring in different perspectives, especially as I get older and they get younger. Their perspective on the world is completely different than mine, and I think it really helps to understand where they are coming from and where they want to go. If I don't know those two things, I can't help them along the way.

Stacey's beliefs in being a fun teacher who learns from her students just as much as they learn from her were reinforced during her summers at the GLWP.

At the behest of her colleague, Jason, Stacey attended her first Writing Project workshop for teachers four years ago. Despite her love for reading, Stacey was originally hesitant to pursue a teaching degree in ELA because she thought she was not a good

enough writer. I asked Stacey to expand on her fear, and she said it had not gone away, but her time at the GLWP had helped her see herself more as a writer:

The National Writing Project's focus on teacher as writing has helped all of us see the benefit of writing as a teacher. I don't like to do creative writing, so for me, it is stepping outside my comfort zone to write a poem or a short story. I see the benefits in it, and it has allowed me to bring more creative writing into my classroom.

The work Stacey did at the GLWP had greatly influenced her philosophy on teaching secondary ELA. In our interviews, Stacey recalled:

It is just a great community of English teachers to work with. You gather ideas and you think some of things that the elementary school teachers are bringing in wouldn't work with high school students, but what we find is strategies that work for elementary students work for high school students and vice-versa.

What Stacey enjoyed the most about attending the GLWP was being introduced to new perspectives of teaching K-12 ELA. She kept in touch with several of the teachers who attended the summer seminars with her. Stacey said, "It helps me to know what is going on in other classrooms, in other buildings, and other districts. If I can take one idea or strategy back to my classroom, then it is all worth it." Both Stacey and Jason not only brought back ideas to their own classrooms, but they also shared those ideas with their fellow educators at Middlebury High School.

Middlebury has a very active Professional Learning Community (PLC) program: "Our administrators have been great about providing us professional development time

and handing over the responsibility of designing the PD as we see fit.” Stacey and her peers enjoyed the autonomy they were given:

We can really sit down and address immediate needs and concerns. It also gives us the opportunity to use the PLC to introduce some of the things that we’ve learned at GLWP for instance. So, we get a lot of books and materials from GLWP, and I might not have time to go through one particular book, but through a PLC, somebody else will go through it and say I was looking at this book and found this strategy or this way to introduce something.

It was through this very process, during a PLC session, that Stacey was first introduced to culturally relevant pedagogy: “One of our teachers brought up this idea of incorporating students’ lives in the classroom and I wanted to learn more. So, I went out and started digging.” Stacey found that many of her classroom practices already aligned with the critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, but she continued to work toward incorporating more culturally relevant practices into her teaching.

She also credited the PLC as having “unified the department K-12 and a lot of the high school staff across departments because most of us have been there, and we speak the same language.” This was important to Stacey because she believed this common, shared language enabled her and her colleagues to discuss aspects of writing or literature. The students understood these terms because they had been exposed to them from class to class and grade to grade. As the ELA District Chair, Stacey recommended to every English teacher she met that they should attend the GLWP because it had been so influential on her philosophy on teaching secondary ELA.

Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Illustrations of its Practice

The purpose of this study is to attempt to answer the following primary questions about the intersection between rural secondary ELA educators and culturally relevant pedagogy: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? The literature review found in Chapter Two revealed the lack of rural contexts in the current discourse on culturally relevant pedagogy, which the findings of this study seek to fill. The professional teaching profiles found in the previous section of this chapter helped establish how the educators of this study arrived in their current teaching contexts, what their current teaching contexts looked like, and what philosophical influences helped shape their teaching of secondary ELA. In order to get closer to answering this study's primary questions, we will now turn our attention to the educators' critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice.

In her work on culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1994) concluded that the beliefs and behaviors of successful culturally relevant educators can be categorized into three critical conceptions of their pedagogy and practice: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. The figure on the following page highlights the conceptual framework of Ladson-Billings' (1994) original study, which also includes several of broad illustrations of the educators' practice that I observed during my time in their classrooms. These three critical conceptions serve as the theoretical framework for this study.

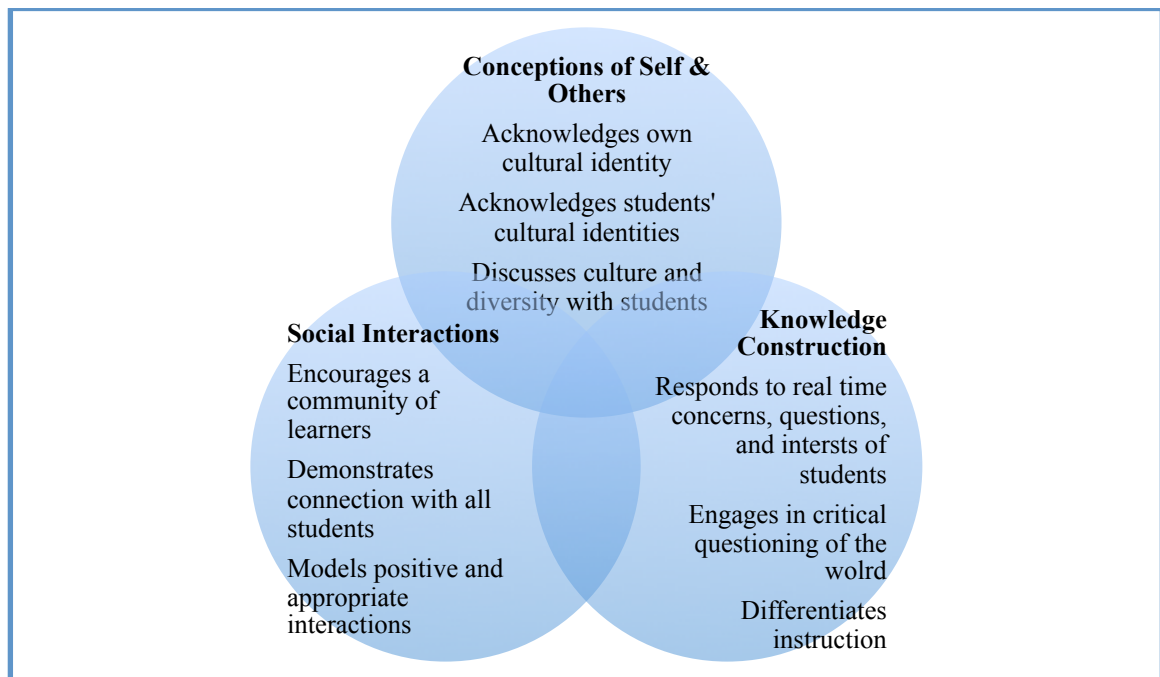


Figure 4. Three Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Its Practice

Culturally relevant educators' conceptions of their own cultural identity and the cultural identities of their students has been emphasized over and over again in the literature on culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1998; Liggett, 2008, Ryan, 2006; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clark, 2003). Under the first critical conception of culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers who exhibit a high level of culturally competency understand how their own identities and those of their students are socially constructed (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ares (2006), argues that when educators understand the social construction of their own identity and culture, they are able to see their practices as "emergent systems that are culturally, socially, and historically constructed and to explicate those practices' political and social consequences" (p. 3). This study highlights Stacey and Jason's critical conceptions of themselves and their students as being a fundamental factor influencing their culturally relevant practices.

Culturally relevant pedagogy stresses that educators should be able to connect with all of the students in their classrooms in order to develop a socially conscious community of learners. Ladson-Billings' (1994) second critical conception of culturally relevant pedagogy – how educators' conceive their social interactions with others – focuses on interactions between teacher and student. She categorizes teachers' social interactions with students into four general premises: encourage a community of learners; demonstrate a connection to all students; model positive and appropriate interactions; extend these interactions into the community (1994). These premises enable educators to respond in real time their students' needs.

The third critical conception of culturally relevant pedagogy asks educators to reflect on their understanding of how knowledge is constructed. Ladson-Billings' (1994) conception of the construction of knowledge is one in which students, teachers, and the community engage in a perpetual cycle of sharing and exchanging information. Culturally relevant practices not only encourage students to acquire knowledge through a shared learning community but also to use this newfound knowledge in ways that enable them to critically examine the world.

The data collected for this study includes: three sets of interviews, during which time the educators reveal many important insights including their understanding of these three critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice; participant-observations over a three-month period of time; analysis of course documents (syllabi, lesson plans, assignment sheets, rubrics, etc.). Prior to a thorough examination of Stacey and Jason's interpretations of these three critical conceptions and illustrations

of their practice, it is important to understand how each of these educators defined culturally relevant pedagogy within their current teaching context.

Personal Definitions and Understandings of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In response to the growing need for a pedagogy that recognizes the cultural diversity of America's students, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) coined the term culturally relevant pedagogy to describe "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, social, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 17). The transformative agenda of culturally relevant pedagogy is two-fold. It challenges traditional views of teaching and learning, and it develops a social consciousness among students in order to confront various forms of societal oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1994). For twenty-five years, many educators have sought to implement the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy in their own teaching practices.

Jason defined culturally relevant pedagogy as "a belief in teaching students to become critical thinkers. It is a pedagogy that empowers students by affirming their lived experiences and requires us to find ways for students to relate what we do in class to their cultures." Jason's culturally relevant pedagogy utilized language to examine culture. He argued, "Language is a reflection of the culture." A belief that language was a reflection of culture was at the center of Jason's practice. Whether his students were reading a text or writing a personal narrative, Jason emphasized the importance of language and the exchanges that take place between people and characters.

For Stacey, culturally relevant pedagogy was "a philosophy that encourages teachers to bring their students' cultural beliefs into the classroom." She expanded on her definition by including how culture could possibly be tied to content: "To me, culturally

relevant pedagogy is a way to connect the literature we read in the classroom to the lives of my students.” Stacey admitted her classes relied on a heavy dose of literature compared to the amount of writing Jason encouraged in his courses. She believed it was important to examine the political, society, and cultural influences on an author. This in turn led students to critically investigate how similar issues influenced their interpretations of the world.

Both Jason and Stacey fell back on these personal definitions of culturally relevant pedagogy when they critically examined their own teaching philosophies and practices. The following sections provide the reader an in-depth look into these educators’ critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy as well as illustrations of their culturally relevant practices. It is important to note these conceptions are not to be viewed in a vacuum. One conception or practice often influenced other critical conceptions or practices. For instance, Jason’s understanding that the majority of his students shared a cultural identity marked by conservative beliefs was informed by his social interactions with his students and the community. Conversely, the choices Jason made to engage socially with his students and the community was influenced by his conceptions of the community, and the types of social interactions between Jason and his students often affected how his students learned and constructed knowledge in the classroom.

Critical Conceptions of Self and Others

The literature on culturally relevant pedagogy consistently emphasized the importance of teachers’ perceptions of their own cultural identities as well as the cultural identities of their students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1998; Liggett, 2008; Ryan,

2006; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clark, 2003). According to Liggett (2008), it is important for teachers to recognize their identities have “cultural orientations that shape the ways in which they think about values, beliefs, communication style (modes of politeness/formality), historical perspectives, art, music, family, rituals (graduation, sport team rallies), rites of passages (notable birthdays), and other social group activities” (p. 397). When educators reflect on the influences that shape their own identities, they are able to better understand their perceptions of the world and their place within it. Additionally, educators’ critical conceptions of others are equally important.

Research on culturally relevant pedagogy reveals that successful culturally relevant educators’ conceptions of others, particularly those critical conceptions of their students, should not be based on broad, sweeping generalizations, but instead, these conceptions should be grounded in knowledge about the students’ personal and educational experiences (Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clark, 2003). Educators with an intimate knowledge of their own cultural identity and their students’ cultural identities recognize how culture can affect their perceptions of the world, self-esteem, and behavior (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This recognition is important because schools are cultural venues, and the interactions among varying cultural conceptions directly impacts student learning.

Jason’s Critical Conceptions of Self and Others

Jason described Middlebury High School as a small, rural, high-needs school with a community and culture that was very much different from his hometown of Metropolis. Although he and many of his students shared some cultural commonalties such as their race – Caucasian - and their experiences growing up in poverty – nearly 45% of

Middlebury's student population qualified for free and reduced lunch – Jason stopped short of any further comparisons between his cultural identity and those of his students.

Jason spent the majority of his formative years living just twenty miles from Middlebury in the city of Metropolis. When he was not living in Metropolis, Jason was traveling and living in the southwest and southeast corners of United States and across the globe to places like Spain and Japan. He explained:

My travels have had a great impact on who I am. Yes, I am a white male, and that comes with certain societal privileges, but I have worked and lived with people from different states, countries, ethnicities, and races. All of whom have kinda a different cultural perspective. My mother married a black man when I was in sixth grade, and I have many cousins that have both black and white parents. I recognized race and culture existed, but it wasn't something that I thought was bad because of its difference. I know a lot of my kids haven't had these experiences, so their cultural influences are limited to the local area, which is not a bad thing. It is just different.

During his first years of teaching at Middlebury, Jason experienced what he described as a culture shock. He remembered arriving in the parking lot on the first day of school and seeing students fly the Confederate flag out of the back of their pickup trucks. Others walked into his classroom wearing Dixie belt buckles and tee shirts with Confederate emblems. Jason recalled, "I couldn't believe it, I was like, oh Lord, I've got to do something about this, you know. I have to address this." Jason's personal experiences and beliefs were often quite different from those of his students, but he needed to find a

way to encourage their cultural competency without demeaning their particular sets of beliefs.

Jason conviction in his responsibility as an ELA educator to build an informed, literate citizenry required him to challenge both his and his students understanding of the world on a daily basis. He said he wanted his students to be able to “function critically in society, which means that they can view, that they can look at texts or images and that they can interpret those in the multiple ways that things can be interpreted: culturally, racially, politically, religiously, philosophically, historically.” He acknowledged that as a result of Middlebury’s growing reputation as a quality school and its close proximity to Metropolis, the school’s student population had become increasingly diverse over the past decade.

Families from the surrounding urban and suburban communities were relocating to Middlebury or elected to utilize Michigan’s Schools of Choice program to come from neighboring communities. As a result of Middlebury’s increased diversity, Jason believed it was appropriate to reinvent the traditional notions of culturally relevant pedagogy. He wanted all of his students to experience academic success, and in order to accomplish his goal, Jason needed to challenge his students’ cultural competencies:

Despite still being predominately a white, lower-class, rural school, I want to create a classroom where students engage with diverse cultures because when they leave my classroom and go out into the world, they will need to be able to communicate and work with people from diverse backgrounds. I’m not teaching them one perspective or culture is right or wrong, better or worse. I hope I’m teaching them to reserve judgment and listen to divergent perspectives. If they

follow my lead, their conceptions will either be confirmed or changed. Either way they will grow as individuals.

Jason preparation of students to move beyond the borders of Middlebury, was an attempt to highlight the intradependence of their lives to the greater world similar to the intradependence outlined by Theobald (1997). Additionally, it brought stability and compassion to a community undergoing change.

At the center of Jason's critical conceptions of self and others was his focus on language and its connection to culture. Jason read an essay with his AP Language and Composition students by Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." In the essay, Anzaldua (2012) discussed the eight different languages she used to interact with the world. She focused on the differences between the Standard American English of her academic culture and the languages of her Chicano culture, particularly Pachuca, the language of the street. Being fluent in English and Spanish, Jason slipped between the languages during the class discussion.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) articulate that teachers should use cultural resources for learning and in doing promote a positive classroom environment. In this instance, Jason admired his students' bilingual capabilities, highlighting his passion for language and cultural diversity. A young Hispanic student engaged in a conversation with Jason, while a handful of students who had taken Spanish language courses tried to follow along. Jason and the young man spoke for several minutes, laughing and pointing at some of the other students in the classroom. This went on for five minutes until a few students began to stir in their seats. Jason asked them what was wrong. They responded by saying they did not know what he was saying. "Oh," he said, "you feel left out of the

conversation.” Jason switched back to English as he deftly fell into a heavy southern drawl before slipping into a valley girl dialect. “What is going here?” he asked his students. He told them that with language comes culture, and with culture comes assumptions about culture.

Jason asked his students to think about their languages and to compare and contrast their written academic language to their spoken language(s). The students took a few moments to reflect. They concluded that one was “correct” – written academic language – while their spoken English(es) were “wrong.” The students constructed a list on the board of assumptions that they and others might have about their particular vernaculars. They wrote words like: uniformed, hillbilly, backward, uneducated – common stereotypes of rural America. It was interesting to note, that not one description the students wrote on the board reflected positively on their culture. Jason left his students with a message found in Anzaldua’s (2012) essay. He told his students:

We all have our own essence language. We all have our own mother tongues, which also happens to be the title of an essay we read by Amy Tan. Standard English does not necessarily reflect our essence language. It doesn't represent our idiosyncrasies or our cultural identities. It doesn't encapsulate us. It tries to define us and people will try to define us by comparing our essence language to it. It is important to hold onto these essence languages. Never let it go. Our essence, who we are, in the end is how we are going to view the world.

After class, Jason explained to me that he did not plan on teaching that essay. The entire lesson had been inspired by events from the previous two days. It was brought to Jason’s attention that a student in the class had made some disparaging comments about a

fellow student. Jason felt the need to immediately address the issue with the entire class in a way he felt would resonate with them more than a lecture about race relations.

When Jason discussed culture in his classroom, he did so through language. He recognized that he and his students shared a common essence language to a certain degree, but his students' experiences and perspectives situated them in a different place than he was culturally. He indicated that was important for him not to preach to the students' about their own culture:

To me, culturally relevant pedagogy doesn't mean I just have to teach my students about their culture. In fact, I probably avoid preaching to them about their own culture because they know more about it than I do considering I live twenty minutes away. Instead, I offer students opportunities to teach me about their culture. Writing assignments designed to get after personal narratives are a great way to get students thinking and talking about culture. You really have to know where your kids are coming from, and who are they. And I teach them about myself. I tell stories. I relate my experiences to the work we are doing in class. Because I've lived longer and seen more of the world, I can offer a new perspective that my students might not be familiar with.

This was an important distinction between Jason's interpretation of culturally relevant pedagogy and the original conceptions of Ladson-Billings (1994).

Jason thought critically about his students' culturally identities when he constructed his lessons, but he wanted to challenge his students' own assumptions about culture. He told me he must allow his students to examine their own cultural identities in a manner that not only acknowledges their identities, but also challenges their prevailing

assumptions about their own cultural identities and the cultural identities of others. In order for Jason to accomplish this goal, he carefully selected literature that examined culture and cultural identities from a broader context than Middlebury. This comparing and contrasting of the students' lived experiences with those individuals considered culturally diverse enabled them to recognize the assumptions they made about others based upon language and consider how those assumptions impacted their interactions with culturally diverse people.

Stacey's Critical Conceptions of Self and Others

Stacey grew up in a town close to Middlebury; however, unlike Jason's urban upbringing, Stacey's hometown was similar in size to Middlebury. As a white, conservative, mother of three, Stacey believed her cultural background was akin to the majority of her students' cultural upbringings: "I think my upbringing was very similar to my students here in the fact that I was not exposed to a lot of other cultures." She admitted that the small town of her youth was predominately white, middle-class, and Christian. Although Stacey's adolescent years were somewhat isolated from experience diverse cultures, she still attributed her life experiences as having had a tremendous impact on the evolution of her cultural identity:

I've been more exposed to diverse cultures more than most of my students. When you go off to college you generally meet people from different cultures and backgrounds. I've also worked with colleagues and taught students with unique cultural perspectives.

Despite having similar cultural characteristics as many of her students at Middlebury, Stacey cited she experienced a similar sense of culture shock as Jason when

she arrived on her first day of school ten years ago. Stacey recalled she immediately recognized the socioeconomic differences between the students of Middlebury and those she had taught during her internship and pre-internship experiences: “Where I did my internship most of the kids had dual income families. There was a lot more money there than there is here.” Stacey also drew a correlation between her students’ low-economic status and their success in school:

You know when I started my internship at Suburb High School, the parents would call you if their kids had a C- or a D+. And when I started here, you’d call up a parent and say your child has a D+ and they say “Are they still going to get their credit?” “Well, yes.” “Ok, thanks for calling.” They weren’t concerned. So that was a real shift that I had to make, to kids just wanting credit. They didn’t want to go to college. They didn’t have any desire to go to college.

She recognized that many of her students were not receiving a message at home that school and education were important or at the very least that college was something they could strive to attend. The transformative practices of culturally relevant pedagogy require educators to recognize the roles schools play in the reproduction and legitimization of social inequality (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Stacey recognized Middlebury High School was implicit in the students’ apathy toward education as well as their attitudes toward individuals from diverse cultures.

When Stacey started at Middlebury, Jason was entering his third year of teaching. It was still a time in Middlebury’s history that the dominant culture found in the school was alarming to individuals from outside of the community. Stacey remembered similar

displays of hatred and ignorance Jason described in his critical conceptions of his students' cultural identities. She remembered:

You would go through the parking lot and there were rebel flags and they wore belt buckles and it's like, where are these kids? I thought these two communities were similar, but I never saw a confederate flag the entire time I went to high school. And maybe it was just the times because that was in the 1980s. I don't know if the Confederate flag is taking a new life again, but for me to come here and see kids with Confederate flags and wearing camouflage, that was not something that I had experienced. And it was just a huge slap in the face to me that not everybody in America had moved on, and this community was obviously still teaching and sending a message to our kids that this was ok.

But neither Stacey nor Jason shied away from these realities. Esposito and Swain (2009) argue culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes that schools serve as a microcosm of society in which the interests of the dominant culture are perpetuated through systems of oppression and privilege. When they arrived at Middlebury, Jason and Stacey knew their students felt academically inferior but they were also experiencing a perception of the world that was stained by the perceptions of previous generations.

Stacey decided that change was necessary. When asked to explain why she believed her students held misconceptions of others, Stacey replied:

Some of what they know about other cultures comes from music and television that is not representative of everybody of a culture. Often you have to go back and almost reteach that what they are hearing and what they see on TV is not always a reality. Often, it is a stereotype.

Culturally relevant educators reject the notion that any culture is superior to another (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Rather than run and hide from the issues, she worked to bring the community and the school together to understand how cultural differences can help increase student engagement and develop the skills necessary to develop a social consciousness in order to confront various forms of societal oppression.

When Stacey discussed culture in her classroom, she did so through literature. She acknowledged that the literature has its limitations, but she believed her concentration on social issues present within the literature allowed her and her students to focus on the realities of their own lives:

I taught *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for six years and the kids hated that book and finally when I jumped on the social issues, now I have something that will pull everyone in because there is something in that book that connects to every single student in my class. And they can bring in personal connections. I guess that is one thing I've always tried to do is get them to relate their world to this book.

Stacey taught Twain's (1994) novel in her English 11 class. In assigning and teaching the text, Stacey exhibited a number of culturally relevant practices.

Her selection of the text was partially influenced by the rural cultural identity of her students. She believed her students could relate to Huck. More importantly, she believed they could relate to the number of social issues Twain (1994) addressed in the text: racism, child abuse, slavery, alcoholism, and religious hypocrisy. Even if the students had not read the chapters, they were able to often participate in class discussion because of Stacey's focus on social concerns. Stacey also relinquished the traditional

teaching practice of controlling discussions by turning the teaching of the text over to her students.

The students in English 11 were assigned to read a couple of chapters a night. Everyday, groups of three or four students were assigned to teach specific chapters. The students really took to the assignment. Each group created a PowerPoint presentation or Prezi to teach their fellow classmates about the text. Stacey provided a framework for the students to follow which included a summary of key events, discussion of relevant social issues, as well as the inclusion of an assessment tool to determine what the class had learned.

These groups of students jumped at the opportunity to quiz their peers' knowledge of the text. Stacey had made learning and engaging with the text a fun experience for her students. They were also able to candidly discuss relevant social issues from the text without the fear of being ridiculed. Furthermore, Stacey was preparing her students for a future critical engagement with the social issues presented in the text. As a final project for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, her students were asked to identify one of the social issues they discussed in class and compare the societal beliefs about those issues compared to how society views those same issues today. These presentations were powerful. Many of the groups discussed focused on child abuse and alcoholism, two aspects of the text that they could relate to their own lives. Other groups talked about racism and prejudice. Each project provided a personal glimpse into how the students viewed the world they lived in through the lens of Twain's (1994) novel.

The following section examines how Jason and Stacey conceived their social interactions with others and how these interactions had not only been shaped by but also continued to be shape by their conceptions of the students and community of Middlebury.

Critical Conceptions of Social Interactions with Others

Educator's critical conceptions of their social interactions are guided by their critical conceptions of themselves and others. Conversely, their critical conceptions of others are often shaped through the interactions they have with diverse individuals. Howard (2007) argues educators' cultural competence (critical conceptions of self and others) is informed by their ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences. Those found to be successful in their implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy understand the importance of how social interactions in the classroom affect students' motivation, self-esteem, and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Pollock (2008) suggests that any examination of culture within a school setting must accept that "human beings forge responses to actual schools and educators in real time and in ongoing interactions with actual educators and actual school opportunities" (p. 372). Culturally relevant educators engage in social interactions with students in their classrooms designed to foster three components of culturally relevant pedagogy: (1) academic excellence for all students; (2) the fostering of cultural competence; and (3) the development of the critical social consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a).

Research on culturally relevant pedagogy reveals if educators are to foster the three components of culturally relevant pedagogy as outlined by Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995a), they need to push the boundaries of traditional teacher-student relationships. Weinstein et al. (2003), encourage teachers to eliminate the distance between themselves

and their students by establishing meaningful relationships with their students through interactions and knowledge of their lives beyond the classroom. These interactions with students should accept and encourage the students' diverse ways of being, acting, and learning (Villegas and Lucas, 2002). In addition to these meaningful interactions, the physical environment of a classroom plays a significant role in the promotion of social interactions between both teachers and students and among the students themselves (Weinstein et al., 2003). The following sections explore Jason and Stacey's critical conceptions of their interactions with others. In addition to providing examples of their social interactions, this examination also offers a physical description of their classrooms, which includes seat arrangement, displays of personal artifacts, and displays of student work.

Jason's Critical Conceptions of Social Interactions with Others

Like Stacey, Jason was a very well established educator in his school district. He spent the past twelve years building a reputation as a positive, empowering educator. Jason classrooms only had four rules: 1) respect one another; 2) work hard; 3) write, and 4) have fun. He believed he had a good relationship with the vast majority of his students:

I think most of them would look at me and say that I am friendly and I care about them and their work. They would also say I'm not always the easiest to work with sometimes because I push them to some degree. I have absolutely no problem with challenging students.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) highlight culturally relevant pedagogy's belief in promoting high expectations for all learners. When it came to writing instruction, Jason had high standards for all of his students, for which he held them accountable.

Jason was spending the day with his Freshmen English class working on elements of a research essay, including how to do quality research and how to integrate the research into their writing. The students were assigned to annotate a series of short articles as practice for their eventual research projects. Jason asked the students to take out their annotations, and he asked them to share what they had written. A few students volunteered a response, but their responses fell short of Jason's expectations. Eventually, he grabbed a student's annotations and placed them on the document camera, revealing the notes on the overhead to the rest of the class. This was a common practice in Jason's classroom. He explained why he did not hesitate to put his students' work on the board:

First of all, I know the students I can do it with. We've been together for months and when I have seniors you know, they have already taken classes with me, so they know what to expect. But I am a writing teacher, and it is important that we look at the writing. Writing is personal, but we try to be as objective as possible and look at what the writing says. I do it with my own writing. I'm not afraid to share with them.

In this case, the student's annotations only contained a single sentence summary of the article.

Jason responded to the whole class, "This is what I am seeing today. This is not good enough. You think I'm making fun of you right now, but I'm not."

The student whose paper was on the screen replied, "I've never annotated before."

Sensing the student's growing discomfort, Jason answered, "Don't take offense to what you have not been exposed to. However, we practiced some annotations in class yesterday. You guys know what I expect, and this doesn't cut it."

Jason spent the rest of the hour going through the articles with his students and modeling annotations on the overhead projector. Like other culturally relevant teachers, Jason responded in real time to the needs of his students. He recognized his students' previous educational experiences did not provide them with the skills necessary to be successful with their current assignment, so he met them where they were at and addressed the need immediately.

Jason characterized his approach to interacting with his students as firm but fair:

I try to create an environment where we respect one another and we have fun. We work together. We have fun together. We write together. I am the teacher. They are the student. But because we are also doing a lot of writing, it's part of the deal that you have to get to know kids personally to help them with their writing.

During his first five years at Middlebury, Jason was very active in his students' lives outside of the classroom. He mentioned that "getting to see them outside of school as a coach really helped to establish trust inside of the classroom. Even if you aren't coaching a kid directly, she knows that you care about their lives." Jason coached wrestling and football and took on a number of advisory roles during his early years at Middlebury.

Since his own children have gotten older, Jason no longer coached in Middlebury but he still coached wrestling, soccer, Muay Thai, and hockey in Metropolis. He said the coach in him often came out in the classroom: "I teach in very similar ways to how I coach, which is loud and probably pushy. But I push because I care. It's sounds cliché,

but it's the truth.” His caring and sometime pushy interactions with students were what many of his students enjoyed about him as a teacher.

Jason’s classroom itself was designed to encourage social interactions. The desk formation Jason used is portrayed in the figure below. The tables were set up in a series of two concentric horseshoes. The students faced inward and could see many of their peers’ faces. There were two additional rows of seats near the entrance to the classroom that also faced toward the center of the classroom. Students were free to choose their own seats at the beginning of the semester to promote a shared sense of community.

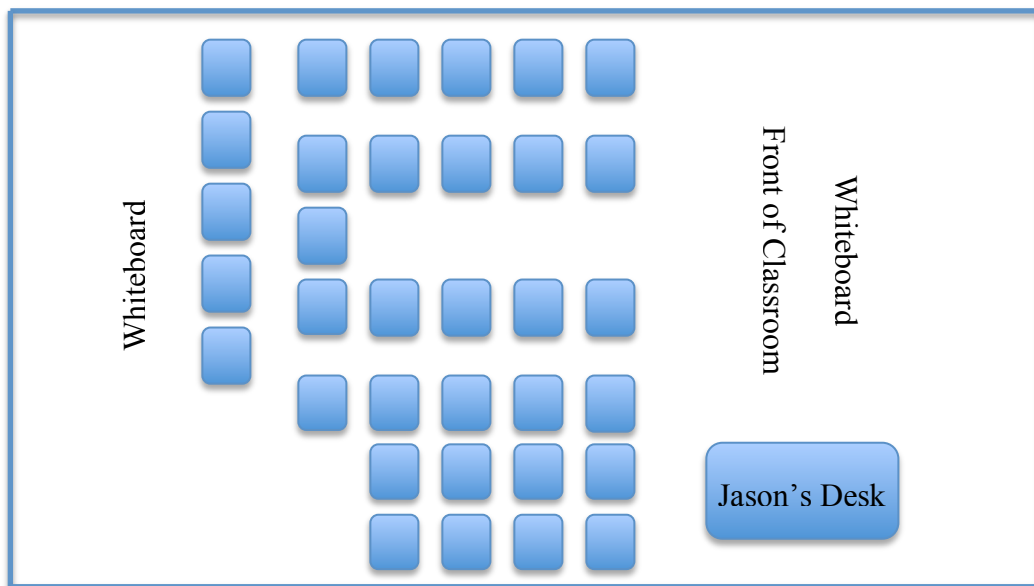


Figure 5. Jason’s Classroom Configuration

I asked Jason to explain why he chose this seating arrangement and he replied “The class is constructed in a way that they are able to face each other and so they can look at each other and they can call on each other and that is very much on purpose.” This arrangement follows the Socratic seminar’s inner circle and outer circle structure. He said the classroom structure was meant to promote those Socratic ideas, which

according to Jason meant “there is a question at the center of every class, and we attempt to answer the unanswerable question through our research, through our practices, through our critical examination of each other.” Additionally, Jason’s classroom walls proudly displayed aspects of both his and his students’ lives.

Scattered along the walls were many poems and short stories written by Jason’s current and former students. He indicated that many of them were not written for class. Instead, the students enjoyed Jason as a teacher so much that they were proud to give him a piece of themselves to display on his walls. In order to help eliminate the distance between Jason and his students, Jason also chose to decorate his room with personal artifacts from his life. Jason said it was just as important for his students to learn about him as it was for him to learn about his students.

Atop the whiteboard at the back of the class sat a collection of albums from Jason’s youth. He would often grab an album and play it on the record player at the front of the classroom before and during class time. Music from artists like Curtis Mayfield, The Jackson Five, Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac, and the Beatles filled the air. Along the top of the walls was a series of inspirational quotes Jason had collected over the years. These quotes came from Greek philosophers, Civil Rights activists, American authors, celebrities, and politicians. Two separate spaces on Jason’s walls featured images and of Japanese sumo wrestlers and Muay Thai fighters along with his certificate of proficiency for his black belt in Karate, which he received during his travels abroad. However, the most revealing bulletin board sat between the two large windows opposite Jason’s desk.

Here Jason had collected various images, maps, and cultural artifacts from his travels across the United States and around the world. The bulletin board featured restaurant menus from the Catalonian region of Spain to the bayous of Louisiana to Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Jason used the bulletin board to highlight his love for food, travel, and language. He explained, “In my opinion it is impossible to separate language, food, and culture. I’m passionate about cooking and language, so it is natural for me to be curious and open to other cultures.” Jason was an avid storyteller; he would frequently indulge his students with tales from his travels abroad. He would also speak to his students in Spanish and Japanese:

A lot of my kids haven’t traveled very far. Most of them will probably never leave the country. I want them experience the world greater than Middlebury to show them what it out there isn’t scary or bad. It’s just different, but different in a good way.

Jason open-mindedness to trying new experiences and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds was what he hoped he passed onto his students at Middlebury.

When Jason portrayed his conceptions of the community of Middlebury and his students as predominately Caucasian and of low socioeconomic status, he admitted, though he said he hated to say so, that they were culturally limited. Jason’s interactions with his students were designed to acknowledge their cultural identities while simultaneously broadening their conceptions of other cultures.

Stacey’s Critical Conceptions of Social Interactions with Others

During her twelve years of teaching secondary ELA at Middlebury High School, Stacey’s work in the community as a coach and an advisor along with her desire to take

on numerous professional responsibilities, such as the District ELA Chairperson, established Stacy as respected educator. She characterized herself as a fun, caring educator who is respectful of her students.

Her early conceptions of the students and the community of Middlebury left Stacey feeling like she needed to help her students to rekindle their passion for learning. Adhering to culturally relevant pedagogy's belief in holding all students to higher standards (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), the staff, led by Stacey's charge, began to offer more honors course, more AP courses, and they began to talk to students about attending college. Outside of every classroom door was a plaque with the teacher's name and the logo of the university where they earned their teaching degree. Stacey started to think about what she could do in her own classroom:

Every Monday with my juniors, we hold a college Monday where we spotlight a different university. It doesn't even have to be a university it just has to be someplace you go for education after high school. And we start talking to the kids about the opportunities that are available because some of these kids really didn't know that college was an option for them.

She was proud that the efforts had paid off. Since placing an emphasis on talking to students about college, the number of students pursuing a post-secondary education had increased.

In her social interactions, Stacey made a concerted effort to get to know her students on a personal level. A large part of Stacey's identity was shaped by her dual passions for sports and literature, and she naturally relied on these passions to find common ground with her students:

I try to pay attention to who are my athletes. And then I look for my kids that bring books into class that are not their textbooks. I look for my theatre kids. I try to have something that I can talk about with all of those kids.

Ladson-Billings (1994) research on culturally relevant pedagogy illustrates educators tend to unconsciously favor those students they perceive are most like themselves. However, culturally relevant teachers make a concerted effort to establish relationships with all students.

Stacey admitted she was drawn to a few like-minded students in her classes, but she still made efforts to connect to all students in her classroom. Although Stacey did not assign as much writing as she would have liked, she said that one of the best ways to relate to her students was through their writing. In preparation to read Orwell's (1972) *Animal Farm*, Stacey had her English 10 class write persuasive essays about a presidential candidate of their choosing. She provided her students the option to write an essay persuading the audience to either vote for or against their candidate.

The students spent several class periods in the computer lab researching their chosen candidate's stances on a number of political and social issues. A large number of students chose to persuade their audience to vote against the candidate they had chosen, while a handful decided promote a positive message of support. After the first two days in the lab, Stacey reflected on the student responses she had received in previous years for similar assignments:

Most of the time with my students I don't agree with them, but I appreciate and acknowledge where they are at in their life compared to where I am at, and at least they have an opinion. I'm always cautious dealing with topics that can be so

polarizing, but the students are passionate about the topics they discuss in these essays, so it gives me a little more understanding about what is important to them. As the students spent the next week in the computer lab working on introductory paragraphs and supporting their opinions with sourced information, three students made some important insights about their candidates.

After spending a week researching and writing about their candidates, these three students decided they no longer supported the candidates they had chosen. Stacey gave a high-five to one young lady as she looked up from her computer screen with a smile on her face. Stacey was proud of her students for using the assignment to better understand their realities: “So many of these kids just believe what they see on social media or hear from their parents. Its refreshing to see kids critically engage with these topics.” The following week, the students presented their letters to the class.

The topics of the persuasive essays many of the students wrote were controversial. Because of this fact, Stacey was very careful to construct a classroom setting where her students were respectful of one another’s opinions. Howard (2007) identifies three key factors that increase students’ motivation and performance: feelings of belonging, trust in the people around them; and their belief that teachers value their intellectual competence. Stacey established a clear set of guidelines for her students to follow when it came to class discussion: 1) students were to listen attentively to the speaker; 2) if a student had a disagreement or questions, she was to write it down; 3) once the speaker had finished, the audience had the opportunity to respond; 4) the speaker had the final word respond to criticism.

She developed these guidelines because it had helped her students keep their discussions focused on the issues instead of hurling personal insults:

You don't have to agree with someone's opinion. It is their right to have that opinion. But we are not going to call people stupid or dumb because we don't agree with their opinion. If you don't share someone else's opinion then it is an opportunity for you to look at yourself and your beliefs and really think about why you believe the way that you believe and keep an open mind. And when you set that up at the beginning I'm able to get the kids at a point where I really feel like they are comfortable, saying what they want to say.

The day that I was present in the classroom for presentations, the students engaged in a spirited discussion of their candidates. They followed the discussion protocol Stacey had established, and they enjoyed countering one another's points with bits of information they had found during their research. Stacey sat with the students and participated in the discussion. She challenged her students' findings and pressed them when they made assumptions with any evidence to support their claims. At the end of class she shared her thoughts on her students engagement with the lesson:

They are entitled to their opinion and I am going to listen to them and respect them. You have to meet the kids at their level and show them respect. When they see that you care, that you really do care about their opinions, they become comfortable in sharing those with you.

The physical space in Stacey's classroom contributed toward her students' feelings of belonging to a community of learners who care and respect their opinions. Stacey's classroom layout is illustrated on the following page. Each long table sat four

students. The tables were angled inward to promote discussion among the students.

Stacey agreed her classroom space limited her options. She would have preferred to have a room large enough to accommodate arranging individual desks in a circle so her students would not have to look at the backs of anyone's head.

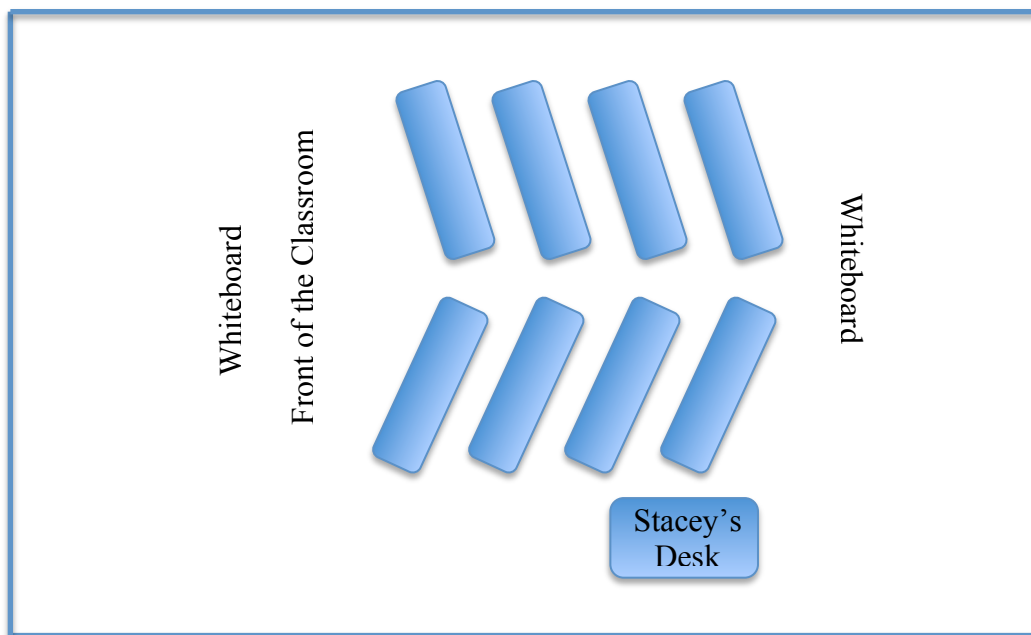


Figure 6. Stacey's Classroom Configuration

Unlike her colleague, Jason, Stacey's classroom was sparsely decorated. She had a few pictures above her desk of her family and large poster of her promoting a college football camp for mothers. The large bulletin board on the wall opposite her desk contained a few images of popular authors and some quotes. As a culturally relevant educator, Stacey could have better used her classroom as a vehicle to promote her students cultures and affirm their knowledge by displaying student work or posting images of cultural referents.

When asked to consider if living in the district in which taught would afford them advantages they otherwise did not have, both Stacey and Jason admitted they would

definitely have a different conception of the community and their students had they lived in Middlebury. Stacey said, “Although I grew up only thirty miles away, I didn’t grow up here and I don’t live here. I’ll always be sort of an outsider to this community, but that isn’t necessarily bad.” Stacey firmly believed that she would not be the same teacher had she grown up or lived in Middlebury. Similarly, Jason admitted, “I live in Metropolis because I’m comfortable living in a culturally diverse community. I think is beneficial to my students that I bring perspective different from their own that help to challenge their beliefs.” Both Stacey and Jason found their own ways to positively interact with their students and the community of Middlebury.

The discourse surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy underscores the importance of connecting and contributing to the health of the community. Tucker et al., (2005) argues that while teaching is a way to contribute toward a community, culturally relevant educators consider themselves a part of the community they serve or at the very least exhibit support for the community’s value through some form of involvement. Although neither Jason nor Stacey lived in Middlebury, their involvement in extra curricular activities, presence at community events, and their social interactions with students in the classroom stressed their dedication to the community they served.

The following section serves to highlight the two educator’s critical conception of knowledge construction. In doing so, the study also looks at how these educators illustrate their conceptions of knowledge construction through their teaching practices, which includes discussions about their methodology and course content.

Critical Conceptions of Knowledge Construction

Culturally relevant educators are guided by their critical conceptions of knowledge construction. Culturally relevant educators believe knowledge is dynamic. According to Ladson-Billings' (1994) original study, knowledge is continually shaped, reshaped, and shared by students, educators, and the community. As such, Ares (2006) suggests, culturally relevant educators view teaching as a series of generative processes that "build on prior experience and foster students' communities' dynamics, flexible knowledge and skills that support success in future activity" (p. 3). For the educators involved this study, this meant that they would actively engage their students' prior knowledge as a means to introduce them to new critical concepts in their classrooms.

In order to help students critically examine new information and engage in these processes to shape, reshape, and share knowledge, culturally relevant educators must promote opportunities for students to work together and build a community of learners (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). These communal learning opportunities allow students to discuss and share their diverse perspectives about how knowledge is shared and what knowledge is accepted in their worlds. However, culturally relevant educators are not limited to this single method of instructional practice. According to Villegas & Lucas (2002), because individual differences exist within the classroom and because culture and knowledge are dynamic, culturally relevant educators implement a variety of teaching strategies to facilitate learning. Finally, culturally relevant educators encourage student agency within their classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Giving students choices and voices in the construction of course curriculums and assignments as well as gradually

releasing to students the responsibility for the success of the class are at the center of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The subsequent sections discuss how Stacey and Jason conceive the construction of knowledge in their own classrooms. The findings highlight the educator's use of community learning to promote a shared sense of learning as well as their attempts to encourage student agency to support their success in future academic and social settings.

Jason's Critical Conceptions of Knowledge Construction

As a culturally relevant educator, Jason's beliefs about knowledge were influenced by work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1973), whose philosophies he was introduced to during his English education courses. When asked to explain his thoughts about knowledge, Jason replied:

My students aren't empty slates. As soon as they are born, they begin to experience the world. By the time they get to my classroom, they have experienced fourteen of fifteen years of life. That is a fact. Their experiences and their individual cultures and the things that make up who they are, those are very important. I hope they can explore those things.

Jason expressed that he tried to choose assignments where his students would have choice in the issues they are going to explore.

One method Jason found effective to promote student choice and encourage a sense of responsibility for the shared success of the classroom is what he called a "Reading Friend." Jason's "Reading Friend" is a take on the Cornell method for note taking. On the following page is a facsimile of a "Reading Friend" Jason used with his students.

stalled, but the students used their “Reading Friend” as a map to navigate classroom discussions.

At the beginning of the semester, Jason established a simple framework for class discussions. One student was to pose a question, and then call on a student raising his or her hand. When that student responded, he or she was to repeat some element of what the previous student had said in order to move the conversation forward. Students could also request to change the topic of the conversation if they felt the original question had been answered or the conversation had lost momentum.

For Jason, the use of the “Reading Friend” accomplished a number of goals. First, he explained that in his opinion, this was a very basic way humans should interact when having a discussion or a disagreement. Jason believed society had turned disagreement into a game of who could shout the loudest. He wanted his students to listen, process, and respond to what was being said, not what they thought was said. Second, he said the “Reading Friend” allowed students to discuss “some classic academic components of ELA like vocabulary, syntax, and grammar.” Finally, according to Jason, the students were able to “choose their own language to discuss those components and the big picture issues found in the texts.” All of this, he said, was to prepare them to be able to confidently conduct research when the time came.

The students arrived to class one day prepared to discuss the previous nights reading from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jason asked his students to get out their “Reading Friends” at the beginning of the hour. He directed them to focus on the on quotes they identified from the text, and to pick one of the three quotes they had written down and place a star next to it. He encouraged them to think about the big picture and by that he

meant the theme(s) present in the text. The day before, the students' focused their majority of their questions about the text on answering questions about the plot. He taught his students that there are three types of questions they could ask on their reading friends: factual, interpretative, and evaluative. Jason said he was okay with the previous days focus on factual questions because it was important for them to understand what was happening in the novel, but he wanted to push them beyond cursory knowledge of the text.

Jason engaged the students in a brief discussion about Langston Hughes' (1958) "Thank you, Ma'am," a short story they read and discussed the week before. Jason called on a student, "Student A, themes present in "Thank you, Ma'am?"

Student A responded, "Poverty, dysfunction, sympathy, and maternal care."

Jason was activating his students' prior knowledge of previous texts they had read in order to jump-start the conversation for the day. He gave the students five minutes to quietly process their "Reading Friends" prior to engaging in discussion for the day. Jason required all of his students to participate in class discussion on a daily basis, and to ensure their participation, he enlisted the help of his teaching aide to keep track of how many times each student spoke during the hour. They were required to speak at least once if they wanted to earn participation points for the day.

When Jason asked for volunteers, Student B asked "Where was Scout when she punched Francis?" Jason smiled at the student for asking a factual question, but assured the student it was okay to ask these factual questions early in discussion. Jason redirected the question to focus on his goal of preparing students to research and how to search for answers. He asked Student B, "What do we do when we set up a quote? We

contextualize it. And part of that contextualization is knowing where the quote is.”

Since the student did not know where to find the answer, Jason set his students on a hunt to track down the passage.

After several other factual questions, Student C asked, “Why does Atticus feel a personal connection to Mrs. Dubose?” The student waited a few moments as the class paged through their books and notes looking for an answer. Student D asked Student C to repeat the question. After another few minutes Student E asked if they could change the topic. Until then, Jason had not directed the conversation, even when the silence had lasted for minutes.

Jason shared he wanted his students to drive the conversation and discover answers to their questions on their own. Jason said he was not going to “spoon-feed them the information.” He told the class the question was very important and they could spend the following two weeks discussing this question. He commended Student C for asking the question. To draw in more students to the conversation, Jason said he thought he should hear from a few more voices.

Eventually, the students began to draw parallels between the courage exhibited by Atticus in his defense of Tom Robinson and the courage Mrs. Dubose exhibited overcoming her addiction, citing specific passages from the text. Jason redirected the conversation and asked the students to identify the disease of Maycomb. He asked three students individually to answer the question. Each responded using terms like conservative and old-fashioned. Student E, one of the few non-white students in the class, shouted from the back of the classroom, “Racism! It’s racism.” Until then, Student E had not spoken, and Student E remained quiet for the rest of the hour.

After class, I asked why he thought it was taking his students so long to directly answer his question:

For a lot of these kids, they think I'm white therefore I don't have anything to say about race. Which as we know is false. This is not a truth. There is always this interplay between what the text says and broader contexts of our lives. In a discussion like today, I remain focused on the text, the language of the text because it allows kids to talk about these personal issues without it being about them personally.

Jason said he hoped his students, whether they were Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, American Indian, or Asian American did not feel the need to speak for the broader communities in which they existed. He concluded our conversation with a reflection on the nature of personal narratives:

We are always searching for self through the world. We tell the stories we need to survive. So the personal narrative...everything exists...all the world exists through our personal narratives. Our personal narratives define the world for us, but our narratives are not Truth. These are little t truths that exist simultaneously with others' little t truths.

According to Jason, if students and educators are to understand "Truth," they must collectively acknowledge and affirm the multiplicity of truths that surround them daily. In doing so, educators and students participate in the shaping, reshaping, and sharing of knowledge culturally relevant pedagogy advocates (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

These critical conceptions of knowledge were on display in Jason's AP Language and Composition classroom on almost a daily basis. During one class period the class

was practicing writing rhetorical essays in preparation for their spring test. The night before, students had read Lippman's (1939) "The Indispensable Opposition." In the essay, Lippman argued that it is necessary to have a vocal minority in opposition to the ruling majority. Furthermore, Lippman expressed the belief that there is inherent value in listening to those with whom we disagree (1939). Events that had taken place on several college campuses inspired Jason to assign the reading to his students.

Jason constructed the lesson around analyzing the text in order for students to be able to construct a rhetorical essay of their own, but underneath his desire to teach the elements of a rhetorical essay was Jason's culturally relevant pedagogy. He wanted his students to think about the value of listening to individuals with whom they disagreed. Jason and his students spent the first fifteen minutes of the class unpacking Lippman's (1939) argument.

Student Z argued, "This essay is about freedom of speech. That we have a right to freedom of speech."

"That's a good starting point, but there is more there," said Jason.

Student Y added, "I think he is trying to say we all have freedom to speak, but some people waste their freedom of speech." Jason pressed his students to think about how people waste their freedom of speech. After a few minutes of discussion, Jason revealed Lippman's (1939) central argument.

Jason turned his attention to language as he often did and projected Davidson's (1982) definition of Triangulation on the overhead:

Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the

concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world. (327)

Jason used Davidson's (1982) definition of Triangulation and Lippman's (1939) essay to encourage his students to engage in discussions with people they opposed rather than dismiss their opinions. After class he explained:

It is too easy for us, and particularly my students, to isolate themselves with like-minded people. We come to understand ourselves through the worlds around us, and through our communication with others in those worlds. But if we fail to communicate and learn from others, or we are not conscious of the worlds that we are walking through then we will live a life ignorance.

His conceptions of the construction of knowledge led Jason to develop a curriculum that problematized his students' worlds through experiencing competing ideologies and perspectives.

Jason's curricula aligned with his critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and the existence of multiple truths. He said his course syllabi expressed his belief that "students need to be informed and capable citizens, capable of making judgments, defending ideas, while maintaining a respect for the opposing ideas." The use of language and texts as vehicles to critically address social issues helped his students to adopt or work toward adopting his philosophy. Each of the texts Jason chose addressed issues of social injustice.

Although he admitted that he did not specifically chose literature because it contained elements of rural life, many of the texts Jason did teach certainly did possess elements of rurality; furthermore, Jason frequently tapped into his students' lives through creative writing assignments throughout the projects he taught. He often used these creative pieces as heuristics for engaging students in topical discussions. Additionally, Jason felt that the issues and themes present in the novels, short stories, and poems he assigned in class held universal appeal for all students: "Some of the texts we read are not necessarily timely, but they have withstood the test of time because they were often ahead of their own time, addressing societal injustices that we still see today." His critical conceptions of his students and the community of Middlebury guided Jason toward a curriculum that both affirmed and challenged his students' conceptions of self and others.

Stacey's Critical Conceptions of Knowledge Construction

Stacey's critical conceptions of knowledge were largely influenced by her educational experiences and what she described as a system of trial and error. As a veteran secondary ELA educator of ten years, Stacey believed her most successful lessons were those that offered students choice, encouraged students to be responsible for their learning, and promoted a community of learners. Stacey's culturally relevant practice encouraged collective responsibility for whole class success, which rejects traditional notions of competitiveness as described by Gay (2002). Building this community of learners is paramount to culturally relevant teaching practices. Ladson-Billings (1995b) described that in order "to solidify the social relationships of their classes, the teachers encouraged the students to learn collaboratively, teach each other,

and be responsible for the success of others” (p. 481). As a culturally relevant educator, Stacey exhibited a variety of instructional techniques to encourage the collaborative learning espoused by Ladson-Billings.

Stacey recognized her students increased digital presence in the world, and so she made use of Middlebury’s technology. Middlebury High School had adopted Google Classroom a few years prior. Working in a school district with limited funds, Stacey said the appeal of the software program was that it was free. Every other classroom had a set of Chromebooks to be shared with neighboring classrooms in addition to the computer laboratory in the library. Stacey’s use of the Google platform allowed her students to simultaneously work on assignments and major projects with peers. This seemed to be a theme in Stacey’s classroom. Every major project in English 10 and English 11 encouraged group participation. The Google platform also allowed students to work on assignments at home because the school assigned every student Google account. Stacey acknowledged this was still problematic because a large number of her students either did not have Internet or computers at their home. She even laughed that the school’s Assistant Principle bemoaned the fact she could not get Internet service at her home because of its location in the country.

When students worked on individual writing assignments, Stacey utilized peer response exercises she learned from her time at the GLWP. Stacey’s English 10 class arrived to class with first drafts of their presidential candidate persuasive letters. They had spent the previous week researching their candidate, developing introductory paragraphs, and constructing body paragraphs with evidence to support their claims.

Throughout this process, Stacey was able to provide students continual feedback on their writing using Google Classroom.

After greeting the class, Stacey instructed her students to grab a Chromebook and retrieve their documents. She broke the students into groups of three, which she assigned. When she assigned the groups she was careful to place one of her better writers with a struggling writer, and she wanted to pair students with opposing candidates. When asked to explain her reasoning for the groups, Stacey said, “I want my stronger writers to encourage my struggling writers and provide them meaningful feedback, and it is good for these students to engage with ideas they may not necessarily agree with or be comfortable discussing.” The students broke out into their groups, some going out into the hallway to find room to work.

Stacey did not need to give many directions to the response groups. The students were familiar with the process as they had done it many time before. After sharing their documents with their peers, the groups were to take a few minutes to read everybody’s paper. Then they responded to the letters using Google Classroom to provide written feedback. Since they had spent the previous week developing introductory paragraphs and supporting body paragraphs with evidence, the students were to respond to these elements of their peers’ papers. After students had an opportunity to respond to the writing, the author of the paper read his or her letter aloud and then the peers gave verbal feedback while the writer listened attentively. Finally, the author of the letter had the opportunity to respond to any questions or comments.

After class, Stacey defended her decision to use this peer response activity because of its potential to address the differentiated learning of her students:

I really like this peer response format because it gives the students a number of different perspectives and feedback on their writing. First, when they read their writing aloud, they hear the language and often catch problematic sections. For my visual learners they can read and see the feedback right on the screen, and of course, my auditory learners hear their spoken words, but they can also listen to their peers and engage in discussion.

Stacey was pleased with the results of the peer review session. Using Google Classroom, she was able to review the students' comments during and after the peer response activity as well as provide her students' immediate feedback of her own. Of course, Stacey's critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy extended beyond her belief that learning should be a communal experience. She utilized instructional material and other culturally relevant practices that asked her students examine situations from multiple perspectives rather than blindly accept their conceptions of the world.

In order to encourage the criticality of culturally relevant pedagogy, Stacey's classes actively involved a lot of debate and discussion. When she explained her critical conceptions about the construction of knowledge in her classroom, Stacey reflected on her interactions with students:

I ask my students a lot of questions. I don't want to guess about their backgrounds. It is also difficult to know 150 students on a personal level, but I talk to them before, during, and after class. I try to get a gauge of where they are at with their knowledge.

Although Stacey was not confident in her creative writing abilities, she used a fair amount of creative writing in her classrooms to meet student where they were and to bring their lives into the classroom.

She also had her students critically question their world through the literature in her classroom. It was the third day of English 10's engagement with Orwell's (1972) *Animal Farm*. On the first day of the unit, Stacey frontloaded much of the novel's allegories to the Russian Revolution with a series of video clips and lecture notes. Ever the historian, Stacey took the opportunity to discuss Communism, Capitalism, Marxism, Stalin, and Trotsky. On the second day, the students read and discussed the first chapter of the novel. On day three, they arrived in class ready to tackle the second chapter.

At the center of the whiteboard, Stacey posted a sheet of paper. As the students settled in their seats, Stacey told the class since the animals in *Animal Farm* had created their own set of laws, they were going to create laws for a society of their own. The students were excited and began discussing in small groups potential laws for their new society. After a few minutes, Stacey started writing down laws as students shouted them out. Some of the laws were quite silly: national bird is a golf ball; national currency is ponies, everybody must eat meatloaf on Monday. Others revealed greater insights: government pays for everyone's education; freedom of speech; one official language – English; child abusers are sentenced to death; must apply for a license to have a child and only one child per family; equal pay for men and women; all energy must be green energy; everyone must serve five years in the military; heavy taxes on large corporations; government gives everyone a home.

After fifteen minutes, Stacey had her students take out their books and follow along as she played an audio recording of the second chapter of the novel. This was a common practice in Stacey's classroom. She would do this for two or three chapters before releasing responsibility to her students to read the novels on their own. She acknowledged in the past she had played entire books for certain classes she believed needed extra assistance. After the students listened to the recording, she directed them to take out their notebooks. Projected on the overhead was Stacey's adaption of the Cornell method of note taking. In the left-hand column she had the students describe a list of characters from the chapter. In the right-hand column, they were to identify passages from the text they found interesting.

When the students discussed the characters, they linked them to individuals from the Russian Revolution. They saw Old Major as Karl Marx and Napoleon represented Stalin. One student jokingly associated Squealer, the propagandist pig, with Donald Trump. Stacey referred her students back to the list of laws they had constructed earlier in the hour and pointed to free education for everybody. She asked them why they thought this was important.

Student A answered, "Because college is so expensive."

Student B quickly responded, "Yeah, and you need to go to college to get a good job."

She questioned her students further: "Think about the book. What did the pigs do to restrict the freedoms of others?" The students thought for a few minutes until Student C said the pigs burned the books they read. "Why would they burn the books?" Stacey asked.

Student A said, “They want to be the only ones who can read and write.”

“Why is that?” Stacey asked.

“I’m not sure,” said Student A.

Student D speculated, “They burned the books because they want to be in charge.

If the other animals can’t read or write, they can’t control the laws of the farm.”

“Exactly,” said Stacey. “If you don’t have knowledge, you really lack power in your life. Those pigs burned that book because they didn’t want others to have access to knowledge that would give them power. How do we get access to knowledge?”

The students’ responses included going to school, attending college, and the Internet. Stacey asked them to consider the benefits of exposure to new experiences, engaging in debate, and challenging their own beliefs. She concluded with this final thought, “Life begins at the end of your comfort zone. If you always stay in your comfort zone, then you never grow as a person.”

I met with Stacey after class and she was pleased with the conclusions the students had drawn from the text. She indicated that the majority of the texts they read in English 10 and English 11 were banned books:

I choose banned books because I don’t want my students knowledge of the world to be limited by others. The pigs in the novel are trying to keep the other animals in the dark, and certain bureaucrats and educators want to keep students in the dark, but not me.

Stacey’s classrooms were a site where students could engage in debate and discussion about important social issues with those who shared and opposed their beliefs.

Chapter IV Conclusion

Culturally relevant pedagogy is “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, social, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17). Ladson-Billings conceptualized the pedagogy in response to the disenfranchisement of students from culturally and linguistically backgrounds, specifically African American students. The transformative agenda of culturally relevant pedagogy is two-fold. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), it challenges traditional views of teaching and learning, and it develops a social consciousness among students in order to confront various forms of societal oppression. As a result, culturally relevant pedagogy promotes three major philosophical beliefs: (1) academic excellence for all students; (2) the fostering of cultural competence; and (3) the development of the critical social consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a). In order to promote these philosophical beliefs, Ladson-Billings (1994) outlines three critical conceptions common to successful culturally relevant educators: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. These critical conceptions served as the theoretical framework for this study, and I examined the participants’ adherence to their critical conceptions through illustrations of their methods of instruction.

The educators in this study invited me into their classrooms and allowed me to observe their methods of instruction, granted me access to their course materials, and consented to a series of three interviews in order to determine if their classroom practices aligned with their conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. In the professional

teaching profiles featured at the beginning of this chapter, Jason and Stacey volunteered what they wanted to share about their childhoods, educational experiences, life experiences, and why they became secondary ELA educators. These profiles illuminated plenty about their first critical conception of culturally relevant pedagogy – how they viewed themselves and their students.

Jason's critical conceptions of himself and his cultural identity were formed from his experiences during his youth. At an early age, he was exposed to a number of diverse cultures. For Jason, diversity was the norm. Whether he was living in a tee-pee with his mother and her Indian-American boyfriend in Arizona or later living in government housing with his African-American stepfather on the south side of Metropolis, Jason saw more of what he had in common with others rather than what made them different. During our interviews, Jason continued to bring up the profound impact his family's economic struggles had on his conceptions of self and others. His entry into education during his undergraduate courses was working with underprivileged urban youth, who much like himself, envisioned a world where attending college was not a reality. When he discussed his students at Middlebury High School, Jason was quick to point out the disproportionate number of students who qualified for the free and reduced lunch program. He was also keenly aware that many of these students were not enrolled in his AP Language and Composition courses.

On the other hand, Stacey lived in the same town her entire childhood. She categorized her hometown as being very similar to Middlebury. Stacey readily admitted her cultural identity was shaped in part by her limited cultural exposure. Coming from a predominately heteronormative conservative Christian community, Stacey's conceptions

of others was through this prism until she attended college and interacted with people from diverse cultures of her own. There was one major cultural difference that both Stacey and Jason shared during their interviews, and that was the lack of acceptance of others their students exhibited. Despite having lived a similar life to her students, Stacey did not have nor did she recall seeing others exhibit the kinds of deep-rooted prejudice she found at Middlebury. Stacey's critical conceptions of herself and her students mirrored Liggett's (2008), argument that "cultural orientations shape the ways in which individuals think about values, beliefs, communication styles...etc." (p. 397). With the educators' backgrounds in mind, I examined how their conceptions of themselves and their students manifested in the classroom.

If we were to refer back to the figure on page 118, we would recall Ladson-Billings' (1994) original study identifies successful culturally relevant teachers as educators capable of acknowledging their own cultural identities, acknowledging their students cultural identifies, and openly discussing culture and diversity. Jason would often break into storytelling sessions, entertaining his students with exploits from his youth or his time spent abroad in Japan. He recognized the differences between his cultural upbringing and those of his students, and although Jason exhibited all three traits of his critical conceptions of himself and his students during his teaching, he acknowledged he did not create lessons to teach his students about their own cultures.

Instead of designing lessons that focused directly on the lives of his students, Jason adhered to Ladson-Billings' (1994) call for a pedagogy that problematizes teaching and learning through his efforts to engage students in critical self-reflection and introducing them to contradictory ideologies. His lesson on Lippman's (1939) essay,

which was designed to help his AP Language and Composition students better understand the components of a rhetorical essay, also provided him the opportunity to engage his students in a conversation about the dangers of surrounding themselves with likeminded individuals while simultaneously ignoring or suppressing the voices of those they opposed. Similarly, Stacey used literature as a gateway to discuss her students' cultures and social issues they found relevant.

Stacey's engagement with her own culture in the classroom was a bit more limited than Jason. Although Stacey actively engaged her students in informal discussions in order to get to know them, she did not share as much about her life with her students as Jason. However, Stacey did recognize differences between herself and her students, and she made several attempts to bridge the cultural gaps she found at Middlebury. Culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes that schools can be implicit in the reproduction of social inequities through a system of oppression and privilege (Esposito & Swain, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Stacey sought to disrupt the cycle she found at Middlebury by using literature as a catalyst to not only discuss her students' cultural referents but to also challenge their conceptions of their culture and the cultures of others. She taught texts that contained more "rural content" than her colleague, and she often began new projects employing their lives as a heuristic for discussion.

Stacey's entire *Huckleberry Finn* project began and ended by connecting the social and moral issues of the text to her students' personal experiences. In doing so, she not only activated her students prior knowledge to engage them in learning, but she also highlighted the relevance of the text's subject matter to their lives, a text that was written

over 130 years ago. Although Stacey remained focused on the social and cultural issues present in the texts she and her students read, the primary authors were white, Europeans or Americans. Stacey expressed she would like to include additional texts written by ethnically diverse authors, but she cited the schools lack of resources and curricular mandates as obstacles. Of course, Stacey and Jason's critical conceptions of self and others certainly influenced the ways they interacted with their students.

Successful culturally relevant educators can be identified by their social interactions with others. Culturally relevant educators encourage a community of learners, demonstrate connections with all students, and model positive and appropriate interactions with others (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that teachers' interactions with students should encourage diverse ways of learning, knowing, and acting. Both Jason and Stacey modeled positive and appropriate interactions with all of their students. I did not witness either educator speak ill of a student, nor did I see them have to shout or yell at their students. They also showed genuine interest in the lives of their students outside of the classroom, and they worked toward the development of a community of learners within their classrooms.

Jason characterized his interactions with his students as being firm but fair. Jason had developed a reputation as a positive teacher over his twelve years at Middlebury. He acknowledged his students entered the classroom already knowing what to expect, and his four classroom rules clearly established the learning environment he wished to foster: 1) respect one another; 2) work hard; 3) write; and 4) have fun. He enforced these rules on himself, writing while his students wrote, respecting while sometimes disagreeing with them, coming to class prepared to teach, and having fun while he was doing it.

Jason relied on his personal experiences working and living with people from diverse backgrounds to connect to all of his students. However, Jason clearly defined his role as teacher and his students' role. Jason engaged his students outside of class, but the relationships he fostered were more professional than personal. In addition to his positive interactions with students, Jason also encouraged a community of learners through instructional techniques and the physical arrangement of his classroom.

The physical environment of Jason's classroom was designed to encourage social interactions and discussion. The seating chart in the figure on page 137 illustrated how Jason was able to arrange the desks in a manner where students could see the majority of their peers' faces. Sitting himself in an open seat, allowed Jason to become a part of the conversation rather than its conductor. His use of the "Reading Friend" and peer review also contributed toward developing a community of learners. The "Reading Friends" held the students accountable for coming to class prepared to lead discussion. Students asked questions they thought were important to the text and the other students would answer the questions to the best of their ability. His work with the GLWP cemented Jason's belief in teachers as writers, and he promoted this idea in his classroom. With a focus on their writing, Jason's students participated in peer review sessions that were designed to encourage a community of writers. Stacey exhibited a number of similar educational practices, which were a reflection of her beliefs about social interactions in the classroom.

Although Stacey was more reserved in terms of sharing her life with her students, her interactions with her students could still be characterized as being more personal than the interactions between Jason and his students. I observed Stacey

spending more time with her students before and after the bell, and she often spent time during instructional time talking to her students about life outside of school. She joked and laughed with her students more than her colleague, in part because her critical conceptions were informed by her learning experiences and a desire to create a classroom that was both fun and educational.

She reduced traditional barriers to learning by eliminating the need for competitive independence (Gay, 2002). Stacey took full advantage of Middlebury's Google Classroom technology. Almost every writing assignment involved a peer review activities. These were focused writing exercises that held the students responsible for the betterment of the group as writers. She also used her schools resources for group projects, which was especially evident during her English 11 unit on *Huckleberry Finn*. The students worked cooperatively on designing and delivering lessons over the material in the novel using the Google Classroom platform. Once again, the students were responsible for teaching one another and leading discussions. When discussing potentially controversial issues, Stacey encouraged debate as long as the conversations remained respectful and focused on the issues rather than people espousing the opinions. Combined, Stacey and Jason's critical conceptions of themselves, their students, and the interactions they had with their students were closely aligned with their conceptions of knowledge.

Culturally relevant educators conceptions of knowledge involve the use differentiated instruction to respond to the real time concerns, questions, and interests of their students in order to engage in a critical questioning of the world (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The educators in this study shared similar conceptions of the construction of

knowledge. Both Jason and Stacey believed knowledge was best-constructed using communal methods of instruction. Their belief that students brought with them to the classroom valuable insights and experiences validated previous studies on culturally relevant pedagogy, which suggest knowledge is shared and shaped by the continually shifting experiences and relationships between members of a community (Ares, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). For Jason and Stacey, this meant they encouraged small and large groups discussions in conjunction with a great deal of peer review groups and collaborative projects.

In terms of differentiated instruction, Stacey led the way in providing her diverse learners with a greater variety of instructional methods. Stacey incorporated both written and verbal instruction in her daily lessons. She also used class time to play audio recordings of novels for her students to follow along and then held small and large groups discussions on the material immediately following the readings. Stacey encouraged the use of technology in her daily instruction. Students often used computers to work on writing assignments, research, and collaboratively work on major projects. She often turned over responsibility to her students to teach a variety of lessons and lead discussions. This method of instruction also allowed Stacey to address the real time concerns, questions, and interests of her students because they were the ones often leading the discussions.

On the other hand, Jason used fewer differentiated methods of instruction during my time in his classroom. Although he would often begin class with a song or video clip related to the day's topics, his classes relied heavily upon large group discussions. Whether he was using the "Reading Friend" with his freshmen students, or offering open-

ended questions to his AP Language and Composition class, Jason expected his students to come to class prepared to discuss the material. In doing so, he certainly ascribed to the idea that learning is a communal activity. Students came to class with questions they had prepared in advance, which steered the conversations for the day. As a result, these instructional methods also addressed the real time questions, concerns, and interests of the students in a similar fashion to the work of Stacey.

In both cases, Stacey and Jason sought to engage their students in a critical inquiry of the worlds around them. Traditional methods of culturally relevant pedagogy empower students through the acknowledgement and validation of their lived experiences and cultural referents (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The critical conceptions these educators held of themselves and their students led them to develop curriculum focused on addressing societal issues such as counteracting cultural misconceptions and prejudicial beliefs. Howard (2007) defines cultural competence as an ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences through an understanding of how culture and cultural memberships affect one's beliefs and interactions with others. Stacey and Jason wanted to help their students develop their cultural competencies in order to reduce any misconceptions of diverse people and cultures.

This study was concerned with this particular understanding of cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy's aim to transcend the dominant culture to breakdown societal barriers. In an attempt to breakdown these barriers, Ares (2006) insists culturally relevant pedagogy, unlike more traditional approaches to education, asks students and teachers to question their understanding of social construction such as: morality, culture, language, and privilege. Both Stacey and Jason taught texts that

introduced important social issues from a variety of perspectives to challenge their students' conceptions of others. They encouraged debate and disagreement as they engaged in classroom conversations that other educators might be too uncomfortable to address. Using their students lived experiences and cultural referents as heuristics to discuss broader social issues rather than as the subject matter itself, allowed Stacey and Jason to remain focused on developing their students' critical conceptions of themselves and others in order to foster a social consciousness among the students in order to confront various forms of societal oppression.

Stacey and Jason provided unique perspectives on culturally relevant pedagogy, which used the transformative nature of the pedagogy to alter and enhance their students' conceptions of others and knowledge. Chapter V discusses these key findings and offers important theoretical implications to those in fields of teacher education and English education. The chapter concludes with a conversation of future research possibilities based on the results of this study.

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS

A Review of This Study

This case study explores the development of two rural secondary English teachers' conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. Rural educators have often been overlooked in previous studies in regard to ELA teachers' conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy. I sought to examine critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice in an authentic setting with teachers professing to adhere to the beliefs of culturally relevant pedagogy. The initial motivation for pursuing this study stemmed from my experiences as a secondary English teacher working in a rural school. I wanted to provide my students with the tools necessary to critically question their worlds, and traditional methods of instruction only perpetuated a system that historically overlooked marginalized individuals.

In Chapter One, I cited my lack of cultural competency in regards to my students' cultural identities as one reason why I sought an alternative pedagogy to those I was familiar with at the time. I grew up in a rural community in northern Michigan, a small resort town on the shores of Lake Michigan, which brought with it a richness of people from different regions of the country with diverse cultures. The small agrarian village in which I found myself teaching operated on a different set of cultural norms and expectations than those I knew from my past. These consolidated communities were deeply rooted in their sense of place, which was intimately tied to farming practices and conservative values. Despite our shared belief in our rural identities, I lacked an understanding and appreciation for my students' backgrounds. This failure on my behalf

to acknowledge the importance of my students' lived experiences resulted in a first-year full of failed lessons and many professional doubts. In many ways, I was an outsider: I lived an hour from the school; I had no ties to the local communities; I limited my social interactions with my students and the communities. I grew frustrated of my seemingly lack of success in the classroom, so I pursued alternative approaches to ELA instruction that did not conform to the traditional methods of instruction I had experienced in my youth.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a teaching philosophy that is capable of being used in multiple teaching contexts because of its focus on how we see ourselves and others and how our interactions with students in the classroom impacts the construction of knowledge. It is a teaching philosophy that asks educators to respond to the needs of their students, taking into account students' cultures and lived experiences. For myself, this specifically meant constructing lessons with my students' cultural referents in mind. I needed to infuse the communities connection to farming into my lessons. This also meant I needed to volunteer for additional extra-curricular coaching positions to become more active in the community, and relinquish my role as the sage on the stage, filling my students with knowledge I thought they needed to know to allow for a more organic construction of knowledge.

For Stacey and Jason, two educators already well established in their communities, culturally relevant pedagogy took on a new meaning. Instead of using the pedagogy to just promote their students' cultures, these educators used the teaching philosophy to overcome critical issues they identified in their conceptions of the community – apathy toward education and systemic prejudice. Jason and Stacey were

concerned for the future well-being of their students, so they implemented lessons and practices that encouraged their students to challenge their traditional conceptions of others and knowledge in order to promote a literate citizenry capable of healthy social interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. Their lessons often began by using the students' lives as a heuristic to discuss greater social issues that they encountered in life and the texts they read. Students discussed these issues within the frameworks of their own lives, and often drew connections between the similarities of their cultural identities and individuals from other cultures. In doing so, Jason and Stacey hoped to break down certain cultural beliefs that led to social barriers in their community.

The primary aim of this study was to examine the conceptions and illustrations of culturally relevant teaching practices of secondary English educators within a rural community in order to gain a better understanding of the following questions: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? To explore these overarching questions, the following sub-questions were considered:

- What are the critical features of culturally relevant pedagogy and its practice?
- How do teachers in rural schools connect such a philosophy to reading and writing instruction?
- What factors do teachers consider during their decision making process on whether or not to use culturally relevant education?
- How do teachers perceptions of self and students influence their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy?

- What goals do rural practitioners of culturally relevant pedagogy express as having for their students?

When I originally set out to conduct this study, I thought I might find rural educators using the critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy to empower their students' through the inclusion of their cultural referents in similar ways as I had done many years ago. To my surprise, Stacey and Jason were using the transformative power of culturally relevant pedagogy to disrupt negative patterns of learned behavior. They encouraged their students to critically examine their own cultures while simultaneously exposing them to the cultures of others.

The findings in Chapter Four help address this study's two major guiding questions and sub-questions. At the center of this study's framework were the original critical conceptions Ladson-Billings (1994) identified in her assessment of effective culturally relevant educators: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. As they described their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, both Stacey and Jason shared how their own educational experiences, teaching backgrounds, life experiences, and rich professional development seminars led to the construction of their own cultural competencies.

Jason and Stacey used their cultural competencies to develop courses with their students' cultures in mind to provide them with relevant educational experiences. This research contributes to a greater understanding of how secondary English teachers in rural schools develop an understanding of the critical components of culturally relevant pedagogy, and how these educators have chosen to implement that criticality within their

specific teaching contexts. It is my intention that the educators' teaching profiles, critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, and their illustrations of its practice found in Chapter Four will provide stakeholders of K-12 English education and other educators interested in culturally relevant pedagogy greater insight into the influences that have come to affect these participants' decision to adopt culturally relevant teaching practices. In doing so, interested parties may chose to adopt similar pedagogical beliefs of their own to empower the next generation of students.

This chapter addresses the study's major research questions by summarizing the key findings as they pertain to the overriding questions. Chapter Five also highlights the implications of the study's findings, and finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future research into rural ELA teachers' conception and illustrations of culturally relevant pedagogy. These findings and recommendations are especially important for English educators, teacher candidates, K-12 administrators, practicing K-12 teachers, and educational policy makers.

Key Findings

This study set out to examine how rural secondary ELA teachers conceived culturally relevant pedagogy and whether or not they illustrated its practices in their classroom. In order to frame the educators' conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, this study included a thorough examination of their professional teaching profiles. These profiles highlighted the educator's personal and professional histories, current teaching contexts, and philosophical influences on teaching secondary ELA in order to accentuate how they arrived at their current conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. Before I

discuss the key findings of this study, I must caution readers that due to the limited scope of this case study, I cannot make generalizations about preservice teachers, K-12 teachers, or English educators based upon the findings of this study.

The study's small sample size is an inherent shortcoming. However, the lack of participants provides the potential to prompt similar studies in the future, which could possibly include a greater number of participants and even participants serving a number of different rural communities. These potential studies are discussed in greater detail in the section titled "Resulting Questions and Potential Future Studies." This section will discuss the key findings of this study, which address two primary questions: 1) How do teachers, specifically rural teachers, define the concept of culturally relevant education? 2) How do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? The following key findings are important to the discourse surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly for English educators and researchers looking to improve their own practices.

How Do Teachers, Specifically Rural Teachers, Define the Concept of Culturally Relevant Education?

Chapter IV of this study offered two in-depth teacher profiles of rural secondary English teachers and their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. The profiles of these two practicing K-12 English educators were designed to offer stakeholders in the field of K-12 ELA a glimpse into what is happening in the classrooms of rural English educators reporting to adhere to the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy. A better understanding of Jason and Stacey's backgrounds (personal educational experiences, teaching experiences, lived experiences, current teaching

contexts) provided readers with reasons why both of these educators approach their instruction.

Jason's nomadic existence and his troubled youth spent living in impoverished neighborhoods exposed him to people and cultures outside of the dominant white middle class cultural expectations of America. He was very understanding and cognizant of the achievement gap between students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds within his classroom. Jason admitted being born and raised in an impoverished urban community surrounded by diversity had contributed toward his strong sense of self-efficacy in working with students from traditionally marginalized populations. He said he tended to identify more with students from impoverished single parent homes because he had a similar upbringing. These connections were evident during my classroom observations and the interactions between Jason and his students. In an attempt to reach out to traditional marginalized students, Jason unsettled the traditional teacher-student power dynamic by sharing stories from his own life. Personalizing his instruction in this manner helped Jason's students make relevant connections between the classroom and their own lives.

Jason's high expectations for his students and his belief that all students were capable of success pushed him to encourage students from disadvantage backgrounds to enroll in more challenging courses. This understanding of the importance of having access to knowledge and questioning that knowledge is important to culturally relevant education. Furthermore, his personal definition of culturally relevant pedagogy was also very similar to Ladson-Billing's (1994) original definition. For Jason, being a culturally relevant educator meant "a belief in teaching students to become critical thinkers." He

believed it was a pedagogy “that empower[ed] students by affirming their lived experiences and required [him] to find ways for students to relate what [he] did in class to their cultures.” Jason focused his lessons on the ways in which language affected social interactions between people and characters from texts. In this way, Jason encouraged his students to reflect on their assumptions about others and themselves based upon differences in language and communication.

Stacey shared a similar definition of culturally relevant pedagogy. For her, being a culturally relevant educator meant bringing “students’ cultural beliefs into the classroom.” In order to accomplish this goal, Stacey indicated she needed to find a way to connect literature to the lives of her students. Unlike her colleague, Jason, Stacey grew up in a small town similar to Middlebury. Her belief that learning should be fun and educational stemmed from her experiences in school and athletics. Stacey admitted her cultural competency was limited compared to Jason, but like her peer, she used literature as an avenue for introducing her students to new perspectives on social issues. In addition to their definitions of culturally relevant pedagogy, Jason and Stacey’s three critical conceptions of the pedagogy (how they conceived themselves and others; how they conceived their social interactions with others, and how they conceived the construction of knowledge) supported their understanding of the pedagogy. Stacey and Jason shared common conceptions about all three critical conceptions, particularly their belief in the construction of knowledge.

As culturally relevant educators, Jason and Stacey believed learning was a generative process, which shaped and reshaped knowledge by building upon students’ prior experiences (Ares, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Both educators relied on

communal learning opportunities to promote critical discussions about knowledge, culture, and societal injustices. Jason's beliefs about his students' funds of knowledge was shaped by the work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1973) and Stacey's conceptions of knowledge were largely influenced by her personal experiences as a student and her professional teaching experiences at Middlebury.

Both educators noted they felt shocked when they first arrived in Middlebury due to the close-mindedness of many of their students and their students' parents. Stacey also mentioned she was upset by the level of apathy many of her students exhibited toward schooling. Jason wanted his students to be able to "function critically in society, which meant that they could view, that they could look at texts or images and that they could interpret those in the multiple ways that things can be interpreted: culturally, racially, politically, religiously, philosophically, historically." Stacey revealed many of her students were not receiving a message at home that school and education were important. Since schools serve as a microcosm of society in which the interests of the dominant culture are perpetuated through systems of oppression and privilege (Esposito & Swain, 2009), Stacey and Jason sought to disrupt this system through an examination of cultures.

What separated these educators from those of previous studies on culturally relevant pedagogy was their attempt to alter cultural expectations while still respecting and incorporating those cultures within their classrooms. As a result, Jason and Stacey held common beliefs found in culturally relevant education and multicultural education. The literature review highlighted proponents of multicultural education advocate pluralist forms of education for all children, which seek to reduce prejudice and discrimination (C. Banks, 2004; J. Banks, 1995; Banks & Banks, 2001; Sleeter, 1996; Sleeter & Grant

2007). At the center of multicultural education's foundation is the belief that schools play an integral role in transforming society to bring an end to social injustices. The educators involved in this study certainly worked toward reducing prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs within their community. At the same time, they also responded to the real-time concerns of their students with a pedagogy designed to empower their students "intellectually, social, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17).

The dual transformative agendas of culturally relevant education and multicultural education challenge traditional views of teaching and learning, and they develop a social consciousness among students in order to confront various forms of societal oppression. Stacey and Jason utilized a number of instructional methods, which encouraged the forms of empowerment within their students described by these two critical pedagogies.

How Do Teachers Demonstrate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy With Their Choice of Instructional Method?

The second primary question of this study asked, how do teachers demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy with their choice of instructional method? As we are well aware, Ladson-Billings (1994) concluded that the beliefs and behaviors of successful culturally relevant educators can be categorized into three critical conceptions of their pedagogy and practice: 1) how they conceive themselves and their students; 2) how they conceive their social interactions with others; 3) how they conceive knowledge construction. During my observations and interviews with the educators of this study, I focused on how their critical conceptions translated into instructional practices to determine whether or not these educators truly practiced what they preached. Figure 8 reveals both Stacey and Jason illustrated culturally relevant teaching practices.

Critical Conceptions	Jason	Stacey
Conceptions of Self and Others		
Acknowledges own cultural identity	X	X
Acknowledges students' cultural identities	X	X
Discusses culture and diversity with students	X	X
Conceptions of Social Interactions		
Encourages a community of learners	X	X
Demonstrates connection with all students	X	X
Models positive and appropriate interactions	X	X
Conceptions of Knowledge Construction		
Responds to real time concerns, questions, and interests of students	X	X
Engages in critical questioning of the world	X	X
Differentiates instruction	X	X

Figure 8. Educator's Critical Conceptions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

This study's participants generally agreed on their critical conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. However, the varying versions of culturally relevant practices and the degree to which these practices were implemented were quite different for both Stacey and Jason. I will now address how Stacey and Jason set themselves apart from traditional notions of culturally relevant education based upon a close-study of the participants' interview responses, course documents, lesson plans, and my observations.

While Stacey and Jason both theorized at length about their conceptions and definitions of culturally relevant pedagogy, Jason, in particular, recognized that culturally relevant pedagogy must move beyond an awareness of different cultures within the classroom. Jason emphasized that teachers must make a concerted effort to apply their own cultural competency to their daily teaching practices in the classroom. He was keenly aware of the transformative potential of a pedagogy designed to encourage critical

reflective practices. I observed Jason routinely incorporate cultures unfamiliar to his students during his daily lessons while also affirming the students' own cultural backgrounds. When I asked Jason why he felt it was important to expose his students to unfamiliar cultures, he made the following comments:

I think it is important to show these kids cultures outside of Middlebury because they not only need to be able to function and get along with students here, but many of these kids are going off to college, war, or another occupation somewhere else. Although our numbers have remained steady over the past few years thanks to school-of-choice options, our community has not been immune to the rural brain drain. Our students do not remain in Middlebury. They go elsewhere to find careers. Additionally, the world these kids live in is smaller than it has ever been. We have students living in extreme poverty, those I'd consider middle-class, and our students live in town and out on the farm. Although we are predominantly white, we also have students who are African American, Hispanic, Native American, students of mixed race, and foreign exchange students from a number of countries. What's more, these kids are plugged in. It is difficult to determine the predominant culture because they are exposed to so many cultures through their phones and computers, and those cultures are continually adapting and changing.

For Jason, being a culturally relevant educator did not mean he was restricted to including only his students' cultures and cultural referents. He argued:

I probably avoid preaching to them about their own culture because they know more about it than I do considering I live twenty minutes away. Instead, I offer

students opportunities to teach me about their culture. Writing assignments designed to get after personal narratives are a great way to get students thinking and talking about culture. You really have to know where your kids are coming from, and who are they. And I teach them about myself. I tell stories. I relate my experiences to the work we are doing in class. Because I've lived longer and seen more of the world, I can offer a new perspective that my students might not be familiar with.

Of particular interest to this study, was Jason's claim that he "avoids preaching to [students] about their own cultures." Jason indicated that his use of his own personal stories which offer a real life point of view change students' perspectives.

Jason continued to clarify that far too often students are engaged in the classroom with fictional characters or writing for imagined audiences. Jason recognized the lack of authenticity in traditional curriculums, and he felt responsible for showing students how to connect the literature to their lives through his own narratives. Jason firmly buys into Ladson-Billings' emphasis on instructional methods over course content. Ladson-Billings (1994) argues:

Much of the purported reforms and the debate about our schools focus on curriculum: What should we teach? Whose version of history should we offer? What priority should different subject matters be given? But it is *the way we teach* that profoundly affects the way the students perceive the content of that curriculum. (13)

For Jason, an implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy must emphasize "the way" he taught versus "what" he taught. This meant Jason connected literature and writing to

his and his students lived experiences whether the readings reflected the students' culture or not.

In detailing their implementations of culturally relevant pedagogy, Jason and Stacey related concrete practices, strategies, and approaches they use in the classroom that they believed were culturally relevant. Stacey identified literature as the most common and accessible method by which she practiced culturally relevant pedagogy. As an extension to her unit on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Stacey assigned her students a project in which they were to research someone they thought exhibited courage and kindness, an individual who inspired and motivated them to become better people. Students needed to recognize individuals who were in their own community, who were accessible to them, and who were role models of what students wanted for their own lives. Through this project Stacey described the culturally relevant practice of using the community to complete academic tasks and by doing so showed value in the community's funds of knowledge (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Although neither of the teachers in the study actually saw themselves as part of the community, Stacey was by far the one participant who integrated students' cultural competence in such a way as to show significance for their communities and the individuals in it.

Stacey also mentioned she held all of her students to high expectations as a part of her culturally relevant pedagogy because it was important to her that her students knew that there was an authority figure in their lives who believed in them. Stacey dismissed a commonly held misconception that students from historically marginalized populations or students from low income are not academically successful because the lack the

necessary motivation. She mentioned that if students did not believe that they could do something, they simply would not.

Stacey intimated that her experiences as a student and teacher had taught her to be fair but firm when working with students. Because Stacey worked with a large number of special education students and students from lower socioeconomic standings, both Stacey and her students recognized that Stacey's fair treatment of students did not always mean equal treatment. Reflective of Love and Kruger (2005), Stacey understood that students' lived experiences could not be ignored. In accordance with Ladson-Billings' (1994) belief in the power of reflective practice, Stacey affirmed that she often reflected on her own lived experiences to help inform her teaching practices.

Working in a rural high school with a predominately Caucasian student body, Jason and Stacey were keenly aware of students in their classrooms from historically marginalized ethnicities. Rather than approaching their instruction with blinders on, Stacey and Jason addressed issues of race head. Researchers have concluded that believing it is more socially acceptable to ignore racial and other differences in the classroom is the conscious act of ignoring students' ethnic values and social class issues which may impact student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Love & Kruger, 2005). Both Jason and Stacey agreed that culturally relevant pedagogy extends beyond racial and ethnic lines to include students from diverse religions, socioeconomic statuses, and sexualities, including students with disabilities and the gifted and talented; furthermore, they believed culturally relevant pedagogy must extend beyond an awareness of diversity and a philosophical belief and move toward actual practice.

This project's key findings respond to calls in teacher education, English education, and K-12 education to fill the rural gap in culturally relevant discourse communities. Although this study itself focuses on a small sample size of rural secondary English teachers working with culturally relevant pedagogy, the work of Jason and Stacey has the potential to influence all of those involved in the preparation and development of rural English teachers. The qualitative case study approach I utilized is important because the personal and professional teacher profiles along with the educator's conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and illustrations of its practice allow educators at all levels interested in learning more about culturally relevant pedagogy to reflect on their own philosophical beliefs and classroom practices.

As a community of English teacher educators, we can share our own conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and our work in the classroom like I have attempted to share with Stacey and Jason's reflections on their own practices working in a culturally relevant classroom. It is my hope that interested K-12 professionals and teacher educators will be able to consider their own work in light of the work of Jason and Stacey adopt and adapt from the participants' approaches to culturally relevant pedagogy to fit their own contexts.

Resulting Questions and Potential Future Studies

Although this study attempts to fill the gaps in research on the culturally relevant practices of secondary English teachers in rural schools, this study does have its own set of limitations. This particular study only examines the work of two individual educators; therefore, I caution readers of this study to avoid the temptation to view these findings as a prescriptive methodology to be adopted in their classrooms without giving considerable

thought and consideration to the needs and concerns of their own students and the communities they serve. This study provides a detailed depiction of two secondary English teachers' implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy, but the methodologies, curriculum design, and course content of the study's participants should not be seen as transferrable to other teaching contexts. Culturally relevant teaching requires educators to respond to the needs of their diverse students, and the cultural referents utilized in one educational setting will not exactly match those present in another setting. Secondly, two cases are not enough to make any generalizations about or to isolate trends in culturally relevant instructional practices.

Further research into the work of the participants' of this study would likely yield insights into the relationships between the educators' conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy, the courses they teach, and their methods of instruction. Examining how participants' pedagogies and courses evolve year to year, for example, would paint a more complete picture of both culturally relevant pedagogy and its influences than this current study is able to provide. Such a study would potentially reveal important information such as how and why ELA teachers with an eye on cultural relevancy evolve their instructional practices and course content as their situation changes with the passing of time.

An effective follow-up to this investigation, first of all, would be to replicate the analytical framework developed and utilized here with more participants who teach ELA courses in rural secondary and elementary schools. Doing so would build on the findings of this study. A study such as this would include teachers of varying professional levels at different stages of cultural competence. Such an investigation would add greater depth to

the pool of knowledge through an increased awareness of how teacher participants act on their conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and how they rationalize their actions based on these conceptions. A larger participant pool would allow for trends and outliers to be identified and classified among the participants such as: the content the participants deem culturally relevant; the participants' conceptions of teacher as self, students, and culturally relevant pedagogy; and the participants' individual application of culturally relevant pedagogy's critical components.

A project of this nature would highlight the unique perspectives of those involved by gathering more information on the diversity of rural communities, rural teachers, and rural students in order to develop a more complete portrait of rural educators' conceptualization and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. In recognizing, sharing, discussing, and celebrating these perspectives – many of which become self-evident in the individual participants' conceptions and implementations of culturally relevant pedagogy – English educators and English teachers can continue to learn and grow from one another in order to meet the needs of the diverse students in their classrooms.

Another potential future project stemming from this study would result in increasing the original study's scope longitudinally. In doing so, this future study could potentially begin with interviews of prospective teachers before they begin their teacher education program and follow them through their program of study into their first years of teaching. An investigation of this design would add to findings of this research by documenting the development of ELA teachers' cultural competence as they transition through their program of study and into their professional careers. It would also address

in greater detail the formal training prospective teachers receive in terms of culturally relevant teaching methods of instruction. I would interview these preservice teachers using similar interview protocols to the ones used during this study. I would also observe their teaching practices during their internships and first years as a full-time teacher.

An analysis of the participants' interview responses and teaching practices utilizing the frame I developed and discussed in detail in Chapter Three would reveal additional teaching contexts not highlighted in this original study – contexts in both rural and urban settings. Conducting a study such as this could potentially illuminate and fuel discussions amongst English educators and English teachers such as: 1) What is the role of teacher education programs in the preparation of prospective teachers' cultural competence? 2) Where does rural belong in the discourse surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly within courses on diversity? 3) What is and is not practiced in terms of culturally relevant instruction in authentic settings? A study of this kind has the potential to redesign English methods courses and possibly English education programs that do not currently focus on culturally relevant methods of instruction.

Concluding Thoughts

This case study has provided evidence that indicates educators working in rural communities with predominately homogenous student populations possess working knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy and enact many of its beliefs within their classroom instruction. Furthermore, the educators involved in this study transformed the traditional conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy to not only empower their students to critically examine the world through the inclusion of their own cultural referents, but also through contact with diverse cultural perspectives. Both Stacey and

Jason expressed and equally demonstrated examples of culturally relevant practices within their instructional methods; however, even these veteran teachers admitted they wished they could do more to promote their students' cultural competencies, lamenting certain curricular constraints and pressures of standardized testing as barriers to implementing greater cultural practices.

The research outlined in Chapter Two confirms that the student population in America has undergone a considerable change in terms of diversity, and it will continue to become increasingly diverse in the future. Many ELA teachers in rural communities have already recognized the changing faces of rural school students and the diversity of cultures, including rural cultures that are present in their classrooms. This increased diversity requires K-12 educators to improve the relevancy of their instruction to the lived experiences of all students (Howard, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Whitfield et al., 2007). English Language Arts instruction grounded in the criticality outlined by Ladson-Billings' (1994) culturally relevant pedagogy affirms the lived experiences and cultures of students and promotes authentic learning activities designed to challenge and question the negative effects of the dominate cultural norms. If we are to help all students learn, think critically, and develop cultural competency, a concerted effort must be made on the part of practicing K-12 teachers, K-12 administrators, teacher educators, and English teacher educators to reshape the educational landscape of America's schools, and make culturally relevant pedagogy a reality for all teachers and their students.

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APPENDIX

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

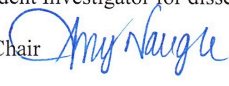
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: October 29, 2015

To: Karen Vocke, Principal Investigator
Joshua Anderson, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: HSIRB Project Number 15-10-43

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Culturally Relevant Education for Rural Schools: Creating Relevancy in Rural America” has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., ***you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study.”*** Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: October 28, 2016

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