

**CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT
THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.**

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the EdD degree in Educational Leadership.

By
Daryl Bryan Florance

Chair: Dr. Kofi Lomotey
Chancellor John Bardo & Deborah Bardo
Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership

Committee Members:
Dr. Aarti Bellara, Assistant Professor of Education Research
Dr. Jewell Cooper, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Success; Professor-
Department of Teacher Education and Higher Education at UNCG
Dr. Denise N. Morgan, Goodnight Distinguished Professor of Early Literacy
School of Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Black students across our nation possess academic abilities that must be nurtured and supported within schools. The unfortunate reality is that Black students consistently perform below academic grade level proficiency in reading. This problem is consistent across grade levels, schools, and districts throughout the nation based on nationwide data. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (2022), only 17% of Black students in fourth grade were at or above proficiency on the NAEP reading assessments, compared to 42% of White students who demonstrated proficiency. These gaps expand when adding the impact of poverty. Thirteen percent of Black students living in poverty were proficient, while White students not living in poverty were 49% proficient. These gaps have existed in our nation, state, and local districts for decades with minimal change (Au, 2016; Cohen, 2006; Coleman-King et al., 2023; Green & Giffore, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 2006; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). There are many factors that influence this problem, including a lack of culturally sustaining teaching, a lack of access to high quality instruction, the presence of deficit ideology, and inequitable school policies and procedures (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Coleman-King et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Madkins, 2011; Paris, 2012; Sun, 2018). The factor that I focus on in this disquisition is the lack of culturally sustaining teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Paris, 2012). Black students often struggle to understand and recall key information in text. This happens due to a lack of connection between the content being taught and students' own experiences and culture (Khalifa et al., 2019; Israel & Duffy, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006). My theory of improvement holds that if there is an intentional focus on including culturally sustaining instructional strategies there will be improvements in students' literacy development. I explore this theory in the unique context of a

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public charter school that serves a large population of Black students, many of whom are living in poverty. The improvement initiative includes professional development for teachers regarding culturally sustaining pedagogy. They learned specific culturally sustaining teaching strategies that will impact students' literacy development. The professional development built the capacity of teachers to make better connections between the content being taught and students' experiences. Teachers are utilizing the strategies learned in classroom settings, after receiving feedback from the design team, and they provide ongoing reflection regarding the process of implementation.

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The Disquisition

The following statement was written by the Educational Leadership faculty to help readers understand the Disquisition – a unique capstone project and paper designed for WCU’s EdD students, different from the traditional “dissertation” capstone present in most PhD programs.

The disquisition is a formal, problem-based discourse. The disquisition is closely aligned with the scholar-practitioner role of Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) students and thus takes on a practical, rather than theoretical focus of traditional Ph.D. dissertations. The purpose of the disquisition is “to document the scholarly development of leadership expertise in organizational improvement” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5). The Ed.D. program at WCU nurtures and matures students as both scholars and practitioners who are trained to understand systems and institutional challenges and opportunities through a lens of research and scholarship. Students apply their knowledge, using their institutional access and positionality, directly to the educational institutions wherein they lead. The Ed.D. is an applied degree, and the disquisition is similarly an applied capstone experience for doctoral work. The disquisition at WCU specifically utilizes an Improvement Science methodology, is shaped by critical theory and scholarly research. It engages the candidate in the application of the concepts in an applied manner through the development and implementation of an intervention within their local institution, focused on improvement of equity within that system. Ultimately, the disquisition serves as documentation and assessment of an improvement initiative that “contributes to a concrete good to the larger community and the dissemination of new relevant knowledge” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5). [1]

[1] Statement prepared by Dr. Alison Joseph (Ed.D. alumni), Educational Leadership faculty, and Dr. Kofi Lomotey (Lomotey, K. (2020). *The Disquisition at Western Carolina University: The Capstone Experience in the University’s EdD Program*. Unpublished manuscript, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC.)

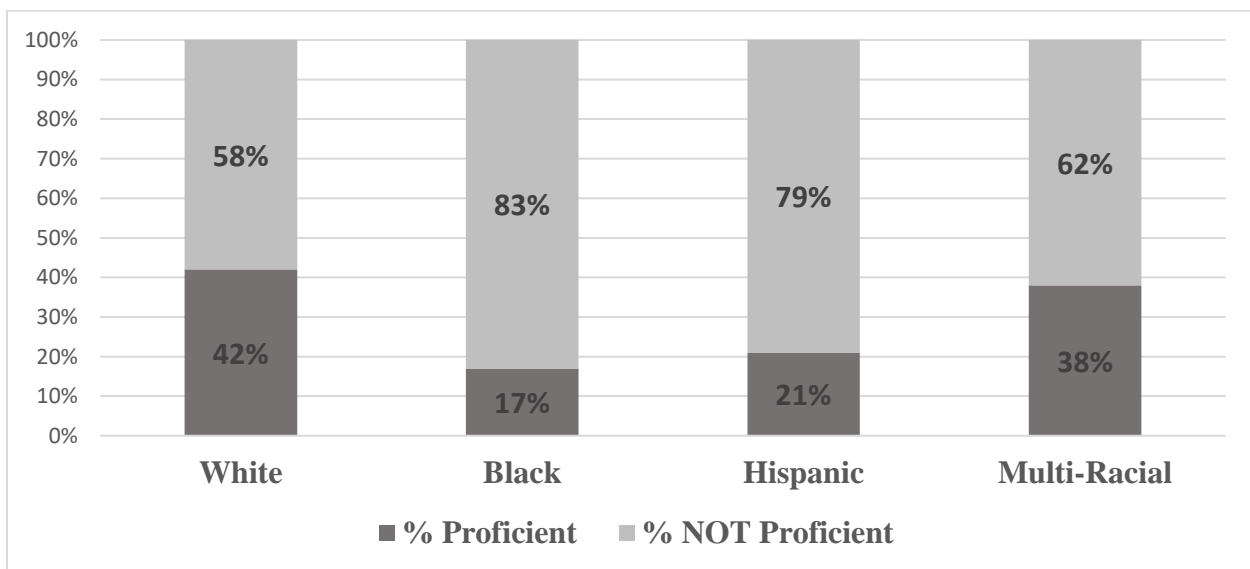
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A National Problem

Black students consistently perform below grade level in reading. This problem is consistent across grade levels, schools, and districts throughout the nation based on nationwide data. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (2022) only 17% of Black students in fourth grade were at or above proficiency on the NAEP reading assessments, compared to 42% of White students who demonstrated proficiency. These gaps expand when adding the impact of poverty. Seventeen percent of Black students were proficient, while White students were 42% proficient. These gaps have existed across our nation for decades with minimal change (Au, 2016; Cohen, 2006; Coleman-King et al., 2023; Green & Giffore, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 2006; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). This is only a small glimpse at the existing opportunity gap that exists nationwide, with students living in poverty suffering the most.

Figure 1

4th Grade Reading Proficiency, 2022 (NAEP Data)



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Note: The data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress have a specific criteria and definition for “proficiency” based on assessments provided to students in all states.

The data in Figure 1 come from the National Report Card, a tool that presents assessment data from NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). This figure specifically shows fourth grade reading proficiency for the year 2022 broken down into multiple subgroups including White, Black, Hispanic, and Multiracial. The graph shows both the percentages of students for each group who were proficient, as well as the percentages of those not proficient in reading for each subgroup. This displays the gaps that exist between White students as compared to the other subgroups. Figure 1 shows the larger gap between White students and Black students in terms of reading proficiency in the fourth grade, with only 17% of Black students demonstrating grade level proficiency or better, while 42% of White students performed at or above grade level.

To bring this problem to life, consider the stories of James and Brandon. Both are third grade students. James lives in an urban area with low property values, and limited material resources. He lives with his three older brothers, two younger sisters, and their dad. Based on circumstances beyond James’ control, he has limited access to meaningful resources such as books at home and school, reading opportunities with adults, homework help, and effective tutoring/support from educated professionals. James likes school, but it is hard for him to keep up with his peers. His teachers are consistently disappointed with his academic progress and place him in the category of “low performing” or “below average.” This also impacts how they respond to him during instruction. He will not get the same attention or focus as other students who demonstrate success. School performance data show that he is making progress, but not at the pace needed for achieving proficiency. He has a challenging time making connections to the

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readings based on his lived experiences. When it comes time for the end of year assessments, James will not likely meet proficiency in either math or reading. He will be crushed because he wants to make his dad, other family members, and his teachers proud. As a result, his confidence will be forever shaken, and his motivation to work hard will be diminished.

Brandon is also a third grade student who loves school. He lives with his parents in an area with high property value and available material resources. The family moved to this area because the schools have a reputation for success in the community. Brandon has access to books and materials at home and at school. Brandon's teachers find it easy to support him, as he gains understanding in math and reading, and demonstrates mastery at high levels. He is placed in groups and settings with other bright students, which challenges him even further. Brandon is able to make connections when reading because of his lived experiences and exposure to other books and other resources.

James and Brandon are fictional students, but their stories illustrate the educational debt from which many students suffer. While their circumstances are beyond their control, the impact results in divergent paths that begin to form in the lower grades and continue to widen as students move through school. James is a Black student, which adds another layer to his complex situation based on the currently established and institutionalized societal norms. Black students are consistently marginalized in school settings due to gaps in understanding between students and teachers, culture, and expectations (Coleman-King et al., 2023; Khalifa et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006). James represents an entire group of students across the nation, from California to North Carolina, in cities to rural areas, and in public schools and charter schools who face these challenging realities. His teachers will likely have a deficit ideology, which lends to them not challenging him fully, and/or not supporting him appropriately (Khalifa et al., 2016). His

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teachers will also not be able to make necessary connections that will enhance and solidify his understanding of content, because they are either not aware/responsive, or have no perceptions to pull from to make those connections (Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2023). However, Brandon, who is White, has a different experience. He is privileged in ways that he does not even understand or recognize. He is seen by most teachers as the model student, as a prototype for what is normal. This will lend to him becoming successful in school and in the ‘real world.’ His teachers will see him as successful beyond his errors and will be able to make connections due to his exposure to a variety of real-world concepts (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

The impact of this problem extends far beyond school. Proficiency in reading is not only a grade or indicator for advancement within schools; it is a marker of success in life. The phrase ‘reading is fundamental’ is very true. One’s ability to read impacts their daily functions such as accessing information, healthy decision making, and job performance. There is an increased risk for those who lack these basic skills to drop out of high school, decreasing their ability to get sustainable jobs that utilize their abilities. There is an increased risk for criminal and/or illegal activity (in order to obtain money), and resultant higher risks of incarceration. (Alexander, 2012; Annamma, et al., 2024; Love, 2019).

Literature Review

A Brief History of Federal Reading Policy

Reading assessments and reading accountability are a part of much larger federal and state level policies. From a historical perspective, low academic performance of Black students is not a new issue. The problem of low performance for Black students has persisted since the onset of school desegregation in the late 1950’s and continued with little to no resolve despite intense federal accountability measures from the early 2000s until the present (Ladson-Billings, 2006;

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Shujaa, 1993, Sun, 2018). The academic performance gap has been evidenced through data since the 1980s when a nationwide push for better accountability (across subjects) within schools began. Changes in reading policies were a major part of the focus on curriculum and instruction prompted by the “A Nation at Risk” report that outlined concerns about how schools in the United States were preparing students to compete in a global context, which led to an era of greater accountability for public schools including the enactment of federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Kim & Sunderman, 2005).

Since the early 2000’s the NCLB legislation has promoted the use of standardized assessments in all public schools to achieve promoting accountability for schools. NCLB was designed to close achievement gaps by holding students, teachers, and schools accountable for their success in schools (Kim & Sunderman, 2005). Researchers using data from multiple states over years of data collection, and across various subgroups determined that despite the stated goals of NCLB, there is limited evidence that using standardized assessments worked to accurately show student achievement, or improve student performance (Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Onosko, 2011). The stated intent was to help improve student performance. Instead, the data provided a clearer picture of the existing racial and socio-economic gaps that exist nationwide. Not surprisingly, the policy did not fix the issue; however, it did clearly bring into focus the huge academic gaps that exist between student groups (Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Love, 2019).

More recently, Race to the Top provided similar results as the No Child Left Behind policies. Baker et al. (2013) argues that Race to the Top policies continued the already failing performance of No Child Left Behind. While the Race to the Top legislation promoted some positive aspects, such as the utilization of value-added data for teachers, it further promoted the

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concept of using standardized assessments as the driving mechanism for holding educators accountable for student performance. The results of the assessments were used to measure teacher performance. In most states, between 35% and 50% of a teacher's evaluation was determined by the standardized assessment results (Baker et al., 2013). These data were used to terminate teachers or reduce funding for schools as opposed to providing support to close the academic gaps. Additionally, this initiative led to negative shifts and trends within the educational arena, such as increased competition among schools and teachers. In many cases, this led to hostile work environments. Funding and support for schools with lower performance were frequently reduced, resulting in a widening, not reduction, of the academic achievement gap (Onosko, 2011). While these national accountability models have provided important data points to confirm the academic achievement gaps between Black and White students, policies have not prompted changes that have effectively improved the performance of Black students.

The current federal legislation "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA) serves as the accountability model and provides federal support for K-12 schools. This legislation replaces the NCLB as of 2015. ESSA provides specifics related to teacher quality, assessments, interventions, and funding for schools. ESSA has established school accountability measures via the School Performance Grades, graduation rates, and student proficiency in reading and math. It promotes the use of a value-added assessment system to evaluate teacher, school, and district performance (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022, p. 25). While ESSA is in place to support K-12 schools, there are still concerns with the equity of the systems in place, specifically concerning accountability. The large achievement gaps for Black students still exist with limited change throughout the period of these three federal initiatives.

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These federal policies have had a significant influence on Black students' performance in reading. In a more localized context, there are several state policies that also influence Black students' ability to achieve at higher levels of reading proficiency. In North Carolina, the policies that impact students most directly include the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, teacher effectiveness standards, teacher recruitment and retention, and School Performance Grades. Each of these policies has implications for the curriculum that is presented to students, teaching and learning processes within schools, and schools' micropolitical status, encouraging quality teachers to abandon less successful schools (Coleman-King et al., 2023; Horsfield et al., 2019; Israel & Duffy, 2009; Khalifa et al., 2016; Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022; Sun, 2018).

While performance gaps may perplex many educators and policymakers (Acker, 2006), the system is perfectly designed to get the intended results. There are systematic influences that impact the reading problem. Institutionalized racism plays a role in literacy performance gaps. The use of standardized assessments, which has been thoroughly critiqued in the literature, provides an unfair, and inequitable standard of measurement for Black students, especially those living in poverty (Au, 2016; Green & Giffore, 1980; Kendi, 2016; Onosko, 2011). Established systems of power and privilege in schools, districts, school boards, and the legislature also help to ensure the results remain the same (Acker, 2006; Giroux, 2010). The governing body for these systems is controlled by a small group of affluent, White men. If these influences are not addressed, the problem will continue because the system is set up to produce the current results.

While these systematic influences play a key role, the focus for educators must be on what can be done within classrooms and schools. There must be an exposure and disruption of the deficit ideology that exists among teachers and staff (Gorski, 2011). School and district

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leaders must work to ensure policies are established and implemented that promote equitable treatment of all students. Families of students must be educated, supported, and encouraged to fully engage in the work of educating students in concert with teachers and staff. Culturally sustaining pedagogy must be utilized in order to make the learning of content applicable and relevant for Black, economically disadvantaged students (Gorski, 2011; Khalifa et al., 2019). Culturally sustaining pedagogy engages a set of strategies that can be effectively implemented in the local context as a means to meet the educational needs of Black students in the area of reading.

Policies for Charter Schools

Charter Schools have their own guidelines, expectations, benefits, and flaws. They are public schools that allow students an opportunity to leave the school in their district to explore a different environment. The funding for charter schools is one of the most notable differences between them and traditional public schools. Charter schools are partially funded by the state but must rely on other funding sources to supplement expenses (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). Some charter schools are funded by generous philanthropists who donate money based on the cause and direction of the charter. Some are venture philanthropists, who donate with intentions of getting something out of it (e.g., goods, services, recognition of achievement). This among other factors has led to negative reputations for many charter schools (Horsford et al., 2019). Most charter schools are founded on specific principles and have areas of focus for their students such as STEM, Arts, experience-based learning, or alternative approaches to learning such as Montessori. Charter schools can accept students, but do also dismiss them for poor academic performance, or behavioral concerns. The flexibility allotted to charter schools is mostly positive. However, there is a negative reputation attached to charters, particularly within

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the traditional public schools, for their ability to release students who do not fit in, or do not meet their academic requirements. This frequently results in the traditional public school getting ‘stuck’ with the student(s) once they have not proven successful at the charter school (Horsford et al., 2019; Pondiscio, 2019). There are funding concerns as well, as the public schools do not get additional funding for students who return. While the charter schools do not get additional funding either, the major funding for charter schools comes with the initial enrollment and does not change based upon enrollment fluctuations.

The teachers at charter schools do not have to be certified or licensed. The guidelines allow for a percentage of the teaching staff to be certified, but not all (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). Many charter schools do not follow a traditional curriculum, and use the flexibility allotted to them to try innovative ideas and instructional strategies (Pondiscio, 2019). This creates a unique nuance for charter schools, in that they must still adhere to most state requirements as mandated by law (such as end of grade and end of course testing), while doing so on their own terms. District schools typically have less flexibility to choose materials, curriculum, and instructional resources outside of what the district mandates for all schools. Like traditional public schools, charter schools must seek to move students toward grade level proficiency in reading, math, science, and other subjects in the secondary realm (high schools). The difference is the flexibility to choose their own methods to achieve this goal. Charter schools in North Carolina have been White institutions, with only a few seats for students of color, and only a few schools that serve mostly students of color (Horsford et al., 2019; Pondiscio, 2019; Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). This makes the context for my work unique in that the school, though a charter school, serves a largely Black student population while still providing families with an alternative to other schools in the area.

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Influence of State Policies on North Carolina Schools

Before examining the local context of Next Generation Academy (NGA), I talk about the influence of state policies on reading, enacted by the state of North Carolina. State policies such as the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, Teacher Effectiveness Standards, and School Performance Grades, and initiatives to recruit and retain teachers also influence the problem of practice in unique ways.

The North Carolina Standard Course of Study, approved by the State Board of Education, drives all instruction in North Carolina, and serves as policy for instructional practice. The standards address what is to be taught and learned in every respective course. This serves as the ‘blueprint’ for all curricular instruction. From this blueprint, teachers are expected to ‘unpack’ the details of each standard, and provide instruction based on the details of each standard. The NC Standard Course of Study is a reasonable starting point for teachers to approach teaching quality content for students. Local school districts and school leaders have the autonomy to make decisions about how to implement the standards. The autonomy creates variance across schools and districts as to the accuracy, depth, and validity of the use of these standards for instruction, as the materials, strategies, and curricular support differ from place to place (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). There are limited explicit expectations for how to teach each standard. The facilitation of the learning is left to the educator to determine and often embedded into a scripted curricular program. Teachers possess varying levels of understanding and capacity for ensuring the standards are taught with integrity, while meeting the needs of all students. With these variables in place, the needs of Black students who struggle to demonstrate grade level appropriate mastery of the content are inconsistently met.

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Teacher effectiveness is measured based on the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards. There are five standards (teacher leadership, content knowledge, facilitation of instruction, classroom management, and professional growth and development), in which a school administrator rates teachers. These measures are designed to promote quality teaching and learning in classrooms (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022, p. 66). This quality teaching and learning, in theory, leads to mastery of learning for students.

One specific element of the standards measures teachers' ability to make the content relevant for students. This requires a level of concern, interest, and/or knowledge about what students can connect with based on their experiences (Khalifa et al., 2016). There is value in the connections teachers make with the real-world experiences of their students. These connections to the content have the potential to make significant differences for improving Black students' academic achievement. Currently, there is a lack of training on culturally sustaining teaching practices, resulting in a persistence of White dominated norms for relevancy in classrooms that are not effective for marginalized students (Handbook of Research on Reading Comprehension, 2009).

School Performance Grades play a key role in how students and schools are evaluated and viewed by the public. In North Carolina, general statute G.S. 115C-83.15 requires the State Board of Education to provide schools with a performance grade based on two factors: academic achievement and academic growth. These two factors are combined (with a heavy weight toward academic achievement based on standardized assessments) to create a School Performance Grade for all North Carolina schools.

The results of this policy have starkly divided the state in terms of race and economic status. Schools with high numbers of Black students and students living in poverty are often

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considered “D” or “F” schools, while schools with affluent and White populations are typically “A” or “B” schools. The data points clearly outline this over the past few years. With the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdown of schools, the gap widened even further but also impacted more schools that had traditionally been successful (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). The School Performance Grades do not help Black students achieve, but rather publicly critique the schools that attempt to serve them. The negative results of this include both quality teachers and engaged families looking for employment and enrollment in schools with high performance grades, and not the schools with high needs. Many quality teachers migrate away from the schools with high needs, drawn by the comfort and reputation attached to the higher performing schools. The current model for establishing these grades does presents challenges with mobility for most schools to move from being an “F” to an “A” or “B” within reasonable efforts from school leadership and staff (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). The absence of these valuable human resources leaves already struggling schools and students behind (Sun, 2018).

A Local Context: Next Generation Academy

Next Generation Academy: A Demographic View

NGA is a charter school located in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was founded by Dr. Sam Misher and his wife, Dr. Pam Misher in 2018. The school started with 138 students in kindergarten through second grade and has now expanded through eighth grade as of the 2024-2025 school year with an enrollment of over 475 students. The school currently serves of population of roughly 87% Black students. Seventy-six percent of the students are considered economically disadvantaged. This is based on the number of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. There are currently 27 classroom teachers. Seventy-eight percent of those

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educators are Black professionals. There is a wide range of experience within the teaching staff as well, from beginning teachers to those with decades of experience as classroom teachers.

Institution's History, Mission, and Vision

Dr. Sam Misher's vision was to provide an alternative educational environment for marginalized and underrepresented students and families. The stated mission is- "Next Generation Academy will inspire students to become productive, literate, 21st century citizens by personalizing their learning experience, and encouraging them to realize their individual strengths and abilities." The stated vision is- "In order to become a productive 21st century citizen, every student will develop and demonstrate effective reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills by participating in high quality, explicit literacy instruction across all content areas." This vision is clearly articulated through the leadership of the institution and is also visible in action through the culture and climate of the school. The institution has a strong record of helping students improve academically based on value added trend data. However, the vision is not able to be fully experienced due to the existing problem of practice that persists. It is Black students, those who we are committed to serve, that continue to perform below expected levels of proficiency.

The sense of urgency and the severity of problems that exist in the state and nation also exist at NGA. The school has a unique nature and purpose. NGA was founded to serve the underprivileged, a model which is starkly different from traditional charter school models. The school is located within an area of the city with elevated levels of poverty and economic deficits. Unlike most charter schools, it draws families from less affluent homes.

The students at NGA enter with a range of academic, social, and behavioral needs. In many cases, there is some trauma that has been faced by the students, from food insecurity,

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domestic violence, unsafe living conditions, and/or separation or loss of family and friends.

While the bruises may not be physically present, they are very real and present. Regardless of these underlying issues, teachers are expected to move all students to a set standard of proficiency.

Each student has a unique set of needs based on their prior experience and personal skills and abilities. Each student also has a unique set of characteristics that influences their learning such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, familial design, economic status, and language acquisition. The vision and mission of the organization is to personalize the learning experience for each student based upon their various needs.

The staff at NGA is trained to provide quality teaching and learning for students. Over 80% of the staff possess a professional teaching license or are in a program currently to obtain it. The staff are also trained (mostly through experience) in how to address students' social and emotional needs. While professional development is provided to staff on a variety of topics from pedagogy, content specific knowledge, and classroom management, each student, class, and lesson requires a unique 'treatment' that meets the needs of those students in that moment. Teachers and staff at the school must be calm, flexible, student-centered, and strategic with instructional practices to be effective. The staff at NGA do not get to choose whom they serve. Their task is to assess, teach, love, and empower the students brought into their care.

Data Supporting the Existence of the Problem

The problem of practice can be made clear by using a few data points. Students begin taking End of Grade (EOG) tests for math and reading in third grade. There are stark gaps between the performance of Black students at NGA compared to White students within the local district. This is consistent with Guilford County Schools data from 2021-22 that showed a 30%

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difference in the performance of Black and White students in math and reading. At NGA, the student population is around 87% Black, and 76% are economically disadvantaged.

Approximately 35% of all students performed at proficiency for the 2022-23 school year in reading, math, and science (fifth grade only). Approximately 31% of students who were economically disadvantaged were proficient, while 49% of students who were not economically disadvantaged were proficient. Trend data at the school and within the associated district (Guilford County Schools) also support this as evidence of the problem.

The school currently implements several initiatives aimed at improving student performance in reading. NGA utilizes a standards-based grading system. This provides teachers and students direct feedback on their progress toward mastery of the North Carolina Standards required for each respective area/course. By tracking student performance in this manner, teachers can focus more clearly on the areas assessed on the end of year tests. Additionally, the students have access to Academic Coaches. These are retired teachers who work as daytime tutors, utilizing small group instruction to work on content and skills that are identified by the teachers and data points. This provides students with support in the standards that will be needed on the standard assessments. There are numerous other curricular and resource-based supports for students. The school's leadership team has strategically planned and set measurable goals for improvement. However, until now, there has not been implementation of a specific improvement initiative targeted at improving the results.

Impact of Existing Legislation and Policy

Legislation and policies at the state level have the biggest impact on both the problem of practice, the initiative for change, and the setting in which this work took place. The policies that

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impact most directly include the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, School Performance Grades, and teacher effectiveness standards.

The North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCS) drives all instruction in North Carolina. The standards address what is to be taught and learned in every course (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). The standardized assessments such as End of Grade (EOG) for elementary and middle grades and End of Course (EOC) for high schools are created based on these standards. Students are measured on their understanding and mastery of these standards. In theory, if the NCSCS is properly utilized and implemented in the classrooms, the anticipated result is that students will be successful on the standardized assessments at the end of the year.

A second policy that impacts the problem of practice is the North Carolina School Performance Grades. School Performance Grades play a key role in how students and schools are evaluated and viewed by the public. In North Carolina, general statute G.S. 115C-83.15 requires the State Board of Education to provide schools with a performance grade based on two factors: academic achievement and academic growth (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022, p. 61). The results of this policy have starkly divided the state by race and economic status. Schools with high numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students (as is the case with NGA) are considered “D” or “F” schools, while schools with economically advantaged White populations are “A” or “B” schools. The data points clearly outline this over the past few years. This has a negative impact not only on the perception of the schools that serve marginalized students, but also on the schools’ ability to hire and recruit high quality staff that are poised to work with students who struggle to meet expected proficiency.

A third policy issue that directly impacts the improvement initiative relates to teacher effectiveness standards. Teacher effectiveness is measured based on the North Carolina

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Professional Teaching Standards (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022, p. 66). One of the elements of these standards specifically measures teachers' ability to make the content relevant for students. Teachers are expected to make real world connections to the content being taught as outlined in the standard. This policy is a positive move toward ensuring teachers are accountable for making those connections.

The Influential Role of NGA's Organizational Culture

The organization had an optimal opportunity to implement with fidelity an initiative to address the struggles with academic achievement of Black students. The school climate and culture of NGA is highly conducive for disruption of this problem of practice. Since this is a charter school, the staff is highly motivated and qualified to work with students. There is a collective desire to see students succeed. This is reflected in the level of work and sacrifice exhibited daily. Additionally, there is flexibility to implement programs and processes that will benefit students.

With the initiative, I focus on teachers providing instruction that is relevant for students. With relevant instruction comes real world connections that will enhance students' ability to learn, retain, and demonstrate mastery of the standards being taught. The initiative provides support for teachers through professional development that enhances their knowledge and skills in this area. This positively impacts students' performance on standard assessments. The details of the improvement initiative will be outlined in upcoming sections.

Positionality Statement

I am a Black, able-bodied, middle class, cisgender male who has served in education for over 20 years. I currently serve as a school-based principal for a charter school. These identities all have a critical impact on my positionality related to the improvement work I did.

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As a Black man, I am considered a limited resource in the educational realm. There are very few Black male educators, and even fewer in leadership positions. Additionally, Black students tend to struggle academically and socially when compared to their peers. There is no coincidence that there is a limited presence of Black males and a prevalence of low performing Black students. This is not to say that Black students cannot learn from those of other races or from Black women. However, representation does matter and has a real impact. This factor plays a key role in my selection of critical race theory as my theoretical framework (Capper, 2019; Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

Though I have had a privileged life compared to many, I have had the experience of living in below par housing for a period of my life and growing up in a one-parent household. I have had the experience of “going without.” While this does not give me complete understanding of students with low socio-economic status, I can identify on many levels. Because of my experiences, this factors into my passion toward seeing inequities addressed regarding the students in these circumstances.

My career has been dedicated to motivating all students toward success. The fact that Black students are constantly the topic of discussion in professional development sessions, data meetings, board meetings, and even the teacher’s lounge has always concerned me. Imagine hearing repeatedly that the most negatively impacted individuals within your institution look *just like you*. Imagine the frustration and feelings of despair when data show the same results year after year. I have been analyzing, reflecting on, and problem-solving my entire career, and feel that I must now work to disrupt systems that promote these less than desirable results.

I can understand the problem in a unique way that others may not have the privilege of knowing and seeing. I also recognize that this can be seen by some as bias. I identify with the

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student group in which I am conducting improvement work on multiple levels. I am also highly motivated to see positive change. These factors create a level of bias that I must acknowledge and consider in my work.

Critical Race Theory has elements of radical movement toward change at times. Though CRT has radical elements, I focus on exercising skills such as lending a critical listening ear to the voices and experiences of students, teachers, and support staff who are impacted by low performance results. While there will be a mixed methods approach to the problem, the qualitative aspect is most impactful.

One of the most useful features that I have brought to the table for improvement is my understanding of how Black students learn. As a classroom teacher, I was able to connect with most Black students because I made learning relevant to them, connecting the content to what they experience and encounter. While a huge part of this was simply staying relevant and updated with what students were interested in, much is already a part of who I am based on my personal experience. This same feature has applied in my experience as an administrator, being able to identify with students in a variety of situations. Additionally, I have an awareness of best practices that promote achievement. I have been fortunate to implement them as a teacher in the classroom. As an administrator, I have been able to share the best practices with others and help them implement them into their classrooms for the benefit of students. I have been able to see how a wide variety of instructional practices, do not promote the needs of Black students.

My position as a school-based principal had implications regarding my ability to complete the improvement work. It provided me with a level of access and authority to be able to implement certain ideas, programs, processes, etc. The other considerations are the perceptions and power dynamic that exist with those who were needed to implement the improvement work.

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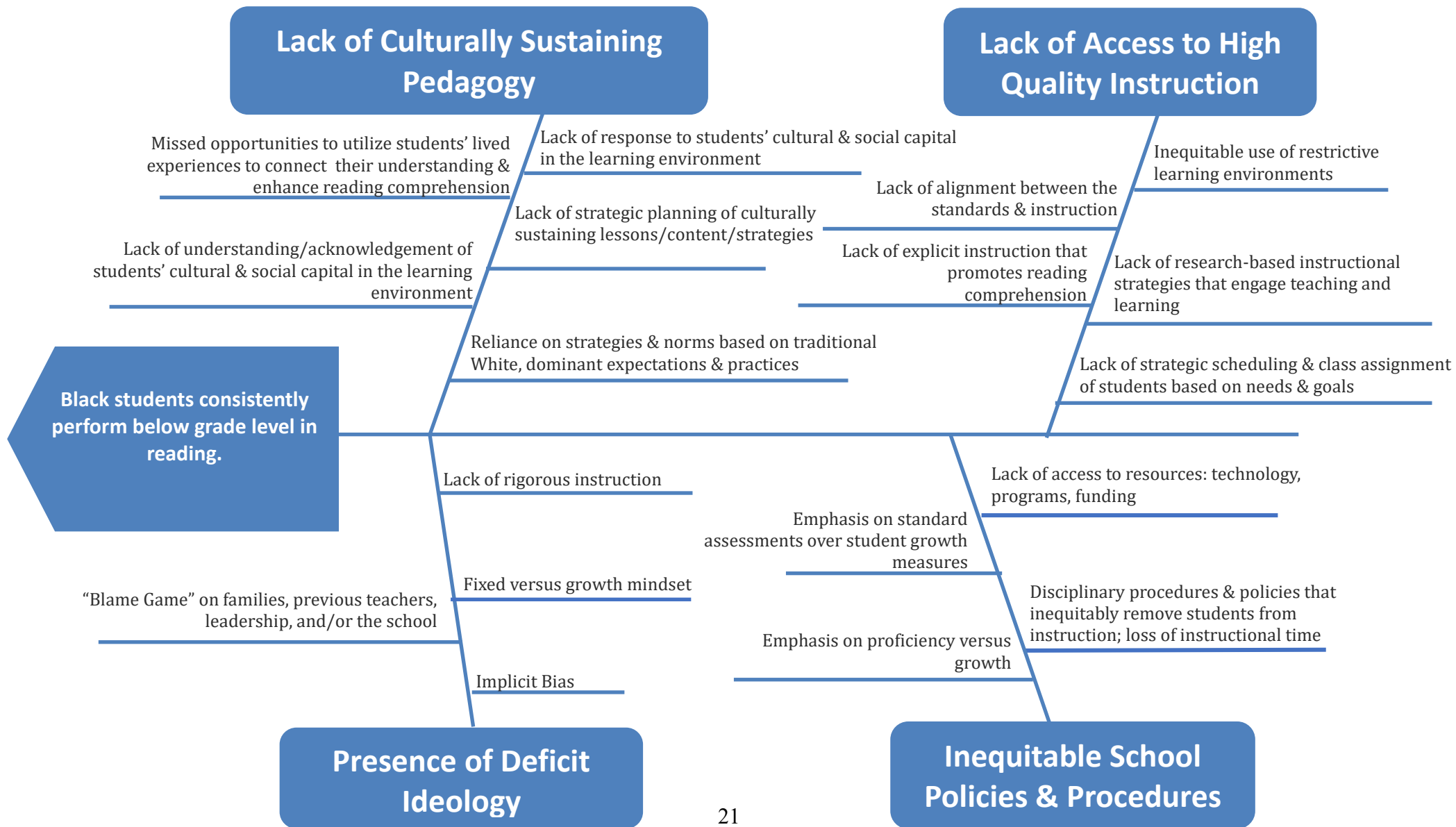
I had to secure ‘buy-in’ from those who are needed and maintain engagement through the process. I also had to be mindful of the power dynamic in my interactions with both the participants and my design team. While I believe most participants understood my positionality and desire to see change, there was room for some to question my intentions or doubt my ability to help promote the change. It was my responsibility to ensure that there was clear communication regarding what this means in relationship to the work.

Causal Analysis

In this section I provide a causal analysis that outlines key factors that influence the problem of practice (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). I have identified four broad areas that have an impact on the low performance of Black students- a) a lack of culturally sustaining pedagogy; b) a lack of access to high quality instruction; c) the presence of deficit ideology, and d) inequitable school policies and procedures. The fishbone diagram provides an illustration of the causes related to the problem. I provide a more in-depth perspective of each of these areas based on professional experience and related literature. The problem area that I focused on for the purposes of my improvement initiative was the lack of culturally sustaining pedagogy, for which I provide an extensive review of the literature.

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Fishbone Diagram



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Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework I use for this work is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. The strategies included in this framework are designed specifically to enhance the teaching and learning process for Black students (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Paris, 2012). The ultimate aim of the improvement initiative was to improve Black students' literacy development and acquisition of literacy skills. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy directly addresses this aim by providing teachers with strategies to best engage Black students in literacy instruction in classrooms.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is grounded in tenets of Critical Race Theory, which is a broader epistemological framework. Critical Race Theory was used as the "lens" for examining the problem of practice- Black students consistently lacking appropriate literacy skills for success. This problem is also grounded in evidence through data (NAEP, 2022). Critical Race Theory (CRT) focuses on systems that create inequities. The CRT research paradigm challenges the power structures that promote inequities in organizations (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). CRT evaluates and exposes the permanence of racism reflected in organizations and structures. It explores the tragic history of our nation, exposing the critical role of racism (Bell, 1995; Capper, 2019). It establishes the idea of Whiteness as property, which explains the inequities faced by schools and districts with non-White students. Property values are directly linked to the access of resources (or lack thereof) within schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

There are six tenets of CRT:

- (1) *The permanence of racism.* This tenet explains the racism as both an unconsciousness and conscious component of life in the USA.

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- (2) *Whiteness as a property*. This tenet links concepts of property to ongoing racial themes in a modern context. This correlates to the effect of property values on the quality of schools in the United States.
- (3) *Counter-story telling*. This tenet promotes using the voices of the ‘unheard’ to reveal shortcomings in institutional and systematic structures. These counter voices provide insight into the experiences of those who are marginalized and, in most cases, the most negatively impacted by the racist design of the structures.
- (4) *Critique of liberalism*. This tenet critiques traditional liberal ideology such as colorblindness and meritocracy. These are also seen as racist structures that cause harm to Black people and other marginalized populations.
- (5) *Interest convergence*. This tenet references the idea that progress for Black people only occurs when Whites in position of power see the issue as one they can benefit from supporting.
- (6) *Intersectionality*. This tenet considers race across multiple identities, and how other factors such as gender and social status impact lived experiences. (Bell, 1995; Capper, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991).

The CRT epistemological approach is useful for understanding the source of the broader problem: Black students consistently performing below grade level. This did not happen overnight but rather through a process of systematic racism, inequitable treatment, and social injustices that marginalize Black students in educational spaces (Bell, 1995; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Paris, 2012). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy specifically addresses the needs of Black students in learning environments that counteract the systematic racism experienced (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012). This framework exposes the lack of

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intentional focus on Black students and provides specific strategies that have high levels of potential to help Black students learn. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy challenges the liberal ideology of colorblindness by exploring ways for teachers to motivate, impact, and reach Black learners specifically (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy provides a specific framework for this improvement initiative, which is to positively impact teachers' capacity for providing high quality literacy instruction for Black students. Culturally sustaining teaching strategies are a way to address the long-standing educational debt and to support Black students with literacy skill acquisition during classroom instruction.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy- A Review of the Literature

Culturally sustaining pedagogy has its roots in culturally *relevant* and *responsive* pedagogy and the epistemological framework of critical race theory (Capper; 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). This is a research-based approach to teaching and learning with the purpose of improving academic achievement for students with cultural and linguistic differences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2011). The principles have been successfully implemented over the past 30 years in educational institutions nationwide (Horsford et al., 2021). In many cases, the strategies were used to support unique groups of students, including but not limited to Black and Hispanic students, students with limited language acquisition, and students situated in urban to rural areas with limited resources (Au, 2007; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Israel & Duffy, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Nichols et al., 2000; Powell, 1997; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

The key components center around teachers' awareness and utilization of their students' backgrounds and cultural experiences as a part of teaching and learning. These factors are

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strategically used to make connections in the learning of content and to increase academic performance for students with cultural and linguistic differences (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Israel & Duffy, 2009; Muhammad, 2023; Nichols et al., 2000; Powell, 1997). Culturally relevant and responsive teaching has evolved over time to include culturally sustaining pedagogy to encompass multiple aspects of the foundational principles and reduce the tendency to minimize the impact to only a few strategies (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012). Culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching arose as a response to the identified gaps in educational attainment between minority students, specifically Black students, and their White classmates. Ladson-Billings (1995) pointed out the need for different approaches for Black students in the classroom settings due to the unique cultural backgrounds and experiences brought into the classrooms. She argued that focusing on Black students was the most reasonable action step due to the fact that the largest gaps existed with that subgroup (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

The evolution of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining teaching over time is attributed to the development of the basic ideas set forth by Ladson-Billings. Culturally relevant teaching serves as the foundation. Prior to culturally relevant teaching, educators possessed a deficit-oriented mindset and practice regarding students' home language, and the impact on teaching and learning. Researchers Moll and Gonzalez coined the term "funds of knowledge" to describe what students bring to the classroom from their homes (Paris, 2012). Ladson-Billings expanded on this work with the idea of culturally relevant teaching. This included critical components related to how teachers see themselves as educators, how they see their students, and the relationships they develop with students for the purpose of teaching and learning. Culturally relevant teachers were described as those who make purposeful connections between the

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students' community and the content being learned. Culturally relevant teachers believe in their students and promote active participation in the teaching and learning process. Culturally relevant teachers also promote a community of learners, and were described as 'miners', pulling the information out of students, as opposed to the 'banking' model of putting knowledge into them (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally relevant teaching was expanded over time and coined "culturally responsive teaching." This more comprehensive approach not only addressed the issue of connecting the content with students' experiences, but adjusting the teaching and learning processes, routines, and pedagogical approaches. Culturally responsive teaching involves not only the teacher, but the larger process of teaching and learning (Au, 2007; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Nichols et al., 2000). This includes filtering the curriculum and teaching strategies through a cultural lens (Mensah, 2021). Culturally responsive teaching puts into practice the knowledge of student's cultural capital in the teaching and learning setting connected with the content being taught (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Hammond, 2015).

Teachers and school leaders have made efforts to implement culturally relevant and responsive strategies in schools (Au, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2021, Nichols et al., 2000; Powell, 1997). These concepts were often minimized or reduced to a few easy strategies that teachers could implement to justify being culturally relevant and responsive with their instruction (Paris, 2012). The intent of culturally relevant and responsive teaching is to provide support for students with cultural differences. It is not designed to have a prescriptive set of strategies, such as "activating prior knowledge" that teachers use as a way be culturally relevant and responsive (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012). Instead, the strategies are intended to be utilized based on students' individual and collective needs within the classroom setting

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(Ladson-Billings, 2021). The concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy emerged from this trend to further extend the reach and impact of culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices. Culturally sustaining pedagogy extends beyond the relevance and responsive elements of teaching to include a focus on the impact of the language of students and sets a framework for addressing the ever-evolving linguistic needs of students (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012). It also provides the framework for a pluralist model of teaching and learning, in which students are empowered through their own cultural and linguistic competence, while gaining the necessary knowledge of the dominant US language and culture within the school setting (Au, 2007; Paris, 2012).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is a critical aspect of teaching and learning in all schools, but especially those that serve students with diverse backgrounds and needs (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Paris, 2012). The concept of making strong connections with students came about due to growing diversity within schools nationwide, and the increased complexity of reading instruction (Au, 2007; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Nichols et al., 2000; Powell, 1997). Culturally sustaining teaching, when implemented with fidelity, serves as a bridge for students with cultural and linguistic differences (Au, 2007; Nichols et al., 2000). Students develop racial and cultural identities at early ages that develop over time and are often dysfunctional due to socially constructed norms that are reinforced in school and classroom settings (Nash et.al, 2017). The links between students' cultural identity and language are strongly connected to their ability to succeed in a classroom setting (Au, 2007; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Hammond, 2015; Muhammad, 2023; Nichols et al., 2000). Also, culturally sustaining pedagogy provides a framework for practicing educators that is often neglected in teacher education

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programs (Jackson & Boutte, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

Culturally sustaining teaching includes a variety of strategies that have been utilized nationwide and abroad. Grouping students is a strategy that allows teachers to better engage with students. This includes, but is not limited to, small groups, pairs, and cooperative learning groups during teaching and learning time (Au, 2007; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Explicit vocabulary instruction is another strategy that is useful given the importance of language related to culturally sustaining teaching (Nichols et al., 2000). Word webs such as the Frayer model assist with providing examples, non-examples, related words, and an opportunity to connect personal experience with the words (Bui & Fagan, 2013). Teachers of English language learners may allow students to use their native language to learn the material first and then draw the connections to the secondary language (Nichols et al., 2000; Powell, 1997). Other strategies include story grammar instruction (pulling out certain elements of the story), story mapping as visualization tool, prediction strategies, and activating prior knowledge (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Ng et al., 2013). Teachers utilized personal biographies, stories, and experiences for both the teacher and students as a strategy to connect various components of lessons taught (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Powell, 1997).

Culturally sustaining teaching also has a correlation to brain-based studies. The concepts of culture and personal experience play a key role in brain development, and individual responses to learning. The brain responds differently based on the way materials are presented. The brain retains information that is provided in ways that engage, and releases information that is not relevant (Hammond, 2015). This provides a compelling argument for the importance of utilizing culturally sustaining teaching practices and strategies.

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Lack of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

There is a wealth of evidence that indicates the lack of culturally sustaining pedagogy in K-12 classrooms. Instruction in public schools has historically consisted of strategies that cater to traditional, White, male, dominant ways of learning. This ranges from the curriculum, resources, and even physical settings of the classroom. As an example, certain textbooks have been challenged not only for their lack of inclusion of various cultures, but also in terms of their accuracy with the version of history documented (Romanowski, 1996). These strategies have not proven to be widely successful for students of color based on data that show consistent gaps in learning and acquisition of knowledge specifically by Black, economically disadvantage students (NAEP, 2022).

There exists a lack of understanding and/or acknowledgement of students' cultural and social capital in the learning environment. Schools nationwide, particularly public schools are becoming overwhelmingly diverse. In North Carolina, this trend is consistent with data projections that indicate a shift in minority representation in schools (Sun, 2018). Despite this trend, there are limited efforts to acknowledge this diversity within most classroom spaces. Teaching and learning models focus less on incorporating the diversity of the students as a teaching tool, and more on traditional practices that work for the dominant majority. As a result of the lack of acknowledgment of students' cultural and social capital, there is a lack of response to these differences within classrooms. Instruction is largely provided without consideration to how these differences might influence students' thought patterns, understanding, and critical thinking skills.

There is a lack of strategic planning and preparation for lessons that are culturally sustaining associated with the lack of acknowledgement and response in the learning

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environment. Teachers in K-12 public schools are rated as a part of their evaluation on their incorporation of relevant instruction for students (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). However, there is a tendency from school leaders to focus more on other criteria that help improve test scores on standardized assessments. Incorporation of culturally sustaining material becomes a minimal to non-existent part of the planning process for teachers.

As a result of the above factors, there are missed opportunities to effectively utilize students' diverse lived experiences as a part of teaching and learning in the classroom. When there is relevant instruction, connections can be made that promote acquisition and retention of information (Handbook of Research on Reading Comprehension, 2009). There is a direct correlation between these connections and students' reading comprehension. There are correlations between students' reading comprehension and success on standardized assessments. With the lack of culturally sustaining instruction, Black students remain at a disadvantage in public school classrooms.

Lack of Access to High Quality Instruction

The lack of access to high quality instruction is another major cause of the poor performance of Black students. There is a plethora of research and evidence based instructional strategies that are proven to be effective for student achievement. These strategies are intermittent in schools and tend to be less present in schools that serve Black students. These schools are hard to adequately find staffing due to the overwhelming volume of academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional needs of students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Coleman-King et al., 2023; Madkins, 2011; Sun, 2018). As a result, there is a lack of effective usage of these strategies. Additionally, there is misalignment between the instruction taking place in classrooms and the standards that are required for student mastery. Standards based instruction is often

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loosely embedded in curricular and resource design but is not explicitly or effectively implemented. These factors lead to a lack of explicit instruction in many classrooms that negatively impacts students' reading comprehension.

Inequitable use of restrictive environments negatively impacts Black students. Restrictive environments are designed for students with severe need for support with academics, socio-emotional and/or behaviors. Black students are referred for specialized services that are not always appropriate based on their needs. These accommodations remove them from the regular classroom instruction and neglect their needs for grade level mastery. Another related issue is the lack of strategic scheduling and class assignment for Black students. School leaders often fit the student in the schedule versus scheduling based on their needs. Criteria is not consistently present to ensure proper placement of students in K-12 classrooms. This issue exists from the individual classrooms in K-5, through courses in high school. Students who are qualified based on data are not always promoted for advanced courses such as honors, AP and/or IB programs. This limits the capacity of Black students by neglecting their access to rigorous instruction.

The Presence of Deficit Ideology

The presence of deficit ideology also has an impact on the problem of practice. Educators frequently develop the mindset that their students are not able to achieve at high levels, and therefore plan, prepare, and provide instruction based on this mindset. These mindsets are often perpetuated by standardized assessment results that suggest Black students are not performing to par (Baker et al., 2013; Green & Giffore, 1980; Onosko, 2011). These results are further used to 'grade' schools despite numerous external factors that impact performance (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022).

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Deficit ideology is dangerous for Black students for several reasons. This type of ideology promotes a fixed over a growth mindset. Teachers and staff view students as final products, not as “in process” (Hammond, 2015). As a result, interactions, responses, and instruction reflect this mentality. There is a lack of rigorous instruction in classrooms with the students because, based on the mindset, the students will not be able to understand or demonstrate mastery. Additionally, there is implicit bias that exists among teachers and staff. This includes mindsets that influence actions of which the participants are unaware. These actions impact the performance of student (Gorski, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Sensoy, 2017).

The ‘blame game’ is another result of the presence of deficit ideology. This practice aims to place responsibility elsewhere when students are not performing at the expected levels. This blame is placed on families for not supporting students at home, on previous teachers for not moving students further in prior years, the leadership and/or systematic structures in place, or the school environment (Gorski, 2011, Ladson-Billings, 2007). This mindset also hinders students, as the focus attempts to shift away from opportunities to provide high quality, explicit instruction.

Inequitable School Policies and Procedures

Inequitable school policies and procedures also contributes to the problem of practice. K-12 schools have the autonomy to use policies and procedures to set boundaries within their organizations. These policies are not always consistent and/or responsive to the diverse needs and circumstances of all students (Ladson-Billings, 2021, Onosko, 2011). Certain policies such as ‘zero tolerance’ initiatives unfairly and inequitably punish Black students (Carter et al., 2017). These students often come to school with vastly different circumstances that hinder their ability to adhere to established expectations. The policies include disciplinary actions for violations of

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the dress code, attendance, disruptive/aggressive behaviors, et cetera. There is also an emphasis on student proficiency over student growth that serves as a challenge for these students.

Standardized assessments measure students' mastery of knowledge at the end of each school year. These measures do not account for growth students make but rather indicate where they are in terms of understanding. Schools are graded on their performance based on the overall proficiency of students, with limited credit given to how well the teachers help the students to grow academically (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). These policies contribute to the academic challenges faced by Black students.

There is a lack of appropriate resources for these marginalized students. Access to resources such as technology, books, curricular programming, and general funding is heavily dependent on the district and area in which students live. Schools with affluent, White populations have far more access to these resources than do schools with large numbers of Black students. Schools that are less than a mile from each other may look very different in terms of the resources available. These issues stem from systematic flaws mixed with outright racist policies from the legislature that trickle down into schools, impacting students.

Black students are consistently provided inequitable treatment as it relates to disciplinary processes and procedures. Teachers, staff, and administrators provide consequences differently based on students' race, socio-economic status, gender, and disabilities. Black students are disproportionately removed from classroom spaces, resulting in loss of instructional time (Carter et al., 2017). This loss of time only deepens the divide academically between them and their peers. Black students are suspended at rates higher than five times that of their White peers (Love, 2019). Black students are often criminalized for the same behaviors for which White students are provided warnings and critical conversations (Alexander, 2012; Love, 2019). Black

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students miss valuable instruction and instructional time because of these policies, impacting their acquisition of critical skills and knowledge. This, along with the other systematic problems, leads to the problem of low performance in reading for Black students.

Driver Diagram

The driver diagram is a tool used in improvement science to visualize the problem of practice, the drivers of the problem (primary and secondary), and change ideas (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). This framework transitions the problem into an ultimate aim/goal with the causes related to the problem becoming drivers towards improvement. The framework also includes specific change ideas that may lead to improvements towards the ultimate aim. There are two versions presented below. The first driver diagram outlines the ultimate aim (improved literacy and reading comprehension skills for Black students) and includes the four broad areas mentioned above as drivers for improvement. The second driver diagram includes the immediate aim of the improvement initiative (teachers providing culturally sustaining teaching strategies for Black students) and the specific drivers and change ideas related to culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Each driver diagram starts with the aim/goal to the left. This aim is a reframing of the problem of practice previously identified- Black students performing below grade level in reading. For the ultimate aim this problem was reframed as a goal- Black students will demonstrate improvements in literacy and reading comprehension skills. Next, there were four root causes identified that lead to the problem- Lack of culturally sustaining teaching, presence of deficit ideology, presence of inequitable school policies, and lack of access to high quality instruction. These root causes become primary drivers in this framework to providing culturally

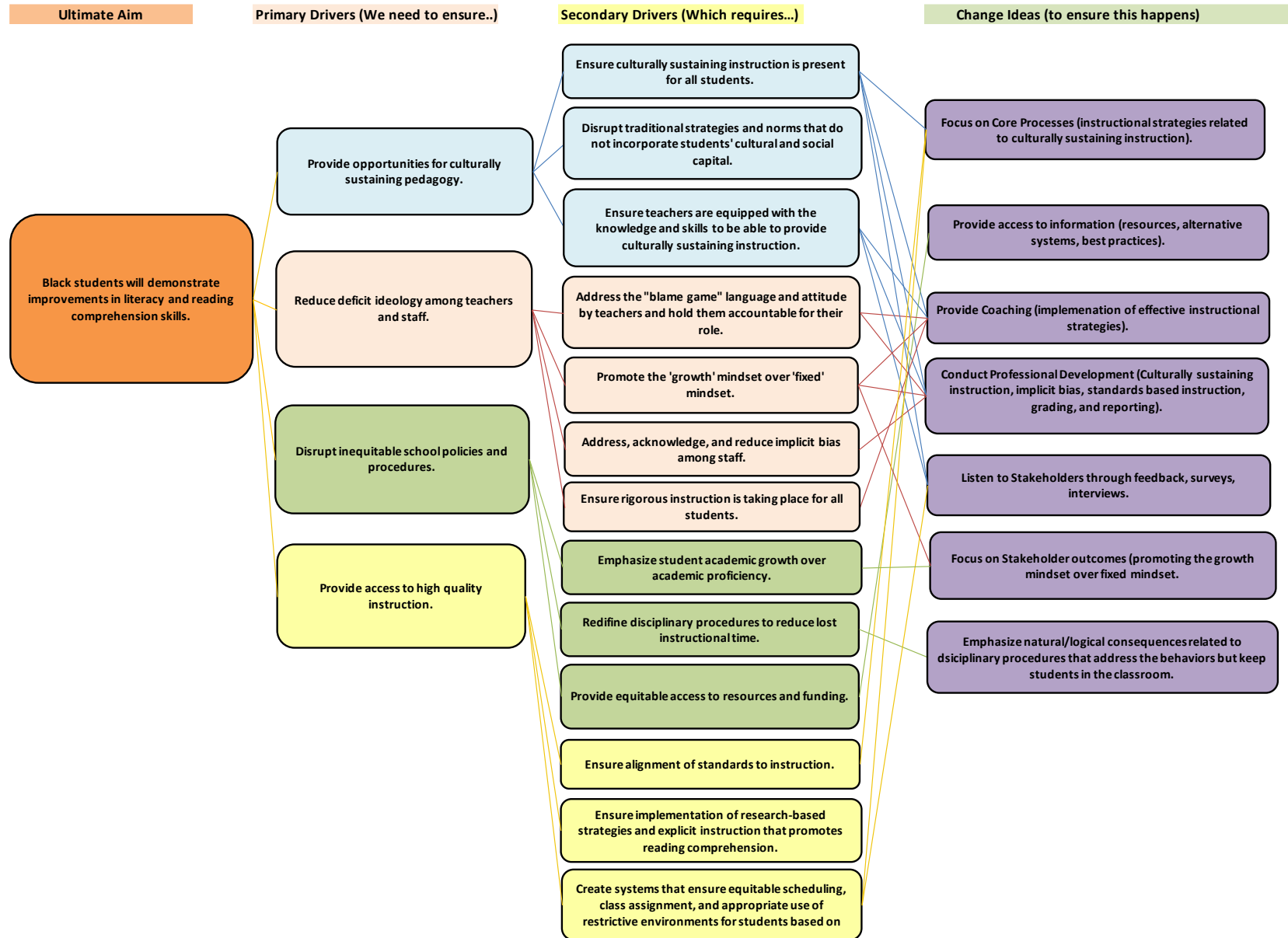
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sustaining pedagogy, reducing deficit ideology, disrupting inequitable school policies, and providing access to high quality instruction.

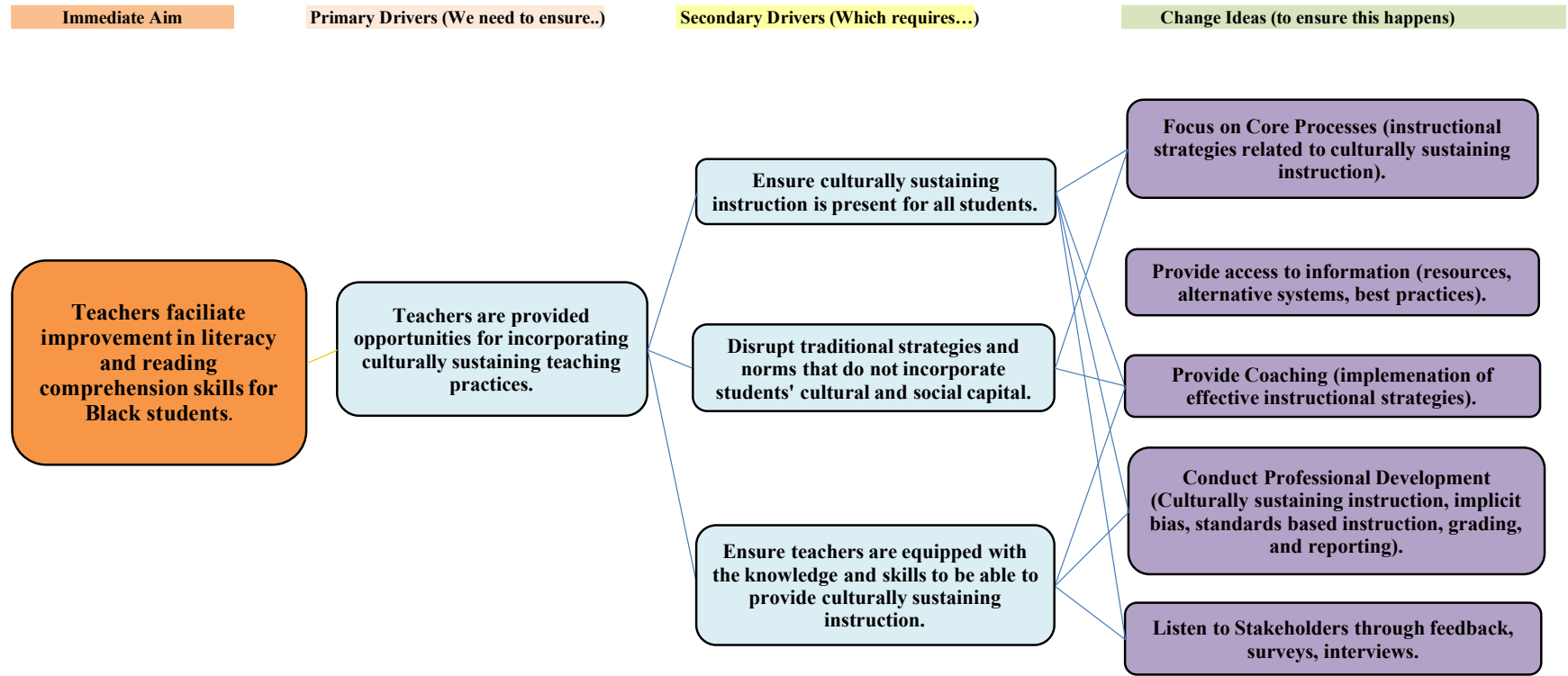
The next element of the driver diagram outlines specific secondary drivers for each of the primary drivers. These include more specific actions within each of the primary drivers that will lead to results in that area. For example, reducing deficit ideology requires a “growth” over “fixed” mindset. Lastly, the driver diagram provides space for change ideas related to these drivers. For example, to ensure “growth” over “fixed” mindsets we must provide professional development and coaching to support it.

The second driver diagram shows the immediate aim of the improvement initiative: teachers facilitating improvement in the literacy and reading comprehension skills of Black students. The primary driver involves teachers utilizing culturally sustaining teaching strategies. This requires that we ensure culturally sustaining instruction for all students, disrupting traditional strategies that do not incorporate students’ cultural capital, and ensuring that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively provide culturally sustaining instruction. The change ideas associated include a focus on these strategies for the benefit of students, professional development, coaching, access to best practices, and feedback from stakeholders involved in the process.

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Improvement Initiative Design

Theory of Improvement

The theory of improvement serves as a guide for thinking through the problem of practice, the causes of the problem, the drivers of resolution for the problem, and what changes may be needed in order to make improvements (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). This process is outlined by using a driver diagram, as listed above (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). My theory of improvement holds that *if we improve teacher capacity for implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies, we will see positive outcomes related to Black students' literacy acquisition*. The ultimate aim that I established was to improve Black students' literacy and reading comprehension skills. The immediate aim was to focus on improving teachers' capacity for meeting the needs of Black students in literacy. I identified four primary drivers that would help move toward reaching the goals. These drivers include 1) providing opportunities for culturally sustaining pedagogy, 2) reducing deficit ideology amount teachers and staff, 3) disrupting inequitable school policies and procedures, and 4) providing access to high quality instruction.

While each of these drivers has a different impact on the problem, I chose to focus on providing culturally sustaining pedagogy. This required that culturally sustaining pedagogy be present in classrooms for all students. Teachers had to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to be able to implement strategies with students that connects their cultural and social capital to the lessons being taught. We also had to disrupt the traditional strategies and norms that did not incorporate the students' cultural and social capital.

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There are a few change ideas that drive this work. There was a focus on core processes, specifically the current instructional strategies aligned with culturally sustaining teaching (Hammond, 2015, Ladson-Billings, 2021, Paris, 2012). There was a self-evaluation of teachers to acknowledge how they are currently incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogy in their classrooms (Hamdan & Coloma, 2022; Siwatu, 2007). This provided them with time to think about opportunities in which they might be able to best implement specific strategies. To approach the problem of low performance for Black students in reading, we used professional development around culturally sustaining instruction for teachers and how to implement these strategies in the classrooms (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Guskey, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hammond, 2015). This started with a session for implementation during our summer programs with the participants and expanded as we moved into the first quarter of the school year. This professional development built the capacity of teachers to better make connections between the content and students' experiences. We then provided coaching and support throughout the process to provide feedback, ideas, and recommendations as the teachers implemented the strategies (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Throughout the process, we utilized stakeholder feedback through surveys, audio/video journaling, and focus groups as measurement of the effectiveness of the initiative, and evaluation of the process.

Each of these elements correlate with the literature provided. Culturally sustaining teaching methods are proven ways to provide Black students with experiences within the classroom that help them connect their current understanding to the content being taught (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012). The strategies utilized were specifically designed to improve the learning environment, teachers' instructional practices, and to appeal to Black students' learning processes (Hammond, 2015).

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Design/Improvement Team

The design/improvement team is a tool used in improvement science to promote change in the identified area of concern. The team is comprised of individuals that possess specific strengths, knowledge, and/or input that can be beneficial for achieving improvement (Bryk et al., 2017). The design team for this work consisted of a few key individuals who helped organize, outline, and inform on the improvement initiative. The individuals selected had very diverse experiences that represented a wide variety of knowledge, skills, and abilities.

I served as a scholar practitioner and project manager. My role was to lead the team in the work of implementing the improvement initiative. I acknowledged that as a principal there are power dynamics at play in leading the project. I strategically selected individuals for the design team who understood my role but were open to give me honest feedback. My leadership style supports collaboration, transparency, and teamwork. This was reflected in the way the team operated. All design team members were active participants based on their expertise in various areas related to the initiative. Mrs. Kenyatta Ridley, who is a thought partner and math specialist, served as the data analysis support person for the team. She has expertise in understanding and evaluating numbers and was supportive in that area. Mrs. Angela Graves served as the curriculum support person for the team. She has expertise in curriculum for grades K-5 and informed on curricular aspects of the initiative. Ms. Castillo served as a creative thought partner regarding implementation of the initiative for teaching staff. She serves as a classroom teacher and provided valuable feedback about the implementation process. Mrs. Katrina Williamson also served as a thought partner and support for literacy instruction throughout the initiative. I sought additional support from this team as well as my full administrative team including the school's founders as needed based on the process of the initiative.

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Professional Development- A Review of the Literature

There was an intentional effort to provide effective professional development for the teachers on culturally sustaining teaching practices. This professional development was implemented by members of the design team and incorporate research-based practices for effective professional development. There were critical elements of professional development that had to be considered as the design team planned the professional development. Early researchers of professional development identified three critical elements of professional development that became standards in the field. These elements were 1) context, 2) process, and 3) content (Wei et al., 2009). Each of these elements was considered critical in planning and preparing professional development. However, there was a need for more in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of professional development provided (Guskey, 2009). Further research examined professional development across multiple contexts and content matters. This research revealed seven critical elements that were consistent in professional development experiences that produced positive results. These elements include: 1) focus on content, 2) active learning, 3) collaboration, 4) modeling of effective practice, 5) coaching/expert support, 6) feedback and reflection, and 7) sustained duration (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

According to Guskey (2009), understanding the context of the organization is the first step to providing effective professional development. Every organization is unique and therefore must be considered as a part of the planning for the professional development to avoid ineffective efforts. After the context is considered, the content is then brought into consideration. The facilitators of the content must be knowledgeable in order to best inform the participants (Bates & Morgan, 2018). Participants should also be engaged in active learning during the professional development. The older models of one-day lectures or ‘sit and get’ are not

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appropriate for effective professional development (Guskey, 2009). Rather, the design of the professional must engage participants, and address how the participants learn (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2009). Agenda-setting for the professional development is a critical tool for ensuring active learning of the participants, revealing the actions that will take place during the professional development sessions (Bates & Morgan, 2018).

Collaboration is an additional component of effective professional development opportunities. This can include work with small groups, coaches, or even across a professional organization (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The key parts of quality collaboration involve trust between colleagues, and professional knowledge being shared within the context of the content of the professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2009). The participants' existing knowledge should be utilized as a resource (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The use of modeling is yet another valuable component to effective professional development. Modeling helps participants better understand how they may implement a strategy in the context of their professional practice (Bates & Morgan, 2018). This can be illustrated in a variety of ways, including but not limited to demonstration lessons, observation of peers, and review of lesson plans and student work samples (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2009). Strongly connected to modeling is the use of coaching support for participants. Professional development is best when supported by coaches/experts in content, and those with knowledge that can sustain support beyond the initial sharing of content (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Feedback and reflection are also important in the initial professional development sessions, and also in the subsequent coaching sessions with participants (Bates &

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Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2017). Time for feedback and reflection is critical for the participants to be able to take input, process it, and make changes that produce positive outcomes (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

It is important that professional development has a sustaining element in which the content knowledge provided, learning that takes place, and the changes in professional practice continue to be refined (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2009). Though there is no set prescribed amount of time that defines success, sustained professional development has a greater chance of developing into common professional practice (Wei et al., 2009).

The professional development designed by the team utilized each of these elements to best engage participants in the learning and help sustain the efforts of including culturally sustaining teaching practices. I utilized the strategies being learned while teaching the material. This is a useful tool for engaging active learners. I also modeled the culturally sustaining teaching strategies as a part of the professional development. This assisted with participants' understanding and their capacity to implement the strategies. Additionally, we evaluated the effectiveness of the professional development provided. Participants were able to share their feedback, which helped inform the design team on further professional development opportunities provided.

Implementation Process Overview and Timeline

The timeline for the work on the improvement initiative began in January/February of 2024 after I defended the disquisition proposal and received IRB approval. During this time there was initial team planning for the implementation phase of the initiative. Between March and April of 2024, I clearly outlined the plan for the design team regarding implementation of the

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initiative. The team was also involved heavily in the process of planning the implementation of the initiative in preparation for the summer session.

The professional development was a 4-hour session that included time for planning and practice with engaging activities centered on culturally sustaining teaching. The team utilized research/evidence-based strategies for effective professional development (content-focused, active learning, collaboration, modeling, coaching support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration) to design the session (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The professional development was designed to engage teachers in the learning of the content, with active learning, collaboration, and modeling of the strategies built into the session. The session was followed up with coaching support throughout the implementation process by the administrative team. Feedback was provided via the observation walkthrough tool to teachers as they implemented the strategies.

Teachers completed audio/video journal entries as an ongoing way to reflect on the implementation of the strategies, respond to feedback, and provide qualitative data for the study. Teachers utilized portfolios to collect student work samples, and formal and informal assessments. Students also kept journals as a way to assess their progress and understanding. Students responded to one or more of the following prompts based on the lesson and/or task completed:

- What have you learned (today/in this lesson/in this story)?
- What parts of the lesson helped you the most?
- What parts of the lesson were hard for you to understand?
- What parts stand out about the (lesson/story/class activity)?

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- Was there anything your teacher did to help you learn (during this lesson/today)? If so, what did the teacher do that helped you?
- In your own words, retell the story.
- In your own words, summarize the lesson/activity for today.

Teachers also provided weekly feedback via audio/video journaling of the implementation of the initiative. Teachers responded to prompts regarding their successes and challenges with implementation and included reflection on the feedback they received from their students' work samples and journals. These recordings were analyzed using "A priori" and "in vivo" coding. The improvement implementation team used an Observation Walkthrough Tool (refer to Appendix D) to document observations of classroom usage of culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The Observation Walkthrough Tool allowed observers to provide feedback on the lessons, strategies, and culturally sustaining instruction provided to students, while also allowing the observer to send immediate critical feedback to the teacher and allow for coaching opportunities with teachers. This was conducted weekly, with each teacher receiving at least three sets of feedback per week. During the months of July and August 2024 the team evaluated the data received from the various measures and adjusted to the implementation plan as needed. Observation and coaching continued during the first quarter (nine weeks) of the 2024-25 school year, with teachers participating in the study completing all feedback by the end of October 2024 for final analysis. During the months of November and December 2024, I consolidated the results and wrote the final sections of the disquisition for defense in the early spring of 2025. (Refer to Appendix F for the Improvement Science Measures Quick Reference and Appendix G for the full implementation timeline.)

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Improvement Science

Improvement science was used to during this improvement initiative. The improvement science elements included a focus on defining the problem of practice, conducting a root cause analysis, developing a driver diagram, utilizing PDSA cycles, and using data collection and analysis methods and measures. Improvement science focuses first on clearly defining a problem of practice. Scholar practitioners are to avoid rushing to solutions (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Careful evaluation of the problem helps to avoid inaccurate assumptions that lead to ineffective solutions (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). There is an emphasis on seeing the systems that promote the problem and consider ways to disrupt the systems based on positionality and established roles (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The root cause analysis is a tool that is used to explore the factors impacting the problem. This is often displaying using the fishbone diagram (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The driver diagram is another tool that transitions to problem solving. The driver diagram outlines an ultimate aim/goal towards improvements with specific elements (drivers) and change ideas that may promote improvement (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

The PDSA cycle is another key improvement science element. This concept breaks down the cycle of improvement, including time for planning, doing, studying, and acting (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). This is a continuous cycle for improvement, and guides scholar practitioners' development of the improvement initiative (Langley et al., 2009). Additionally, improvement science provides a litany of data collection and analysis tools and methods, ranging from focus groups, interviews, surveys, to checklists and process mapping (Bryk et al., 2017; Langley et al., 2009). These measures are used to collect specific types of data in order to provide a clear picture of all factors related to the improvement

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initiative (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Improvement science uses four distinct measures to evaluate improvement initiatives. These measures include: 1) outcome measures, 2) process measures, 3) driver measures, and 4) balance measures. These measures help answer the inquiry questions: 1) is it working, 2) did it work, 3) how it is working, and 4) is it working as intended (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected before, during, and after the implementation in order to assess the process and progress of the improvement initiative. The initiative began as scheduled starting promptly at the end of the 2023-24 school year. The first step was to confirm the participants of the study. Participants completed all necessary documentation and confirmed their participation. The next step was providing the self-assessment survey as a pretest that contained two parts- 1) Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy and 2) Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy scales. This was used to provide a baseline understanding and knowledge of culturally sustaining teaching practices prior to the professional development and implementation of strategies in the classrooms. The participants were provided with a code for the survey (Teacher A through F). There were six participants at the onset of the initiative; however, one of the participants did not complete the process. For this reason, there were six codes provided (A, B, C, D, E, and F); however, only Teachers A,B,C, E and F completed the project. All data and results reflect these teacher codes only. I have provided the following pseudonyms for each participant: 1) *Teacher A*- Ms. Gambill, 2) *Teacher B*- Ms. Alexander, 3) *Teacher C*- Mr. Lewis, 4) *Teacher E*-Ms. Elam, 5) *Teacher F*- Ms. Davis. Participants were given a deadline to complete the pretest prior to the professional development session.

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The Professional Development Session

The professional development session was scheduled for Saturday, June 1, 2024, from 8:30am until 12:30pm. Teachers were provided with an engaging professional development designed to immerse them in the learning of culturally sustaining teaching. They gained a robust understanding of the history of culturally sustaining teaching practices, the rationale for the use of culturally sustaining teaching in our context, and practical strategies that can be utilized in their classrooms. I used the “Ready for Rigor” framework (Hammond, 2015). The professional development was sustained with various opportunities for coaching, feedback, reflection, and practice during the summer session, and then again during the first quarter of the 2024-25 school year.

The session began with an overview of the agenda for the session, and an opening focus group discussion about the teachers’ experiences, perceptions, and current understanding of culturally sustaining teaching strategies (refer to Appendix I for the session agenda). This discussion included targeted questions about participants’ experiences working with Black students, barriers to learning, their current understanding of culturally sustaining teaching practices, and anticipated challenges with implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies in their classrooms (refer to Appendix B for the full list of question prompts). The focus group served a dual purpose for collecting baseline data from the participants and serving as strategy to “activate their prior knowledge.” This was used strategically to model these culturally sustaining teaching strategies within the professional development session. Participants were informed that they would be recorded during the focus group so that the information could be transcribed and used as data for the initiative.

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I then began the presentation with information about the history of education for Black students, definitions of culturally sustaining teaching, and a brief overview of the research that supports this as a strategy to help Black students with the development of literacy skills. Participants then learned about the connections between the brain and culture based on research as well as the Ready for Rigor Framework for categorizing the culturally sustaining strategies (Hammond, 2015). Examples were used from popular culture such as the movies “Inside Out” and “Lucy” that both reference how the brain works. There was a robust description of the parts and functions of the brain during learning. One element of interest for participants was the concept of “dendrites” which are brain matter that develop when connections are made. As connections are made more dendrites form, therefore increasing capacity for critical thinking and comprehension (Hammond, 2015).

The participants were then introduced to the culturally sustaining strategies for implementation during the improvement initiative. The instructional strategies fell into one of four categories following the *Ready for Rigor Framework* from “*Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*” (Hammond, 2015). These categories are as follows:

- 1) awareness (teachers’ input/impact on learning)
- 2) information processing (how students’ brains work)
- 3) learning partnerships (relationships within the classroom)
- 4) community of learners and learning environment (educational setting)

During the data collection timeframe, teachers implemented the culturally sustaining strategies and monitored student performance. Due to the limited timeframe for introducing the strategies, we focused only on a few, key culturally sustaining teaching strategies:

- 1) activating prior knowledge (*information processing*)

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- 2) utilizing cognitive routines (*information processing*)
- 3) rhythmic/mnemonics (*information processing*)
- 4) providing quality feedback to students (*learning partnerships*)
- 5) using culturally connecting language (*awareness*)
- 6) reframing mistakes as information (*learning partnerships*)
- 7) establishing routines and rituals within the classroom (*community of learners and learning environment*)

The strategies were presented as “menu items” versus “do them all”. Teachers were not expected to do any specific strategies, but rather to find ones that fit their instructional style and aligned with instructional goals.

These specific strategies were selected for a few reasons. It was important to have strategies that fell into different categories within the Ready for Rigor framework to focus on the teacher’s instructional delivery, the students’ learning process, relationships within the classrooms, and the teaching and learning environment. Additionally, the strategies were somewhat familiar to the participants prior to the session. Participants acknowledged that they had used one or more of these strategies prior to this initiative. Some had used the strategies in their instruction, but did not make the connection regarding the potential impact on Black students’ learning. The professional development allowed them an opportunity to be “consciously competent” regarding their instructional practices. It provided them an in-depth understanding of the how to implement the strategies, as well as the understanding of their ability to connect with students aligned with culturally sustaining teaching. The familiar strategies also helped mitigate the time constraints with both the professional development (4 hours) and the implementation (12 weeks total) as there was a limited learning curve. Lastly, in addition to the

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strategies being emphasized in the literature as impactful for Black students, these were also strategies that I personally connected with based on my professional experience which allowed me to effectively teach and model them for the participants.

I used a variety of methods to teach the culturally sustaining teaching strategies to the participants. The opening discussion served as a way to “activate prior knowledge” of the participants. Examples were provided for “cognitive routines”, “rhythmic/mnemonics”, “establishing routines and rituals”, and “reframing mistakes as information”. I engaged the participants in a game of “Culture Tag” to explain the strategy “culturally connecting language”. This game had participants figure out a commonly known phrase (to some) used in Black culture based on the first letters of the phrase. For example, “WHDI” (Won’t He Do It). The purpose of this was to have the teachers think about language that connects to their students but also point out that not everyone uses and/or connects with the same phrases/language. Participants were provided examples of feedback protocol including the wise feedback and asset-based feedback protocol. Both of these were modeled for participants.

Embedded in the presentation were opportunities for participants to express their understanding of the content delivered using an online assessment tool called “Quizizz” to do formative assessments throughout the professional development. The participants answered questions about the material covered in a gaming format which required them to compete against each other. This was a fun and engaging way to ensure the participants were grasping the material along the way and ensure active learning. There were also opportunities for participants to engage through discussion, question and answering, and mini games related to the content.

Participants were then provided time for reflection, gaining clarity on the strategies, and lesson planning for their use of the strategies. They were provided a “cheat sheet” as a planning

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guide that included the strategies, their research-based benefits/features, recommendations for when the strategy may be best used (beginning, middle, or end of lessons/units, etc.), specific examples of the strategies, and a space for participants to reflect on how they might best use the strategies in their own context. (see Appendix H for the “cheat sheet”). During this time, the participants collaborated with each other, asked clarifying questions, and made plans for how to utilize the strategies within the classroom.

The final part of the professional development provided participants with time to share their understanding of culturally sustaining teaching strategies and how they planned to incorporate and implement the strategies. Participants were then tasked with implementing these strategies into their lessons. The expectation was that participants would incorporate as many strategies as possible based on their academic goals for students. They were asked to document their experiences by recording and/or documenting at least two to three journal entries per week. These journal entries would serve as a measure to evaluate the process toward the outcome (increased confidence in their own abilities and increased expectancy of positive student outcomes). There were some logistical items shared regarding the summer program, and then participants were provided a link to complete the professional development survey. This survey was to be used as a process and balance measure for the research team to evaluate how well professional development was implemented in terms of clarity, engagement, and quality of the materials and resources provided. It provided participants with an opportunity to express anticipated challenges with the implementation of the strategies, as well as anticipated outcomes (refer to Appendix C for the complete set of survey items).

Summer Program Implementation

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The summer program began the following Monday, June 3. The summer program was specifically designed for providing targeted reading instruction for students in grades two through seven. Three of the participants worked with all grade levels while the other two participants worked only with grade two students. Two of the participants taught a course specifically designed for the summer program called “Readers’ Theatre” in which students were able to learn about reading using plays, dialogue, and characters. One of the participants taught social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies to students.

The summer program lasted for three weeks. During this time, I was able to complete multiple observations of the participants in the classroom. Participants were asked to include the culturally sustaining teaching strategies in their lesson plans, which were to be submitted to the summer administrative team. This was to serve a dual purpose: to ensure participants were intentionally considering how to incorporate the strategies into their lessons, while also providing the administrative team with an idea of when to best observe the implementation of the strategies. The reality was that very few lesson plans clearly outlined when and how the participants would use the strategies. Fortunately, I was able to spend more time in the classroom during the summer program (due to less distractions, interruptions, and other administrative tasks) than I would during the regular school day. I used the observation walkthrough form to document these observations. This tool gathered data related to observed levels of teacher and student engagement, the type of strategy used, alignment to the established lesson plan/objectives, and anecdotal notes from the observer regarding the lesson (refer to Appendix D for all walkthrough items). I also consulted with our curriculum director on some of the observations as well and provided her and our reading coach with the walkthrough form to use during classroom observations. The feedback from these walkthroughs was used to help coach

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the participants on the use of the strategies. During this time, there were various instances of the teachers having questions about how to best implement the strategies. They asked for feedback from the improvement team regarding their use of the strategies. These conversations were often informal and as quick follow ups to the observation that was conducted. I felt that this informal approach was best based on the circumstances of the improvement initiative. Teachers are often *required* to implement various strategies based on school, state, or federal mandates. I did not want the teachers to feel undue pressure to perform during this time, but rather to have guided support through the process as needed.

A second focus group was conducted at the end of the three-week summer program with the participants. The same question prompts from the first focus group session were used again. This focus group was designed to help identify and document the growth and development of the participants from the beginning to this “midpoint” of the initiative. Participants shared their experiences and expressed an understanding of culturally sustaining teaching strategies. They were able to describe specific strategies used in the classroom, and how they perceived students’ understanding and connection to the content changed in a positive way. They also expressed excitement regarding the use of these strategies beginning in the fall within their regular classrooms.

First Quarter Implementation

The regular school year started in early August with all staff and students returning. I met with the participants to remind them of the expectations for the initiative, and checked their needs for resources, materials, and information. They continued incorporating culturally sustaining teaching strategies during their instructional time. Four of the five participants were now in their regular classroom setting with students. This expanded to include instruction in

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grades one and grade three. One participant moved from reading instruction to math in the regular classroom. One participant continued working with students on SEL strategies. This was done through our elective “specials” course time. Our administrative team continued with observations and use of the walkthrough tool. Observations were also documented through the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System (NCEES) as we conducted formal evaluations during the fall. The timeframe was longer for making observations (nine weeks of the first quarter versus three weeks of the summer program). However, opportunities to observe the strategies in action were more limited as other obligations increased for myself and the administrative team. The participants, however, continued the process, as evidenced in their journal entries throughout the term. Lesson plans were submitted, but there was limited time to review and plan observations accordingly. The lesson plans that were reviewed continued to be vague on how the culturally sustaining teaching strategies would be implemented in the classrooms. Despite this lack of inclusion in the lesson plans, there was evidence of the use of the strategies by the participants.

At the end of the first quarter the participants conducted their third and final focus group session. This session was designed to reflect on the work conducted from the beginning, middle, to the end of the initiative. The same question prompts were used with minor adjustments to reflect the results of the work versus the anticipated work. For example, participants were asked “what challenges did you experience with implementing the strategies” versus “what challenges might you experience with implementing the strategies.” Participants were then provided with a deadline for completing the posttest survey. It was explained that the results of the survey would be compared to the pretest as a part of the results of the initiative.

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Outcome Measures

Outcome measures evaluate whether the improvement initiative leads to the desired goal (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The ultimate aim was to improve the literacy skills of Black students. The immediate aim of the initiative was to improve teachers' capacity for providing culturally sustaining pedagogy in order to support the ultimate aim for Black students. Therefore, the most important outcome measure was the results of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy (CRTSE) and the Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy (CRTOE) self-assessment surveys. Teachers completed a modified version of these two surveys at the beginning of the initiative. The Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale (CRTSE) and the Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy Scale (CRTOE) were used as assessments to gather baseline data. These are previously designed measures used to assess teacher efficacy and belief in positive outcomes (Siwatu, 2007). The CRTSE was used to evaluate teachers' current level of understanding and utilization of culturally sustaining strategies. The CRTOE assessed teachers' perception of the ability of culturally sustaining teaching to produce positive outcomes for students. These measures answered the question "did the improvement initiative increase teachers' capacity and expectations for positive outcomes related to culturally sustaining teaching?" These two surveys served as pre and post assessments. These results were compared using a dependent (paired) T test to evaluate the significance in the change between these two assessments. (Refer to Appendix A for the survey questions.)

Driver Measures

The driver measures were used to evaluate if the initiative was working as toward the desired outcome as intended (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The driver measures evaluated the impact the initiative had on teachers' perceptions, understanding, and capacity

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related to culturally sustaining teaching. We utilized focus groups with the teachers to evaluate their capacity for implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies. Teachers responded to question prompts that drove conversation about their professional beliefs surrounding culturally sustaining teaching, successes, and challenges with implementing the strategies. These focus groups occurred at the beginning (as part of the professional development), at the end of the summer program (June 2024), and at the end of the first quarter (October 2024). This measure addressed the question “is the initiative working to improve teacher’s capacity and perceptions of culturally sustaining teaching as an effective strategy?” The focus groups were audio/video recorded, and I reviewed the results using “A priori” and “in vivo” coding. (Refer to Appendix B for the list of question prompts.)

Process Measures

The process measures helped to determine if the initiative was being implemented and was working as intended (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). . These measures asked the question “is the improvement initiative being implemented/working as intended?” There are a few process elements to the initiative. The first element was the professional development provided to teachers, in which they learned the background of culturally sustaining teaching, as well as strategies that can be implemented in their classrooms. The first process measure is designed to assess the implementation process of the professional development provided to teachers. The survey, created in Qualtrics, asked the participants questions about the clarity, organization, and value of professional development. There was also an opportunity for the teachers to express their needs for additional support from the improvement team, collecting quantitative data from participants. Based on the survey results, the team adjusted support,

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clarified misconceptions, and also adjusted future professional development opportunities (in later PDSA cycles). (Refer to Appendix C for the survey questions.)

The second phase of the initiative involved the teachers using the strategies learned from the professional development opportunity in their classrooms. The administrative team used an observation checklist via a digital walkthrough tool (created in Qualtrics) to monitor the implementation. This walkthrough tool was aligned to the expectations established in the professional development for teachers to utilize the culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The walkthrough tool allowed observers to document the interactions observed during the classroom instruction. Members of the administrative team conducted classroom walkthroughs using their phones or laptops with the walkthrough tool. They provided feedback via the walkthrough tool regarding the implementation of the culturally sustaining teaching strategies by the teachers. This included the name/type of strategy being implemented, level of observable student and teacher engagement during the lesson, and alignment of the teaching with teacher objectives and lesson plans. The walkthrough tool also provided space for the observer to write anecdotal notes regarding the observation, as well as coaching recommendations regarding the lesson implementation. This provided both qualitative data such as descriptive statistics (date, time of day). There was also quantitative feedback data collected that was analyzed using "A priori" and "in vivo" coding. (Refer to Appendix D for the walkthrough tool)

The teachers were also provided with an opportunity to provide feedback on the process of implementation of the strategies via weekly teacher audio/video journaling. Teachers were provided with prompts to engage their reflection processes regarding their experiences implementing the culturally sustaining pedagogy in their classrooms. The prompts included questions to provide qualitative feedback from the teachers to determine if the process of the

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initiative was working as intended. The expectation was that teachers would make journal entries at least three times per week. "A priori" and "in vivo" coding was used to analyze the qualitative data collected. (Refer to Appendix E for teacher reflection journal prompts.)

Balance Measures

Balance measures evaluated the unintended consequences and implications of the improvement initiative, asking the question "What are the unintended consequences of this improvement initiative" (Bryk et al., 2017; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The balance measures were used to assess the unintended consequences of the initiative process, implementation, and the impact on outcomes. There were opportunities on each of the surveys, journaling, and observation walkthrough tool for participants (teachers and observers) to express any challenges faced during the process and/or implementation. The professional development survey asked teachers to list and/or describe any anticipated challenges with implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies. It also asked them to list anticipated outcomes from their students.

For the teacher journaling, there were prompts to guide teachers' reflection of their use of culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The teachers were asked to respond to the following questions in their reflective journals "What went well with the lesson/use of CSP strategies?", "What, if anything, did not go as planned with the lesson?", "Did you have enough time to plan/prepare for and/or implement the strategy?", "Did you have access to needed resources to implement the strategies?", "Did the use of culturally sustaining teaching strategies make a difference in student outcomes?", and "Share why, or why not?" Teachers created weekly journal entries during the summer session, and bi-weekly (at minimum) during the fall quarter 2024.

On the walkthrough tool, observers were asked to provide anecdotal notes regarding the observation of the instruction provided by the teacher. This provided space for unintended

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consequences to be noted such as time constraints, and resource accessibility. Observers used the lesson plans provided by teachers to determine best times for observing the use of the strategies. Observations took place daily during the summer session 2024, and twice per week (at minimum) during the fall quarter 2024.

With each of these measures, participants were able to provide qualitative data regarding that which may be unintended. These balance measures were collected along with the surveys throughout the duration of the improvement initiative. "A priori" and "in vivo" coding was used to analyze all of the qualitative data collected from each of these balance measures. (Reference Appendix F for an outline that includes the outcome, driver, process, and balance measures for the initiative.)

Results

There were five participants involved in the initiative. These teachers were all Black, mostly female with the exception of one male participant; they ranged in age from 30 to 55. The participants also had a range of teaching experience from 4 years to over 30 years both locally and internationally. Participants entered this initiative with a diverse set of backgrounds, ideas, and beliefs based on their diverse life experiences.

Outcome Measure Results

In Improvement Science, the outcome measure is designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the improvement initiative (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The outcome measure for this improvement initiative was aligned with the goal of the improvement initiative: to improve teacher capacity for implementing culturally sustaining teaching practices with the ultimate goal of improving academic outcomes for Black students. The outcome measure intended to answer the inquiry question "did the initiative improve teachers' capacity for

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providing culturally sustaining teaching strategies?” The participants completed a self-assessment survey before and after the initiative to measure their confidence in their abilities as well as their certainty of positive student outcomes. The rationale for using this measure was to compare participants’ perceptions before and after receiving professional development and opportunities to implement culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The elements on the survey directly align with participants’ improved capacity to provide culturally sustaining teaching.

The survey was adapted specifically for this initiative. There were three adaptations made to the survey for the purposes of this initiative. First, the number of items was reduced from 40 to 25 on the self-efficacy portion, and from 26 to 10 on the outcome expectancy part. The rationale for this was to keep the survey as succinct as possible while capturing the elements that aligned most closely with the initiative. Secondly, items that were less relevant to this work were removed. Examples of less relevant items included questions about English Language learners, individual subjects (science and math), student attendance, and questions about the impact of standardized testing. These items were less relevant to this study and were removed. A few items that had similar concepts and/or wording were combined. For example, item 6 on the Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-efficacy (CRTSE) scale (obtain information about my students’ home life and background) combined parts of two questions from the original survey, one being ‘home life’ and the other ‘backgrounds.’ Another example was item 4 on the CRTOE “Understanding the communication and learning preferences of my students will enhance their learning” was combined from parts of two questions from the original survey.

For this measure, I chose to have participants complete a self-assessment survey before and after the initiative. The questions for the survey were adapted from two pre-existing assessments. The Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy (CRTSE) scale was used to

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measure participants' confidence in their abilities before and after the initiative. The Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy (CRTOE) scale was used to evaluate participants' certainty of the outcomes before and after the initiative. The survey was completed by participants at the beginning (May) prior to receiving the professional development and implementing the strategies learned. Participants then completed the same survey at the end (October) of the initiative. The items on the survey measured participants' confidence and certainty of outcomes regarding a variety of concepts including but not limited to details about adapting instruction, school and home culture, student backgrounds and home life, student interests, curricular choices, and teaching methods. This survey was in Qualtrics for the participants to access easily, and also for the data analysis by the research team.

Dependent (paired) samples t tests were conducted for both parts of the survey (self-efficacy and outcome expectancy) to determine if the mean score of individuals who received the professional development and subsequent opportunity to implement strategies had increased to reflect improved confidence in their abilities and certainty in student outcomes. A comparison was conducted between the item responses before and after the initiative for both parts of the survey- self-efficacy and outcome expectancy. This was designed to see how each survey item either increased or decreased from beginning to the end.

The results from the participants were represented by numerical values for the responses. The self-efficacy survey scale was as follows- 4=Completely Confident, 3=Somewhat Confident, 2= Minimally Confident, and 1= Not confident at all). The outcome expectancy survey scale was as follows- (4=Completely Certain, 3=Somewhat Certain, 2= Minimally Certain, and 1= Entirely uncertain). The mean value for each item for each part of the survey was calculated for the

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pretest and the posttest and compared. The numerical differences in the means from the pretest to posttest were evaluated.

Pretest and posttest data were collected from a sample of five individuals with a pretest mean of 84 ($SD = 6.670$) and a posttest mean of 91.2 ($SD = 5.540$). The average mean difference between administrations was 7.2. Confidence levels increased on average among the participants. A dependent t test was conducted to determine if the difference was statistically significantly different from 0, and the results indicate that the pretest and test means were not statistically different ($t = 0.2235912$, $df = 4$, $p = .22$). Therefore, the null hypothesis that there would be no difference in confidence levels before and after the initiative is not rejected at the .05 level. The effect size d was -1.174 and is interpreted as a large effect size (Cohen, 1988). This combination of results (non-significant p-value with a large effect size) may have been impacted by the small sample size (5) for this initiative. Based on this effect size, it is likely that with a larger sample size for this initiative there would be statistically significant change in this outcome measure.

Pretest and posttest data were collected from a sample of five individuals with a pretest mean of 37.4 ($SD = 3.209$) and a posttest mean of 36.8 ($SD = 1.643$). The difference in the mean was -.6. The levels of certainty of outcomes among the teachers decreased from pretest to posttest. The dependent t test was conducted to determine if the difference was statistically significantly different from 0, and the results indicate that the pretest and posttest means were not statistically different ($t = 0.6656643$, $df = 4$, $p > .66$). The null hypothesis that there would be no difference in confidence and certainty levels before and after is not rejected at the .05 level. The effect size d was 0.235 and is interpreted as a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). The results did not provide evidence to support the conclusion that certainty of outcome levels would increase after the initiative.

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Table 1 shows the results of the t tests for both parts of the survey, including descriptive statistics that were also collected as a part of the analysis (mean, standard deviation, and Cohen’s d (effect size)). The maximum possible score for the self-efficacy survey was 100 with a minimum of 25. The mean score increased for the self-efficacy survey from 84.0 to 91.2. This indicates a level of improvement in the participants’ perception of their self-efficacy as it relates to culturally sustaining teaching. The maximum possible score for the outcome expectancy scale was 40 with a minimum of 10. The mean score decreased on the part of the survey measuring outcome expectancy from 37.4 to 36.8. This indicates that participants’ certainty in the outcomes of students did not improve after completing the improvement initiative. However, the difference in the results is minimal for both the t test and mean scores.

Table 1

Survey Results (T Test Paired Two Sample for Means)

Survey Parts	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i> (5)	<i>Cohen’s d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
CRTSE (Self-efficacy)	84.0	6.670	91.2	5.540	.223	-1.174
CRTOE (Outcome expectancy)	37.4	3.209	36.8	1.643	.665	0.235

Note. The survey was conducted as a pretest and posttest for participants before and after the initiative. The survey included two parts- Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy (CRTSE) scale, and the Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy (CRTOE) scale.

Item Analysis Results for CRTSE (Self-efficacy)

Participants expressed perceptions of growth in their self-efficacy on 19 of the 25 items. Participants expressed higher levels of confidence in understanding the student as individuals, their backgrounds, culture, and learning preferences. Participants also felt more confident with adapting their teaching based on that information through utilization of examples from students’

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everyday lives and interests, as well as activating their prior knowledge. I attribute this growth to the intentional focus on culturally sustaining teaching strategies that were learned and implemented in the classrooms. Participants' confidence in the use of cooperative learning was another growth area. The culturally sustaining strategies learned and implemented also provided opportunities for cooperative learning. Participants also gained confidence in (1) examining the curriculum regarding negative stereotypes, (2) assessing student learning, (3) using a variety of teaching methods, (4) establishing a classroom environment conducive for learning, (5) using displays that reflect various cultures, and (6) designing instruction based on developmental needs.

Participants expressed either decreased or no growth in their self-efficacy on 6 of the 25 items. The two items with no growth were item 2- "Obtain information about my students' academic strengths, weaknesses, and interests" and item 15 "Communicate with parents regarding their child's educational progress." For item 2 there is a bit of a contradiction in data points, as there appears to be gained confidence in other areas, specifically with the aspect of students' interests (items 11, 20, 22, and 23). I conclude that the participants did not focus on students' academic strengths, weaknesses, or interests, but rather on their cultural backgrounds and interests based on their lived experiences. Participants expressed the highest level of growth in confidence with item 20- "Use a learning preference inventory to gather data about how my students like to learn." This indicates that the participants gained confidence in understanding their students' learning preferences, without focusing on their current academic strengths and/or weaknesses. With this item I believe the language of the item, specifically with the word "weaknesses," led to participants rating themselves less confident in their abilities on the item. Culturally sustaining teaching encourages an understanding of students' current level of

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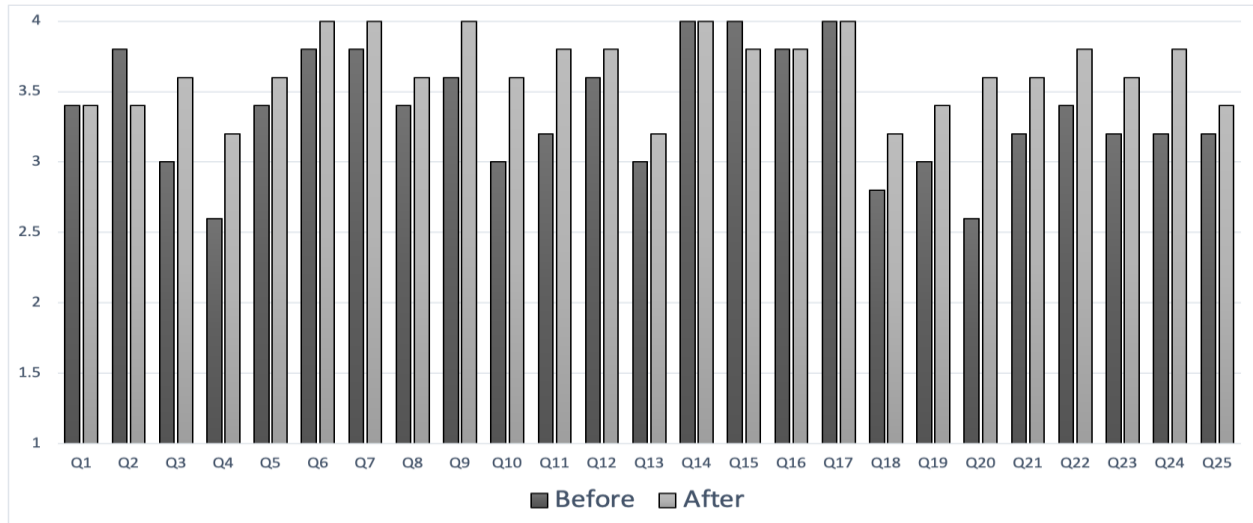
understanding so that future learning can be built upon it (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Obtaining information about students' weaknesses was not promoted through this initiative.

Participants also expressed negative growth for item 15- "Communicate with parents regarding the child's educational progress." Parent and family engagement is indeed a component of culturally sustaining teaching. However, it was not a critical focus of this initiative. Instead, the focus was on teachers finding ways to connect the content being taught to students in the classroom using specific teaching strategies. The strategies provided did not directly span beyond the classroom, nor intentionally engage families in students' learning. Item 16 specifically asked about confidence levels with structuring parent-teacher conferences to avoid being intimidating. This item did not result in increases in confidence among the participants. Other areas that resulted in no overall growth in confidence for the participants included adapting instruction to meet student needs, developing personal relationships with students, and helping students feel important within the classroom. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the item responses used for comparison before and after the initiative.

Figure 2

Results from the CRSTE (Self-efficacy) Survey

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Note. The question numbers are denoted on the x-axis, with the mean on the y-axis. The range of responses for each item was from 1 to 4.

Item Analysis for CRTOE (Outcome expectancy)

Overall, there were more items with either no growth or a decrease in certainty of positive student outcomes. Participants expressed increased certainty in student outcomes with only two of the 10 items with this part of the survey. Participants' levels of certainty increased related to the effect of students' prior knowledge leading to deeper learning. This can be attributed to the intentional focus on "activating prior knowledge" as a culturally sustaining teaching strategy. Participants utilized this strategy multiple times throughout the study and provided qualitative feedback on the success of this strategy when implemented. The certainty in positive outcomes for students by the participants aligns with these data points. Participants also believed that including representations of students' cultural groups would result in them having a more positive self-image. This also aligns with specific teaching strategies that were provided for participants to implement in their classrooms, specifically with the use of "culturally connecting language" and "establishing routines and rituals."

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Results from participants indicated that four of the 10 items had decreased levels of certainty. The item with the greatest decrease in certainty involved the impact of changing the structure of the classroom to increase students' motivation to come to class (Q8). My interpretation of this negative growth is based on the wording of the item. The students who were served in the study were in grades two through seven. Students are required to come to class at this age. Participants may have interpreted that their actions would not impact whether they were motivated to come to class since coming to class is a requirement. Another interpretation of this negative result from participants is the general challenge of motivating students. The participants consistently expressed motivation of students as a challenge in both the focus groups and in their journal entries. Participants expressed willingness to try new methods via the strategies but clearly identified motivation as a challenge. The result on this item, as well as a similar item "using my students' interest when designing instruction will increase their motivation to learn" (Q9) which yielded no growth in certainty, reflects the participants' lack of certainty in this outcome. If I had an opportunity to go back and make changes, I would have adjusted this question to read "motivation to learn." This may have yielded less negative growth.

The other areas that had negative growth with participants' levels of certainty in student outcomes included (1) students developing an appreciation for their culture when taught about contributions from their own culture, (2) acknowledgement of the differences between school culture and home culture leading to less disciplinary problems, and (3) use of culturally familiar examples making learning new concepts easier. There was not an explicit focus on teaching material from students' home cultures. Participants felt that understanding more about their students' culture was impactful; however, teaching expressly about those cultures was not considered impactful on student outcomes. Disciplinary issues were not consistently expressed as

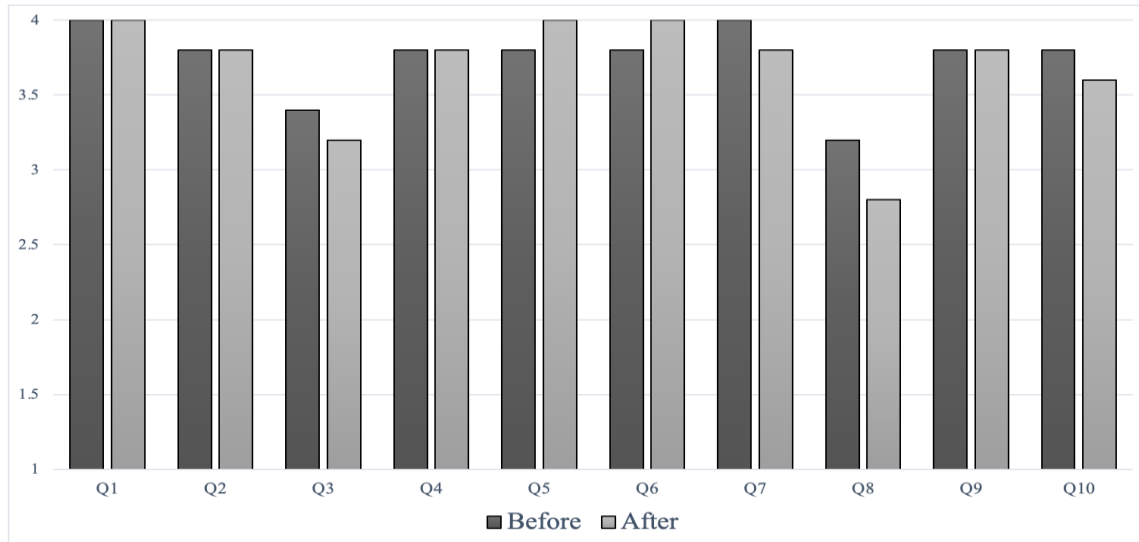
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a concern with any of the participants throughout the initiative. The strategies provided were not directly related to student discipline either through the strategies, if implemented with fidelity, increase student engagement and lead to decreased disciplinary issues. I interpret this as participants not making a direct correlation to the impact of the strategies on student behaviors. Lastly, I was surprised by the negative growth in certainty regarding the impact of using culturally familiar examples on making learning easier. Based on other data points (i.e., focus groups, teacher journal data, walkthrough data), as well as increased confidence levels with the participants regarding use of examples that connect from students' cultures and backgrounds, I would have anticipated an increase in certainty in the outcomes for this item. Participants had no growth in certainty of student outcomes on four of the 10 items. These items dealt with the impact of the teacher-student relationship building trust, communication and learning preferences enhancing learning, and use of students' interest motivating them to learn. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the item responses used for comparison before and after the initiative.

Figure 3

Results for CRTOE (Outcome expectancy) Survey

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Note.

The question numbers are denoted on the x-axis, with the mean on the y-axis. The range of responses for each item was from 1 to 4.

Summary of Outcome Measure

Participants received professional development and opportunities to implement strategies learned over a period of 12 weeks. Each of the five participants completed a pretest and posttest survey that was divided into two parts. The first part measured participants' confidence in their own abilities related to culturally sustaining teaching before and after the initiative; the second part measured changes in their certainty in student outcomes before and after the initiative. The dependent sample t test results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttests for both self-efficacy and expected outcomes. However, there was evidence of a large effect size with Part A, indicating that if the sample size were larger, the results would likely be statistically significant. Participants' confidence increased on 19 of the 25 items with self-efficacy, while only two of the 10 items showed an increase in certainty of outcomes among participants. Overall, the results align with the anticipated outcomes.

Participants had more confidence in their own abilities after completing the initiative; however, their certainty in the positive outcome of students was less impacted by the initiative. I attribute

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the positive increases in self-efficacy to the participants' efforts to refine and improve their own instructional practice by intentionally focusing on culturally sustaining teaching strategies. While their confidence levels increased, their certainty in the outcomes was limited. Participants perceived a higher level of control over their own actions, versus certainty that their actions would positively impact student outcomes. Participants' confidence was impacted by the awareness of the instructional strategies. This also made them more fully aware of their own potential impact. Before the initiative teachers may not have had an accurate perception of how to obtain these outcomes. Before the initiative they knew less about culturally sustaining strategies and their impact. Afterwards they knew more solidly what they could accomplish using the strategies, and there was a greater awareness of the possibilities and the limitations.

Driver Measure Results

The driver measure is designed to evaluate progress toward the desired outcome (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). For this initiative, the goal was for participants to gain confidence in their own abilities to positively impact academic outcomes for Black students through the use of culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The inquiry question specially for the driver measures was "Is the initiative working to improve teachers' capacity and perceptions of culturally sustaining teaching as a strategy?" I chose to use focus groups with the participants at checkpoints throughout the initiative. The rationale for this measure was to hear directly from the participants regarding the progress toward the goal of increasing their capacity.

The focus groups provided participants an opportunity to share their current experiences, perceptions, ideas, and understanding of teaching and learning specifically related to culturally sustaining teaching over the course of the initiative. The focus groups occurred at the beginning (June), middle (end of June), and end (October) of the initiative. Participants were asked specific

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questions related to their experience with teaching Black students (including barriers), their understanding of culturally sustaining teaching strategies, and their anticipated and experienced challenges with implementing these strategies.

The focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed using an online transcription tool. I used “a priori” and “in vivo” coding methods to pull out key elements of the focus groups. I chose “a priori” as a method to best capture the themes within and across the scope of the focus groups. Also, there were some statements that I felt were important to include “as is” to capture the participant’s thoughts and ideas. For this reason, I also used “in vivo” coding to best capture these moments.

Pre-service Focus Group Themes

The first focus group was conducted at the beginning of the Professional Development session. The participants were prompted with questions about their prior experiences and current level of understanding of culturally sustaining teaching practices. There were some overall themes that were noted during this first focus group. Participants expressed students’ limited exposure as a challenge from their previous experiences. This impacted students’ acquisition of standard content, their ability to dialogue in an academic setting, and ultimately their ability to understand content being presented in the classroom. One participant expressed this lack of exposure in terms of physical location awareness:

“You know, I had one of the girls in my class this year, her and her mother do a lot of traveling. But there’s some kids who have never been out of North Carolina. They didn’t understand that High Point and Greensboro were both in North Carolina...they were like, “I’m going to High Point this weekend” when I asked who was going to be traveling this weekend because we were

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talking about traveling...they thought it was a different state and I said no it's in the same state it's just a different city but all of it is within the county..."

For reference, High Point and Greensboro are in the same county (Guilford) and can be accessed within 15-20 minutes from either location. Participants also shared that some students also lacked understanding of what we may consider “common” words:

“I was teaching a lesson, and we were talking about the trombone. They didn't know what a trombone was...they didn't know musical instruments. I had to stop the lesson and show them what those things were and show them videos of what they sound like, because that is something that I had growing up, but they don't have a lot of those stories and exposure to different things like that.”

Participants referenced a lack of exposure at students’ homes as a barrier to their language acquisition:

“If you don't dialogue with your child and say certain things [at home], they won't identify when it comes to school...that's what literature is about...idioms, figurative language, and all that kind of stuff.”

As a result of these gaps the participants expressed that the responsibility to create meaningful ways to dialogue within the classroom was often placed on them.

Another common theme within the first focus group was concern from the participants about understanding the language of their students. This was not in reference to foreign languages, but rather the language associated with popular culture through music, social media, slang, etc. One participant noted that she used to keep up with the language when her children were younger, but she is now “just quite removed from it.” It was also pointed out that what is

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relevant changes frequently, which requires participants to have to make intentional efforts to “keep up.”

Making connections with students was another common theme. This came up as both an important part of the teaching and learning process but was also a challenge for various reasons. One participant pointed out that being a Black teacher does not automatically qualify them for being aware and understanding of culture, but that common experiences can help with connections. This was expressed by the participant in two parts. In one instance the participant shared her own personal story and became “relatable” to her students, while in another instance she had to learn something different in order to connect to the students:

“We read a story, and I mentioned about being homeless and I said I was homeless and the whole class looked at me like. I was homeless for two years. It made me relatable because some of them who may [have experienced homelessness] won't say “I'm homeless” [aloud].”

“Now I do not know all the songs and stuff...so when a song came on and I was singing and I was acting like them and [a student said] wow, that's crazy...you're kind of cool...so I think sometimes even though it don't match my culture, being able to adapt just so that I can bring them in or get their attention or make them be engaged.”

A final theme that was found during the focus group was a feeling of anxiety with connecting not only with Black students but with Hispanic, White, and Asian students. Language and cultural barriers were expressed as challenges in the classroom experienced by the participants even though there were limited numbers of students in those demographic categories within their classrooms.

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There was some prior knowledge of culturally sustaining teaching strategies expressed by the participants. When asked about general instructional strategies that have worked for them, “activating prior knowledge” came out as one that helps students connect:

“If you use visuals to say, ‘did you know about this’, and they go, no’. When I get them like that, then I could say ‘well, let’s read about it’...versus just handing them the passage...put it up [the visual] so they can see it first...sometimes I have to change the approach on how I give them the passage.”

“So, you do have to do a lot of introductions and a lot of frontal loading prior to doing a story or a concept. You have to try to make it to something that they can relate to.”

The participants had an awareness of how this strategy might positively impact learning despite the fact that activating prior knowledge is not a strategy exclusively in the culturally sustaining teaching category. Additionally, when asked about the meaning of the term “culturally sustaining teaching” there were some incorrect assumptions. One participant hypothesized that it related to the protection of cultural history (keeping awareness of the history of one’s culture). This was interesting to hear, and assured me that though there was some understanding, there was indeed room for learning about culturally sustaining teaching practices.

Midpoint Focus Group Themes

The second focus group was conducted at the end of the three-week summer program. This focus group served as a midpoint for the participants. Most importantly, participants were able to discuss and reflect on specific strategies utilized in their classrooms. This was an important part for me, as it provided evidence of growth toward the overall outcome goals of teachers gaining confidence in their abilities to provide culturally sustaining teaching for students.

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The strategy “providing feedback” was referenced first in the discussion. The participants described the benefits of this learned strategy for individual student feedback. Prior feedback had been for the entire class or whole group. However, by using the protocol established for feedback that was learned, participants were able to provide personalized feedback for each student:

“I was able to tailor it [feedback] specifically for a person, and that seemed to work better with them switching their instruction, changing things up, and they seemed to be more engaged and able to catch on.”

Another strategy that was mentioned specifically during the focus group was “rhythm and mnemonics.” This was pointed out by a couple of the participants as a strategy that helps keep students engaged, as they tend to remember and recall lyrics, beats, and rhythms well. One participant noted:

“It’s not something I think I do off the top of my head, but they catch on a whole lot...I noticed the kids automatically just pick up and they just in their heads want to just sing along.”

“Activating prior knowledge” was a third strategy that was mentioned multiple times during the focus group session. A couple of participants incorporated a “word of the day” which served as their foundation for activating prior knowledge. This word would prompt a discussion that would lead to reading a passage or script. Students made connections to the word of the day through these discussions, which provided necessary connection to the subsequent passage, script, or story. It was also mentioned that students made cross-curricular connections, stating that they had learned certain words in another participants’ class. One participant summed it up with this statement:

“My biggest one [strategy] was activating prior knowledge... I found out if I don't do that first they're lost if I just jump right on in...”

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Participants also referred to the learning that took place during the professional development during this focus group session. There was a specific reference made to understanding how the brain works. For example, dendrites are brain material that develop only when connections are made from previous understanding/learning (Hammond, 2015). One participant referenced this learning in terms of how she thinks differently now about the importance of activating students' brains with prior knowledge. Additionally, there were some benefits expressed from utilization of the strategies. Participants noticed that students were more engaged during open discussions and took on a level of accountability and responsibility during those moments. The strategies were also attributed to students being pushed to think critically and at higher levels. Conversely, the participants also expressed that the challenge for students to "think outside of the box" still existed with many students. There were a few misunderstandings that were described by the participants due to students' continued lack of experience with the concepts and/or ideas. There were also some concerns specifically about the fourth grade student group and their level of engagement as compared to all other student groups. Participants were challenged to think about different ways to approach different age groups, understanding that plans may have to be adjusted.

The participants had an opportunity to express their concerns as well during the focus group session. The issue of time for implementing the strategies was shared, as participants were required to do assessments and other required tasks toward the end of the summer session. Additionally, there was a question about whether participants were required to implement all seven strategies. The expectation was reiterated that participants could pick and choose their strategies based on their students' needs and professional preference. The only requirement was that the process be documented using the audio journaling. Participants expressed excitement

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about being able to implement the strategies during the first quarter. They were anticipating this to help with consistency in using the strategies with their own group of students.

Post-service Focus Group Themes

The final focus group was conducted in October at the end of the first quarter of the school year. Participants once again shared their experiences based on question prompts. The questions remained similar as before, asking participants about their experiences with implementing the strategies, their challenges and successes, and what they learned in the process. The questions posed for this focus group were designed to evaluate the change and growth experienced by the participants. They discussed what worked for them during this improvement initiative. The strategies that were specifically mentioned included providing feedback, establishing routines/rituals, cognitive routines, activating prior knowledge, reframing mistakes as information, and rhythm/mnemonics. The participants provided specific examples of how these strategies worked for them in the classroom. The notable part of this was that the benefits of these strategies led to similar outcomes. The participants perceived that they were more relatable to the students, and the students were able to relate more effectively to the content. One participant described feeling more relatable to the students by telling stories about their own life: *“I noticed that when I tell stories about my own life they are like ‘in it’ [engaged]...they were engaged...making connections as well.”*

This vulnerability led to this participant making stronger connections with the students and the content. This participant also used the strategy “reframing mistakes as information” to help students make connections as well:

“When I purposely make mistakes they are real good about telling me ‘oh you did it wrong’ so I said ‘well then tell me how I did that wrong’ and when they’re telling me how then they go ‘oh

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you did it on purpose' ...that part helped me with my class...it makes the lessons a lot more meaningful and you're able to build those connections.."

Another participant also described the benefits of making connections to what students already know to better understand the concepts:

"I found it helpful for my kids when you make whatever the lesson is relatable to...their real-life experiences...so we were talking about something about a cowboy. Most of them don't have a clue about a cowboy let alone the word 'bandana' ...honestly the way I made them remember it was I said, 'it's what your mama wraps her hair up at night' ...that made it relatable to them as well."

Some additional themes that were shared through the focus group were empathy and understanding. The participants expressed that in the process of using the strategies to assist with teaching and learning, various moments occurred due to them giving space for students to express their own thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. This developed a sense of empathy for students and also perceived empathy among the students. One participant described a moment in which a student expressed anxiety about his family's future based on the presidential election results:

"I would say one benefit of making bring out different cultures in our classroom was that I think they have developed an empathy for each other where they did not have that before...we were talking about voting...I opened it up...[and] allowed them to talk about what they hear maybe at home. One student said her dad said he was going to vote for Donald Trump...another little boy said 'no, because if that happens my father's going to have to go back to Africa' ...that's his world and that's the way he saw that... and so the whole class saw it differently now. So, I think that being relatable gave them just a little bit more empathy and understanding for each other."

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Based on the participant's account of this moment, this had an impact on the other students as well. These real-world moments helped students make real, lasting connections to the content, and encouraged awareness as well.

Summary of Driver Measures

The three focus group sessions allowed the participants an opportunity to share their current levels of understanding, and their experiences, challenges, and successes with culturally sustaining teaching strategies. They began with vague understanding of the concepts included in culturally sustaining teaching. However, they developed to being able to identify, utilize, and understand the impact of the strategies. Participants utilized each of the strategies presented to them, and experienced similar results in their respective classroom settings. Participants moved from being unconsciously competent to consciously competent in the area of culturally sustaining teaching practices. The experiences that were shared by the participants included themes of connection, engagement, relatability, empathy, understanding, vulnerability, and capacity building. There was consistent concern regarding students' lack of vocabulary/language acquisition, exposure outside of their home and local community, and lack of interest and motivation for some students. The driver measure provided evidence of growth toward the goal of the participants' improved capacity for implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies for the benefit of students.

Process Measure Results

The process measures were designed to evaluate the implementation for the improvement initiative (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). There were three measures in place to gather data from various aspects of the initiative- 1) professional development survey, 2) teacher implementation feedback journals, and 3) observation walkthrough feedback. These measures

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answered the general inquiry question “Was the improvement initiative implemented as intended?” These measures gathered data from both the participants and the improvement/administrative team to provide various perspectives and data points. The rationale for these measures was to get feedback throughout the process of the initiative directly from the participants and the administrative team who also observed implementation. These measures occurred throughout the duration of the initiative, beginning in June, and ending in October.

The first process measure was a Professional Development Survey. This survey was completed by participants after receiving the professional development on culturally sustaining teaching strategies. This survey was collected using the Qualtrics online platform. The survey collected both qualitative and quantitative data to be analyzed after participants completed in June. The objective of this measure was to evaluate whether the professional development session was implemented as intended.

The second process measure included feedback from the participants on the implementation of the culturally sustaining strategies in the classroom. This was conducted using audio/visual journaling, in which the participants recorded their reflections of strategy implementation. Participants used a set of guiding questions provided to them while journaling their experiences. The objective for this process measure was to evaluate whether the process of implementation by the participants was occurring as intended. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through these journals throughout the initiative. The data were analyzed at the end of the initiative (October).

The third measure was the Observation Walkthrough Tool. The improvement team used this walkthrough instrument to monitor the implementation of the strategies in the classrooms. The objective of this measure was to evaluate the implementation of the initiative from the

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administrators' perspective. These data were collected using the Qualtrics online platform.

Members of the administrative/improvement team were able to document their observations using this platform. This measure collected both quantitative and qualitative data from the improvement team to be analyzed and discussed throughout the course of the initiative.

For each of the three measures, a combination of "a priori" and "in vivo" coding was utilized for the qualitative data analysis. These methods were used to establish themes within the data between participants and individually, as well as with the administrative team. "In vivo" coding was used in certain circumstances to best preserve the voices, thoughts, and perspectives of the participants. Quantitative data were also collected with each of the measures. These data points were designed to collect information regarding times, dates, and the frequency, quality, and variety of strategies observed.

Professional Development Survey Results

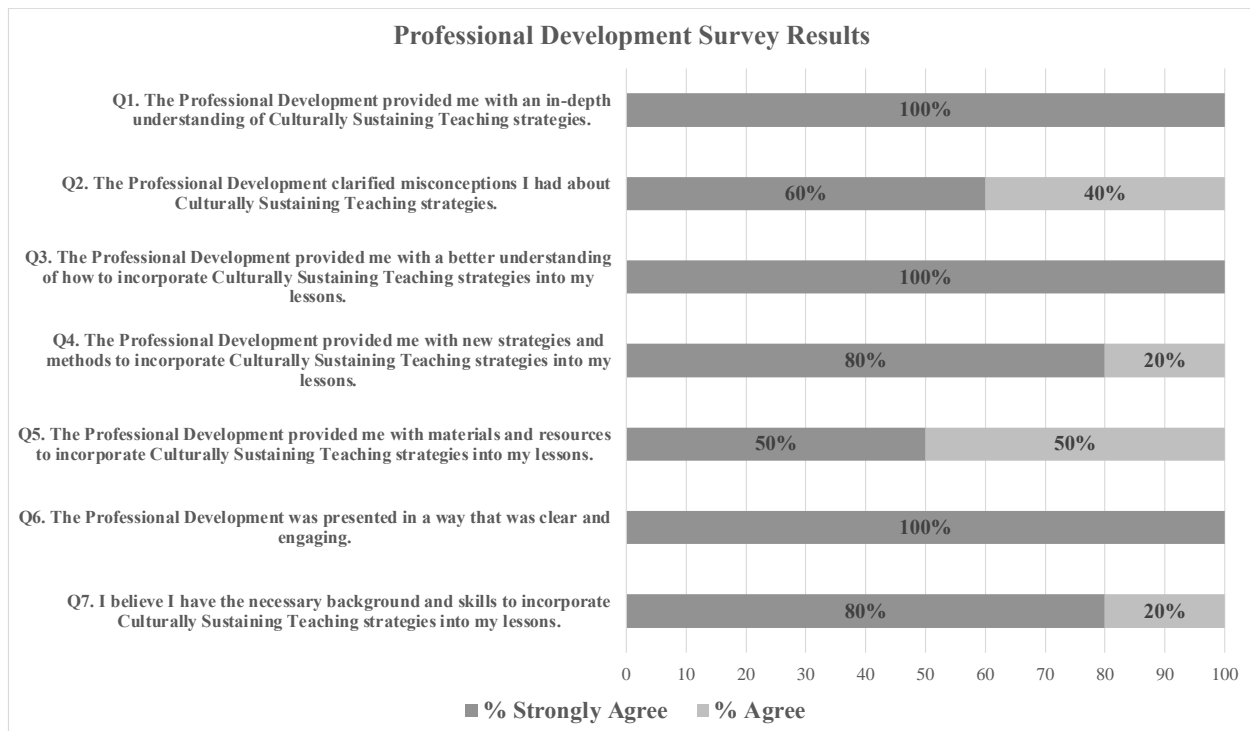
The professional development survey results indicated an overall satisfaction with the professional development session. Participants were asked nine specific questions about the session, with seven of those being on a Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." These questions evaluated participants regarding their satisfaction with the professional developments' ability to help them gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies and how to incorporate them and clarify misconceptions regarding culturally sustaining teaching. Participants were evaluated on whether they were provided with new strategies and methods, resources, and materials to implement culturally sustaining teaching. They were also asked to rate satisfaction with the clarity and level of engagement with the presentation, and their level of readiness to implement the strategies. Participants selected either "strongly agree" or "agree" to each of the above items, with 82% of those responses as "strongly agree" and 18% as "agree."

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There were no ratings of “disagree” nor “strongly disagree” for any questions items. Figure 4 outlines the responses to each of the survey items.

Figure 4

Professional Development Survey Results



Note. There were five participants that responded to the survey. Only four participants responded to question #3. The only responses received were either “strongly agree” or “agree”.

The second process measure for this initiative involved the participants’ feedback on the implementation of the strategies. Each of the five participants made efforts to implement various strategies learned in their respective classrooms and settings. They audio recorded themselves multiple times throughout the course of the initiative as a way to reflect on their practice, while also providing insight for the researcher on whether the process was occurring as intended. There were some common themes among the data collected from all participants and individual themes for each specific participant. I will highlight the participants’ individual themes first and then

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provide an overview with similarities for all. Please note that there is no “Teacher D”, as one of the participants transitioned to another school and did not participate.

Ms. Gambill

There were a few themes weaved into Ms. Gambill’s feedback on implementation. This included connections, personal experience, critical thinking, and sharing through conversations and feedback. Ms. Gambill described a number of instances in which the use of the strategies helped students make connections. This occurred often with the utilization of the strategy “activating prior knowledge,” but also in the use of “cognitive routines” in which similarities and differences between items were evaluated. Ms. Gambill used vocabulary words and word study techniques to help with student understanding. Students were also provided with real world experiences such as going to the library, acknowledging service providers (cafeteria and bus drivers), and experiences with family. These examples were provided to help them make connections. Ms. Gambill also used sharing and collaboration within the classroom as a classroom routine to encourage dialogue between the students and have them share their own experiences. Ms. Gambill noted:

“The students enjoyed being able to share their experiences with each other...I also appreciated it to get to understand them a little bit better.”

This discourse within the classroom set the stage for critical thinking as well. Students were asked to not only think about themselves and others, but about how the concepts being taught applied to them and others.

Ms. Alexander

Three themes emerged from the feedback provided by Ms. Alexander. These included making connections, trust and respect, and critical thinking. Ms. Alexander described using

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“rhythm and mnemonics,” “establishing routines and rituals,” “cognitive routines,” “activating prior knowledge” and “reframing mistakes as information” as strategies to help students make connections to the content. This participant found that students’ level of engagement and ability to make connections increased with rhythm and mnemonics. This strategy as well as “activating prior knowledge” also helped students with recalling key information.

Ms. Alexander described perceptions of increased trust and respect among students due to the use of strategies. Trust and respect were developed between students as they were often asked to “turn and talk” as an established routine/ritual, which allowed them to listen and learn from each other. Ms. Alexander observed the levels of trust and respect increase within the classroom and noted:

“Scholars...were to ask their neighbor a question based on the story....then their partner was to give feedback. I think [they were] demonstrating respect and trust in each scholar to believe that they would come up with a legitimate question based on the story, which means they have to pay attention to the story and their partner would have to pay attention to be able to answer back.”

Students’ use of critical thinking skills was also observed through the use of the strategies. Ms. Alexander used “reframing mistakes as information” as a way to get students to think critically about correct and incorrect answers. The participant challenged students to explain what information provided was incorrect, why it was incorrect, and explain the correct answer. Ms. Alexander noted a high level of engagement from students eager to correct misinformation provided, acting in the role of the teacher:

“So basically, I did it [made an error] on purpose...so they could help me. So that’s a way of them instructing me instead of me instructing them.”

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Mr. Lewis

There were two major themes that emerged from the feedback provided by Mr. Lewis: making connections, and effective feedback. This participant utilized “establishing routines and rituals”, “cognitive routines”, “rhythm and mnemonics”, and “providing feedback” as strategies to help students connect with the content. With each of these strategies, Mr. Lewis described seeking ways to best make the content connect with students. The participant taught reading and math during the timeframe of the initiative. There were multiple references to students identifying patterns, providing visual aids such as Venn diagrams, and increased focus on student errors by using them as information, not just making corrections. The utilization of feedback on student work also had a positive impact for Mr. Lewis. This not only helped the students with understanding their errors in an “instantaneous” manner, but also helped the families support their student:

“One scholar today said that when he took home his paper the other day, he noticed that I had made corrections. His mom really appreciated it because it was able to help guide her as well.”

Ms. Elam

The themes that emerged from the feedback provided by Ms. Elam included making connections, trust and respect, and sharing through conversations and feedback. Ms. Elam used “rhythm and mnemonics,” “establishing routines and rituals,” “providing feedback,” “cognitive routines,” and “culturally connecting language” as strategies to help students make connections to the content. Ms. Elam had one of the unique classroom settings of the participants, as students were provided with lessons on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) topics and skills. These are tools that assist students with regulating and processing their emotions. These lessons were built into the schedule during the summer program for students and provided as elective “specials”

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courses during the regular school year. Ms. Elam found the use of the culturally sustaining teaching strategies helpful for making connections for students with the teaching and learning. The students used the skill of retelling to demonstrate understanding of the content. Ms. Elam also found songs and music as a way to get students to connect, remember, and recall details.

The majority of Ms. Elam's feedback on the initiative process, however, was regarding the development of trust and respect among students through sharing, conversations, and feedback. The set-up of these courses allowed for a lot of conversations between students. This format helped students to open up, communicate their feelings, and discuss issues at home and at school. The framework for these conversations was established using a variety of cognitive routines, as well as established routines and rituals in the classroom. The rituals and routines promoted trust, respect, and confidence. Students' listening skills improved through this process. The students also knew what to expect. As a result, the outcome of these conversations often ended in validation of students' feelings, and with feedback from Ms. Elam, improved skills to help manage feelings and emotions so that learning can take place:

“And it usually goes very well...to get that off their chest. So now you can teach, and they can learn.”

Ms. Elam noted that students would much rather talk to someone who listens and provides feedback than be on a device for learning this content. This was expressed directly by the students and noted by Ms. Elam:

“They want to share how they feel...their emotions, who knows...a lot of their emotions could be all over the place. They just want to share with somebody that's willing to listen and give them some really good advice.”

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One of the least utilized strategies discussed by the participants was the use of “culturally connecting language.” This strategy deals with using words and phrases that connect with students so that they are able to make further connections. Ms. Elam described using this strategy to help students make a concept of their own. The students were having a challenge with remembering the processes to one of the mnemonic devices (Stop, Think, Act) used for managing stress. The students had a challenging time recalling this protocol, but found a way to “make it their own” by putting it in culturally connection language terms:

“So instead, they wanted to change the terminology a little bit to make it more valid for them and more familiar for them. And so, they said- stop, think, and ‘just roll with it’. So, I thought that was an awesome opportunity to think about words that connect with them that they’re familiar with that is more meaningful for them.”

Ms. Davis

Themes included in Ms. Davis’s feedback on implementation included making connections, personal experience, and sharing through conversations and feedback. Ms. Davis described using the strategies “providing feedback,” “activating prior knowledge,” “cognitive routines,” “establishing routines and rituals,” and “rhythm and mnemonics” to help students make connections to the content. Ms. Davis also had a unique role during the summer as the teacher of a course called “Readers’ Theatre.” This course was scheduled into the summer program as a part of the focus on literacy instruction for students. This setting was unique in that students had time and opportunities to work through plays, scripts, and dialogue that is not often provided during the regular school year.

Ms. Davis described instances of students making connections with the content, as did all of the participants. There was a strong relationship between students engaging with the

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characters to make connections to the content, their own personal experiences, and understanding the material presented. Students were tasked with taking on various roles within the scripts. This opened up a great deal of conversation through the use of “cognitive routines” to promote learning points of view, similarities and differences, and comparing and contrasting. It allowed students to explore their own personal experiences, attitudes, ideas, feelings, and emotions through the characters. There were instances of students making connections from both identifying with characters, and portraying characters who they perceived as different from them. One student, playing a princess, was able to express feelings of connection to the character based on her own personal experiences at home. Ms. Davis noted:

“So, one of the ways she identified was that she was the oldest child in her family and that she felt like she was always the peacemaker in her family. And that’s how she incorporated her personal experience into her character. She felt that because the princess was the one who showed kindness to the dragon...that that was one of the things she does in her family and with her friends, that she is a peacemaker.”

In another circumstance, students acknowledged the differences in their personal character and that of the one portrayed:

“One of the other ‘valley girls’ said that sometimes she can be moody, but she felt like her personal character was quite different from the ‘valley girl’ and the other girl [in the script].”

In other instances, students were able to identify emotions and feelings as well with certain character roles. The exploration of these characters promoted a level of connection to the stories, while including students’ personal experiences and prior knowledge. The dialogue and feedback provided by Ms. Davis to the students expanded their understanding and self-awareness.

Common Themes

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All participants used their implementation journals to actively reflect on their own practice, specifically with the use of the newly learned culturally sustaining teaching strategies. Each participant used multiple strategies, adapted them to their individual settings, and applied them to their own understanding. There were many common themes throughout the participants' feedback on implementation as well. "Making connections" was overwhelmingly the most consistent recurring theme. The participants described numerous accounts of instances in which they perceived students to make critical connections to the content as a result of one or more of the culturally sustaining teaching strategies utilized. These connections were a result of the participants taking what students previously knew or could relate to and building on that knowledge to make deeper connections to the content. Participants embraced the concepts regarding brain-based learning that were presented in the professional development session. "Making connections" was identified through the research and professional development session as a benefit and expected outcome of using culturally sustaining teaching strategies.

Establishing trust and respect, sharing through dialogue and feedback, promoting critical thinking, and using personal experiences to connect with the content were also consistent themes among the participants. Trust and respect were the result of the participants providing opportunities for students to talk, listen, and learn from each other. There were countless examples of students sharing their personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, and even misconceptions within the classroom setting. These expressions from the students provided the connections to the content needed for student understanding. This also promoted critical thinking for students, allowing them to explore and better understand at deeper levels. Evidence of success with these connections involved accounts of students being able to recall information, explain details, and effectively evaluate aspects of the content as a result of implementing the

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strategies. The outcomes of increased trust and respect were also identified as a benefit/feature of using culturally sustaining teaching strategies. Table 2 outlines the common themes using direct quotes from the participants.

Table 2

Implementation themes from participants

Common Themes from Participants	Example Quote
Making connections	<p>“Well, one of the strategies I use often...is the rhythmic and mnemonics. I think it is something they enjoy, and it helps to foster the recall memory for them in the activity. I use this for when we’re reciting certain spelling rules. So, I say that whenever the ‘a’ is walking with ‘l’, ‘m’, or ‘n’, what does she do? And they go, she be acting funny.’ It works, really, it works.” (Ms. Alexander)</p> <p>“Today I tried to use the reframing mistakes as information with scholars. In the past, I’ve always taught the error, but I did not go through and make sure that [students] really understood and could connect to why their error was an error.” (Mr. Lewis)</p> <p>“Students had to discuss the different characters’ point of view and how it was similar or different from their own character and discuss their relationship with their characters.” (Ms. Davis)</p>
Establishing trust and respect	<p>“Scholars...were to ask their neighbor a question based on the story...then their partner was to give feedback. I think [they were] demonstrating respect and trust in each scholar to believe that they would come up with a legitimate question based on the story, which means they have to pay attention to the story and their partner would have to pay attention to be able to answer back.” (Ms. Alexander)</p> <p>“[The students] just really enjoyed being able to talk about their feelings and that really opened up a door for them to be comfortable and for them to feel like they</p>

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	could trust the room and the people that were in there with them.” (Ms. Elam)
Promoting critical thinking	“Last year when we started opinion writing it was very cut and dry and straight to the point. This year, each day before I started my mini writing lesson we would play ‘would you rather.’ I asked students if they would rather go to art or music. Then I asked them to take a few minutes and think about reasons as to why they like art or music so much. After having them think of reasons, I asked them to share with partners, and then share out their reasons on why they picked what they picked. They came up with great reasons as to why they liked the side they picked.” (Ms. Gambill) “So basically, I did it [made an error] on purpose...so they could help me. So that’s a way of them instructing me instead of me instructing them.” (Ms. Alexander)
Sharing through conversation and feedback	“This week we worked on author’s point of view. To build connections to our new story, I asked students the meaning of the word ‘memory.’ Students gave several different answers to what they thought it meant. I explained that memory is something that took place in the past that you can think about now. I then asked students to talk with a partner. They love partner sharing now. I told students to talk with a partner about their favorite summer memory. They gave me some good answers...and I told the students that this connects to our new story for the week because the author wrote the story about his memories during the summer at his grandma’s house.” (Ms. Gambill) “I was just giving them wise feedback on the spot, and I believe that will help us in the future to build that culture of learning that it’s okay to make mistakes.” (Mr. Lewis) “And it usually goes very well...to get that off their chest. So now you can teach, and they can learn.” (Ms. Elam) “They want to share how they feel...their emotions, who knows...a lot of their emotions could

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	be all over the place. They just want to share with somebody that's willing to listen and give them some really good advice.” (Ms. Elam)
Incorporating personal experiences	“The students enjoyed being able to share their experiences with each other...I also appreciated it to get to understand them a little bit better.” (Ms. Gambill) “So, one of the ways she identified was that she was the oldest child in her family and that she felt like she was always the peacemaker in her family. And that's how she incorporated her personal experience into her character. She felt that because the princess was the one who showed kindness to the dragon...that that was one of the things she does in her family and with her friends, that she is a peacemaker.” (Ms. Davis)

The professional development session feedback was overwhelmingly positive and indicated that participants felt ready to implement the strategies. However, there were some instances in which the strategies were not implemented in the way that they were intended. I attribute these misunderstandings and misconceptions with the strategies. One specific example was a misconception with the use of the strategy “cognitive routines.” Ms. Alexander was observed working with students to get them to understand similarities and differences. The activity taking place during the time observed simply involved teacher question and answering as the instructional strategy. Students were being asked to identify the similarities and differences but were asked to raise their hands and point out the similarities and differences. The recommendation from the observer was that a Venn diagram be considered to use as a cognitive routine. This was recommended not only to help students identify the similarities and differences, but also to have a visual representation. Ms. Alexander felt that a “cognitive routine”

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was being used simply because there were similarities and differences involved. However, this misconception had to be clarified; the “cognitive routine” as a strategy is a tool to address the skill of students identifying similarities and differences. Ms. Alexander reflected on this in the feedback journal:

“I thought I was giving accurate information and using the accurate resources for doing... ’cognitive routines.’ So, after speaking with the observer, I realized that I needed to get a Venn diagram to help make sure they understand the similarities and differences in the words that I was using.”

There were some similar misconceptions about specific strategies and how they are best implemented in the classroom. “Culturally connecting language” and “providing feedback” were two strategies that were sometimes vaguely implemented based on the feedback from the participants. There were multiple instances with participants in which they referenced using the “culturally connecting language” strategy; however, the description of their actions did not align with how the strategy was recommended to be used. This strategy encourages use of language that appropriately connects with students based on their cultural background and/or experience. An example provided during the professional development session involved giving students clear directives such as “go sit down in your seat,” as opposed to presenting this as a recommendation “hey, do you want to go sit down?” While the latter may connect with some students, for others the response could be “no” and subsequently perceived as disrespect (Hammond, 2015). The participants mentioned using culturally connecting language; however, their descriptions were about general dialogue/discourse with students and/or between students. While having quality discourse is a valuable instructional tool, this does not necessarily mean that culturally

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connecting language is being used. The unintended consequence was that the strategies were incorrectly identified as being implemented.

There were some instances noted through feedback and observations in which the word “feedback” was misused or vaguely referenced by participants. The strategy that was shared, “providing feedback,” provided specific protocols as options to use when providing feedback to students such as the asset-based feedback protocol model and wise feedback. These protocols gave participants specific steps on how to provide feedback to their students so that students could better connect with the previous and future learning. However, the word feedback was used in ways that did not always align with this level of feedback to students. The word feedback in some cases was simply a student providing an answer, sharing a story, or making a connection. The participants at times listed these moments as providing feedback. Again, the unintended consequence here was that this strategy was incorrectly identified as being implemented in certain instances.

There were some additional misconceptions regarding having to incorporate all of the strategies. This feedback came up during the second focus group session. Participants started with concern that they did not have enough time to implement the strategies. However, with further exploration it was determined that some had the misconception that all strategies had to be implemented within the classroom. This was not the expectation. It was clarified that as mentioned in the professional development, the goal was for the participants to utilize any or all of the strategies, but with no expectation that all had to be used. The participants were to use their autonomy to decide which strategies would best serve their students and their goals for the learning. The participants expressed relief in knowing that this was the expectation, not simply to

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implement all strategies. The unintended consequence of this misconception was anxiety from the participants that the expectations set forth were not being met.

The last tool used for data collection as a process measure was the observation walkthrough tool. This was set up as a survey in Qualtrics for observers to complete while making observations in the classrooms. The tool collected information about the observation including the culturally sustaining strategy being utilized, the observed level of student and teacher engagement, and the alignment of the instruction to the lesson plans and lesson objective. The walkthroughs were conducted while in the classrooms on phones or laptops by members of the administrative team. Walkthroughs each lasted 10-15 minutes. The tool also provided space for observers to provide anecdotal notes and recommendations for the participant being observed. The full set of items can be referenced in Appendix D.

The strategy that was observed the most through the walkthrough tool was “cognitive routines.” This strategy was observed in a variety of ways, including story maps, Venn diagrams, matching activities, and simulations. “Rhythmic and mnemonics” was also observed with the use of songs, a tongue twister warm-up activity, and mnemonic devices used to help students learn the various parts of a stage and to assist in another setting with decoding words. “Culturally connecting language” and “providing feedback” were also strategies that were observed.

Students and teachers were either “highly engaged” or “mostly engaged” during the times observed with no ratings of “somewhat engaged” or “not engaged” from observers. The instruction was rated as aligned to the lesson plan and lesson objectives on 50% of the observations, with the other 50% rated as “unable to determine.” Overall, the observations provided a level of insight into the process of implementation by the participants. There were

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active attempts to implement these strategies in a variety of ways based on the needs of the students in the classroom and objectives of the participant.

Summary of Process Measures

The three measures used to evaluate the process of the initiative included data from the professional development survey, teacher feedback on implementation via audio journals, and feedback from the observation walkthrough tool. Each tool provided a unique perspective from participants to help answer the question “Is the initiative being implemented as intended?” The feedback from the implementation journals provided the most insight and quality data as this occurred in real time as a reflection tool for them while making the attempts to implement. Based on the data collected, the established processes and procedures created for the purpose of the initiative worked as intended.

Balance Measure Results

Balance measures were implemented to explore the unintended consequences of the improvement initiative (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). These measures answer the inquiry question “What unintended consequences have come about as a result of the improvement initiative?” There were four measures in place to gather data from various aspects of the initiative. This included space for qualitative feedback on the professional development survey, participant implementation feedback journals, focus groups, and the observation walkthrough tool. These measures were used to gather data from both the participants and the improvement/administrative team. They provided various perspectives and data points and occurred throughout the duration of the initiative, beginning in June, and ending in October. The rationale for using these measures was to get qualitative feedback from the participants regarding the unintended consequences anticipated and experienced throughout the initiative.

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The balance measures were embedded within the four process measure instruments. Participants evaluated the professional development session by answering questions on the survey. There were forced-choice questions that measured the participants' preparedness for the work of implementation. The survey also included two open-ended questions to allow participants to express any unintended consequences, as well as their anticipated outcomes. The balance measure question asked participants to list any challenges that they anticipated with incorporating the culturally sustaining strategies.

The participant implementation journals and the focus groups both served as balance measure involved feedback from the participants on the process of implementation. Each participant recorded audio journals to document their experience. There was a list of guiding questions that asked them to reflect on the lessons, and implementation of the strategies. The questions also asked participants to think about what was not going well with those items, and to describe those experiences as well. The focus groups were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the initiative. This also involved participant feedback as they responded to question prompts regarding the process. These questions also opened up opportunities for the participants to share anticipated and experienced unintended consequences.

The observation walkthrough tool used by the administrative team allowed the collection of data on unintended consequences observed during the implementation. The tool asked observers to collect a few forced-choice items such as the type of strategy observed, engagement levels of the students and teachers, and the alignment to the lesson objective and lesson plans. There was also space for open-ended feedback. Observers were asked to provide anecdotal notes regarding the observations, as well as recommendations for improvement for implementing the

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initiative. The data for the balance measures were collected throughout the course of the initiative beginning in June and ending in October.

For each of the four measures, the responses from participants for each instrument were reviewed, evaluated, and compared. These methods were used to find any common elements within the data between participants and individually, as well as with the administrative team. “A priori” coding was also utilized for the qualitative data analysis to detect any themes within and across data points.

There were some consistent themes expressed by the participants. “Time” was consistently mentioned as a barrier for the participants. This barrier was consistently expressed through feedback received from the professional development survey, focus groups, implementation journals, and the observation tool. Participants expressed a desire to implement the strategies with fidelity with the understanding that time was required to plan, reflect, and properly refine the use of strategies. Based on the feedback, time became an issue as the initiative progressed. This was especially evident during the fall quarter implementation timeframe. During this time there was an increase in other requirements such as testing, progress monitoring, and professional learning community (PLC) meetings. During the summer program, there were less of these other requirements, and the participants were able to focus more time toward implementing the strategies. The administrative team was able to spend more time conducting quality observations in the classroom as well during the summer sessions. Some of the participants anticipated that implementation would be more consistent during the fall implementation timeframe:

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“I think if we do it [implementing the strategies] more on a consistent basis with our actual classroom that we get to establish like this relationship throughout the year...that we’re able to really build connections and things like that with our students.”

Based on the data points, however, there was a decrease in the focus from summer to fall as the participants’ available time shifted. This was an unintended consequence of continued implementation during the fall. I do however believe that there would be progress and growth in future PDSA cycles if the strategies continued beyond the first quarter, as the teacher-student and student-student relationships expanded.

There was a concern about having time for effective lesson planning. There was no intention of increasing the workload for participants. However, adjustments needed to be made regarding their lesson planning to intentionally include the strategies with fidelity. The expectation was that participants include the culturally sustaining strategies in the lesson plans. Lesson planning was revealed as a major area needing improvement for the participants. This was an unintended consequence in that lesson planning was not a critical focus of the initiative. Lesson planning is an essential aspect of implementation for any lesson, regardless of implementing new strategies. However, based on the data from observations, the participants all had some level of struggle with lesson planning.

The teachers struggled with getting their thoughts together in a way that could be clearly communicated via lesson plans. Participants were provided with a guide for how they might implement the strategies, whether at the beginning, middle, or end of a lesson. This was provided to them at the professional development session. This was designed to help participants think through when they might use one of the strategies and to best choose the appropriate strategy. However, there were only two to three times when the strategies were actually observed in the

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lesson plans. Participants did not consistently include the strategies in their lesson plans and were not specifically required to include the strategy to be used in their lesson plans. Again, the focus was on them implementing the strategies. I anticipated that this would coincide with their lesson planning and be reflected clearly in these plans. Therefore, there was less focus placed on this element, and no formal process implemented for logistically sharing the lesson plans with the administrative team. In future PDSA cycles, I would revise this part and provide additional supports for how and where to include the strategies in the lesson planning process. I would also be much more intentional regarding the evaluation of the lesson plans to ensure the thought processes were there for the participants.

There were a few other unintended consequences that were noted less consistently but worth mentioning. In one instance, one of the participants experienced a student “shutting down” after providing an incorrect answer. The positive aspect of this was that the student was sharing, which is evidence of the established routines and rituals in the classroom that allow for sharing and collaboration. However, when things did not go well for this student, the result was a complete shut down, and a refusal to answer any more questions. This lack of engagement from students is an unintended consequence simply because the strategies are designed to do the opposite, which is engage students in the learning.

Another unintended consequence identified was that of unsuccessful applications of the strategies for non-Black students. One participant expressed concerns about a non-Black student and the participant’s efforts to connect with the student. The student was described as an English Language Learner (ESL) student from Mexico with limited language acquisition. Ms. Gambill expressed:

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“I have an ESL student that I have been struggling with...I am still having difficulty gauging what he actually knows. He is a very sweet boy and hugs me every morning, but I feel like there is a connection barrier between us. I am normally great at building relationships with my students, but I am struggling to find ways to connect with him or understand what is going on in his mind.”

It seemed ironic to me that the culturally sustaining teaching strategy focus would not be able to address this type of connection barrier that was described. The strategies are designed to help make connections with any student if done with fidelity. I wondered if the focus placed on Black students gave a false sense of the potential of culturally sustaining teaching strategies to help other students. There was no intention of leaving out students who were not Black. The focus was on Black students because of the demographic make-up of the school with the vast majority of the population being Black. However, an unintended consequence in this situation was that the participant either failed to apply the same principles to a non-Black student, applied them in a way that was not culturally appropriate for that student, or did apply them but received limited evidence of success. Each of these scenarios for the purpose of this initiative were unintended consequences.

Summary of Balance Measures

There were unintended consequences gathered as data points throughout the course of the initiative. The unintended consequences were noted as a part of the process measures, each collecting qualitative feedback on various aspects of the initiative from both the participants and observers. Unintended consequences included misconceptions, misunderstandings, and less quality data points in certain instances. These surrounded issues such as time, resources, engagement, and lesson planning.

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Summary of Results

The improvement initiative was measured by using process, driver, balance, and outcome measures. These elements helped create a clear picture of the impact of use of culturally sustaining teaching practices as a means to improve literacy development for Black students. Five participants were provided quality professional development that prepared them for implementation of the culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The participants expressed feelings of increased confidence utilizing the strategies throughout the initiative and documented their experiences by providing feedback via journaling and focus groups. These interactions within the classroom were also documented by members of the administrative team and me as the scholar-practitioner. As the participants gained capacity, students benefited by experiencing increased connections to the content. Results of t test analysis provided limited evidence of statistical differences in confidence and outcome expectancy levels due to the small sample size (n=5). There were some unintended consequences that were documented as well including misconceptions, misunderstandings, and gaps in quality data. However, overall, there was evidence of increased capacity for culturally sustaining teaching for the participants and increased connections to the content for students.

Implications

Culturally sustaining teaching practices are valuable for improving literacy acquisition for Black students. The evidence for this statement is supported through the research conducted in a public charter school with a large population of Black students. The participants consistently expressed success with making connections to students in ways they had not experienced previously. The connections led to improved student outcomes. These interactions were documented through the implementation journals, focus groups, and also observed by the

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administrative team. Implementing culturally sustaining strategies leads to inclusive classrooms that provide the environment for Black students to learn. There are a few changes and enhancements that I recommend for next steps both in the local context and for future research in this area.

Connecting the Research to Literature

The results of this study aligned with previous research efforts related to culturally sustaining teaching. Culturally sustaining teaching is described as a ‘bridge’ for students, helping them make needed connections with the content being taught (Au, 2007; Nichols et al., 2000; Powell, 1997). There were multiple incidents both through this study and previous research in which culturally sustaining strategies were successfully utilized to make connections and make learning relevant for students (Au, 2007; Bui & Fagan, 2013; Powell, 1997). Personal experiences from the teachers and students were used to build trust and respect, and create culturally affirming classrooms (Bui & Fagan, 2013, Nichols et al., 2000). Culturally sustaining teaching strategies were often used as a prescriptive measure without investment in their authentic capacity to enhance student learning. The professional development provided in this initiative prepared participants to implement the strategies with sustainability, meaningfulness, and adaptability to changes in cultural and linguistic needs of students (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012). There were challenges with accountability, standardized testing, district and state mandates, and growing diversity of needs within schools that impacted both this study and referenced in previous studies (Bui & Fagan, 2013; Nichols et al., 2000).

Equity Focus

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This improvement initiative focused on providing teachers with strategies to best support Black students in the classroom. Black students are consistently outperformed academically based on data from state and national assessments and this has prevailed over time (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). This equity issue is a result of multiple factors including the lack of high quality instruction, presence of deficit ideology and inequitable school policies, and lack of culturally sustaining teaching for Black students (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Coleman-King et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Madkins, 2011; Paris, 2012; Sun, 2018). It was important to focus on Black students due to this trend. Culturally sustaining teaching practices are useful tools to mitigate this equity issue for Black students as evidenced in the results of the initiative. These teaching practices provide students with access to learning content by making connections to their own experiences and culture. The connections set the stage for students to learn new, unfamiliar concepts and content.

This improvement initiative also serves as an example of how these strategies can benefit students. It is a model of success for implementing strategies that help Black students. The real-time testimonials and feedback from the participants provide insight into how culturally sustaining teaching positively impacts Black students in the classroom setting.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations with this improvement initiative that impacted both the data and the results. First, there were six participants at the beginning of the initiative. One participant moved to another school and was therefore not able to complete the study. The data collected reflect the five remaining participants. The number of participants was already small, but by losing an additional participant, it was even smaller. This had an impact on the outcome measure

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when the t test was conducted. The results had to be carefully interpreted due to the small sample size.

There were two timeframes for the data collection. The first part was conducted in June during a summer reading program provided by the school. The participants were provided professional development prior to the summer program. The summer program was an intensive three-week program in June. Data were collected during this time. Participants then returned in August and resumed data collection during the first quarter of the regular school year. This included 9 weeks between August and October. During the summer program the participants were able to focus on a smaller group of students and work specifically on using these strategies with their students. During the first quarter data collection the participants had more external responsibilities and were less focused on implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies. Two of the participants who taught literacy exclusively during the summer taught other subjects (math, science, and social studies) during the first quarter timeframe. The strategies were implemented in both settings, however it is worth noting that the settings changed for these participants. Additionally, the participants in the summer worked with varying grade levels. Only one participant worked with the same grade level of students during both the summer and fall data collection periods. These changes between timeframes impacted the data collected.

There were a few logistical limitations that are noteworthy. Teachers were asked to respond to question prompts for their feedback journals. This was also recommended and designed to help spur their thinking regarding their experiences. Some of the participants clearly used the prompts and even responded directly by including the question as a part of the audio recorded journal entries. However, there were a few who did not respond directly to the prompts, but rather just talked through their experiences. The unintended consequence of this was that the

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reviewing of the data was less structured for the journals. The hope was that the responses could be even further categorized by responses to organize the data more efficiently. Additionally, the walkthrough tool was not clearly shared and communicated with the other administrators. The administrative team normally uses a separate tool that is similar to the one used for this initiative. However, the team did not perform a “calibration” of the tool by going in together to some classrooms and comparing notes on what was observed using the tool. This step helps the administrative team to understand their perspective and also clears up misconceptions regarding the actual tool. As a result, there were some misconceptions noted regarding the findings from other observers. As previously noted with the participants, there were also some vague and/or incorrect references to the strategies from the observers as well. The unintended consequence from these items was a less impactful set of feedback for the participants, and less quality data for the purposes of the research initiative.

Implications for Practice

There are a few implications for practice based on the results of this improvement initiative. Culturally sustaining teaching strategies work for creating connections to the content for Black students. When students make connections, they are able to learn and master concepts. The large gaps in academic performance for Black students exists in part due to the lack of these connections to the content. Utilization of culturally sustaining teaching strategies helps mitigate the academic gap for Black students. When these culturally sustaining practices are effectively used in classrooms, Black students are able to achieve growth and move toward proficiency.

There are few next steps that I would recommend for continuing this work in my local context. Based on the success of the initial PDSA cycle, the next phase would include expanding the professional development and implementation of culturally sustaining teaching strategies to

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include the entire teaching staff. The participants in the improvement initiative would play key roles in the professional development for the remaining staff by providing feedback on their successes and challenges, teaching and modeling strategies, and serving as peer coaches. There would be additional professional development to ensure ongoing support. There would also be an expansion of the strategies over time to expand the teachers' available resources for teaching.

I would recommend a 2-3-year cycle for these next steps. The professional development would be provided as a refresher at the beginning of each school year with quarterly to bi-yearly check-ins for teaching staff. Additional teachers who demonstrated quality implementation of strategies as observed by the administrative team would be added as peer coaches for others. The additional time for implementation would allow for more strategies to be introduced and implemented.

Recommendations for Practitioners

There are a number of recommendations based on these factors. This includes a deeper focus on lesson planning for culturally sustaining teaching, having a consistent timeframe for data collection, increased clarity of expectations for participants and the administrative team, better alignment of pretest/posttest survey questions, and increased size of the participant pool.

There was a clear focus on the purpose, potential impact, and understanding of culturally sustaining teaching strategies based on evidence from the feedback received throughout the initiative. However, there were observed deficits in the lesson planning aspect from the participants. The participants did not consistently demonstrate how they planned to implement the strategies in their lesson plans. They were requested to include the use of the strategies in their lesson plans and to share their lesson plans with the design/improvement team. The lesson plans were shared, however there were very few clear instances of participants including the

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strategies in their plans. The best practice for the participants would be to incorporate the strategies into their lessons prior to implementation. This would increase the level of intentionality and success with the strategies. From my perspective the teachers did not appear to be purposely insubordinate with not completing the task as hoped. However, I see the issue as one of time and focus. The teachers did not have the correct resources and/or coaching to *make* time for including these strategies in their plans. I recommend that lesson planning be a larger focus of the professional development sessions, with more explicit discussion regarding how to incorporate the strategies into the lesson plans. I also recommend ongoing support throughout implementation with the lesson plans with feedback and coaching. This should be reflected in the time spent and content shared during the professional development and a part of the evaluation process as well. Feedback should be shared regarding both the lesson plan and the observation of implementation.

The timeframe for this improvement initiative had to be split between a summer reading program and the first quarter of the regular school year for the participants. The changes in setting and responsibilities for the participants had an impact on their ability to focus on implementing the culturally sustaining teaching strategies. I recommend conducting this improvement initiative within a timeframe that is consistent, and allows for targeted, intentional implementation. I recommend a 9-12 week summer program with a literacy focus, in which the professional development is provided, and implementation period follows without interruptions, gaps, or changes in setting.

The improvement initiative needed increased clarity of expectations in certain areas. The feedback that was received had plenty of quality material for the qualitative data collection. However, the question prompts provided to the participants were not consistently utilized when

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providing feedback on the implementation process. The guiding questions were designed to pull out specific aspects of the process, specifically how the students responded to the lessons and strategies. Many of the participant journal entries included descriptions or summaries that indirectly addressed the questions. I recommend emphasizing use of the question prompts for each journal entry. The journal entries would need to start with the question being answered. Additionally, participants would be asked to answer at least 3-5 different questions. This would provide more succinct data for the researcher to be able to organize, process, and code.

There was also an expectation that participants would have their students keep their own journals as a way to chart their own growth and development. This was completed but not emphasized enough during the initiative. There was limited data taken from the students' journals. Instead, there was feedback from what students expressed in the classroom setting between peers or with the teacher and documented in the teachers' journals. I recommend increasing focus on the student journals to get an additional level of feedback on their perceptions of the lessons and/or strategies.

increased clarity of expectations, emphasis on the reflections prompt emphasis, and more direct feedback from students.

Another recommendation for practitioners would be to better prepare the administrative team conducting the observations. There was an assumption with this initiative that the administrative team members were clearly aware of the strategies being utilized. The reality was that there were different perceptions within the administrative team regarding the strategies and how they manifest within a lesson. This was noted with the observation feedback form, as some administrative team members marked (either by error or misunderstanding) that certain strategies were being used during that time observed, however the anecdotal feedback indicated

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observation of something else. Also, the number of observations required by the administrative team was not clearly established. This resulted in fewer observations than desired throughout the course of the initiative. I recommend having a detailed administrative professional development session with clear expectations, goals, and information sharing prior to the professional development for teachers. This would provide a clearer, more consistent stream of feedback for the teachers on their strategy implementation.

I also recommend aligning the pretest/posttest survey questions to the expected outcomes for the initiative. The Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-efficacy (CRTSE) and Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy (CRTOE) surveys were used as pre and post tests for this initiative. The objective was to have quantitative data to show the impact of the initiative on the participants' self-efficacy and expectations for student outcomes. These surveys were customized for this specific initiative to include elements that were most likely to be impacted. Survey questions that included elements not related to the initiative such as impacts on English Language Learners were taken out. Other questions were combined to make the survey more succinct. Despite these changes however, there were still questions that did not align well with the content of the initiative. As a result, there were many items that showed limited or no change especially regarding participants' expectancy of student outcomes. I recommend further adaptations to the surveys to align the questions with what participants actually experience and are exposed to within the initiative.

I recommend an increased number of participants for the improvement initiative. There were benefits from having a small group. For example, more time was able to be spent observing the participants as opposed to having more participants and more observations. The smaller group also allowed for some deep diving into the qualitative feedback provided that would be a

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greater challenge with more participants. However, the small group of participants decreased the confidence levels of the quantitative measures. The t test conducted compared the pretest to the posttest to establish statistical significance between the two. There was less significance determined due to the small sample size. There was a component utilized within these data points that take out the element of sample size. This did indicate in some ways that with a larger sample size there may have been statistical significance between the pre-test and posttest. I recommend using a sample size of 10-12 participants to better gauge the impact of the improvement initiative. This would also provide rich data for the other measures collected as well.

Other Relevant Implications for Practice

Teachers must make culturally relevant and responsive teaching a *sustaining* practice. Culturally sustaining means that the practices are embedded into the daily instructional processes (Paris, 2012). Teachers cannot have the mentality of completing the strategies to “check a box” solely as a requirement. The understanding of the critical importance of the strategies and their ability to influence brain activity for learners must be present among educators. I also found that most of the teachers had used in some way previously one or more of the strategies presented. However, they were unconsciously competent in the use of the strategies. They may have utilized the strategy but without knowledge of a more effective or efficient way to implement it. The professional development and opportunities to implement the strategies made the participants consciously competent, providing them with the awareness needed to better serve Black students.

There must also be a healthy combination of the culturally sustaining teaching practices within the classroom that work for the teacher. The beauty of these strategies is that there is not only one method or process for success. Often in education there are strategies that are provided that must be completed with limited autonomy for teachers and the learners. Culturally

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sustaining teaching strategies have endless potential based on the teacher's capacity, understanding, skills, and based on the needs of the learners.

The importance of lesson planning with culturally sustaining teaching strategies in mind is of critical importance for educators. I would recommend that culturally sustaining teaching be embedded into the NC Standard Course of Study and further embedded into the Teacher Effectiveness Evaluation System. This would require educators to think about how to incorporate the strategies into each lesson, classroom, and/or procedure. Regardless of policy, including culturally sustaining teaching strategies during lesson planning is a critical component. This is where teachers can focus on students' cultural capital in relation to the content and assist with facilitating the learning for students.

Implications for Policy

This improvement initiative improved teacher capacity for providing culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The ultimate goal however was to improve academic performance outcomes for Black students. Based on the results, improving teacher's capacity in the area of culturally sustaining teaching practices helps to improve student outcomes. There are a few implications of this work for policies discussed previously. This includes policies surrounding the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS), the Teacher Effectiveness Standards, and the North Carolina School Performance Grades.

The North Carolina Standard Course of Study is the blueprint for all instructional practice in classrooms. It provides guidance on the resources, strategies, and curricular supports needed to provide quality instruction for students (Public School Forum of North Carolina, 2022). Culturally sustaining teaching strategies should be an integral component. Teachers should be required to attend professional development regarding culturally sustaining teaching practices.

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Resources and materials should also be made readily available as part of the “unpacking” tools associated with the standards, as well as guides for including culturally sustaining strategies in teachers’ lesson plans. Culturally sustaining teaching must be a critical part of this process; it should not be optional.

The Teacher Effectiveness Standards are the components of the North Carolina Teacher Effectiveness Evaluation System (NCEES) by which teachers are observed and measured each year. There is an element within this evaluation that measures teachers’ ability to make the content relevant to the learners. This is currently under the category of “Teacher’s knowledge of the content.” However, culturally sustaining teaching should be measured more specifically within the evaluation tool, and as part of the facilitation of the lesson. The observer should be able to identify how the culturally sustaining teaching strategies were implemented within the lesson and rate the teacher directly on their ability to make the connections. The level of student engagement should also be noted based on the use of the strategies.

Recent legislation has required that teachers be provided professional development on the “Science of Reading.” This is designed to help teachers understand how students learn to read using brain-based research and strategies. Based on the results of this improvement, I assert that professional development regarding culturally sustaining teaching practices must be provided to teachers as well. The knowledge and understanding of how the strategies positively impact students is extremely important. Teachers must be exposed to this in addition to the other various areas for professional development.

School Performance Grades are provided for all public schools (including charter schools) in North Carolina. These grades are based on a formula that unfairly and unjustly measures these schools based on their students’ proficiency (80%) and growth (20%). Schools

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with high populations of Black students and students living in poverty are consistently considered “low performing” based on this inequitable formula. The true work of teachers and staff to help students improve from where they are is disregarded and demeaned by using standardized assessment data to categorize the schools. This information is then heavily publicized with limited guidance on the process for the general public.

The work of this improvement initiative gives voice to the “unheard” efforts of a few teachers working with Black students living in poverty. Their efforts and successes with making connections with students, and observing the students better connected to the content is a testimony to the importance of the focus on growth over proficiency. There was a focus on improving teacher capacity for understanding, implementing, and reflecting on their instructional practices related to culturally sustaining teaching. This had positive impacts on students that are not acknowledged through the School Performance Grade results. I assert that the formula for School Performance Grades must be dramatically changed to reflect the type of growth and improvement observed through this improvement initiative. The change must include a formula that accurately accounts for the ability of the teachers and staff to impact students from their current academic state to an improved one.

Directions for Future Research

Culturally sustaining teaching is effective for making connections within classrooms for Black students. One suggestion for future research involves correlating the qualitative data from initiatives such as this one to student data. This improvement initiative demonstrated the benefit for building teachers’ capacity for culturally sustaining teaching. The next reasonable step is to see the correlation between this improved capacity and students’ performance data. Ultimately if students are exposed to culturally sustaining teaching practices their performance improves.

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Using valid assessment data, the evidence of this success should be monitored and shared as further evidence of the benefits of these strategies for Black students.

Future research efforts should also focus on showing the benefit of culturally sustaining teaching strategies in classroom settings with Black students. However, there are other factors that play a role in the academic performance gaps experienced by Black students. Researchers should explore these factors in future research efforts. Black students are often denied access to high quality instruction. This occurs in schools that are hard to staff with highly qualified teachers and lack adequate resources and funding to meet students' needs (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Coleman-King et al., 2023; Madkins, 2011; Sun, 2018). Black students are not treated equitably many schools and educational settings. There are equity issues for Black students in terms of teaching practices, scheduling and class assignment, use of restrictive learning environments, identification of learning disabilities, and alignment of instruction to expected standards. Further research is needed in these areas to expose the gaps within these schools that create and promote equity issues for Black students. The research should then be used to move toward policies and practices that limit these gaps and promote equitable access for Black students.

I suggest more research efforts in charter school settings. Charter schools have more flexibility in most cases to explore alternative strategies for improving teaching and learning. Many charter schools are independent of large districts that require multiple steps and processes to change policies, curriculum, and even access resources. Despite the limitations experienced with this improvement initiative, the flexibility provided for me in the charter school setting to implement the plan was a definite benefit. Charter schools also tend to have unique demographics within their students based on the mission, vision, and focus of the school. The

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charter school for this study was unique in its' demographic, with over 88% of students being Black, and over 77% of those students living in poverty. These types of demographics may be ideal for research within certain groups or subgroups of students.

Conclusion

Culturally sustaining teaching involves a set of strategies that help to improve Black students' literacy performance. My theory of improvement holds that *if we improve teacher capacity for implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies, we will see positive outcomes related to Black students' literacy skills*. An improvement initiative was designed to evaluate this theory of improvement. The initiative took place beginning in the summer of 2024 during a summer reading program and continued through the first quarter of the regular school year. The work of this initiative was done at a charter school with a large population of Black students. The initiative involved a group of 5 teachers who agreed to receive professional development on the topic of culturally sustaining teaching, implement strategies learned in their classrooms, and provide and receive feedback along the way. The improvement initiative was evaluated using the measures associated with improvement science: *process, driver, outcome, and balance measures*. These measures captured both quantitative and qualitative data points that were analyzed and interpreted. The results of the improvement initiative supported the theory of improvement that there would be positive outcomes for Black students as a result of teachers' use of culturally sustaining teaching strategies. The evidence towards this assertion was captured most clearly in the qualitative data from the participants as they expressed perceptions of increased capacity and connections made for students through the use of the strategies.

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There were limitations of the initiative that may have influenced the impact and results. These factors include the limited sample size (n=5), changes in program/setting over the timeframe of the initiative, and lack of clarity with the expectations for participants and administrative team. Despite these limitations, the improvement initiative was successful in building teacher capacity for literacy instruction related to Black students and is recommended for continuation in the local context with an expansion of the same professional development and subsequent implementation for additional teaching staff. Culturally sustaining teaching is an effective strategy for increasing teachers' capacity to provide meaningful, quality literacy instruction for Black students.

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APPENDIX A

Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectancy Survey

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Identify yourself with your unique code.

- Teacher A (1)
- Teacher B (2)
- Teacher C (3)
- Teacher D (4)
- Teacher E (5)
- Teacher F (6)
- Teacher G (7)
- Teacher H (8)
- Teacher I (9)
- Teacher J (10)

End of Block: Participant Information

Start of Block: Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale

Please rate yourself based on your current self-efficacy related to culturally sustaining teaching strategies.

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CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Adapt instruction to meet the needs of my students.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Obtain information about my students' academic strengths, weaknesses, and interests.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Identify ways that the school culture (e.g., values, norms, and practices) is different from my students' home culture.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Implement strategies to minimize the effects of the mismatch between my students' home culture and the school culture.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Assess student learning using various types of assessments.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Obtain information about my students' home life and cultural background.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Establish positive home-school relations.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Use a variety of teaching methods.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Develop a community of learners within my classroom.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Use my students' cultural background to help make learning meaningful.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Use my students' prior knowledge to help them make sense of new information.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Identify how students' communication at home may differ from the school norms.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Design a classroom environment using displays that reflect a variety of cultures.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Develop a personal relationship with my students.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Communicate with parents regarding their child's educational progress.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Structure parent-teacher conferences so that the meeting is not intimidating for parents.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Help students to feel like important members of the classroom.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Revise instructional material to include a better representation of cultural groups.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Critically examine the curriculum to determine whether it reinforces negative cultural stereotypes.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Use a learning preference inventory to gather data about how my students like to learn.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Use examples that are familiar to students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Explain new concepts using examples that are taken from my students' everyday lives.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Use the interests of my students to make learning meaningful for them.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

Implement cooperative learning activities for students.

- Completely confident (1)
 - Somewhat confident (2)
 - Minimally confident (3)
 - Not confident at all (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Design instruction that matches my students' developmental needs.

- Completely confident (1)
- Somewhat confident (2)
- Minimally confident (3)
- Not confident at all (4)

Page Break

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

End of Block: Culturally Responsive Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale

Start of Block: Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy Scale

Please answer the following questions based on your level of outcome expectancy regarding each culturally sustaining teaching practice.

A positive teacher-student relationship can be established by building a sense of trust in my students.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

Students will be successful when instruction is adapted to meet their needs.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Acknowledging the ways that the school culture is different from my students' home culture will minimize the likelihood of discipline problems.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

Understanding the communication and learning preferences of my students will enhance their learning.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

Connecting my students' prior knowledge with new incoming information will lead to deeper learning.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Revising instructional material to include a better representation of the students' cultural group will foster positive self-images.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

Students will develop an appreciation for their culture when they are taught about the contributions their culture has made over time.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

Changing the structure of the classroom so that it is compatible with my students' home culture will increase their motivation to come to class.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

Using my students' interests when designing instruction will increase their motivation to learn.

- Entirely certain (1)
 - Somewhat certain (2)
 - Minimally certain (3)
 - Entirely uncertain (4)
-

Using culturally familiar examples will make learning new concepts easier.

- Entirely certain (1)
- Somewhat certain (2)
- Minimally certain (3)
- Entirely uncertain (4)

End of Block: Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy Scale

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Discussion Prompts

- ❖ Based on your experience, what do you find helps students learn best?
- ❖ Based on your experience, what teaching strategies have provided you with the most benefit for outcomes, specifically with literacy?
- ❖ What barriers exist with *teaching* and *learning* for Black students?
- ❖ What do you currently know about culturally sustaining teaching?
- ❖ What benefits might culturally sustaining teaching have for students?
- ❖ What challenges might you experience with utilizing culturally sustaining teaching strategies in your classrooms?

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

APPENDIX C

Professional Development Survey

Please answer the following questions regarding your recent Professional development experience.

The Professional development provided me with an in-depth understanding of Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies.

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

The Professional development clarified misconceptions I had about Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies.

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

The Professional development provided me with a better understanding of how to incorporate Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies into my lessons.

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

The Professional development provided me with new strategies and methods to incorporate Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies into my lessons.

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

The Professional development provided me with materials and resources to incorporate Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies into my lessons.

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

The Professional development was presented in a way that was clear and engaging.

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

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I believe I have the necessary background and skills to incorporate Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies into my lessons.

- Strongly Agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Disagree (3)
 - Strongly Disagree (4)
-

Please list and/or describe any challenges you anticipate with incorporating Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies into your lessons.

What outcomes do you anticipate from students by focusing on Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategies?

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APPENDIX D

Observation Walkthrough Tool

Observer

▼ Mrs. Graves (1) ... Other (8)

Q16 Teacher/Support Staff Observed

▼ Teacher A (1) ... Teacher E (5)

Was there a culturally sustaining teaching strategy being implemented during the time of this observation?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Unable to determine (3)

Please indicate the Culturally Sustaining Teaching strategy/practice observed.

▼ Activate Prior Knowledge (1) ... None Observed (12)

Level of Student Engagement in the use of the Culturally Sustaining strategy. (Observable)

▼ Highly engaged (1) ... Not engaged (4)

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Level of Teacher Engagement in the use of the Culturally Sustaining strategy. (Observable)

▼ Highly engaged in the instruction (1) ... Not engaged in the instruction (4)

Was the lesson aligned to the lesson plan?

▼ Yes (1) ... Unable to determine (3)

Was the content aligned to the lesson objective?

▼ Yes (1) ... Unable to determine (3)

Please provide any anecdotal notes regarding the observation.

Please provide recommendations for improvement concerning the use of the culturally sustaining teaching strategy observed.

End of Block: Default Question Block

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

APPENDIX E

Reflection Journal Prompts

- ❖ What went well with the lesson?
- ❖ What went well with the use of the culturally sustaining strategy?
- ❖ What (if anything) did not go as planned with the lesson and/or strategy usage? What do you think contributed to this outcome? What might you do differently to make improvements?
- ❖ Do you feel that the use of the culturally sustaining teaching strategy made a difference in the outcome for students? Please share why or why not. Any evidence (observed, stated, or based on student work samples/journals)
- ❖ Why did you choose to use this particular culturally sustaining strategy with this particular lesson, task, or activity?
- ❖ Did you have enough time to implement the strategy as intended?
- ❖ Did you have the resources needed to implement the strategy as intended?

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

APPENDIX F
Improvement Science Measures Quick Reference

Improvement Science Measure	What inquiry question is being answered?	Data collection from who?	What type of data collection tool will I use?	What type of data will I collect?	When will I collect this data?	How will I analyze this data?	When will I analyze this data?
CRTSE/CRTOE Self-Assessment Surveys (Outcome)	Did the initiative improve teachers' capacity (ability and perceptions) for providing culturally sustaining pedagogy?	Teachers	Qualtrics Survey (based on the CRTSE and CRTOE)	Quantitative	Beginning and end (May, October)	Review the results using a dependent t test and item analysis	After each assessment (June and October)
Focus Groups with teachers (Driver)	Is the initiative working to improve teachers' capacity and perceptions of culturally sustaining teaching as a strategy?	Teachers	Teachers will discuss the initiative in focus groups using a variety of question prompts.	Qualitative	Beginning and end of summer (June), end of 1 st quarter (October)	Review the results using a priori and in vivo coding	After each focus group session (June, October)
Professional Development Survey (Process)	Was the Professional Development effectively provided as intended?	Teachers	Qualtrics Survey	Quantitative & Qualitative	Summer (May); Fall (August)	Review the results, discuss action steps	After each survey (May, August)
Observation Walkthrough Tool (Process)	Is the improvement initiative being implemented as intended?	Improvement Team	Researcher-developed walkthrough tool	Quantitative & Qualitative	Weekly (June; August-October)	Review the results, discuss action steps	Bi-Weekly (June; August-October)
Teacher Implementation Feedback (Process)	Is the improvement initiative working as intended?	Teachers	Video/Audio Journaling	Quantitative & Qualitative	Weekly (June); Bi-weekly (August-October)	Review the results using a priori and in vivo coding	Daily (June); Weekly (August-October)

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Professional Development/ Observation Walkthrough/ Teacher Feedback/Focus Groups (Balance)	What unintended consequences have come about as a result of the improvement initiative?	Teachers and Improvement Team	Qualtrics Survey (specific questions related to challenges faced with implementation)	Qualitative	Beginning (June); Weekly (June, August-October)	Review the results using a priori and in vivo coding	Bi-Weekly (June; August-October)
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APPENDIX G

Implementation Timeline

GOAL: To build teacher capacity for implementing culturally sustaining teaching strategies in the classroom.	Dec/Jan. 23/24	Feb. 2024	March 2024	April 2024	May 2024	June 2024	July 2024	Aug. 2024	Sept. 2024	Oct. 2024	Nov. 2024	Dec. 2024
Develop a design team and set meetings for the duration of implementation. Team leader build capacity of design team to do the work.	X 	X										

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Design team collaboratively identifies problem; conducts causal analysis; research potential improvement initiatives; designs intervention; designs implementation plan; and creates measures for assessing process and outcomes connected to the problem/cause.		X	X									
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<p>The design team develops plans for Summer Program, including the Professional development on culturally sustaining teaching.</p>		<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>	<p>X</p>								
<p>Teachers will complete the Culturally Responsive Self-Efficacy Scale (CRTSE) and the Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy (CRTOE) surveys for pre-service data to be compared with post-survey results. (Outcome Measure)</p>					<p>X</p>							
<p>Pre-service focus group to assess teacher’s capacity, and self-efficacy regarding culturally sustaining teaching for qualitative data. (Driver Measure)</p>					<p>X</p>							
<p>Provide Professional development for teachers on culturally sustaining teaching and guidelines for implementing strategies.</p>						<p>X</p>		<p>X</p>				

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Teachers will complete the Professional development Evaluation survey for feedback. (Process Measure)						X		X				
Teachers will use the culturally sustaining strategies learned and monitor student performance.						X		X	X	X		
Teachers will complete weekly audio/video journal entries based on question prompts related to the process of implementation. This will include space for feedback regarding successes, challenges, concerns, and unintended consequences of the initiative. (Process/Balance Measure)						X		X	X	X		
The Improvement Team will use an Observation Walkthrough Tool to evaluate the implementation of the teaching strategies on a daily basis. (Process/Balance Measure)						X		X	X	X		
The Improvement Team will meet regularly to discuss the data received and feedback collected.					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

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APPENDIX H

Culturally Sustaining Teaching Strategies “Cheat Sheet”

Strategy	Benefits/Features	Best when used...	Examples	How might I use it?
Activating Prior Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Making Connections</i> ➤ Validation ➤ Affirmation 	At the beginning of instructional time (lesson, unit, task, project)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Questioning and answering ➤ Discussion ➤ Storytelling ➤ Using relevant examples 	
Cognitive Routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Active Processing (organizing information)</i> ➤ Making Connections ➤ Trust ➤ Respect 	During instructional time (lesson, unit, task, project)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Similarities/differences ➤ Whole-to-part ➤ Relationships ➤ Perspectives 	
Rhythmic/Mnemonics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Active Processing (organizing information)</i> ➤ Making Connections ➤ Affirmation 	During instructional time (lesson, unit, task, project)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Making a rap or song ➤ Storifying the content ➤ PEMDAS ➤ Never Eat Soggy Waffles (North, East, South, West) 	
Providing Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Wise feedback</i> ➤ Trust ➤ Respect ➤ Validation ➤ Affirmation 	At a checkpoint or at the end of instructional time (lesson, unit, task, project)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Constructive feedback ➤ Wise feedback ➤ Instructive feedback ➤ Asset-based Feedback Protocol 	
Culturally Connecting Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Making Connections</i> ➤ Instructional conversations ➤ Validation ➤ Respect 	During instructional time (lesson, unit, task, project)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ “Please have a seat at your assigned desk” vs. “Would you like to have a seat now?” 	

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

<p>Reframing mistakes as information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Validation</i> ➤ Affirmation ➤ Wise feedback ➤ Respect ➤ Trust 	<p>During instructional time (lesson, unit, task, project)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students talking about their mistakes/errors ➤ Finding correct information as a part of an incorrect whole answer ➤ Providing opportunities to rethink an approach 	
<p>Establishing Routines and Rituals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Affirmation</i> ➤ Validation ➤ Instructional conversations ➤ Trust ➤ Respect 	<p>Transitions, Independent and/or small group work times, beginning or ending the lesson/task/unit/project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Open with a centering activity ➤ Use music or call and response for transitions. ➤ Routines for “parallel” independent work time 	

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: EXAMINING STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT THE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK STUDENTS.

APPENDIX I

Professional Development Session Agenda

Agenda Item	Objective/Outcomes	Timeframe
Welcome	Participants will understand the purpose of the Professional Development session, and desired outcomes	8:30am- 8:40am (10 minutes)
Opening Discussion	Participants will activate their prior knowledge regarding quality instructional strategies that help Black students learn.	8:40am- 9:00am (20 minutes)
History/Define CSP/Research	Participants will gain an understanding of the background of culturally sustaining pedagogy	9:00am- 9:10am (10 minutes)
Why CSP?- Culture and the Brain	Participants will understand the connections between culturally sustaining pedagogy and how the brain functions.	9:10am-9:30am (20 minutes)
Break	N/A	9:30am-9:40am (10 minutes)
Ready for Rigor Framework	Participants will understand how the Ready for Rigor Framework helps categorize CSP strategies.	9:40am-9:50am (10 minutes)
CSP Instructional Strategies	Participants will learn about various culturally sustaining strategies and learn ways to implement them into their instruction.	9:50am-10:35am (45 minutes)
Break	N/A	10:35am-10:45am (10 minutes)
Time for modeling/lesson planning	Participants will be provided time for adjusting their own lessons to include culturally sustaining teaching strategies.	10:45am-11:30am (45 minutes)
Break	N/A	11:30am-11:40am (10 minutes)
Summer School Plan; Research processes	Participants will be provided the details for the summer program (schedule, expectations, research processes, etc.)	11:40am-12:10pm (30 minutes)

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Professional Development Survey	Participants will provide feedback on the effectiveness of the professional development session.	12:10pm-12:20pm <i>(10 minutes)</i>
Closure	Participants will be provided with materials and resources for the work.	12:20pm-12:30pm <i>(10 minutes)</i>