

NO STUDENTS LEFT BEHIND: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate in Education.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables vi

Acknowledgments.....vii

Dedication.....ix

Abstract.....x

The Disquisition..... ix

The Problem of the Literacy Gap for Black Students..... 1

 NAEP Trends in Fourth-Grade Reading for Black and White Students 2

 Understanding the Gap 2

 National Literacy Policy: ESSA 3

 The Contextual Significance of COVID-19 4

 Why Third Grade? 5

 The Impact 7

A Critical, Causal Analysis and Theoretical Framework 7

 The Importance of Causal Analysis..... 8

 Institutional Causes..... 9

 Theoretical Frameworks and Causality 10

Critical Race Theory.....11

Critical Whiteness Studies13

 Lack of Outreach to Black Families 14

 Reduced Access to Early Reading Resources..... 17

 Inadequate Teacher Preparation and Professional Development..... 18

 Lack of Culturally Responsive Instruction 21

 Lowered Expectations..... 23

 Access to Grade-Level Curriculum 24

 Limitations of Standardized Testing as an Indicator of Reading Proficiency 25

Local Context: Ira B. Jones Elementary 28

 Background and Demographics..... 28

History and Review of the Problem at IBJ 30

 Academic Performance..... 33

North Carolina’s Reading Policies.....34

Connecting to the Causes at IBJ.....35

My Professional Role and Positionality at IBJ.....35

 Improvement Initiative to Bridge the Literacy Gap for Black Student 37

Research for Increasing Reading Proficiency:The Science of Reading37

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Instruction.....39

Teacher Training and Professional Development42

Family and Community Involvement and Outreach43

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Access to Grade-Level Curriculum.....44

Driver Diagram and Theory of Improvement..... 46

Driver Diagram46

Theory of Improvement48

Improvement Science for Improvement Design 49

Goals 53

 Implementation Process Summary54

 Anticipated Challenges/Barriers Other Than Hurricane Helene54

 Impact of Hurricane Helene on Implementation and Adjustments56

 Adjustments to the Implementation Plan.....57

 Evaluating the Improvement Initiative 59

Data Collection and Analysis59

 Driver Measures..... 61

Data Collection Processes.....62

Data Analysis Processes.....63

Results from Analysis.....64

Kindergarten.....67

First Grade.....67

Second Grade.....68

Overall K-2 Trends68

Teacher Observations of Student Engagement 69

Findings69

 Process Measures 72

Data Collection Processes72

Data Analysis Processes73

Findings75

 Outcome Measures..... 77

Data Collection Processes..... 78

Data Analysis Processes77

Results from Analysis78

Qualitative Focus Group and Informal Conversation Results79

Notable Individual Insights..... 80

Student Reading Outcomes80

Findings81

Balance Measures 82

Data Collection Processes82

Data Analysis 85

Results from Analysis.....83

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Findings..... 86

Impact and Future Directions.....85

Recommendations for Practice86

Peer Observation and Feedback.....86

Ongoing Professional Support.....86

Community Engagement Initiatives87

Assessment and Accountability Measures87

Policy Recommendations and Systemic Change88

Leadership Lessons Learned..... 90

References..... 92

Appendix A: Implementation Timeline 110

Appendix B: Culturally-Responsive Teaching Pre and Post Survey Questions..... 111

Appendix C: Teacher Focus Group Questions 114

Appendix D: Culturally Responsive/Relevant Teaching & Pedagogy: PD & Logistics 116

List of Figures

FIGURE 1: NAEP Trends in Fourth-Grade Reading for Black and White Students2

FIGURE 2:Black Students Reading Below Grade Level Using a Fishbone Diagram10

FIGURE 3: Ira B. Jones Elementary Student Demographics by Percentage28

FIGURE 4: Reading Proficiency by Race/Ethnicity in Asheville City Schools30

FIGURE 5: Driver Diagram (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020)47

FIGURE 6: Plan, Do, Study, Act Model (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020)50

FIGURE 7: Implementation Timeline52

FIGURE 8. DIBELS Measures for Determining Reading Benchmarks.....65

FIGURE 9: K-2 mClass Reading Performance Trends: BOY to MOY66

List of Tables

TABLE 1: Third-Grade Reading: Grade-Level Proficient (Achievement Levels 3, 4, & 5)31

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BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

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DEDICATION

This disquisition is dedicated to my beloved grandmother, Ida Mae Dix, the matriarch of our family and the foundation upon which I stand. Though she is no longer with us in body, her spirit walks beside me every day, guiding my steps, fortifying my voice, and grounding my purpose.

Ida Mae instilled in me the values that continue to shape my life—self-worth, confidence, courage, uniqueness, determination, compassion, and gratitude. Because of her, I speak boldly and unapologetically. I advocate for those whose voices are unheard, underrepresented, or silenced. As my childhood pastor would say, I do it all “for the good of the group.”

I am the embodiment of Black Excellence—a reflection of love that uplifted me, wisdom that guided me, and expectations that demanded my best. I am here because of Ida Mae and the many someones who believed in me, poured into me, and reminded me that greatness is not a destination—it is my birthright. Excellence is our legacy.

I am the dream and the determination of those who came before me. I am the product of genius, love, and pride, nurtured by high expectations and an unshakable belief in who we are. Excellence is not just something I strive for—it is who I am. It is in my DNA. It is woven into the very fabric of our history, our culture, and my daily existence.

This work is for her. This work is because of her. This work is Ida Mae Dix.

Abstract

This disquisition explores the persistent literacy gap affecting Black students and the systemic barriers that hinder equitable access to reading proficiency by third grade. Anchored in an equity-centered leadership framework, this improvement initiative was implemented at a Title I elementary school and utilized Improvement Science methodology to identify and address root causes of reading disparities. The project centered on professional learning focused on the Science of Reading (SoR), culturally relevant pedagogy, and the integration of responsive teaching strategies designed to affirm students' identities and increase engagement. Data were collected through teacher reflections, student performance metrics, and literacy assessment tools, including mClass DIBELS benchmarks. The study highlights the critical role of school leaders in disrupting inequitable practices, fostering teacher growth, and building inclusive learning environments where Black students can thrive. Findings suggest that intentional, culturally responsive literacy practices—combined with high-quality instruction and a commitment to equity—can improve early literacy outcomes and set the foundation for long-term academic success. The disquisition concludes with recommendations for sustaining instructional change, deepening equity work, and honoring the brilliance and potential of every child.

Keywords: Black students, early literacy, culturally responsive pedagogy, equity, Science of Reading, educational leadership, improvement science

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, and differing from the traditional dissertation used by most doctoral 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).

The Problem of the Literacy Gap for Black Students

Reading proficiency among Black children in the United States has been a matter of concern for decades. Most states want all their students to achieve proficiency in reading by third grade. Unfortunately, many Black students do not achieve this, as determined by state standardized assessments, and struggle with reading performance at rates higher than their same-age White peers (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Reardon et al. (2019) found that the gap between Black and White students has remained significant over the past two decades. Despite efforts to improve literacy outcomes, the problem persists.

The U.S. Department of Education's (USDOE) National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called the "nation's report card," is an assessment mandated by Congress (NCES, n.d.). The NAEP exam is the largest ongoing assessment of what U.S. students know in various subjects. The exam is overseen by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that is within the USDOE. According to the 2009 NAEP results, only 33% of all fourth-grade students were reading at a "proficient" level. The majority, (67%), were reading at the "basic" level and 33% were below basic level. These results indicate that the education system is not meeting the needs of many students.

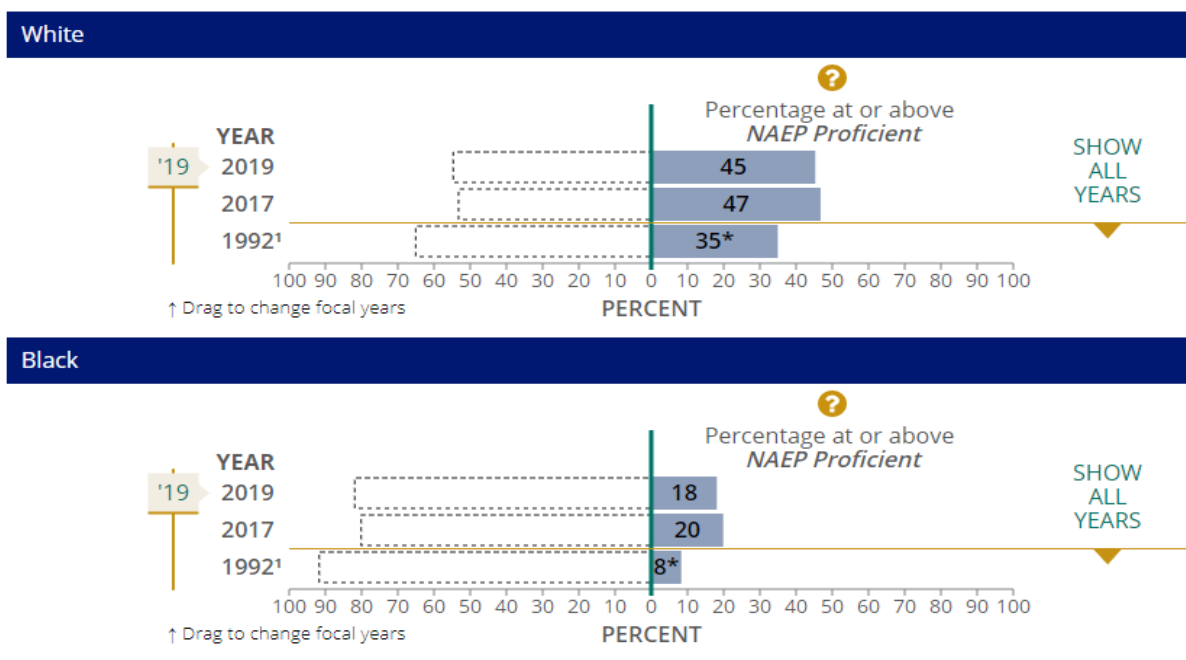
NAEP data (Figure 1) suggests that we have more work to do to improve the reading performance of Black students. There is a significant disparity in reading achievement between Black and White students. Although both groups have improved their reading proficiency through the years, except for 2019, the rate of improvement is not equal between the two groups. White students have consistently shown higher reading scores over time compared to Black students. The percentage of students who achieved proficiency in reading also differs

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

substantially between Black and White students, with more White students achieving proficiency levels compared to Black students.

Figure 1

NAEP Trends in Fourth-Grade Reading for Black and White Students



Source: *NAEP Report Card: Reading*. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>

Understanding the Gap

Disparities in academic performance (e.g., standardized test scores, grade point averages, graduation rates, dropout rates, college admission statistics) are most often seen between White and minoritized students (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). Hilliard (2003) defined the achievement gap as the difference in academic performance between African American and European American students. Interestingly, the term generally refers only to the performance gap between Black and White students, and not between Black and Asian students or Black and Latino students. Therefore, “. . . it seems that something more than achievement is being discussed when the gap language is used” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 137).

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Ladson-Billings (2013) understood that how we frame an issue is as significant as the argument we make about it. Calling the persistent achievement disparities between White students and minoritized students a “gap” suggests that something is inherently wrong in Black and Latino students, families, and communities. Ladson-Billings (2013) found this perception shortsighted and reframed the conversation about “gaps” in education by shifting the focus from what students lack (as implied by the term “achievement gap”) to what they are denied: equal opportunities to succeed. In her view, the opportunity gap is not about deficits in students’ abilities or efforts but about the systemic disparities in access to high-quality resources, rigorous curriculum, experienced teachers, and supportive learning environments.

A narrow focus on the achievement gap predictably leads to policies grounded in high-stakes testing, which in turn leads to narrow thinking about groups of students, their teachers, and their schools. While assessments attempt to determine where students are academically, they ignore the role of prior access and opportunity – the true measure of standardized testing (Gorski, 2018; Welner & Carter, 2013).

National Literacy Policy: ESSA

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) (ESSA) is a federal law designed to replace the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002. ESSA emphasizes improving student achievement, including reading proficiency. The Act was designed to give states and school districts more flexibility in utilizing federal funding to support K-12 education. ESSA was a bipartisan measure that reauthorized the nearly 50-year-old *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA). Its purpose was to ensure that all children had access to a high-quality education.

ESSA requires states to develop academic standards, assessments, and accountability plans that prepare all students for college and careers. Schools must annually assess the reading

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

proficiency of students in grades three through eight and once again in high school. The ESSA *Act* includes provisions to support early literacy and recognizes the importance of building a strong foundation in reading skills at an early age. States and their school districts are encouraged to invest in evidence-based early literacy programs and professional development (PD) for educators to build a strong literacy foundation (USDOE, 2018).

ESSA identifies schools that consistently underperform and requires states to intervene to support these schools. Reading proficiency is a key factor in determining whether a school needs improvement, and states are required to develop plans to help struggling schools improve their reading instruction and outcomes. The law also includes provisions to support English learners, students with disabilities, and students from families with low levels of income. The overall goal of ESSA is to ensure that every student, regardless of their background or circumstances, has access to a high-quality education, and the support they need to succeed in school and beyond. Despite federal legislation and policies to improve reading performance, schools have been unable to significantly improve students', especially Black students' performance in reading.

The Contextual Significance of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted learning for many students. The pandemic forced many schools to close and transition to remote learning. This was a context for which most educators and students were unprepared. The disruption of traditional classroom learning environments exacerbated the pre-existing achievement gap in reading (Bailey et al., 2021).

Dorn et al. (2021) estimated that students in the United States likely lost several months of learning in 2020, with students of color and those from low-income backgrounds being disproportionately affected and experiencing an even longer loss of learning. The researchers estimated that some students, particularly those in grades K-5, could be behind by over a year.

They further suggested that the effects of the pandemic on learning could have long-term consequences for educational achievement. Other investigators (Bronzino et al., 2021) highlighted the digital divide between those with and those without access to technology or a high-speed internet connection.

This situation worsened existing educational inequalities, as students from low-income families were especially affected and it became very difficult for these students to access classroom materials and engage in remote learning. Extended periods of remote learning and disruptions to the school year led to concerns about educational losses ('learning loss') (Dorn et al., 2021). Many students fell behind academically and, as a result, will likely need more instructional time and additional resources to catch up (Doan-Nguyen, 2023; Dorn et al., 2021; Editorial Board of the *New York Times*, 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Why Third Grade?

In grades kindergarten through third grade, children spend a large amount of time learning to read. In grades four through twelve, less emphasis is applied to the mechanics of reading. Students are expected to use their acquired reading skills to learn course content (Chall et al., 1990; Zakariya, S. B., 2015). As such, third grade marks a critical point in reading. In fourth grade, students begin encountering a wider variety of texts with greater rigor. Students must be able to extract and analyze new information and expand their vocabularies through texts (O'Brien, 2008).

However, the sudden increase in academic difficulty can overwhelm those who have yet to master the mechanics of reading. These students must continue learning basic reading skills, such as sounding out words while also trying to grasp more complex texts. Also, a lack of

foundational phonics can result in significant learning gaps that may persist throughout a student's academic career (Lyon, 2004).

Scholars found that reading to learn requires the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from various sources (Lyon, 2004; Goldman, 2012; Hammond, 2015). Effective reading also involves applying different knowledge, reading, and reasoning processes to various types of content (Goldman, 2012). Readers must assess sources of information for relevance, reliability, impartiality, completeness and must be able to connect information from multiple sources. In short, successful readers must use general reading skills and pay close attention to discipline-specific processes (Goldman, 2012).

Strong reading comprehension skills are not only central to academic and professional success, but to a productive social and civic life (Shanahan et al., 2010). These skills build one's capacity to learn independently, absorb information on a variety of topics, enjoy reading, and experience literature more deeply (Shanahan et al., 2010).

Early reading challenges can create dependent learners who struggle with academic progress and confidence (Hammond, 2015). These students often require extensive support from teachers and peers, which can impede their development of self-reliance and independent problem-solving strategies. Dependent learners consistently seek external guidance and reassurance to complete tasks, displaying limited initiative in tackling challenges independently.

This reliance on constant supervision and specific instructions tends to inhibit their critical thinking and self-directed learning capabilities, potentially leading to passive behavior when support is unavailable (Hammond, 2015). Further, they may struggle with retaining information and comprehending new concepts. Dependent learners, according to Hammond, are the result of an education system that prioritizes obedience over critical thinking and creativity.

Conversely, independent learners have developed the skills and dispositions to navigate academic language and norms of discourse while taking ownership of their learning.

The Impact

Reading is a vital skill necessary for academic success, lifelong learning, engagement in the world, and access to a higher quality of life. Studies reveal that students who cannot read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school, are less likely to enroll in college, and are at greater risk for incarceration (Hernandez, 2011; Kazakoff, 2021). Third grade reading scores strongly predict access to future educational and employment opportunities (Milner, 2020) which provide the income needed for people to thrive (e.g., housing, physical and mental health resources, recreation and leisure, social belonging, security, and freedom). Using data from the NAEP, Grigg et al. (2003) found that many American children cannot read well enough to do their schoolwork, casting doubt on whether they will receive the full economic, social, and civic benefits they deserve.

A Critical, Causal Analysis and Theoretical Framework

This section presents literature-supported causes of low literacy performance among Black students and the persistent racial achievement gap in literacy. To tackle the inequities that affect the literacy performance of Black students, a causal analysis is needed to identify possible underlying factors and root causes. The analysis will help pinpoint causal influences within a school and enable effective action to be taken to change the identified variables is perpetuating the inequities.

According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020), a causal analysis can help us move away from a deficit-based perspective (Valencia, 2019) of blaming factors outside our organizations for the problems we face. A more critical causal analysis requires us to examine internal practices or

behaviors that may contribute to the problem. She also recommends that the process be user-centered and accommodate multiple perspectives. At times, we may not see how our own practices contribute to the problem, but they may be evident to others. With this approach, we can take responsibility for our role and seek to change the things that exist within our locus of control.

The Importance of Causal Analysis

Rodriguez (2016) describes causal analysis as a comprehensive and systematic approach to examining the relationships between causes, effects, reasons, and outcomes of a particular phenomenon, event, problem, or situation. The approach thoroughly investigates the underlying factors contributing to a specific result or consequence. The aim is to identify, understand, and explain the complex interplay of variables that can lead to a particular outcome.

The process of causal analysis goes beyond simply identifying correlations between variables. It also establishes a logical and substantiated understanding of how specific causes contribute to observed effects or outcomes. This requires a deep understanding of the underlying mechanisms and processes that lead to a particular outcome (Pearl & Mackenzie, 2018).

Causal analysis involves breaking down a complex problem or situation into its components, identifying the key factors contributing to the outcome, and then examining the relationships between them. The purpose of causal analysis is to develop a clear and comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to a particular outcome, which can then be used in making decisions, developing policies, and creating interventions or strategies to address the problem or situation in question.

I am using a ‘fishbone diagram’ to visualize and help categorize potential causes of my problem of practice. A fishbone diagram is also known as a cause-and-effect diagram or

Ishikawa diagram. The tool's primary objective is to identify a problem's root causes. In his book, *Guide to Quality Control* (1986), Ishikawa called the diagram a cause-and-effect diagram and gave three general reasons for creating it: determining the quality characteristic that needs improving (the problem); identifying the major factors causing it; and detailing factors that may contribute to the broader reasons, which are called 'twigs'.

Institutional Causes

Figure 2 is a fishbone diagram (Ishikawa, 1960) showing five institutional causes of low reading performance for Black students:

- Lack of outreach with Black families
- Limited access to early reading resources
- Inadequate teacher preparation and PD
- Lack of culturally relevant instruction
- Reduced access to grade-level curriculum as the result of pull-out service structures

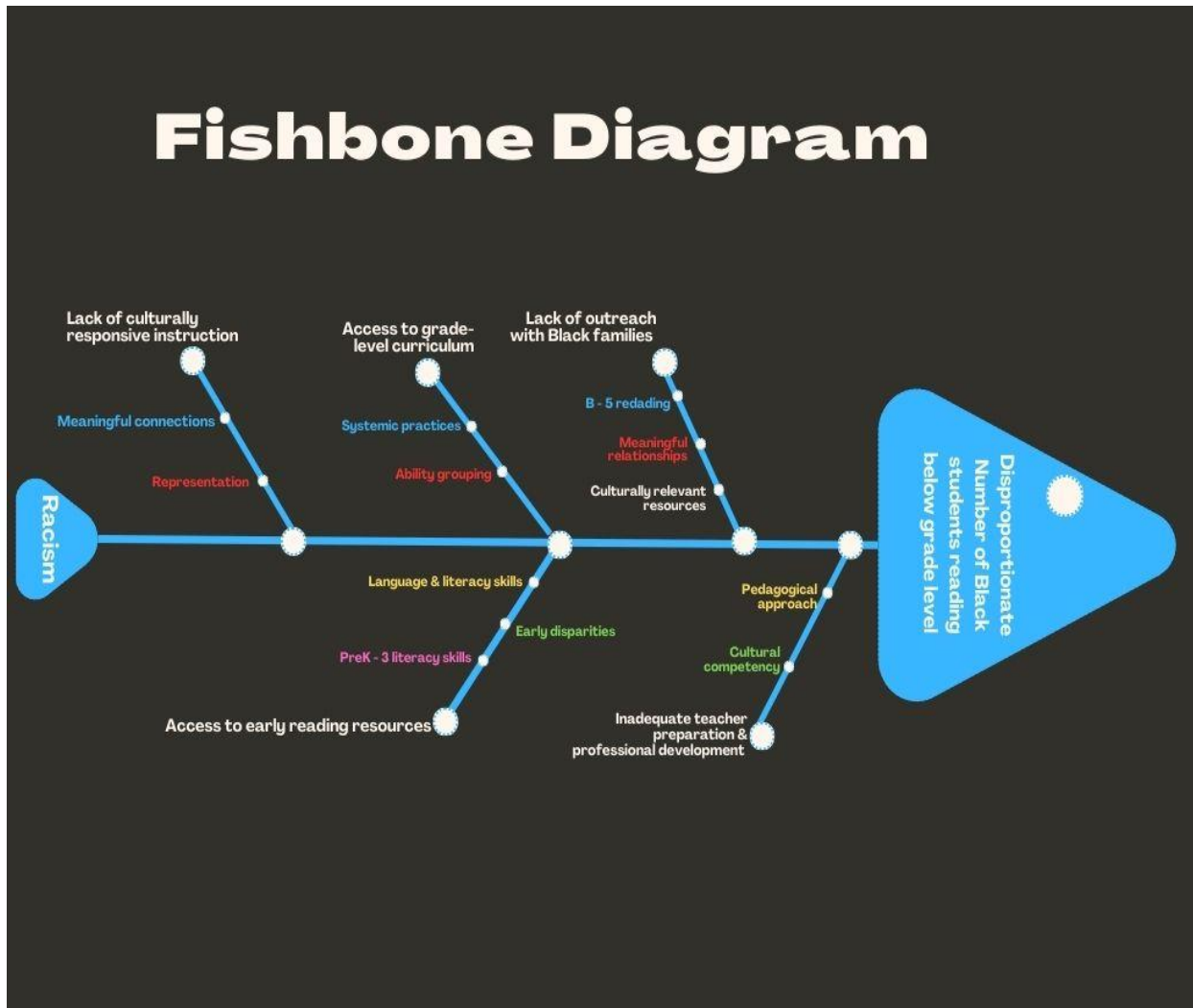
The problem statement is located in the 'head' of the fish, (disproportionate number of Black students reading below grade-level expectancy) and each bone contains an individual, institutional influence. I consciously excluded variables outside of the school in order to focus on the school's role and locus of control and to avoid deficit ideology that blames students and families for the problem. The 'tail' of the fish—its driver, so to speak, —is racism, which connects with my later discussion involving the theoretical underpinnings of critical race theory and critical whiteness.

Before describing the organizational influences (bones of the fish), it is important to discuss the theoretical frameworks that energize those causes. They help us understand why

educational organizations might choose to implement certain policies and practices while discounting others.

Figure 2

Causal Analysis of Black Students Reading Below Grade Level Using a Fishbone Diagram.



(After Ishikawa, 1960)

Theoretical Frameworks and Causality

Racism is a deeply ingrained system of prejudice, discrimination, or bias based on a person's race or ethnicity and manifested in actions, policies, or practices. It intentionally or unintentionally limits, denies, or hinders individuals or groups of a specific racial or ethnic

background from access to resources, opportunities, rights, or privileges available to others in society (Weiler & Virtue, 2024). This definition underscores the systemic and structural aspects of racism that result in unequal treatment and unequal access. It recognizes that racism can be both intentional (“explicit discrimination”) (ed post, 2024) and unintentional (“implicit bias with systemic disparities”) (Long, 2016) and encompasses a wide range of practices and policies that perpetuate racism.

Critical race theory (CRT) and critical whiteness studies (CSW) are two theoretical frameworks that frame and explicate racism in policy and practice. Both help us understand why institutional causes (e.g., inequitable practices) exist.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that emerged in the United States in late 1970s and early 1980s to address the limitations of traditional civil rights approaches to racial inequality (Bridges, 2021) and questions many of the fundamental assumptions surrounding the American legal system. Bell (1980), a lawyer, law professor, and legal scholar, was one of its earliest leading theorists. CRT analyzes how race intersects with other forms of social stratification to shape and maintain power, privilege, and oppressive systems (Crenshaw, 1989). It describes how racism is systemic and ingrained in societal structures and institutions through policies and practices.

The theory examines the role of race and racism in perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial groups. Several of its key tenets are:

- Viewing race as a social construct rather than a biological reality
- Highlighting the intersections of race with other forms of social stratification

- Emphasizing that racism is a structural and systemic issue that requires critical analysis of social, cultural, historical, and political contexts (Bridges, 2021).

CRT helps us understand how inequitable institutional practices persist and are deeply embedded in societal systems. This suggests that racism is not simply the result of individual acts of discrimination but is also institutionalized within systems and structures. It acknowledges that institutions, policies, and practices can be inherently biased, resulting in unequal outcomes for different racial groups. The significance of historical legacies, structural racism, intersectionality, implicit bias, and policy analysis in understanding and addressing ongoing disparities is also underscored. CRT calls for critically examining institutional practices and pursuing reforms that advance equity and justice within these systems (Bell, 2004; Crenshaw, 2011).

Education scholars have shed light on the prevalence and persistence of racism in schools. They argued that policies, practices, and institutional norms perpetuate racial disparities in areas such as student achievement, discipline, and access to educational opportunities (Patton et al., 2007). Inequities such as systemic advantages and privileges highlight unequal advantages for Whites over people of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contended that race is under-considered as a theory in education and called for educational researchers to pay closer attention to the relationship between race and educational inequity. Using Bell's notion of "racial realism" (Bell, 1992, p. 364ff.), racialized inequities are not accidental or aberrant. Rather, racialized educational inequities are the result of specific policies and practices designed to maintain particular forms of societal dominance and marginalization.

Patton et al. (2007) recommended adopting critical race perspectives in daily educational practices to promote awareness of the role of race in producing disparate outcomes among student groups. It is imperative to recognize and acknowledge the intricate challenges and systemic complexities that hinder and contribute to hindering students of color, as emphasized by DeCuir and Dixson (2004) and Patton et al. (2007).

Critical Whiteness Studies

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) examine the meaning of White privilege and White privilege pedagogy and how White privilege is complicit in racism. “Whiteness” is a term of racial discourse, whereas the category “White people” represents a socially-constructed identity usually based on skin color (Leonardo, 2009). Whiteness, in this sense, refers to a set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that place the interests and perspectives of White people at the center of what is considered normal daily life.

Critical scholarship on “Whiteness” is not an assault on White people themselves, but on the socially constructed and consistently reinforced power of White identifications, norms, and interests (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The concept of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), described by legal scholars using CRT, highlights how Whiteness is perceived as an identity that grants certain privileges and rights. CRT scholars identified how the White curriculum has been defended as a form of White property protected by those who benefit from it (Harris, 1993).

As a result, addressing issues of race in the curriculum may face resistance from White stakeholders (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). CRT underscores the importance of including diverse perspectives and counter-stories, particularly those of minority voices (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In public schools, the curriculum is highly valued and protected by those who design it (i.e., White people). The understanding of Whiteness as property sheds light

on legal and social mechanisms that allow some to exclude others from the privileges associated with being White. A majority of current school curriculum is often biased towards White perspectives, ignoring and erasing the perspectives of people of color. While some schools try to address this through initiatives on cultural diversity and culturally responsive teaching, their efforts will likely be ineffective unless they specifically address power, privilege, and embedded racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Lack of Outreach to Black Families

Children's education is not shaped solely by their experiences at school, but by the rich learning environments created by their families and communities (The Education Trust, 2022). Children's development and growth depend heavily on families from all backgrounds, but especially on those from historically minoritized communities (Garcia & Marks, 2011). It is important to recognize and build on the strengths and expertise that Black families bring to their children's education. We can ensure that families are considered integral to the educational process by fostering genuine, two-way learning partnerships.

Educators must prioritize cultural responsiveness and inclusivity by recognizing the value of Black families' knowledge, skills, and values. By working collaboratively, schools and families can create supportive and stimulating learning environments at home and in the community. In doing so, schools contribute to a learning ecosystem that uplifts and elevates all participants. This approach values the expertise of Black families and acknowledges that children's early experiences, in conjunction with their families, form the foundation for lifelong learning and success (Allen & Kelly, 2015). From a partnership grounded in equity and mutual support, children can thrive and each participant can feel valued for their unique contributions.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Effective collaboration between elementary schools, early care, education programs, and community-based organizations can support partnerships. These provide opportunities for families to exchange knowledge, share resources, and engage in meaningful dialogue about their children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development. This is done by combining resources, promoting consistent development across multiple areas, and engaging families in the learning process. Early language and literacy development, critical to later academic success, can be enhanced by working together to build on the practices families already use at home. Such partnerships ensure children receive comprehensive support tailored to their developmental needs.

Effective collaboration between elementary schools, early care programs, and community-based organizations provide crucial opportunities for families to engage in their children's educational development. Their absence has important implications for student achievement, especially for early literacy development among Black students. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2023), 85% of Black students read below grade level by fourth grade, compared to 45% of their White peers and emphasizes the critical need for comprehensive support systems.

These partnerships, when properly implemented, enable knowledge to be exchanged, resources shared, and create a meaningful dialogue about children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development. Early language and literacy development, essential to later academic success, can be enhanced when schools and families work together to build upon existing home practices. However, when these collaborative structures are missing, schools miss vital opportunities to provide tailored developmental support that acknowledges and builds upon

families' cultural wealth and home literacy practices, potentially contributing to persistent achievement gaps in early reading proficiency.

When schools operate in isolation from families and community organizations, they miss critical opportunities to use families' cultural wealth and knowledge when fostering children's literacy development. However, many schools continue to implement literacy programs without considering families' perspectives or cultural contexts, resulting in several significant problems.

First, without regular knowledge exchange between families and educators, schools often fail to understand and build on the literacy practices already present in students' homes. This disconnect can lead to instructional approaches that don't align with students' cultural experiences and learning styles. Second, the lack of coordinated resource sharing leaves many families without access to essential literacy support materials that reflect their cultural backgrounds. Third, limited meaningful dialogue between schools and families can cause misaligned expectations and decrease family engagement in literacy development.

The impact is particularly significant in early literacy development, where the disconnect between home and school learning environments can hinder students' reading progress. Howard (2019) found that schools with strong family-community partnerships experienced a 40% increase in reading proficiency rates among Black students compared to those without such partnerships. Additionally, data from The Education Trust (2022) shows that schools serving predominantly Black communities are 30% less likely to have established family engagement programs, which may contribute to persistent achievement gaps.

Instead of positioning outreach programs as a way to 'equip' families, it is crucial to co-create opportunities that support children's learning while highlighting the cultural wealth families contribute. Educational initiatives should be developed collaboratively, identifying

culturally relevant resources, high-quality reading materials, and literacy experiences that align with families' values and experiences. In the absence of these partnerships, schools miss important chances to effectively support student literacy development which perpetuates systemic inequities in early reading achievement.

Reduced Access to Early Reading Resources

Language and literacy skills—as well as specific literacy challenges—emerge much earlier than the third grade (Fernald et al., 2013). Children enter kindergarten with widely divergent literacy skills. National data sets, such as the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study* (NCES, n.d.), show that minority children, and those from families with lower incomes enter kindergarten with substantially lower reading skills than their White and higher-income peers (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Quinn, 2015; Reardon & Portilla, 2016; von Hippel & Hamrock, 2019). These early differences are important because children's skills in kindergarten predict their future outcomes (Claessens et al., 2009).

A child's education is not limited to the classroom and needs to include their families and communities as essential partners in their development. Research has shown that focusing on PreK-third literacy skills and providing access to early reading materials notably improves children's educational outcomes. Access to early reading resources for Black families with children from birth to five, followed by kindergarten to third grade is a concern that must be addressed to promote literacy and educational equality (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009).

Language and literacy skills—as well as specific literacy challenges—can emerge much earlier than the third grade, making early access to reading resources critical for academic success (Fernald et al., 2013). Limited access to these early reading resources can meaningfully affect Black children's readiness for kindergarten and can result in an achievement gap that may

widen as students progress through elementary school. Data from the (NCES, n.d.) show that Black children enter kindergarten with substantially lower reading readiness skills compared to their White peers, a disparity largely attributed to unequal access to early literacy materials and experiences (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Quinn, 2015).

This initial readiness gap has cascading effects, as children who start behind often struggle to catch up to their peers who entered school with stronger literacy (National Reading Panel, 2000). Research indicates that students who begin kindergarten with limited exposure to books, phonological awareness, and print concepts are 60% more likely to require reading intervention by third grade (Brown, 2014). Further, children's skills in kindergarten strongly predict their future academic outcomes, with early reading gaps typically expanding rather than narrowing over time (Claessens et al., 2009).

The lack of accessible, culturally relevant reading materials in many Black communities from birth to age five creates a barrier to developing early literacy skills, contributing to the disproportionate number of Black students reading below grade level by third grade (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009). This systemic inequity in the distribution of early resources perpetuates a cycle whereby reduced access to foundational literacy materials directly impacts readiness, making achievement gaps that persist and often widen during the elementary grades.

Inadequate Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Among the nation's most important challenges is providing high-quality schooling for all students, especially those currently underserved by the educational system. These include students of color, low-income students, English-language learners, and students in rural and urban settings (Hollins & Guzman, 2009). Although there are many factors that influence educational outcomes in schools serving diverse student populations, there is agreement among

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

the educational community that teacher quality is important. According to Sanders and Horn (1998), teacher quality is the most critical factor in school success and student achievement, surpassing even socioeconomic status, class size, family background, school context, and all other factors that affect student achievement.

Continuing disparities in achievement and access to resources between students of color and their White peers have led to growing recognition of the teacher's role in tending to that gap. This has focused greater attention on the knowledge, skills, and temperaments of today's teachers (Hollins & Guzman, 2009). Some critics, both within and outside teacher education, have suggested that traditional preservice and in-service teacher training have not adequately prepared teachers to teach diverse populations (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Zeichner & Hoefft, 1996).

Historically, diversity issues in teacher education programs and curricula have been segregated from mainstream teacher preparation coursework, often relegated to optional or supplementary 'diversity' or 'multicultural' courses (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Zeichner & Hoefft, 1996). This compartmentalization represents a significant structural challenge in preparing educators for today's diverse classrooms, as the core teacher education curriculum has remained largely unchanged (Gollnick, 1992; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The consequences of this separation are far-reaching: future teachers typically complete one or two standalone courses in diversity education while their core pedagogical courses in literacy instruction, classroom management, and assessment lack substantive integration of cultural competency.

This artificial division implies that working with diverse student populations is a specialized skill rather than a fundamental aspect of effective teaching that leads to a troubling disconnect: Teachers enter classrooms with theoretical knowledge about diversity but limited practical experience in applying culturally responsive teaching strategies across subject areas.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

This gap is particularly evident in literacy instruction, and teachers often struggle to connect reading materials and teaching approaches to students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. To address these systemic challenges, teacher education programs must fundamentally restructure their approach by weaving cultural competency, inclusive practices, and diverse perspectives throughout all coursework. This ensures that future teachers can effectively implement culturally responsive practices across all aspects of teaching, from lesson planning to assessment.

Given today's diverse educational landscape, teachers must demonstrate intercultural competence. Unfortunately, many teachers still feel unprepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Banerjee & Luckner, 2014; Michel & Kuiken, 2014, Slot et al., 2019). This lack of preparation highlights the need for PD opportunities to better equip them to effectively work with diverse students. Providing comprehensive and inclusive training programs that focus on enhancing their capacity is crucial to overcoming this challenge (Gollnick, 1992; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Sharp et al. (2019) found that many teacher preparation programs in the U. S. do not provide training on cultural competency or inclusive teaching strategies. This omission likely contributes to teachers having a deficit perspective toward Black students (Gorski, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valencia, 1997). As a result, teachers may locate the problem within the child and not the curriculum or their teaching practices. Numerous studies underscore the need for teacher education programs to incorporate strategies that promote cultural competency and inclusive teaching practices.

It is important to note that recent executive orders from President Trump's administration make this work increasingly difficult and impose challenges for addressing reading proficiency among Black students. The School Choice Initiative, which advocates redirecting federal

education funding to allow students to choose private, charter, or homeschool options, raises concerns about resource distribution. Research by Anderson & Williams (2022) indicates that while school choice may offer access to diverse educational environments, it could potentially dilute targeted funding for evidence-based reading interventions in predominantly Black schools. The Curriculum Reform proposal, centered on ‘patriotic education’ and increased parental control over curriculum decisions, may impact the implementing culturally responsive literacy programs that Same et al. (2018) have shown to be effective for early reading development among Black students.

Additionally, the proposed elimination of the Department of Education would remove all federal oversight of educational policies, end accountability measures that Same et al. (2018) identified as crucial for monitoring and addressing reading achievement gaps. The International Reading Association (2002) emphasizes that successful reading intervention programs for Black students require robust federal oversight, culturally responsive teaching practices, and sustained funding mechanisms. These activities could be compromised or ended under current proposed changes. This analysis suggests that the combined effect of these policies could undermine progress toward ensuring reading proficiency among Black third-grade students unless specific provisions are included to protect and enhance evidence-based literacy programs in underserved communities.

Lack of Culturally Responsive Instruction

Culture refers to the collective beliefs, lifestyles, and customs that shape the identity of a group of people. In the U. S., there has been a significant increase in the number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (non-white), according to the USDOE (2013). In 2001, 39% of students were from diverse backgrounds. This figure increased to 48% by 2011.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

The demographic shift has raised concerns as to whether teachers (mostly White women) will be able to meet the needs of students from different backgrounds. (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011).

Studies have shown, though, that implementing culturally responsive practices in schools and classrooms can effectively address the achievement gap that is disproportionately observed in racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students (Hammond, 2015).

Culturally responsive practices, as described by Ladson-Billings (1995), emphasize teaching that recognizes, values, and incorporates students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process to promote academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Her framework highlights the importance of student-centered instruction, high expectations, and teaching methods that validate and empower diverse learners. Despite the existence of promising classroom practices, teachers and school staff often lack examples of how to effectively address these issues, as well as the appropriate tools to use. Several studies (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011) support these findings.

One of the most important challenges public education faces today is addressing the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Many teachers are not adequately prepared to handle the learning needs of such students due to a lack of relevant content knowledge, experience, and training. Au (2009) and Cummins (2007) highlighted this issue, saying that inadequate preparation in this area creates a cultural gap between teachers and students and limits educators' ability to choose effective instructional practices or materials. Often, teachers and instructional contexts are developed for White students from middle and upper socioeconomic backgrounds and ignore the cultural and linguistic characteristics of other learners.

Incorporating culturally responsive pedagogical principles into teaching practices can be challenging. It requires understanding the fundamental concepts of culturally responsive pedagogy, such as valuing diversity, affirming identity, and addressing societal inequities (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Research by Hammond (2015) shows that teachers need to implement appropriate instructional methods that are identity-affirming, skill-building, and centered on students.

A comprehensive study by Aronson and Laughter (2016) revealed that culturally relevant instruction fosters a more inclusive learning environment and significantly increases student engagement. Participants exhibited 20-30% higher participation rates compared to control groups. Morrison et al. (2008) considered 40 studies and found that culturally responsive teaching practices are linked to better academic achievement. On average, students' standardized test scores and course grades increased by 0.5 to 1.0 standard deviations.

Lowered Expectations

Educators' erroneous assumptions about students considered 'disadvantaged' or different due to their language, gender, race, or socioeconomic status contributes to the achievement gap. Hammond (2015) stated that many students begin school with small learning gaps. However, the gap between African American and Latino students widens over time due to a lack of support that encourages independent learning (Hammond, 2015). Unfortunately, we tend to underestimate the intellectual capabilities of disadvantaged students and challenge them with interesting material only when we believe they have mastered the basics according to their labels (Means & Knapp, 1991). Presenting these students with merely the rudiments of subjects deprives them of a meaningful context for learning and practicing higher-order thinking.

Access to Grade-Level Curriculum

Access to grade-level curriculum is crucial for all students to prevent them from falling behind and widening the achievement gap. Black students are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to grade-level curriculum, and this often stems from systemic practices that limit their exposure to rigorous, age-appropriate materials and instruction. Reardon et al. (2019) highlighted how disparities in accessing high-quality curriculum resources (e.g., textbooks, instructional materials, and advanced coursework offerings) are more pronounced in schools serving predominantly Black students.

Brown et al. (2018) found that Black and Latino students across the United States experience inequitable access to advanced coursework opportunities. They are locked out of these opportunities early when they are denied access to gifted and talented programs in elementary school and again in middle and high school when they are not enrolled in eighth-grade algebra. They are thereby not given an opportunity to participate in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment programs. As a result, these students are denied access to critical opportunities that can prepare them for success in college and careers.

Limited access to rigorous opportunities is also true for students of color within predominantly White schools (Ford, 1998). In K-12 schools throughout the country, Black children make up roughly 17% of the students. However, they are underrepresented in gifted education programs, with less than 10% of all gifted students being Black. In contrast, over 33% of Black students are categorized as cognitively disabled, which is a stigmatizing label (Ford, 2014; Ford & King, 2014).

Schools have historically focused their curriculum and pedagogical practices on a normed group of students: White, non-disabled, and English-speaking. When students do not fit that

norm, they are often pulled out of the ‘regular’ classroom and ‘tracked’ into classes that deny them access to high quality teaching and learning (Capper & Frattura, 2008). Hattie (2011), Oakes (2005), and Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded these practices have little or no research supporting them and often perpetuate inequities based on race, class, and sex.

Studies document the fact that underserved students (e.g., English learners, students experiencing poverty, and students of color) routinely receive less instruction in, and are denied access to, higher-order skill development (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Oaks, 2005). Their curriculum is less challenging and more repetitive. Instruction is more focused on skills that are lower on Bloom’s taxonomy (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Oaks, 2005). This type of instruction denies students the opportunity to engage in what neuroscientists call ‘productive struggle’ that actually grows brain power (Means & Knapp, 1991; Ritchart, 2002).

Limitations of Standardized Testing as an Indicator of Reading Proficiency

Although standardized tests are widely used to measure proficiency in various subjects, they have several limitations (Popham, 2007). One is that they often assess a limited range of skills and knowledge, focusing on what can be easily quantified (Popham, 2007). This approach may capture only part of the spectrum of a student’s abilities or potential. Standardized tests can be culturally and socioeconomically biased, with questions that favor students from specific backgrounds and potentially disadvantage those from different cultural or socioeconomic contexts (Kim & Zabelina, 2015). Further, the uniform format of standardized tests may not be suitable for students with diverse learning needs, leading to a narrowing of the curriculum and hindering critical thinking and creativity (Popham, 2007).

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Educators may feel pressured to ‘teach to the test,’ owing to the high-stakes environment created by standardized-testing and accountability. Teachers spend more time on test-preparation and less on culturally responsive instruction (Popham, 2001). Moreover, standardized tests provide limited feedback, making it challenging for educators to understand specific areas where students may need improvement. They also offer little guidance for instructional adjustments (Grant, 2004).

Proficiency on standardized tests may only sometimes align with real-world skills and abilities, as they often emphasize rote memorization and test-taking strategies over practical application of knowledge (“Problems with Standardized Testing”, 2013). Standardized tests are a snapshot in time and may not show the growth or improvement a student has made throughout the academic year. According to Marzano (1990), performing well on standardized tests has little to do with students’ thinking abilities and much with how well they have learned facts represented in test items. Finally, standardized tests may not effectively assess a student’s long-term retention of knowledge or their ability to apply what they have learned in the future. Though valuable for specific purposes, they are limited when seeking an indicator of overall proficiency.

Gorski (2015) emphasized that standardized tests can simply be a measure of access and opportunity. Their results may indicate more about students’ social, economic, and educational contexts than academic achievement. Gorski’s statement that standardized tests not only measure a student’s ability but also reveal the systemic inequities and opportunities that have influenced their educational journey.

Recognizing that standardized tests are just one part of the larger educational landscape, it is crucial to address disparities in access and opportunity. Understanding the history of educational marginalization is necessary to avoid perpetuating it in our curriculum and

instruction. A scientifically-based curriculum alone is insufficient. We must address learning differences, provide diverse perspectives and culturally relevant materials and resources, and avoid focusing on White, middle-class values. Unfortunately, when students do not fit the norm, they are often labeled and segregated into lower-level classes with limited exposure to high quality teaching and learning (Hattie, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004). An inequitable system disproportionately affects Black students, who are often overrepresented in alternative, special, and at-risk programs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

According to Hattie (2011), labeling students (e.g., those in special education) has shown little or no impact on their achievement. Opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse students to develop cognitive capacities are significantly constrained by ongoing educational inequities (Hammond, 2015; Gay, 2018). Research demonstrates that these students often face learning environments that fail to leverage their cultural assets, resulting in reduced engagement and academic outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2014; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

This systemic failure can lead to less cognitive growth that leads to dependent learners who struggle with critical thinking, problem-solving, and taking charge of their educational journey (Hammond, 2015). Studies indicate that in schools lacking culturally responsive teaching practices and effective support systems, these students are more frequently misidentified for special education services and have limited access to rigorous curricula (Gay, 2002). Additionally, data from the USDOE (2018) reveals significant disparities in educational resources, qualified teachers, and enrichment opportunities in schools catering to predominantly culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Hammond (2015) emphasizes the critical importance of transforming dependent learners into independent ones who can actively and

confidently engage in their learning processes. Implementing culturally responsive teaching practices may reduce this dependency by fostering learning environments that validate students' cultural identities while enhancing their cognitive capacities and academic autonomy.

Local Context: Ira B. Jones Elementary

This section considers the problem of low reading performance among third-grade Black students at Ira B. Jones Elementary School (IBJ). This is the school where the proposed improvement initiative would take place. As the current principal of IBJ, it is important for me to share my positionality as a scholar-practitioner, which I do in the next section.

Background and Demographics

IBJ is a public elementary school that serves students from kindergarten to fifth grade. The school is classified as Title 1, meaning over 40% of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. The school is located in Asheville, North Carolina, which is the largest city in Western North Carolina, with an estimated population of 94,000 as of 2022 (U. S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The school is one of five magnet schools in the Asheville City School District, and has a “global scholars” theme which focuses on cultural diversity, service learning, project-based learning, and Paideia Seminars as its educational pillars. The district serves approximately 4,500 students and unlike other public-school systems, students residing in the district can attend their preferred elementary school as long as the school has space available space and can maintain a balanced racial mix.

Student demographics by race at the school 63% White, 18% Black, 1% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 9% Hispanic/Latino, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native students, and 0.8% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander students (as shown in Fig. 3). IBJ has a student body of approximately 375, and 42% are economically disadvantaged and receive free or

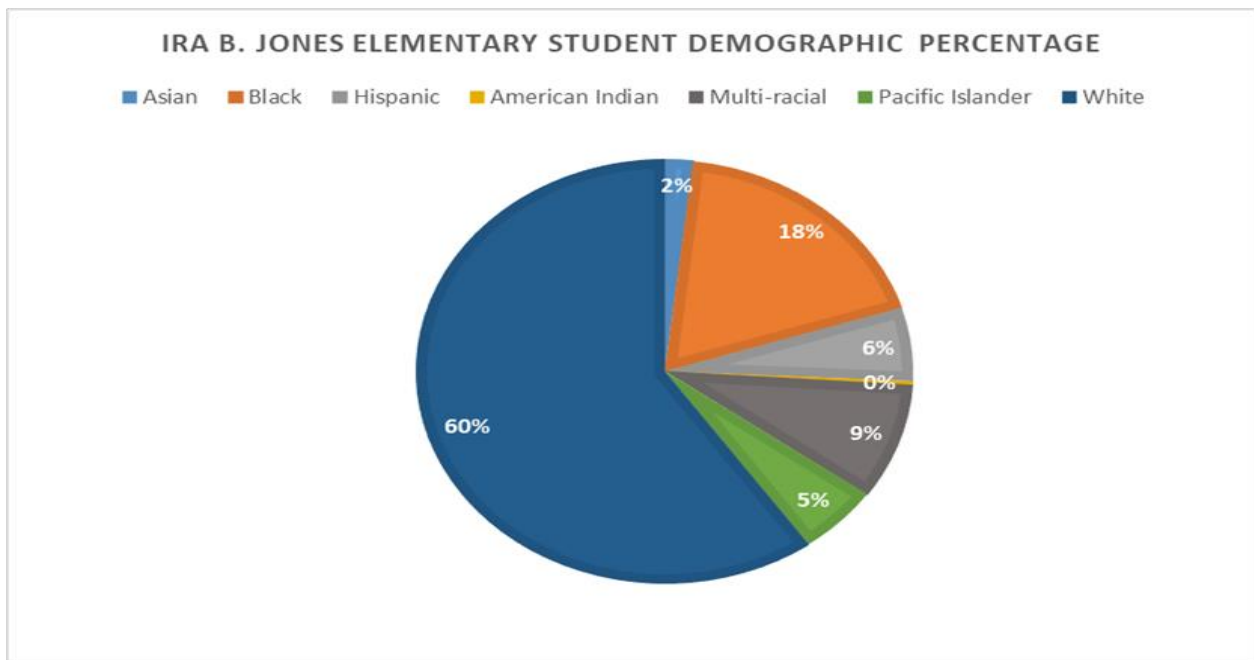
BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

reduced-price lunches. Seventeen percent of the students have individualized educational plans, meaning they have been identified as having a learning disability and require specifically-designed instruction.

Two percent have Section 504 plans, indicating that they have been identified by gender, sexuality, and race as having a disability and requiring accommodations, and 6% are English language learners. IBJ has 32 teaching and instructional support staff, and 31 have more than five years of experience. Previously, the turnover rate for all IBJ faculty and staff which restricts what they can teach was less than 10%. Currently, 32% of the teaching and support staff are new. The change is believed to be a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current political climate surrounding education in North Carolina. Teachers are facing low pay in a time of inflation, as well as legislation that restricts what they can teach regarding gender, sexuality, and race.

Figure 3

Ira B. Jones Elementary Student Demographics by Percentage



History and Review of the Problem at IBJ

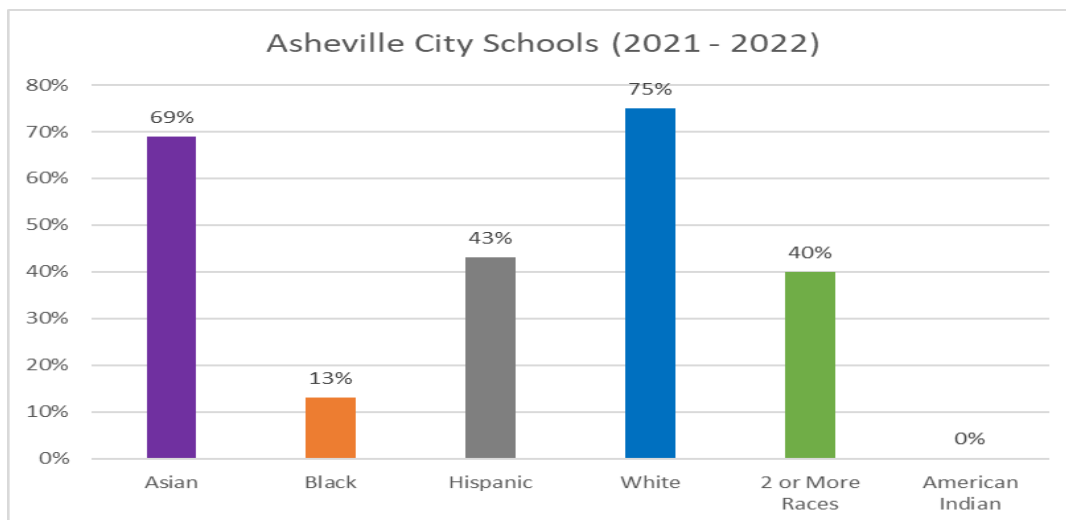
A report to Buncombe County Commissioners (2023, February 7) described a significant gap in reading proficiency between Black and White students in grades three to eight in Asheville City Schools during the 2021-22 school year. Figure 4 (*Educated and Capable Community*, n.d.) demonstrates this disparity. The data showed that only 13% of Black students were proficient, while 75% of White students were proficient. IBJ also had similar disparities between Black and White students in grades three through five: only 6.8% of Black students were considered proficient in reading, while 70.9% of White students were proficient. Due to this issue, the school was designated as a “Targeted Support & Improvement-Consistently Underperforming (TSI-CU)” school by the North Carolina State Board of Education. The label is given to schools where a particular group of students routinely performs poorly on end-of-grade testing.

Black students at IBJ were identified as consistently underperforming in reading and math. Despite the persistent gap, the school met the state’s growth expectations for all students in 2018-2019 and surpassed them for 2020-2021 (Fig. 4). Various efforts are underway to continue closing the gap, including teaching phonics in grades K-3, intervening early when students struggle with grade-level content, and providing teachers with time to plan and create grade appropriate instructional material and activities.

Figure 4

Reading Proficiency by Race/Ethnicity in Asheville City Schools

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS



Sources: (1) *Buncombe County Board of Commissioners* (2023, February 7): <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2023/02/08/buncombe-county-schools-asheville-city-schools-have-achievement-gaps/69881461007/> (2) *Educated and Capable Community Strategic Plan Focus Area* (n.d.): <https://buncombe.clearpointstrategy.com/educated-capable-community/>

IBJ is dedicated to improving student learning through various initiatives. We focus on aligning reading resources and instructional practices with the “*Science of Reading*” (SoR) program (National Center on Improving Literacy, 2024) research and promote high-quality professional learning communities (PLCs). We have also established a schoolwide PD equity goal involving leveraging critical, historical, and equity-oriented perspectives to recognize systematic and instructional issues and better understand culturally responsive/relevant pedagogies. To achieve this goal, we have studied Hammond’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2015) to help us stop practices that negatively impact students and instead cultivate their gifts and talents.

Although teachers are using PLCs to focus on curriculum development, instruction, and assessment, this structure is yet to be successful in moving the academic needle for all students. A PLC is a collaborative in which teachers seek to enhance their teaching practices, improve student learning outcomes, and foster a culture of continuous professional growth. The structure

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

provides an opportunity for teachers to share expertise, analyze student data, discuss instructional strategies, and develop targeted interventions to meet the diverse academic needs of students.

Though PLCs have shown promise in fostering collaboration focusing on curriculum development, instruction, and assessment, implementing this framework has yet to yield the expected improvements in academic outcomes for all students at IBJ. Several factors contribute to the limited success of PLCs in these areas. At times, PLCs have lacked clear goals or specific strategies tailored to address the diverse needs of all students, leading to a one-size-fits-all approach that does not effectively meet individualized learning requirements.

Moreover, challenges in sustaining consistent collaboration and communication among teachers include:

- Limited time for in-depth planning and reflection within PLC meetings,
- Insufficient support or resources to implement identified strategies have impeded translating PLC discussions into impactful classroom practices,
- Other barriers, such as varying levels of teacher buy-in and entrenched institutional norms, may hinder comprehensive implementing PLC strategies across the school, limiting the PLC's ability to significantly improve academic outcomes for all students.

Despite barriers and challenges, PLCs can enhance teaching practices and improve student outcomes. When teachers have adequate time and support for collaboration, clear goals and priorities are established. Along with a commitment to sustained PD, PLCs can thrive. When school leadership actively supports and fosters a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for student achievement, PLCs can function as robust structures for continuous improvement.

By leveraging collective expertise, analyzing student data regularly and implementing evidence-based strategies, teachers can create culturally-responsive lessons that connect to students’ identities. High expectations can be set for all students and foster a culture of reflective practice. PLCs have the potential to create meaningful and lasting changes in the quality of teaching, and therefore student success.

Academic Performance

IBJ has been experiencing an achievement gap between Black and White students for at least seven years. White students have been performing notably better in reading, which is a cause for concern. Table 1 gives the disparities in reading between the two groups. In 2019, only 12% of Black students passed their reading test, while 53% of White peers did so. This significant gap, which is almost a fourfold difference, has negative consequences for underachieving students.

Data from 2016-2017 showed only 16% of Black students scored at level 3, 4, or 5 on the third grade reading assessment, indicating a year with the most significant proficiency gap between Black and White students. A student must score at level 3 to be considered proficient on the reading test for third grade. Levels 4 and 5 indicate they are college and career-ready.

Table 1

Third-Grade Reading: Grade-Level Proficient (Achievement Levels 3, 4, & 5)

Year	All	Black	White	% Diff.
2019-2020	43%	12%	53%	41%
2018-2019	66%	25%	83%	58%
2017-2018	68.1%	26.3%	83.9%	57.6%
2016-2017	67.6%	16.7%	89.6%	72.9%

North Carolina's Reading Policies

North Carolina has implemented several educational policies to improve student outcomes. One such policy is the NC *Read to Achieve program* (2013), which aims to ensure every student can read at or above their grade level by third grade. The program requires additional support to students who are not reading at grade-level through reading camps and other interventions. The law was established as part of the *Excellent Public Schools Act* (2012), which intended to student outcomes and bridge the achievement gap across schools in the state.

The *Read to Achieve* (2013) program uses a standardized assessment program to identify students who may need reading support. This assessment measures vocabulary, foundational reading skills, and comprehension. It automatically assigns a reading level to students, and teachers make instructional decisions based upon those levels. Strategies include those identified by SoR. The program's goal is to ensure all students are on track for grade-level reading success.

The North Carolina *Read to Achieve Program* (2013) was modified by Senate Bill 387, also known as the *Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021*. The modification emphasized using (SoR) which focuses upon language acquisition, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics and spelling, fluency, vocabulary, oral language, and comprehension. To support this initiative, the General Assembly provided funding for educators to receive training in language essentials for teachers of reading and spelling (LETRS).

LETRS is a PD program presented as a research-based, best practice in literacy instruction. The new law requires colleges and universities to prepare teachers with coursework grounded in SoR. Elementary teachers must renew their literacy credits with SoR coursework and mandates educators in the NC PreK program and those working with students in

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

kindergarten through fifth grade participate in training programs that meet the requirements of the *Excellent Public Schools Act*.

Connecting to the Causes at IBJ

IBJ has struggled to ensure proficient reading achievement for Black students for a number of reasons. My preliminary causal analysis suggests that the causes of these problems nationwide exist at our school as well. I have identified three such causes for the design team to consider:

- Inadequate curriculum;
- Insufficient teacher training in diverse student needs, socioeconomic disparities, and a lack of cultural relevance;
- One of the main issues has been the need for proper training for teachers to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds;
- Insufficient focus/prioritization to ensure Black students are proficient readers, In the past, teachers have often approached Black families from a deficit perspective.

My Professional Role and Positionality at IBJ

I am a middle-class Black female with no disabilities and 23 years of experience in education. I am a wife and a mother of three children: a daughter and two sons. Currently, I serve as the principal of an elementary school with 370 students.

I grew up in the small community of Hurtsboro, Alabama, located about 45 minutes away from more populated cities such as Auburn, Tuskegee, and Phenix City. I grew up in an all-black community on a dirt road in a mobile home and attended an all-black elementary school. My elementary school teachers were strict and serious about our learning. Thanks to their dedication, we all learned how to read.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

My mother held me to a high academic standard and instilled the importance of pursuing higher education. She spoke at length about the benefits of attending college, highlighting the opportunities and advantages it could bring. Her continual support and guidance served as a motivating force, pushing me to strive for excellence in all of my academic pursuits.

Teaching at Asheville Middle School revealed many inequities to me. I saw Black students being left behind, not being treated fairly, and disproportionately disciplined and suspended from school. Since then, I have been on a mission to make educational institutions more equitable and excellent for all students.

As a Black principal, my personal and professional connections to ensuring that Black students are proficient readers by third grade is rooted in my lived experiences and my commitment to equity in education. I understand firsthand the impact literacy and educational opportunities can have on the lives of Black students. My experiences inform my passion for creating inclusive learning environments that celebrate diverse cultures, values, and experiences, so Black students can see themselves reflected positively in the curriculum and reading materials.

Professionally, I am dedicated to dismantling systemic barriers that impede the academic success of Black students, particularly in literacy. I strive to foster a school culture that values literacy development, provides targeted interventions, and empowers teachers with culturally responsive strategies to support Black students' reading proficiency. What describes me best? I am an equity-centered instructional leader who believes students must feel safe at school, authentically engage in culturally relevant and responsive experiences, and be immersed in higher-order thinking and problem-solving.

As a math teacher, I always emphasized the importance of equity in math education for my students. While I firmly believe that math, especially Algebra I, is a key class that unlocks opportunities for students to attend college, along with reading proficiency. Students who are skilled readers can fully engage in the world around them in ways that non-readers cannot. I am dedicated to advocating for equitable opportunities and outcomes for every student, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, and enabling Black students to excel as proficient readers, empowering them for lifelong success.

Improvement Initiative to Bridge the Literacy Gap for Black Students

Several interventions were proposed to improve the reading proficiency of Black children. These included: (a) early literacy interventions grounded in the Science of Reading (SoR) framework, (b) culturally responsive and relevant instruction, (c) targeted teacher training and professional development, (d) increased family and community involvement and outreach, (e) expanded access to grade-level curriculum, and f) policy changes aimed at addressing systemic disparities. I discuss these interventions in the sections below.

Research for Increasing Reading Proficiency: The Science of Reading

SoR is a proven research-based approach to teaching reading to all learners. The approach is based on more than 50 years of research into how we learn to read and how to teach it effectively. Through this research, we have gained a greater understanding of the skills involved in reading and how different parts of the brain work together to process written language.

The structured literacy approach, informed by this research, includes five critical components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Lyon et al., 2004). When students are given explicit and systematic instruction in these components, 95%

of them have the cognitive ability to learn to read. Even children at risk of reading failure can learn to read at average or above-average levels if they are identified early and given intensive instruction in these components (Lyon et al., 2001; Torgesen, 2002a).

For early intervention to be effective in helping struggling readers, it must be comprehensive, diagnostic, and responsive. Without this approach, most at-risk readers will continue to struggle and fall behind. Research suggests that failure to read by the age of nine can lead to a lifetime of illiteracy for at least 70% of struggling readers (Shaywitz, 2003). However, identifying children at risk for reading failure and providing evidence-based interventions can significantly reduce the number of students reading below basic levels to less than 6% (Lyon, 2024). By incorporating these elements into instruction, all students can benefit and achieve more equitable learning outcomes.

Effective reading instruction requires teachers to have a strong foundation in research-based instructional practices. Teachers must understand the curriculum they are teaching in order to use the appropriate teaching methods. SoR is a large body of scientifically-based research that provides teachers with an understanding of the mechanisms of reading, the skills involved, how they work together, and the areas of the brain responsible for developing proficient reading.

While experience is valuable, relying solely on experience can leave many children behind. Therefore, educators need basic information about scientific knowledge to guide the selection and implementation of instructional programs, strategies, and approaches (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004; Moats, 1999; Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003). The quality of literacy instruction is crucial so that all students can succeed.

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Instruction

In addition to understanding SoR, teachers must understand and engage with their students' cultural backgrounds to improve learning. Gay (2010) asserted that teachers should use cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference to make their instructional techniques, materials, student-teacher relationships, and classroom climate more relevant and effective. Teachers must understand the importance of cultural comprehension because it serves as the foundation for new learning.

When teachers fail to include the cultural backgrounds, histories, and experiences of diverse students in their teaching practices, it is considered a lack of culturally relevant instruction. This can result in students feeling disconnected from what is being taught and losing interest in learning. To address this, culturally responsive teaching involves developing curricula and instructional practices that genuinely incorporate students' cultural identities, experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds.

It also allows students to learn from diverse perspectives and see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Hammond (2015) explained that culturally responsive teaching requires educators to recognize students' cultural displays of learning, meaning-making, and using cultural knowledge to connect new concepts and content to what students already know. Rather than viewing students' cultures as obstacles, teachers are encouraged to incorporate them into their teaching as valuable assets (Paris, 2012). To create a positive learning environment that considers the diversity of cultural backgrounds and experiences, students must first find education relevant to their lives. The teacher also understands the value of building a relationship and having a social-emotional connection with the student to create a safe learning environment (Hammond, 2015).

Gay (2010) outlined critical practices for culturally responsive teaching, including:

- Having high expectations for all students;
- Engaging their cultural knowledge and experiences;
- Bridging gaps between home and school practices;
- Educating the whole child;
- Identifying and leveraging their strengths, and
- Questioning normative schooling practices.

Teachers must shift their mindset and interrupt deficit perspectives and subtractive conceptions from those from minoritized backgrounds, families, and communities to positively impact student behavior and manage the learning space. Culturally relevant pedagogy is essential for connecting students' cultures, languages, and life experiences to help them access a rigorous curriculum and develop higher-level academic skills.

Johnson and Gonzalez (2014) wrote:

A culturally relevant pedagogical stance requires a complex understanding of content and culture. For English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, that complex understanding includes recognizing, valuing, and centering content from diverse authors and realizing the possible impact that content may have on students' lives. Teachers with such a stance use culturally relevant teaching consistently and effectively with diverse learners.

Additionally, they are able to customize standards, practices, and tools based on the needs of their students—not just at the planning stages of curriculum implementation but during implicit or explicit instruction and classroom management (p. 18).

Culturally relevant pedagogy connects students' cultures, languages, and life experiences to help them access a rigorous curriculum and develop higher-level academic skills. Hackman

and Rauscher (2004) noted that some students were left out of the mainstream curriculum, leading to marginalization due to insensitive and inequitable curriculum and practices. Educators struggle to serve all students, especially those not fitting the mainstream profile or curriculum. In today's schools, students with disabilities and other marginalized groups often have their needs overlooked.

Therefore, adopting more inclusive educational approaches is important to ensure that all students receive a quality education. Teachers should incorporate opportunities in the curriculum for students to consider who has been harmed, their needs, and the obligations involved in taking a transformative approach to literacy education. According to Winn (2020), doing so can help teachers decolonize literacy and support students to become empowered and disciplined writers, readers, thinkers, and doers.

From the standpoint of education theorists, "the curriculum represents much more than a program of study, a classroom text, or a course syllabus. Rather, it introduces a way of life and prepares students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society" (McLaren, 2003, p. 86). We want the focus of our curriculum to incorporate these values that foster a love of learning and encourage students to be lifelong learners.

While teachers may believe their classrooms are stress-free, the reality often proves otherwise. Many students feel their voices are unheard, and their needs unmet. This can create high levels of stress and anxiety, which can hinder their ability to learn. Our school recognizes these challenges, including the fear of failure, and is committed to finding ways to reduce these barriers to learning.

Creating a respectful and emotionally safe classroom environment supports collaborative learning. For students to grow and learn, they must feel encouraged and trusted by their teachers

and classmates to take risks. I have noticed that some students, particularly Black students, sit quietly in class and are not actively learning.

Also, some teachers may scaffold learning too much, leading to dependent learners who rely heavily on the teacher to guide them through each step. Teachers need to allow students to think critically and develop their own solutions to problems rather than simply telling them what to think. Teachers can help students develop their unique perspectives and skills by encouraging active and individualized learning.

However, studies by Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) and Tantum (2019) have shown that culturally responsive education can improve student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers who take the time to understand and appreciate their students' backgrounds can establish a sense of belonging and respect in the classroom. A teacher's ability to develop and foster relationships can lead to increased educational and academic success and better motivational outcomes. Students are more likely to spend greater time on tasks and activities and are more motivated to attend school when they feel valued and understood by their teachers.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

When teachers are not adequately prepared and trained, it can hinder their ability to effectively teach diverse learners, including, and even especially, those from Black families. Providing teachers with comprehensive and inclusive training programs that focus on enhancing their capacity is important to overcome this challenge. In her book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literature*, Muhammad (2020) presented a practical four-layered equity framework for designing literacy instruction and education across all content areas.

The framework's learning goals are identity development, skill development, intellectual development, and criticality. Ladson-Billings (2014) identified three major domains of successful teacher work: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Culturally responsive teaching, as defined by Gay (2002), involves using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students to teach them more effectively. Gay suggests that students' engagement in learning increases when educators use pedagogies connected to their experiences.

Family and Community Involvement and Outreach

Recognizing and respecting their cultural diversity is essential to improving outreach and partnerships with Black families. Incorporating culturally responsive practices in early reading programs, such as using culturally relevant books, incorporating storytelling traditions, and respecting different reading practices within Black communities, can be helpful. When teachers recognize how their own views about child development and schooling are influenced by a particular cultural perspective, they can more easily see parents as sources of knowledge about a different perspective. A stance that reflects the teacher's respect for the fund of knowledge that reside in children's communities is critical to cross-cultural understanding (Dauber & Epstein 1993; Moll & Greenberg 1991).

Providing targeted parent education programs that focus on early literacy development and strategies for fostering a reading-rich environment at home and promoting equity and inclusion in early reading programs are also essential. Eliminating bias in book selection, ensuring a broad range of books, and training educators on cultural competency and anti-bias practices can reduce systemic biases and discriminatory practices that may inadvertently exclude Black families. Improving access to high-quality early learning opportunities and reforming

children's experiences in elementary school is crucial to ensuring equitable learning for all children. Improving outreach and partnership with Black families in accessing early reading resources requires a multi-faceted approach that considers cultural responsiveness, parent education, and equity and inclusion.

Access to Grade-Level Curriculum

All students need access to grade-level curriculum to prevent falling behind and widening the achievement gap. Schools and teachers must address barriers that prevent students from accessing high-quality curricula. Historically, schools have taught to a normed group (i.e., White, non-disabled, and English-speaking students), which has led to tracking practices based on standardized tests or estimated abilities.

According to Mondale (2001), tracking was an efficient way to sort through the growing number of students in the early 1900s. Unfortunately, these practices have little or no research supporting them (Hattie, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004) and often perpetuate inequities based on race, class, and sex. This approach fails to consider each student's individual strengths and potential, which undermines the goal of public education to help all students reach their full potential and become productive citizens.

Understanding the history of educational marginalization is important to avoid perpetuating it through our curriculum and instruction. A scientifically-based curriculum alone is insufficient; we must address learning differences, provide diverse perspectives and culturally relevant materials and resources, and avoid centering on White, middle-class values.

Unfortunately, when students do not fit into the "norm," they are often labeled and segregated into lower-level classes with limited exposure to high-quality teaching and learning. This

inequitable system disproportionately affects Black students, who are often overrepresented in alternative, special, and at-risk programs.

According to Hattie (2011), labeling students has been shown to have little or no impact on student achievement, and culturally and linguistically diverse students' opportunities to develop cognitive capacity are limited by educational inequity (Hammond, 2015). This results in stunted intellectual growth, leaving students dependent and unable to work to their full potential. Furthermore, Muhammad (2020) explained that the deficit language often used to describe Black and Brown children's educational experiences are rooted in and guided by Whiteness.

Teachers can help these students succeed by ensuring they have access to grade-level curriculum, fostering independent learning skills, and avoiding deficit-focused language and practices. When teachers prioritize cultivating independent learning skills like critical thinking and problem-solving, students are better equipped to understand complex texts and grade-level content. This self-sufficiency allows students to engage more meaningfully with rigorous reading materials, improving their comprehension and fluency.

More autonomy means better access to grade-appropriate curriculum and the ability to tackle challenging tasks independently. These are crucial to address the issue of poor reading proficiency among Black children in the United States, as it significantly impacts their academic achievement and long-term outcomes. There are persistent disparities in reading proficiency within this demographic and it is essential to identify effective strategies for improving their reading outcomes. By implementing evidence-based interventions and policies that support literacy development for all children, we can work towards closing the reading achievement gap and promoting equitable educational opportunities. Understanding the complex interactions

among the multiple factors influencing reading proficiency in Black children is crucial to achieving these goals.

Driver Diagram and Theory of Improvement

Driver Diagram

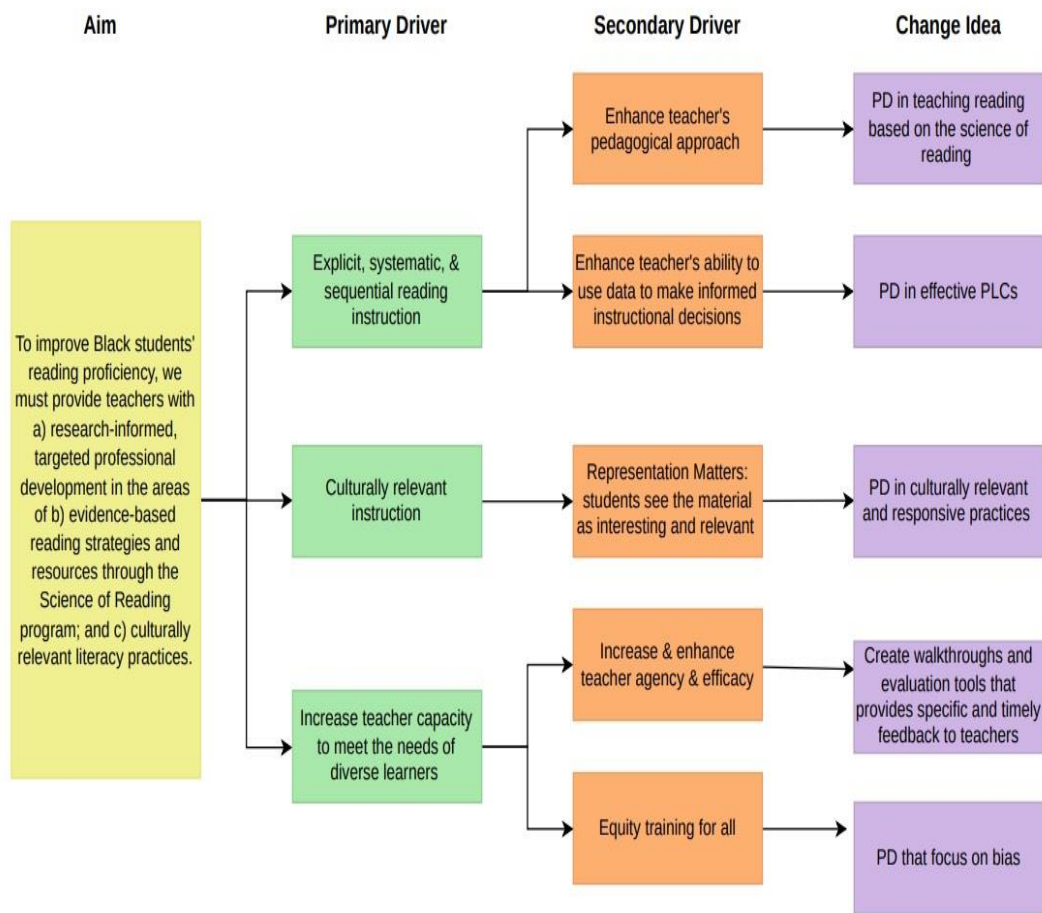
I arrived at my theory of improvement following the construction and analysis of a ‘driver diagram’, which is a visual tool used in strategic planning and improvement initiatives (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The diagram serves as a blueprint that outlines a project or initiative’s primary aim or goal, along with the key drivers or factors necessary to achieve that goal. Overall, the driver diagram provides a clear, structured framework that helps teams visualize the relationships between elements contributing to a desired outcome, facilitating focused planning, implementation, and continuous improvement efforts.

To narrow the focus, the primary drivers indicate where the system change can begin (Bryk et al., 2015; Perry et al., 2020). At the same time, the secondary drivers represent the component parts of the primary drivers and provide more actionable steps (Bryk et al., 2015). The change ideas consist of specific, research-based improvements that may lead to a new level of performance. Although not all change ideas in Improvement Science are appropriate or feasible, presenting a range of thoughts enables the researcher to highlight future leverage points. The driver in Figure 5 explores four potential drivers of change that can each have an impact on closing the gap in reading performance between Black and White students:

- Explicit, systematic and sequential reading instruction;
- Access to grade level curriculum and instruction;
- Providing culturally relevant instruction; and
- Increasing teacher capacity through PLCs and PD.

Figure 5

Driver Diagram (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020)



To read the Driver Diagram, start on the left with the aim statement, which focuses on improving reading proficiency for Black students. The next column presents the primary driver, highlighting explicit, systematic, and sequential reading instruction, culturally relevant teaching, and enhancing teacher capacity to support better student outcomes. The third column outlines five secondary drivers. On the far right, the change ideas fill the final column. The arrows between the columns illustrate the relationship between each change idea and their progression

through the drivers originating from the Aim Statement. These change ideas provide practical approaches for my Theory of Improvement.

Theory of Improvement

This literature review suggests that we can improve the reading proficiency of Black students. After exploring the research, I proposed four areas for my design team's improvement work. My theory of improvement holds that to improve Black students' reading proficiency, we must provide teachers with research-informed, targeted PD in the areas of evidence-based reading strategies and resources that use SoR research and culturally relevant literacy practices.

According to research by Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), ongoing PD is crucial for teachers to adapt to the ever-changing educational practices and cater to the diverse demographics of their classrooms. Inadequate and/or infrequent PD can leave teachers ill-equipped to address the unique challenges presented by diverse learners. It is crucial to have comprehensive PD that focuses on enhancing core reading practices and instruction to improve student learning outcomes.

Equally essential is creating an inclusive learning environment that recognizes the differences in students' cultures, families, and backgrounds. This will help create a culturally responsive atmosphere that caters to the needs of all students. To achieve this, teachers must receive training on understanding and valuing their students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. They should also be trained in differentiated instruction to adapt teaching strategies, materials, and assessments that meet the diverse needs of learners, including those from Black families. Strategies such as flexible grouping, individualized learning plans, and culturally relevant materials should be used. Lastly, teachers need ongoing PD to stay updated on

best practices and be equipped with the necessary tools to effectively meet their students' diverse needs.

Improvement Science for Improvement Design

Hinnant-Crawford (2020) notes that while change is necessary for improvement, not all changes lead to progress. Improvement Science is an approach to problem-solving that involves ongoing inquiry and learning. It requires collaboration, intentional efforts, data-driven strategies, and an understanding of how the system produces the desired outcomes. Using Improvement Science to explore ways to enhance Black students' reading proficiency at my school allowed me to identify effective strategies for implementation. Specifically, I adopted explicit, systematic, and sequential reading instruction, along with culturally relevant training for teachers via PD. The intention was that these initiatives would significantly improve reading proficiency among Black students, and ultimately result in more meeting or exceeding grade-level expectations.

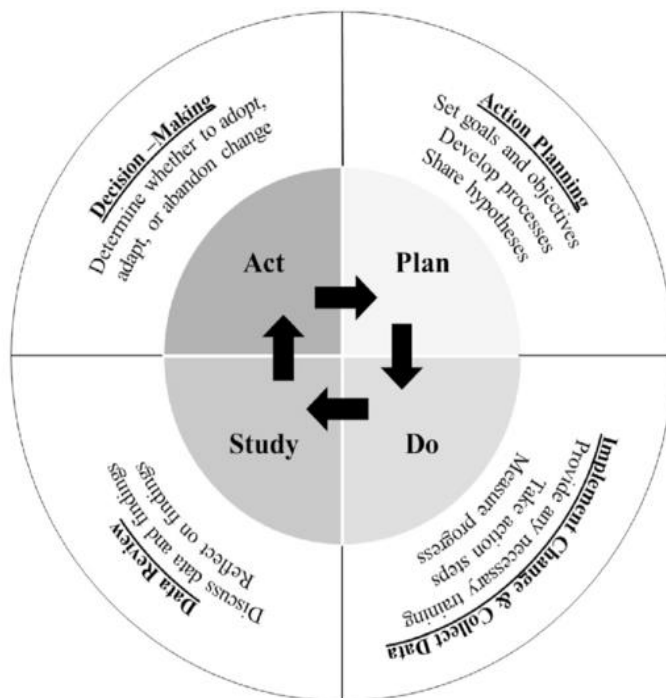
I used the Plan, Do, Study, and Act (PDSA) model for continuous improvement, as shown in Figure 6 (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020), to test my improvement theory. The model involved short cycles that let me make quick decisions based on the data gathered. This approach was responsive and flexible, enabling me to adapt to changes and realities within my local context. The cyclical nature of the model allowed me to evaluate and adjust at the end of each cycle while also scaling up initiatives and continuously improving my approaches.

At the end of the first cycle, I evaluated the collected data and made necessary adjustments to my interventions. This approach allowed me to improve my methods, ensuring progress toward my goal of evaluating and analyzing the effectiveness of the SoR research and strategies in teaching reading to all learners. Further, I could decide whether the PD for teachers in culturally responsive teaching was effective. The objective was to close the gap in reading

proficiency between Black and White students, eventually resulting in more Black students meeting or exceeding benchmark reading expectations. I discuss these outcomes further in the Data and Analysis section.

Figure 6

Plan, Do, Study, Act Model (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020)



I selected the school-based instructional coach, digital lead teacher, media specialist, and assistant principal for my design team. These individuals were my instructional leadership team, and I have directly supervised them for five years, except the assistant principal. I am the first Black principal with whom the instructional leadership team has worked. Most of the design team members have less educational experience than do I. The highest degree held by any team member is a master's degree.

All team members are White. There are three females and one male. The instructional coach has been at the school for at least 10 years, while the assistant principal joined in

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

December 2023. All team members work directly with teachers and students, attend PLCs, and provide professional development for teachers. They are responsible for implementing research-based instructional practices throughout the school.

Involving this team helped guarantee a collective understanding of the problem and a user-centered solution (Bryk et al., 2017). I was unsuccessful in securing a Black parent to join my design team. In the design process, I assumed dual roles as scholar and practitioner. As a scholar, I analyzed the PDSA cycles for improvement by conducting surveys and facilitating a focus group during the planning and implementation phases of the initiative. As a practitioner, I led the design team by leveraging my expertise in culturally responsive and relevant teaching, early literacy, and professional development.

As a former middle school math teacher, math coach, assistant principal, and principal, I brought a unique perspective to the team. However, my authority among the staff requires me to be mindful of any influence I may hold over them. The absence of another Black team member may have affected the initiative's design, particularly the lack of a Black family on the team. Including a Black family member on the design team could have improved our cultural competence, literacy, and compassion by better engaging families.

Having a family member who was Black would have led to a user-centered design that reflects the perspectives of a diverse group rather than only White educators (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). To gather valuable insights for implementing my improvement initiative, I shared the proposal with the design team beforehand to allow time for review. This was done so our discussions could focus on identifying ways to enhance and implement the initiative effectively by examining its pros and cons. Their feedback was sought to ensure the

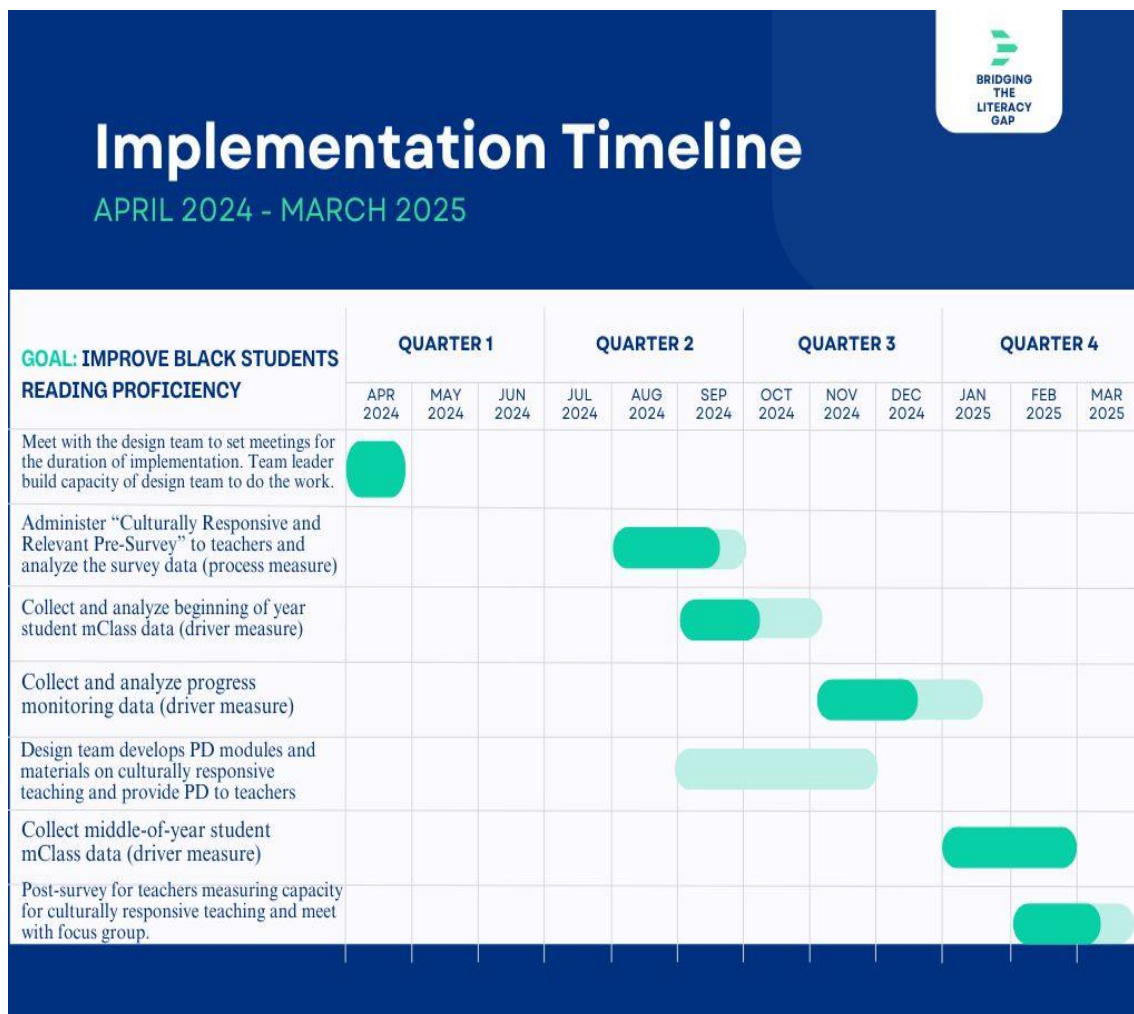
proposal's alignment with effective teaching strategies and its potential for successful implementation (Design Team, personal communication, October 2024).

Feedback from the design team considered both the strengths of the proposed initiative and areas needing improvement. The team praised the proposal for being well-articulated, effectively designed, and aligned with ongoing school priorities such as equity, PLCs, and training initiatives. Including improvement theory was seen as both compelling and relevant (Design Team, personal communication, October 2024). Constructive feedback underscored the need for greater clarity concerning PD and coaching components, particularly during the PDSA phase.

Team members suggested specifying how interventions and teacher support would adapt in cases where student progress is inadequate. Recommendations included having intensive coaching sessions or additional PD tailored to these circumstances. Also, one member proposed sharing expertise in culturally responsive teaching by assisting with PD delivery, while another noted minor grammatical corrections (Design Team, personal communication, October 2024). Overall, the team described the initiative as well-planned, with a realistic timeline, and appropriately focused on addressing the literacy gap. Using DIBELS for progress monitoring was especially praised for its ability to inform instruction and allow timely interventions (Design Team, personal communication, October 2024).

Figure 7

Implementation Plan and Goals



My improvement initiative to bridge the literacy gap was implemented from April 2024 to March 2025, with distinct phases of planning, execution, and evaluation.

Goals

Although the ultimate aim is to improve Black student reading performance and proficiency at Ira B. Jones Elementary School, achieving this long-term goal is beyond the timeframe of the disquisition.

- Long-Term Goal. Between May 2025 and May 2026, 20% more Black third grade students at Ira B. Jones Elementary School will be proficient on the North Carolina Third

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Grade EOG Reading Test. My goal is to accomplish the following outcome goals by the end of the disquisition period:

- Short-Term Goal 1. Between August 2024 and February 2025, 80% of Black K-2 students identified as non-proficient readers—based on beginning-of-year Amplify mClass DIBELS8 composite scores—will show average or above-average growth toward proficiency in foundational reading skills, as measured by mClass reading progress monitoring data or middle-of-year benchmark data.
- Short-Term Goal 2. Teacher surveys will reflect an improved understanding of culturally responsive and relevant teaching, as shown by an increase in self-ratings from pre-survey to post-survey data results.

Implementation Process Summary

The improvement initiative’s implementation timeline was structured to address key steps and measures systematically:

Dark Green (Primary Design Phase): Beginning in April 2024, this phase focused on setting up the design team, building their capacity, and initiating foundational activities like survey preparation and mClass data collection.

Light Green (Transition Phase): Activities initiated in earlier phases continued into subsequent months but began wrapping up, including analyzing survey and student performance data and finalizing PD materials.

Anticipated Challenges/Barriers Other Than Hurricane Helene

Implementing a change initiative to improve reading proficiency among Black students can face several challenges and barriers. One challenge is systemic inequities and longstanding disparities in educational opportunities, which can hinder efforts to address the specific needs of

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Black students in their literacy development. Further, implicit biases or misconceptions about the capabilities of Black students might impact educators' expectations and instructional approaches, contributing to barriers to effective teaching strategies tailored to their needs. Another challenge may be resistance to change among teachers, students, or parents. Resistance may stem from fear of the unknown, concerns about increased workload, or a lack of understanding regarding the benefits of the proposed change. Mitigating these challenges involves:

- Fostering a culture of open communication and transparency,
- Providing clear explanations about the rationale behind the change,
- Offering ample opportunities for input and feedback
- Demonstrating the potential positive impacts that can help alleviate resistance.

One fundamental consideration when collecting data through surveys is how people rate and evaluate themselves in them. Kruger and Dunning (1999) argued that people lacking the abilities required for accurate self-assessment in a particular domain often overestimate their competence. This is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, a cognitive bias that can be dangerous because people with low abilities tend to perform poorly but believe they are doing well.

This bias is caused by the lack of metacognitive skills, which would allow them to accurately assess themselves. On the other hand, people with high abilities tend to underestimate their abilities, which is a related effect. When people fail to recognize their mistakes, they tend to have inflated judgments about their performance. Dedicating resources for training, PD, and ongoing support will ensure that teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the change successfully. Building a shared vision, setting realistic goals, and celebrating incremental successes can also motivate everyone involved and create momentum towards successful implementation.

Impact of Hurricane Helene on Implementation and Adjustments

Natural disasters cause widespread devastation and greatly impact societies economically and socially. They can result in lasting damage to social structures and living conditions, disrupting essential services such as transportation, shelter, healthcare, and education. A 2024 UNICEF report highlighted that extreme weather events, such as heatwave, cyclones, and flooding, affected at least 242 million children in 85 countries. This represents one in seven school-going children worldwide. These disruptions often result in prolonged school closures, infrastructure damage, and hindered access to education. Beyond the physical destruction of school buildings, students and educators may suffer trauma, disabilities, or even death, creating extreme barriers to maintaining a quality learning environment.

Following Hurricane Helene, our school was closed for six weeks, severely disrupting students' education. Its impact extended beyond immediate educational disruptions, affecting family resources and communication channels crucial for student support. During this time, instruction stopped entirely as many families prioritized survival over schooling. Homes were destroyed, the water and power were largely unavailable, and many families were displaced, making education a secondary concern.

In the United States, natural disasters can lead to long-term declines in student performance. Research indicates that school closures due to such events have similar impacts on student performance across economic groups, with nearly every group experiencing a decline in test scores (Shipman, 2024). Attendance has been a concern since Hurricane Helene. While we are not yet certain of the full impact of missed instructional time on student learning, the disaster's effects have been significant.

Substantial adjustments were necessary to support students' academic progress and well-being. In response, the school prioritized social and emotional learning to help students cope with disruptions. The impact of Hurricane Helene on my improvement initiative underscores how natural disasters disrupt multiple aspects of schooling—from instruction and student attendance to community engagement—demanding flexible, responsive strategies to meet the evolving needs of students and staff. This experience reinforced the critical need for institutional resilience and adaptability in the face of such challenges.

Adjustments to the Implementation Plan

The disruption caused by Hurricane Helene required substantial modifications to the implementation plan for the improvement initiative, leading to delays in key activities. These adjustments were essential to ensure the initiative remained effective despite the challenges posed by the disaster. The primary disruptions were:

- **Teacher Pre-Survey Delays:** Administering and analyzing the Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pre-Survey for teachers was postponed, resulting in delays in collecting baseline data to inform PD needs.
- **Student Data Analysis Challenges:** mClass progress monitoring data were intended to be collected and analyzed every 10 days for students significantly below grade-level expectations and every 20 days for those slightly below grade-level reading expectations after the beginning-of-year assessment window closed in September. However, due to school closures and student absences, data were not collected, hindering a crucial factor and driver of student progress.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

- **Design Team Meetings Postponed:** Initial meetings with the design team, vital for refining the improvement initiative and PD modules, had to be rescheduled, affecting the project timeline.

Despite these setbacks, the implementation team remained committed to advancing key objectives of the improvement initiative. To mitigate the impact of disruptions, several adaptive strategies were used:

- **Building Teacher Capacity:** PD for culturally responsive teaching was prioritized to support teachers to create inclusive learning environments despite the challenges brought by the disaster.
- **Leveraging Progress Monitoring:** mClass data were incorporated into instructional planning, ensuring student progress could still be tracked effectively once normal operations resumed. We enhanced our use of progress monitoring data to identify and address learning gaps resulting from missed instruction. This approach included implementing targeted interventions and integrating social-emotional learning components to address storm-related trauma and was consistent with best practices in post-disaster educational recovery (Aldrich, 2012). These adaptations reflected an understanding that natural disasters can worsen existing educational disparities, particularly in historically marginalized communities.
- **Reengaging the Design Team—**The design team was actively engaged in refining and implementing the initiative, allowing flexible scheduling and ensuring that all members contributed meaningfully. Some of our communication occurred using email and phone conversations.

The challenges and responses to Hurricane Helene underscored the need to have adaptive leadership in educational settings affected by natural disasters. Research showed that resilience in educational institutions relies on proactive planning, flexible policy adjustments, and strong community engagement. As demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, effective crisis management involved not only responding to immediate disruptions but also navigating uncertainty, managing stakeholders, mitigating risk, and implementing innovative strategies for long-term recovery (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

These demands highlighted the need for school leaders to cultivate crisis leadership skills that enabled them to steer their schools through novel and unpredictable challenges. The ability to advocate for governance structures underscored adaptability in times of disruption. It also emphasized the significance of social-emotional support, data-driven decision-making, and teacher PD to rebuild learning environments.

Evaluating the Improvement Initiative

Data Collection and Analysis

Measurement is a crucial component of any improvement initiative. In Improvement Science, data collection and analysis occur continuously throughout the PDSA cycle to inform decision-making at multiple points and to guide real-time adjustments. A comprehensive evaluation process relies on the use of multiple types of measures, including outcome measures, process measures, driver measures, and balancing measures.

To monitor progress throughout this improvement initiative, a variety of tools were systematically employed to gather driver, process, balancing, and outcome measures. This structured approach ensured that both short-term impacts and broader system-level effects were continuously monitored and addressed in real time.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Driver measures were collected using mClass benchmark and progress monitoring data, gathered at strategic points throughout the school year. These data provided ongoing formative insights into students' reading development and helped inform instructional adjustments aligned to the Science of Reading (SoR) framework. The mClass data indicated how students were performing across the five essential components of the Structured Literacy approach grounded in SoR research: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In light of these results, the focus of instructional improvement efforts centered on ensuring that teachers implemented evidence-based practices that support early reading development, while simultaneously using culturally responsive methods that promote learning for all students. Anticipating these changes, the initiative sought to strengthen the alignment between clear, research-driven instruction and culturally affirming classroom practices.

Process measures included the implementation of professional development focused on culturally responsive and relevant teaching practices. This professional learning experience was designed to support teachers in applying culturally affirming instructional strategies in their classrooms and to build teacher capacity for fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Balancing measures were used to ensure that the intensified focus on reading instruction did not negatively impact other areas of instruction or teacher well-being. Student math skills were regularly monitored to confirm that math proficiency remained stable throughout the initiative. Lesson planning documents were reviewed to ensure that reading instruction was not prioritized at the expense of mathematics instruction. Additionally, informal conversations with teachers were conducted to assess perceptions of professional learning and to monitor for signs of implementation fatigue.

Outcome measures included a five-point Likert scale *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Teaching Practices Survey* (Hsiao, 2015), administered both as a pre-assessment and post-assessment. Additionally, a teacher focus group and informal one-on-one interviews with participants were conducted following the implementation of the professional development. These outcome measures provided summative feedback on the overall impact of the improvement efforts and offered qualitative insights into the perceived effectiveness and sustainability of the changes implemented.

Regular check-ins and feedback loops played a crucial role in ensuring the initiative's success. By systematically applying the PDSA process, ongoing formative data were used to evaluate whether the changes, particularly the integration of culturally responsive and relevant instruction with the Science of Reading framework, contributed to narrowing the reading proficiency gap between Black and White students.

Through the triangulation of these multiple data sources, the initiative was able to assess real-time progress, monitor implementation fidelity, and evaluate overall effectiveness while maintaining a balanced and responsive approach to continuous improvement.

The following sections present the findings from each of these data sources, organized by driver, process, balancing, and outcome measures.

Driver Measures

Driver measures serve as predictive indicators of progress toward a goal before outcome measures are collected (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). These measures are typically gathered more frequently than outcome measures but less frequently than process measures.

During the "Do" phase of the PDSA cycle, specific methods were implemented to address each driver measure, and data were collected to monitor progress. This collection process allowed for timely adjustments based on emerging trends and helped inform instructional decision-making before summative outcomes were finalized.

Data Collection Processes

Throughout the improvement initiative, mClass reading benchmark data were collected during the designated benchmark windows: within the first 20 days of the school year in September (beginning-of-year baseline) and again in January 2025 (middle-of-year benchmark). Although mClass benchmark data are collected three times annually—September, January, and May—the end-of-year (May) data fall outside the designated timeline for this improvement initiative and, therefore, were not included in the current analysis.

Following the closing of each benchmark window, progress monitoring data were collected at regular intervals of 10 to 20 instructional days. Progress monitoring served as an ongoing formative assessment measure between benchmark periods, providing teachers with timely insights into students' reading development and allowing for real-time instructional adjustments. Weekly or biweekly progress monitoring provided sufficient data to quickly establish patterns of growth or areas of concern, facilitating timely, targeted intervention.

Grounded in the Science of Reading (SoR) framework, mClass offers standardized, universal, norm-referenced assessments of foundational literacy skills. It functions as both a dyslexia screener and a progress monitoring tool, assessing critical components of literacy development, including phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonics, reading fluency, reading accuracy, and reading comprehension (Reading Comprehension Support Guide for DIBELS, 8th ed.; Lyon, 2004). The brief, predictive assessments within mClass enable

teachers to identify at-risk students early and implement evidence-based interventions to support their reading growth.

In addition to offering benchmark comparisons against national norms, mClass data help determine what students already know and what they are ready to learn next, ensuring that instruction remains both targeted and developmentally appropriate. The comprehensive data collection allowed teachers to closely monitor student growth throughout the year and adapt their instructional practices to meet individual learning needs more effectively. Progress monitoring results were graphed and visually compared to an aimline, representing the trajectory from a student's current score to the benchmark goal, to assess ongoing student progress.

Addressing the needs of struggling readers as early as possible was essential. Torgesen (2004) describes the “devastating downward spiral” that can occur when students fail to receive timely, evidence-based interventions. Struggling readers cannot afford a “wait and see” approach; rather, systematic and frequent progress monitoring provided actionable information that allowed instructional teams to intervene early and prevent further academic decline.

Data Analysis Processes

mClass progress monitoring data were collected and analyzed every 10 days for students significantly below grade-level expectations. Data were gathered and analyzed every 20 days for those slightly below grade-level reading expectations. Although I initially planned to start collecting this progress monitoring data in October 2024, the data collection did not begin until later in November 2024 due to Hurricane Helene, after students had been out for approximately six weeks without receiving reading instruction.

After returning from Hurricane Helene, progress monitoring resumed the week of November 10, 2024. Progress monitoring cycles occurred for the weeks of November 10–

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

November 23, November 24–December 7, and December 8–December 21. During this period, students followed a modified schedule for a week and a half, were out of school for Thanksgiving break for one week, and for an additional two-week Winter Break. Upon their return in January 2025, students were assessed during the mid-year benchmark window.

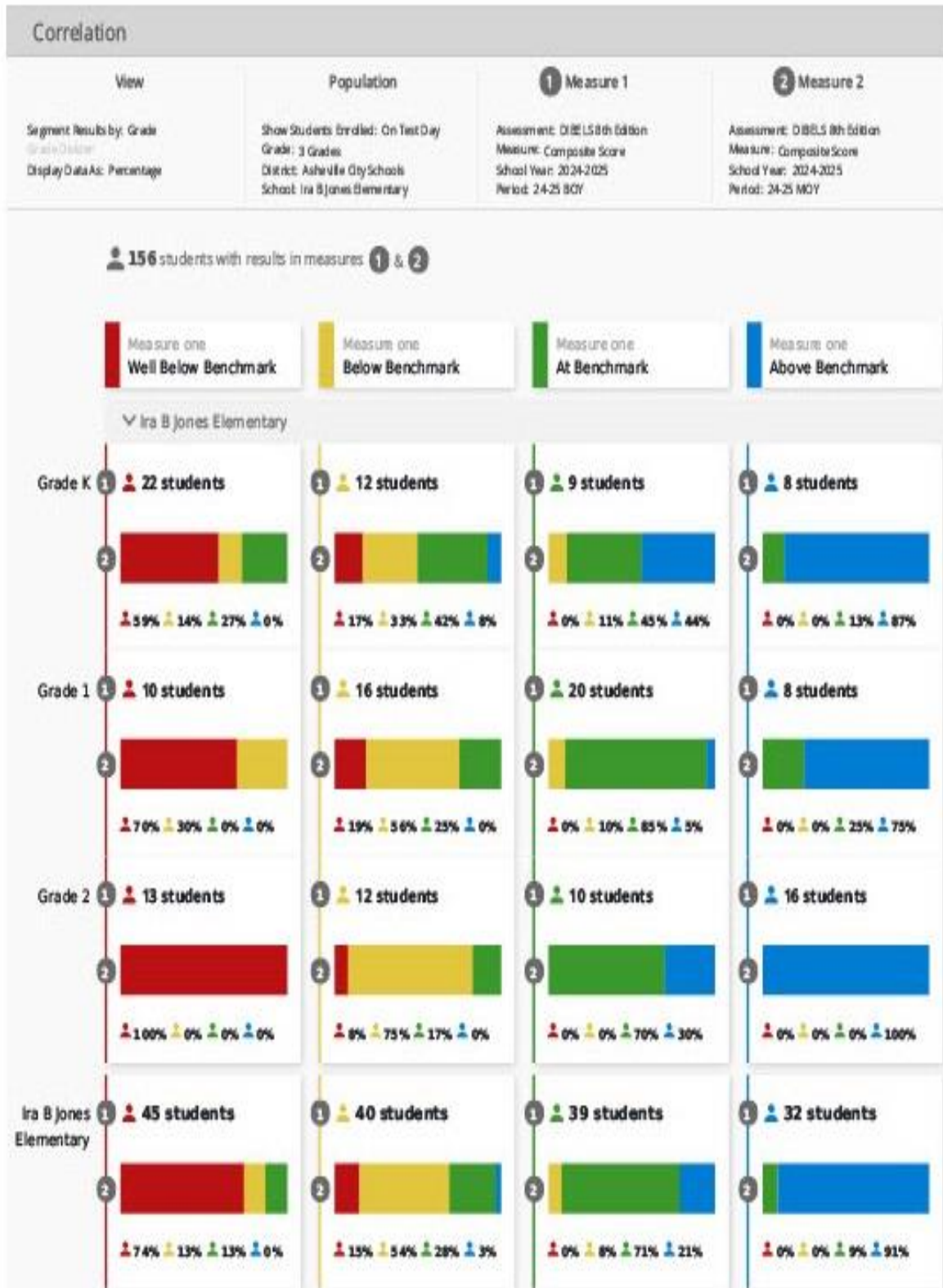
Results from Analysis

Figure 8 shows a comparative analysis of all K-2 students' reading achievement from the beginning of the year (BOY) to the middle of the year (MOY), as measured by mClass assessments. Figure 9 gives a comparative analysis of all K-2 Black students' reading achievement from BOY to MOY, also measured by mClass assessments. A total of 156 K-2 students were assessed at both points in time. Benchmark 1 corresponds to BOY composite scores, while Benchmark 2 represents MOY composite scores.

Figure 8

DIBELS Measures for Determining Reading Benchmarks

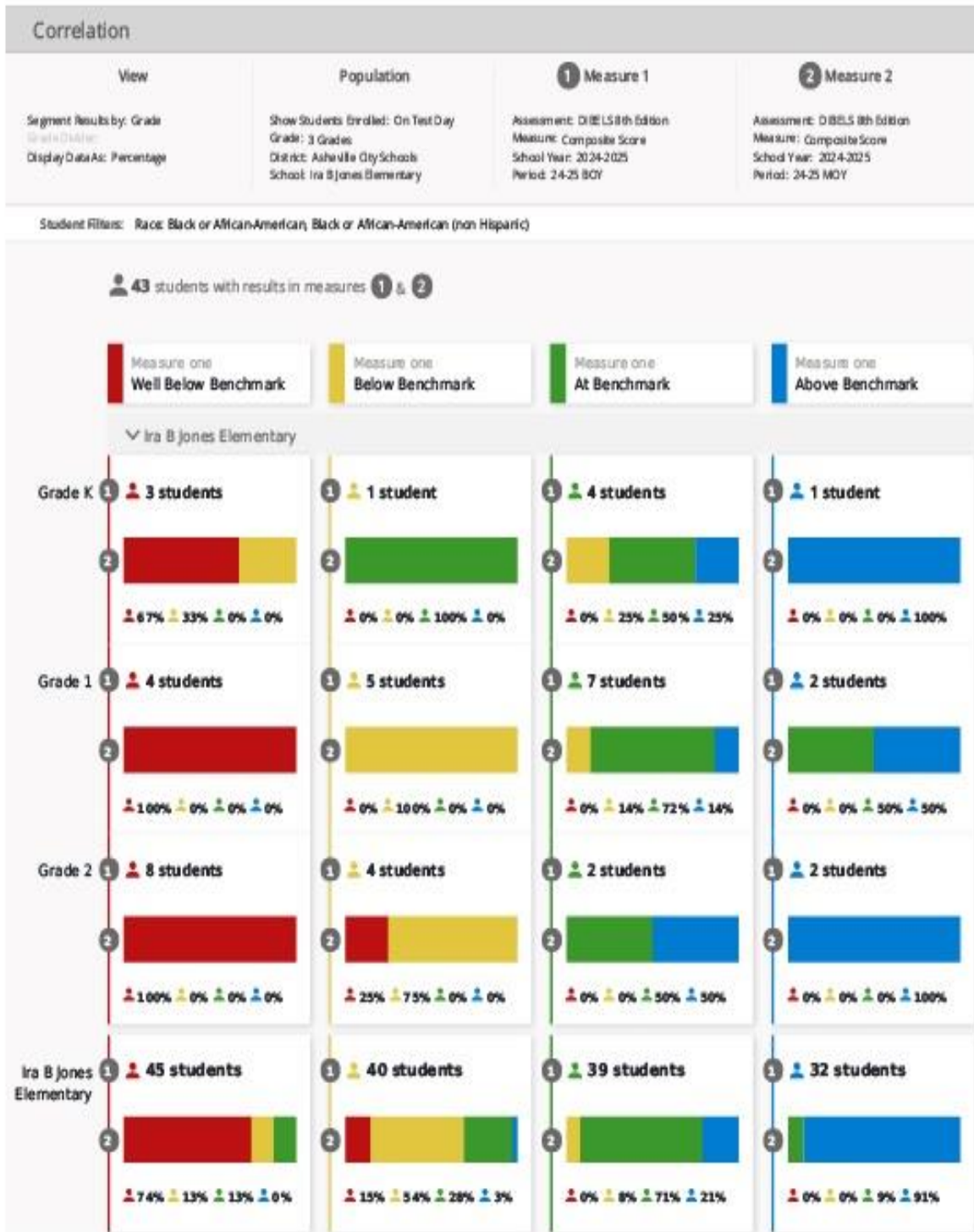
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Figure 9

Analysis of K-2 Black Students' mClass Reading Data: Performance from BOY to MOY



Kindergarten

At the BOY assessment, 22 kindergarten students scored well below the benchmark. By the MOY assessment, 59% remained well below the benchmark. However, 14% improved to below the benchmark, and 27% met the benchmark. No students moved above the benchmark, but 12 kindergarten students initially scored below the benchmark. By the MOY assessment, 17% had dropped to well below the benchmark, 3.9% stayed below the benchmark, 62% improved to the benchmark, and 9% exceeded the benchmark.

Among Black kindergarten students, three began the year well below the benchmark. By the middle of the year (MOY), 67% remained well below the benchmark, while 33% moved to below the benchmark. One Black student who started below the benchmark progressed to at benchmark by MOY. Four Black students began the year at the benchmark. Of these, 25% dropped to below benchmark, 50% stayed at benchmark, and 25% advanced to above benchmark.

First Grade

Ten first-grade students started the year well below the benchmark. Of these, 70% stayed in this category, while 30% improved below the benchmark. No students reached the benchmark or above. Further, 16 students began the year below the benchmark. By the middle of the year, 19% declined to well below benchmark, 5.6% remained below benchmark, 29% achieved benchmark, and none progressed to above benchmark.

For students who started the year at the benchmark (n =20), 85% stayed at the benchmark, 10% dropped below the benchmark, and 5% advanced to above the benchmark. Among the eight students who began the year above the benchmark, 75% remained above the

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

benchmark, while 25% moved to at the benchmark. No students in this group fell below the benchmark.

Four Black first-grade students started the year well below benchmark, and all four stayed in this category at the middle of the year (MOY). Five Black students who began below benchmark also remained below that level. Seven Black first-grade students began the year at benchmark; among them, 14% dropped below benchmark, 72% remained at benchmark, and 14% advanced to above benchmark. Two Black first graders started the year above benchmark, with one staying above benchmark and the other dropped to benchmark.

Second Grade

In second grade, 13 students began the year well below the benchmark, and all remained in this category by the middle of the year (MOY). Similarly, 12 students started below benchmark; by MOY, 8% declined to well below benchmark, 75% remained below benchmark, and 17% improved to benchmark.

Among second-grade students who began the year at the benchmark (n=10), 70% remained at the benchmark, while 30% improved to above the benchmark. Additionally, 16 students started well above the benchmark, and all remained in this category at (MOY).

Eight Black second-grade students started the year well below the benchmark, and all continued to be well below that benchmark by the middle of the year. Four Black students began below the benchmark; by the middle of the year, 25% declined to well below benchmark, while 75% stayed below benchmark. Two Black second graders began the year at the benchmark, with one maintaining the benchmark and the other improving to above it. Two Black second graders started above the benchmark, and both remained above it.

Overall K-2 Trends

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Across K-2, 45 students started the year well below the benchmark. By the middle of the year, 74% remained in this category, 13% moved to below benchmark, and 1% achieved benchmark status. Among the 40 students who began below benchmark, 15% declined to well below benchmark, 54% stayed below benchmark, 29% reached benchmark, and 3% advanced to above benchmark.

Among students who began the year at the benchmark (n=39), 71% remained at the benchmark, while 21% moved to above the benchmark. Finally, among students who started above the benchmark (n=32), 91% remained in this category, while 9% declined to benchmark.

Teacher Observations of Student Engagement

In addition to the quantitative data collected through mClass assessments, informal conversations with teachers who participated in the improvement work offered further insight into student engagement. Several teachers noted that their Black students appeared to be more engaged in reading instruction than in previous years. Teachers attributed this increased engagement, in part, to the culturally responsive and relevant approach to reading instruction emphasized during the improvement initiative. While these observations were informal and anecdotal, they provide important context to the quantitative findings, suggesting that culturally responsive practices may have contributed to positive shifts in student engagement and participation during reading instruction.

These quantitative results and qualitative observations together provide important context for interpreting the impact of the improvement initiative and are explored further in the following discussion.

Findings

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Reviewing the trends in student achievement from the beginning of the year (BOY) to the middle of the year (MOY) revealed important patterns regarding student reading proficiency growth. Although some students demonstrated measurable progress, a significant proportion—particularly those who began well below or below the benchmark—remained within those categories by the MOY assessment. Kindergarten students showed the greatest upward movement, with 62% of those who started below the benchmark reaching benchmark proficiency by midyear. In contrast, first- and second-grade students who began well below benchmark experienced greater difficulty making significant gains, highlighting the ongoing need for intensified interventions focused on foundational literacy skills.

Based on these emerging trends, I reviewed the instructional practices and strategies teachers employed to support students' reading development. Special attention was given to whether classroom instruction aligned with Science of Reading (SoR) research, incorporated differentiated strategies, and effectively addressed the five essential components of structured literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Rather than conducting formal statistical analysis, I interpreted the patterns in the benchmark and progress monitoring data to gather meaningful insights that informed decision-making during the "Study" phase of the PDSA cycle.

As part of this review, I examined the effectiveness of targeted interventions provided to students who scored well below benchmark, particularly focusing on the consistency of systematic phonics instruction and foundational skill development. Additionally, I considered how the integration of culturally responsive and relevant teaching practices might have contributed to observed changes in student reading performance. Although further discussion of these instructional approaches is provided in the Process Measures section, initial observations

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

indicated that some instructional shifts had begun to positively influence student engagement and access to grade-level content.

A key area of focus involved understanding the reading progress of Black students. The trends showed that a substantial number of Black students who began the year well below benchmark remained in that category at midyear. These findings reinforced the importance of continuing to strengthen culturally responsive instructional practices, refining intervention strategies, and maintaining high expectations for all students' literacy development.

In addition to benchmark data, progress monitoring data were used to track instructional impact between assessment windows. Progress monitoring completion rates fluctuated over time. From November 10 to November 23, completion rates were 100% for kindergarten, 77% for first grade, and 71% for second grade. However, during the week of November 29 to December 7, completion rates declined to 52% in kindergarten, 62% in first grade, and 57% in second grade. Completion rates rebounded between December 8 and December 21, reaching 91% in kindergarten, 92% in first grade, and 93% in second grade. Although interruptions in progress monitoring affected the consistency of available data, the information gathered still provided valuable insight into how students were responding to instruction.

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BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

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Despite challenges related to school closures and attendance disruptions, the mClass driver measures allowed teachers and instructional leaders to adjust instruction in real time. This information supported instructional planning aligned with structured literacy practices and ensured that strategies remained grounded in evidence-based and culturally responsive approaches. Moving forward, continuous monitoring and refinement of instructional methods will remain critical to accelerating literacy growth for all students, particularly for those historically underserved.

In addition to these findings, professional development on culturally responsive and relevant instructional practices served as a key process measure for this initiative, as discussed in the following section.

Process Measures

Data Collection Processes

As part of the improvement initiative, culturally responsive and relevant professional development (PD) was implemented as a key process measure. This PD aimed to support teachers in integrating culturally affirming strategies into their instructional practices to better meet the needs of all learners, particularly Black students.

Of the ten K-2 teachers invited to participate, five elected to engage in the PD sessions. The remaining five teachers opted out due to their existing commitments to the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training, a rigorous two-year professional development program grounded in the Science of Reading (SoR) framework. Due to the time-intensive demands of LETRS, these teachers were unable to take on additional professional learning during the initiative.

Prior to participating in the professional development, the five teachers completed Hsiao (2015) *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Teaching Practices Survey* (Appendix B). The survey was administered anonymously one week before the first PD session to encourage candid responses and minimize response bias. The instrument evaluated five key domains of culturally responsive teaching: cultural awareness and pedagogical knowledge, curriculum and assessment integration, instructional implementation, family and community engagement, and classroom environment. The results of this survey were used to guide and refine the focus of the PD sessions to better address areas of greatest need.

Data Analysis Processes

Rather than conducting a formal statistical analysis, survey responses were reviewed to identify general trends and patterns across the five domains. Teachers' self-reported levels of frequency and confidence were examined to determine areas of strength and areas in need of further support. Open-ended survey comments, informal teacher feedback during PD sessions, and discussions during a teacher focus group were also reviewed to triangulate findings and gain a richer understanding of teacher experiences and perspectives.

This qualitative review of data allowed for formative adjustments to professional development content and provided insights into the impact of the PD on teacher mindsets and

instructional practices. The analysis remained descriptive in nature, focusing on identifying key themes that could inform instructional decision-making.

Results from Analysis

The review of pre-survey results and feedback revealed varying levels of competency across the domains of culturally responsive teaching. Key findings are summarized below:

- **Cultural Awareness and Pedagogical Knowledge:** Four out of five teachers reported either "rarely" or "sometimes" implementing identity-affirming strategies, indicating limited integration of racially and ethnically affirming instructional practices. Only one teacher indicated regular use of such strategies.
- **Curriculum and Assessment Integration:** Three out of five teachers reported occasionally incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into curriculum and assessment practices, while two consistently reviewed curricular materials for multicultural representation. These findings align with research highlighting the challenges of embedding cultural inclusivity into assessment design (Civitillo et al., 2019).
- **Instructional Implementation:** Three out of five teachers indicated occasional use of culturally relevant instructional examples, while two reported rare use. Similarly, four out of five teachers occasionally used diverse assessment strategies, reflecting a need for more consistent integration of culturally responsive pedagogy into daily instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2009).
- **Family and Community Engagement:** Teachers demonstrated strong skills in building relationships with families and students, with four out of five expressing high confidence in maintaining constructive communication and fostering family-school partnerships.

However, there was greater variability in strategies for engaging culturally diverse families (Larson et al., 2018).

- **Classroom Environment:** Establishing inclusive and supportive learning environments emerged as the strongest area of practice, with four out of five teachers reporting consistent implementation of strategies that foster culturally affirming classroom spaces.

Findings

The professional development sessions positively influenced teacher mindsets and practices, helping participants become more intentional, reflective, and responsive to the cultural identities and needs of their students. Open-ended feedback and discussions during the teacher focus group reinforced that teachers were increasingly aware of the importance of making instruction relevant, inclusive, and equitable.

While the findings indicated clear strengths in relationship building and creating inclusive environments, they also revealed areas for continued growth. Teachers expressed a desire for additional support in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and the practical application of culturally responsive instructional strategies. Several priority areas for ongoing professional development emerged:

- Strengthening the connection between culturally responsive teaching practices and student academic outcomes.
- Developing concrete strategies for integrating students' cultural backgrounds into curriculum and assessments.
- Building teacher confidence in differentiating instruction to align with students' cultural assets and lived experiences.
- Continuing to deepen understanding of identity-affirming pedagogical practices.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

- Embedding culturally responsive professional learning as a regular and ongoing part of school improvement efforts rather than a one-time initiative.

The culturally responsive and relevant professional development (PD) series was designed to address literacy disparities, particularly for Black students, by strengthening teachers' culturally affirming instructional practices. Grounded in Ladson-Billings' (1994) framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, the PD provided teachers with strategies to connect learning to students' cultural identities, integrate inclusive classroom practices, and foster equitable engagement.

Post-implementation survey results indicated meaningful improvements across several aspects of culturally responsive teaching. Teachers reported greater intentionality in connecting instruction to students' backgrounds, heightened cultural awareness, and increased confidence in creating inclusive learning environments. In addition to self-reported growth, informal conversation and focus group discussions revealed that teachers were more reflective about their practices and more attuned to fostering academic success for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

While the data were reviewed descriptively rather than through formal statistical testing, the overall trends suggest that the professional development series positively influenced teacher mindsets and instructional approaches. These findings reinforce the importance of sustained investment in culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy as a foundation for promoting student engagement, equity, and achievement.

In addition to examining shifts in instructional practices through the culturally responsive professional development, outcome measures were used to evaluate the broader impact of the improvement initiative on teacher beliefs and student learning outcomes.

Outcome Measures

Data Collection Processes

To evaluate the broader impact of the improvement initiative on teaching practices and student learning, multiple outcome measures were collected. These included:

- A five-point Likert scale survey assessing culturally responsive and relevant teaching practices, adapted from Hsiao (2015) (see Appendix B).
- A teacher focus group discussion (see Appendix C) conducted at the conclusion of the initiative.
- Informal conversations with participating teachers throughout the improvement initiative.
- Review of K-2 student reading achievement data (particularly for Black students) using beginning-of-year (BOY) and middle-of-year (MOY) mCLASS benchmarks.

The culturally responsive and relevant teaching survey, developed by Hsiao (2015), assessed teachers' use of culturally responsive strategies across domains such as cultural awareness, instructional implementation, curriculum integration, and family engagement. The survey was administered twice: once prior to the professional development (pre-survey) and once after the completion of the initiative (post-survey). Both surveys were completed anonymously to promote honest reflection.

The teacher focus group discussion provided structured qualitative feedback, while informal conversations with participating teachers offered additional real-time insights into teachers' perceptions, implementation experiences, and reflections.

Student mClass data were also collected to evaluate reading achievement patterns across participating and non-participating classrooms.

Data Analysis Processes

Survey results were examined descriptively, with changes in teacher self-reported practices compared between the pre- and post-assessments. Responses were categorized by domain (e.g., instructional practices, cultural awareness, curriculum integration) to detect patterns and shifts in attitudes and behaviors over the course of the initiative.

Focus group discussions were audio-recorded, manually transcribed, and systematically coded using thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Emergent themes were identified to capture common perspectives, shifts in practice, and perceived challenges and successes associated with culturally responsive teaching.

Notes from informal conversations with teachers were reviewed to help triangulate the findings and support the emerging patterns identified in the focus group and survey data.

Student mClass benchmark results were descriptively reviewed, particularly comparing student outcomes between teachers who participated in the initiative and those who did not.

Although no formal statistical tests were conducted, descriptive analysis provided meaningful trends that informed findings and conclusions.

Results from Analysis

- **Pre-survey findings** revealed varying levels of self-reported competency across culturally responsive teaching domains.
- **Post-survey findings** demonstrated notable growth:
 - a) 4 out of 5 teachers reported regularly reviewing instructional materials for multicultural relevance, up from 1 out of 5 teachers at pre-survey (Hsiao, 2015).
 - b) Use of culturally familiar examples increased from 3 out of 5 teachers to 4 out of 5 teachers.

- c) The implementation of diverse assessment methods rose from 2 out of 5 teachers to 3 out of 5 teachers.

These improvements suggest that teachers not only became more aware of culturally responsive strategies but also began to integrate them more consistently into daily instruction (see Table 3 for detailed survey results).

Qualitative Focus Group and Informal Conversation Results

Analysis of the focus group discussions and informal conversations revealed several key themes related to implementing culturally responsive teaching practices. Teachers emphasized the importance of relationships, curriculum, and classroom environment in fostering an inclusive learning space. Several participants reported that culturally responsive strategies, such as morning meetings and student-led routines, increased student engagement and strengthened their sense of belonging within the classroom.

- **Recognizing Diversity Within Cultural Identities:** Multiple teachers highlighted the importance of acknowledging the diverse experiences within cultural groups. They emphasized valuing each student's unique background rather than assuming a monolithic cultural experience. One teacher shared a classroom activity where students discussed holiday traditions, fostering community and mutual understanding.
- **Sustaining the Momentum of Culturally Responsive Teaching:** Participants expressed a strong desire for the ongoing integration of culturally responsive practices beyond initial professional development. They advocated for embedding culturally responsive perspectives into lesson planning documents to ensure long-term instructional change.
- **Increased Awareness and Reflection:** Teachers reported that completing the survey twice—before and after the initiative—heightened their awareness of their strengths and

areas for improvement. As one teacher explained:

"Revisiting the survey questions helped me realize where I could do better — now, I think about student backgrounds with every book or activity I select."

- **Culturally Responsive Teaching for Literacy Development:** Teachers described how students' enthusiasm increased when identity-affirming texts were integrated into literacy instruction. This observation aligns with Hammond's (2015) research linking culturally responsive teaching to greater literacy engagement.

One teacher reflected:

"When students see themselves in literature, they 'pretend read' with pride. That joy is the spark for lifelong literacy."

Notable Individual Insights

In addition to common themes, individual teachers offered insights that further illustrate the impact of the improvement initiative:

- **Accountability and Intentionality:** One teacher described implementing an accountability system in collaboration with her instructional assistant to monitor equitable participation during lessons. She tracked which students were called on for positive and corrective feedback and used this information to adjust her instructional practices to ensure fairness and inclusivity.
- **Strengthening Instruction Through Barrier Identification:** The same teacher also became more intentional in identifying potential barriers to student success, adjusting expectations, and modifying assignments to ensure all students had equitable opportunities to succeed.

Student Reading Outcomes

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Review of student reading mClass benchmark data indicated:

- Classrooms of teachers who participated in the initiative showed higher rates of student growth, particularly among Black students.
- Among Black kindergarten students, those in participating teachers' classrooms demonstrated greater benchmark progression compared to peers in non-participating classrooms.
- In first grade, Black students assigned to non-participating teachers were less likely to improve their benchmark status by MOY.
- Across K-2, students in classrooms with teachers engaged in culturally responsive PD maintained or improved their reading performance more consistently.

Teachers who implemented culturally responsive strategies not only supported greater academic progress for Black students but also sustained higher performance levels across all learners.

Findings

The findings from the post-survey results, focus group discussions, and informal conversations demonstrated that the professional development series on culturally responsive and relevant teaching had a positive impact on participating teachers' instructional practices, mindsets, and planning.

Key themes from the focus group discussions highlighted increased teacher awareness of student cultural identities, a stronger emphasis on sustaining culturally responsive practices beyond initial training, greater reflection on instructional materials and teaching practices, and a deeper commitment to integrating culturally relevant texts and experiences into literacy

instruction. Teachers described observable increases in student engagement, particularly when students' cultural backgrounds were reflected in classroom materials and discussions.

Additionally, individual teacher insights reinforced these themes and provided examples of concrete practices, such as implementing accountability systems to monitor equitable participation and intentionally identifying and addressing barriers to learning.

Survey data indicated measurable growth across multiple dimensions of culturally responsive practice, particularly in areas such as selecting culturally relevant materials, using diverse assessment strategies, and fostering inclusive classroom environments. Notably, 4 out of 5 teachers reported regular review of instructional materials for multicultural relevance by the end of the initiative, an increase from baseline data.

Overall, these findings suggest that the improvement initiative helped foster important instructional shifts that contributed to more inclusive, asset-based teaching practices. Teachers demonstrated stronger intentionality in designing learning experiences that affirm student identities and support literacy development, particularly for Black students.

While the initiative produced encouraging outcomes, the focus group discussions also underscored the need for culturally responsive teaching to be an ongoing focus, not a one-time professional development event. Sustained support, reflection, and reinforcement of culturally responsive practices will be critical to maintaining momentum and achieving lasting equity-centered instructional improvement.

Balance Measures

Data Collection Processes

To ensure that the improvement initiative did not inadvertently negatively impact other areas of instruction, a balanced approach was implemented. Students' math skills were regularly

monitored through classroom assessments and review of Universal Screener for Number Sense (USNS) data to confirm that math proficiency remained stable while intensifying the focus on reading instruction.

Lesson planning documents were also reviewed to verify that reading was not prioritized at the expense of mathematics. Additionally, I engaged in informal conversations with participating teachers to gauge their perceptions of the professional learning process and to monitor for signs of implementation fatigue.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through trend monitoring rather than formal statistical testing. Math progress data from USNS reports were reviewed periodically, and lesson plans were examined for evidence of balanced instructional coverage across core subjects. Informal teacher conversations were synthesized to detect emerging concerns related to workload, instructional balance, or teacher well-being. Observations from grade-level Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings were also considered as part of this formative monitoring process.

Results from Analysis

Monitoring revealed that students continued to demonstrate steady growth and progress in mathematics throughout the initiative. No significant decline in math performance was observed, as evidenced by USNS data and PLC discussions focused on strengthening foundational math and number sense skills.

Lesson planning consistently reflected balanced instructional time between reading and math, suggesting that teachers maintained fidelity to both content areas.

Informal conversations with teachers indicated that, while the initiative required intentional planning, it was largely perceived as an opportunity to enhance practice rather than an

additional burden. Teachers expressed positive attitudes toward culturally responsive instruction and demonstrated a willingness to integrate new strategies without sacrificing other academic priorities.

Findings

The balancing measures confirmed that the improvement initiative succeeded in maintaining appropriate instructional balance without negatively impacting student performance in mathematics or contributing to teacher burnout.

Teachers continued to prioritize both literacy and numeracy goals, ensuring holistic student achievement. The proactive integration of culturally responsive teaching strategies was viewed not as a competing demand but as a meaningful enhancement to existing instructional practices. Maintaining open communication with teachers and aligning schoolwide instructional priorities across subjects contributed to this success. Moving forward, continued monitoring of multiple content areas and supporting teacher well-being will remain essential to sustaining equitable and high-quality instruction.

My goal was to ensure that teachers viewed this initiative not as a burden, but rather an opportunity to enhance reading instruction, particularly for Black students. By maintaining open dialogue, I reinforced the connection between culturally responsive teaching and improved student outcomes. To further support a balanced instructional approach, I attended grade-level PLC meetings to ensure that each grade level maintained a math goal. According to our universal math screener (USNS), students showed steady growth and progress in math. This progress was likely influenced by PLC discussions, where teams focused on strengthening foundational math and number sense skills. By aligning instructional priorities across subjects and emphasizing

both literacy and numeracy, I supported holistic student achievement while ensuring that teachers remained engaged and supported in the professional learning process.

The findings from the driver, process, balancing, and outcome measures suggest that the improvement initiative positively influenced both teacher instructional practices and student learning outcomes. Notable growth in culturally responsive teaching strategies, improved student engagement, and steady academic progress across content areas were observed. While the initiative demonstrated promising results, particularly in narrowing gaps for Black students, opportunities remain for ongoing refinement and broader implementation. The following section discusses the implications of the improvement efforts, lessons learned, and recommendations for sustaining and expanding culturally responsive and relevant teaching practices in the future.

Impact and Future Directions

This improvement initiative highlighted the transformative potential of combining culturally responsive teaching practices and culturally relevant pedagogy with evidence-based literacy instruction to address reading inequities among Black students. Despite its limited scope of five participating teachers and extreme disruptions from Hurricane Helene, the study provided valuable insights into effective instructional practices and strategies for systemic change.

The findings indicated that when teachers combine culturally responsive pedagogy with structured literacy approaches, student engagement and achievement improve. Using explicit phonics instruction, grounded in the SoR framework and monitored with mClass DIBELS assessment, established a solid foundation for early identification and intervention in reading difficulties. Additionally, consistently incorporating culturally relevant texts and instructional materials enhanced student engagement and promoted academic growth.

Recommendations for Practice

Peer Observation and Feedback

Peer observation and feedback systems will support teachers in implementing culturally responsive reading instruction, particularly by leveraging students' cultural assets to enhance engagement and learning outcomes. This process will be peer-driven to build teacher capacity and ensure that observations occur frequently and authentically. It will allow teachers to observe and provide feedback to each other, fostering a culture of trust and continuous improvement.

Teachers will participate in structured observation cycles, allowing them to analyze instructional practices through a culturally responsive lens and receive focused feedback on areas such as text selection, student participation, and instructional equity. Observations will emphasize how lessons draw on students' lived experiences, linguistic diversity, and cultural backgrounds to make learning more meaningful. Furthermore, peer feedback will support teachers in recognizing and addressing implicit biases, refining differentiation strategies, and strengthening inclusive literacy practices.

By embedding this collaborative learning model within the school culture, peer observations will become a sustainable and continuous practice, ensuring that culturally responsive instruction is integrated into daily teaching rather than treated as an isolated initiative.

Ongoing Professional Support

To sustain culturally responsive instructional practices, ongoing professional support will include quarterly check-ins and a digital repository of culturally relevant instructional resources. Quarterly check-ins will provide structured opportunities for reflection, collaborative problem-solving, and targeted coaching, ensuring that teachers receive continuous guidance as they refine their culturally responsive teaching strategies.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

In addition to quarterly check-ins, monthly PLC meetings will serve as regular touchpoints for professional dialogue and support. During these meetings, progress will be monitored, instructional coaching will be provided, and discussions on best practices for culturally responsive teaching will be facilitated. This ongoing, embedded support will ensure that culturally relevant pedagogy remains a consistent focus throughout the school year.

Community Engagement Initiatives

To strengthen culturally responsive practices and enhance student learning experiences, community engagement initiatives will focus on elevating Black voices through strategic partnerships with parents, community elders, and local authors. These partnerships will provide students with authentic connections to their cultural heritage, reinforcing the relevance of their learning experiences.

Parents will be invited to work with teachers, sharing their cultural knowledge and experiences to help shape classroom discussions and activities. Community elders will act as guest speakers and mentors, providing historical and cultural perspectives that enrich students' understanding of identity and resilience. Additionally, local Black authors will be involved in leading read-alouds, writing workshops, and book discussions, ensuring that students see themselves represented in literature.

Assessment and Accountability Measures

To ensure that culturally responsive instruction results in measurable student growth, assessment and accountability measures will incorporate culturally relevant texts and data-driven monitoring tools. These assessments will track students' literacy progress while reflecting their cultural backgrounds, ensuring that evaluation methods are inclusive and equitable.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Regular progress monitoring will be conducted to track student growth, particularly among Black students and other historically marginalized groups. Culturally relevant texts will be embedded into formative and summative assessments, allowing students to engage with materials that reflect their identities. Additionally, benchmark assessments and classroom-based data will be analyzed during PLCs and quarterly check-ins to inform instructional decisions and support continuous improvement.

The initiative's focus on systemic improvement through critical, user-centered practices (Weiler & Virtue, 2024) established equity as a collective responsibility within the school community. This approach corresponds with research demonstrating that lasting educational change requires continuous reflection, data-informed adaptation, and shared accountability (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). PDSA cycles offered a structured framework for tracking progress and making necessary adjustments throughout the initiative.

Policy Recommendations and Systemic Change

At the policy level, ongoing advocacy is crucial for addressing systemic barriers that hinder equitable educational opportunities. A key focus is dismantling tracking practices, which have historically disproportionately limited Black students' access to rigorous instruction (Hattie, 2011; Oakes, 2005). These practices often lead to lowered expectations, limited access to advanced coursework, and reduced academic opportunities.

Policies must support inclusive, data-driven placement decisions that guarantee all students, especially Black students, have access to high-quality instruction and enrichment opportunities. Furthermore, professional development should prepare teachers with anti-bias training and strategies to identify and disrupt inequitable sorting mechanisms.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

North Carolina recently underwent a statute change to strengthen early literacy instruction. During the April 2021 legislative session, North Carolina legislators passed an act modifying the Read to Achieve legislation to improve statewide reading proficiency by third grade. Session Law 2021-8 (Senate Bill 387) mandates that all PreK–fifth grade teachers be highly trained in the science of reading and emphasizes systemic and explicit reading instruction. To support this initiative, the legislation requires that all Pre-K and K–5 classroom teachers, elementary EC resource teachers, elementary English Language teachers, and one elementary administrator per school complete a two-year professional development course called LETRS

While this law strengthens systemic and explicit reading instruction, an essential next step is to ensure that professional development also incorporates anti-bias training and culturally responsive practices. A recommended policy expansion is to mandate all educators to complete professional development focused on culturally relevant pedagogy. This would ensure that teachers not only have the skills to deliver research-based reading instruction but also understand how to create inclusive, equitable learning environments that affirm students’ identities and cultural backgrounds.

Advocacy for dismantling tracking practices aligns with current educational policies aimed at promoting equity and access to rigorous instruction. The U.S. Department of Education’s strategic plan for fiscal years 2022–2026 emphasizes ensuring that all students have access to well-rounded, rigorous, engaging, and diverse learning opportunities. Further, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to develop plans that address disparities in educational outcomes, encouraging the implementation of strategies that provide equitable access to high-quality instruction. These policies reinforce the need for systemic changes in

placement and instructional access, ensuring that historically marginalized students receive the opportunities necessary to thrive academically.

Leadership Lessons Learned

Implementing culturally responsive instructional practices required intentional leadership, strategic planning, and continuous reflection. A key leadership lesson was the importance of sustained PD and embedded support, rather than one-time training sessions. Teachers exhibited the greatest growth when they had ongoing opportunities to engage in peer observation, obtain targeted feedback, and participate in structured PLC discussions centered on culturally responsive teaching. Additionally, teacher buy-in and capacity building proved essential in ensuring that culturally responsive practices were viewed not as an extra task but as an integral part of effective literacy instruction.

Another critical takeaway was that change takes time. Undoing deeply ingrained instructional habits and longstanding mindsets is not an immediate process. Teachers often approach instruction compartmentally, and challenging implicit biases requires intentional reflection as well as structured opportunities to rethink instructional practices. I also learned that simply because I am passionate and excited about an initiative, does not mean that others will share that enthusiasm. Meaningful change requires meeting teachers where they are, allowing them to engage in honest reflection, and supporting their growth at a sustainable pace.

Leading as a learner instead of an expert proved to be a powerful approach. Creating space for curiosity in dialogue fostered productive conversations and reduced resistance. Rather than presenting solutions as prescriptive mandates, positioning myself as an active participant in the learning process encouraged greater teacher engagement and buy-in. This shift in leadership style allowed for more open discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and a collective commitment to improving instructional equity.

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

This improvement initiative emphasized that prioritizing equity in literacy instruction through culturally responsive teaching practices can significantly enhance student outcomes. Achieving success requires a dual commitment Teachers must continually refine their instructional methods while education leaders and policymakers need to strive to remove systemic barriers to achievement. By focusing on both classroom innovation and comprehensive change, schools can effectively advance toward closing literacy gaps and promoting educational equity for all students.

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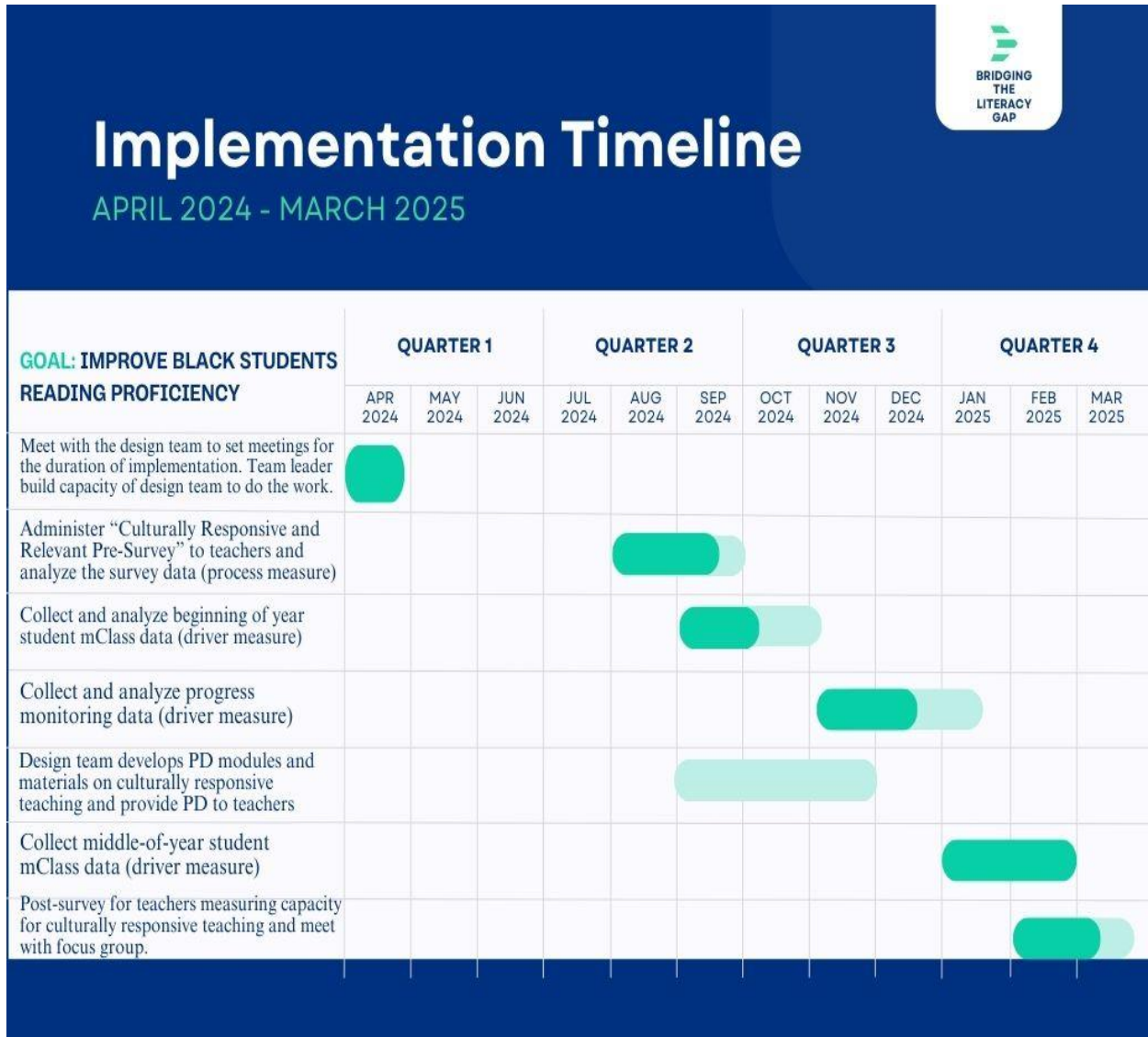
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Appendix A: Implementation Timeline



Appendix B: Culturally-Responsive Teaching Pre and Post Survey Questions

Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
I am able to:					
1. Understand and be knowledgeable about the particular teaching strategies that affirm the racial and ethnic identities of all students					
2. Infuse the curriculum and thematic units with the culture of students represented in the classroom.					
3. Review and assess curricula and instructional materials to determine their multicultural strengths and weakness, and relevance to students' interest and instructional needs, and revise them if necessary.					
4. Develop a repertoire of instructional examples that are culturally familiar to students to serve as a scaffold for learning.					
5. Use my students' cultural background to help make learning meaningful.					
6. Use a variety of assessment techniques, such as self-assessment, portfolios, and so on, to evaluate students' performance in favor of cultural diversity.					
7. Design assessments to complement the culturally responsive pedagogical strategies that were employed during instruction.					
8. Assess culturally diverse students' readiness, intellectual and academic strengths and weaknesses, and development needs.					
9. Utilize a variety of instructional methods to match students' learning preferences in learning the subject matter, and maintaining their attention and interest in learning.					
10. Know how to communicate with culturally diverse students and their parents or guardians.					
11. Foster meaningful and supportive relationships with parents and families, and actively involve them in their students' learning.					
12. Communicate expectations of success to culturally diverse students.					

13. Establish expectations for appropriate classroom behavior in considering students' cultural backgrounds to maintain a conducive learning environment.
14. Develop and maintain positive, meaningful, caring, and trusting relationships with students.
15. Create a warm, supporting, safe, and secure classroom environment for culturally diverse students.

(Source: Hsiao, 2015, p. 245)

Table 2

Culturally-Responsive Teaching Pre-Survey Results

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
I am able to:					
1. Understand and be knowledgeable about the particular teaching strategies that affirm the racial and ethnic identities of all students					
2. Infuse the curriculum and thematic units with the culture of students represented in the classroom.					
3. Review and assess curricula and instructional materials to determine their multicultural strengths and weakness, and relevance to students' interest and instructional needs, and revise them if necessary.					
4. Develop a repertoire of instructional examples that are culturally familiar to students to serve as a scaffold for learning.					
5. Use my students' cultural background to help make learning meaningful.					
6. Use a variety of assessment techniques, such as self-assessment, portfolios, and so on, to evaluate students' performance in favor of cultural diversity.					
7. Design assessments to complement the culturally responsive pedagogical strategies that were employed during instruction.					
8. Assess culturally diverse students' readiness, intellectual and academic					

- strengths and weaknesses, and development needs.
9. Utilize a variety of instructional methods to match students' learning preferences in learning the subject matter, and maintaining their attention and interest in learning.
 10. Know how to communicate with culturally diverse students and their parents or guardians.
 11. Foster meaningful and supportive relationships with parents and families, and actively involve them in their students' learning.
 12. Communicate expectations of success to culturally diverse students.
 13. Establish expectations for appropriate classroom behavior in considering students' cultural backgrounds to maintain a conducive learning environment.
 14. Develop and maintain positive, meaningful, caring, and trusting relationships with students.
 15. Create a warm, supporting, safe, and secure classroom environment for culturally diverse students.

(Source: Hsiao, 2015, p. 245)

Table 3

Culturally-Responsive Teaching Post-Survey Results

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
I am able to:					
1. Understand and be knowledgeable about the particular teaching strategies that affirm the racial and ethnic identities of all students					
2. Infuse the curriculum and thematic units with the culture of students represented in the classroom.					
3. Review and assess curricula and instructional materials to determine their multicultural strengths and weakness, and relevance to students' interest and					

- instructional needs, and revise them if necessary.
4. Develop a repertoire of instructional examples that are culturally familiar to students to serve as a scaffold for learning.
 5. Use my students' cultural background to help make learning meaningful.
 6. Use a variety of assessment techniques, such as self-assessment, portfolios, and so on, to evaluate students' performance in favor of cultural diversity.
 7. Design assessments to complement the culturally responsive pedagogical strategies that were employed during instruction.
 8. Assess culturally diverse students' readiness, intellectual and academic strengths and weaknesses, and development needs.
 9. Utilize a variety of instructional methods to match students' learning preferences in learning the subject matter, and maintaining their attention and interest in learning.
 10. Know how to communicate with culturally diverse students and their parents or guardians.
 11. Foster meaningful and supportive relationships with parents and families, and actively involve them in their students' learning.
 12. Communicate expectations of success to culturally diverse students.
 13. Establish expectations for appropriate classroom behavior in considering students' cultural backgrounds to maintain a conducive learning environment.
 14. Develop and maintain positive, meaningful, caring, and trusting relationships with students.
 15. Create a warm, supporting, safe, and secure classroom environment for culturally diverse students.

(Source: Hsiao, 2015, p. 245)

Appendix C

Teacher Focus Group Questions

What were the successful aspects of this initiative?

Which areas do you think need improvement?

What was your initial reaction to the *Culturally Responsive Teaching Survey*? How did your pre and post-survey results change?

What culturally responsive and relevant teaching and pedagogy aspects do you consider most important?

How has your teaching changed as you have learned more about culturally responsive and relevant teaching and pedagogy?

Do you think learning more about culturally relevant and responsive teaching has helped you to better teach students to read? Why or why not?

Appendix D

Culturally Responsive/Relevant Teaching & Pedagogy: PD Agenda & Logistics

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Culturally Responsive and Relevant Teaching & Pedagogy PD

Special Note: Use different ways to have the participants sit to help ensure they are mixed up (e.g., sit next to someone they haven't talked to yet/pull equity sticks/assign random numbers and pair them) **This PD is a series and will happen in several sessions**

Audience: Classroom teachers

Date/Time: This PD will happen over a few days and times

Agenda Item	Details	WHO/NOTES
<p>Pre-Readings/Video/Survey</p>	<p> Culturally Responsible Pedagogy Fact Sheet.pdf REI+Groundwater+Approach+-+Printer+Friendly.pdf Dr. Gholdy Muhammad on Cultivating Genius _ Facing History & Ourselves.pdf Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors culturally responsive teacher survey </p> <p>Provide these readings and video to the participants at least one week before the first session. Inform them that we will discuss these articles as a group, and they need to read them in advance, as we will not be reading them together during our time.</p> <p>Rudine Sims Bishop uses “Mirrors, Windows, Themselves—and Sliding Glass Doors” as an analogy to discuss the importance of diversity in books and the authors who write them. We need books in which children can see reflections of themselves—but also look through and see other worlds.</p> <p>Ask participants to take the Culturally Responsive Pre-Survey</p>	

<p style="text-align: center;">Community Agreements/Greeting/Mission Statement/Review School Priorities/Quote</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Review school-wide agreements—we collectively created these agreements. ★ Greeting: Circle Up Culture Walk <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Purpose: Creates a shared space of vulnerability and reflection ○ Activity Instructions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Form a circle, listen to statements, step in if they resonate. ■ Pair up to discuss experiences. ■ Whole group share Resonates/Causes Pause <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What resonates with you? ● What causes pause for you? ● Why does this type of greeting/icebreaker matter? ■ See the questions below <p>Notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Set the stage for meaningful engagement by emphasizing that everyone’s experiences matter in the conversation about culturally responsive teaching and relevant pedagogy. → Take time with this activity because it should help to set the stage for “the why.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Review our school’s mission statement as a way to also set the stage about why this type of work and learning is essential and contributes to our student achievement, especially our Black students ★ Review the school priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ PLCs & Instructional Planning ○ Ensuring all students are proficient readers—emphasize that this is the priority this PD is focusing on ○ Continuing to work on our magnet theme, including Paideia Seminars, school-wide and in Core Instruction ○ Using more inclusive language and practices ○ Embedding SEL and writing across school settings ★ Read Quote: “Students need educators who regularly rethink and challenge structures that suppress what isn’t cultivated in the classroom—educators who understand there isn’t one right way to think, create, speak, or behave.” (from the article: “On Hip Hop and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” by Tara Martinez Posted: 05/25/21) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What resonated with you? ○ What causes you pause? 	
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According to Dr. Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy is a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the social order. (Ladson-Billings 160)

Circle Up Culture Walk Questions

Cultural Identity & Background:

- I speak more than one language or grew up in a multilingual household.
- I have learned a valuable lesson from a student about their cultural background.
- I have changed my approach to teaching after understanding a student's cultural perspective.
- I have a family tradition that influences how I interact with students or colleagues.

Teaching Experiences:

- I have taught a lesson that intentionally included diverse cultural perspectives.
- I have struggled to connect with a student due to cultural misunderstandings.
- I have had a moment where I realized my classroom materials were not inclusive enough.
- I have taken the time to learn more about a student's background to support their learning.
- I have experienced success when making a lesson relevant to students' lived experiences.

Student Engagement & Inclusivity:

- I have seen students become more engaged when they see themselves reflected in the curriculum.
- I've used a text by a Black author in my reading curriculum.
- I have used music, art, or storytelling from different cultures to teach a concept.
- I have encouraged students to share their personal experiences in class discussions.

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	<p>→ I have noticed students disengage because they didn't feel represented in the lesson. → I have worked with a family to understand how to better support a student's learning needs.”</p> <p>Personal & Professional Growth:</p> <p>→ I have reflected on my own biases and how they affect my teaching. → I have adapted my classroom management strategies to be more culturally responsive. → I have advocated for curriculum changes to be more inclusive of diverse perspectives. → I have had a meaningful conversation with a student about their cultural identity.</p>	
<p>Purpose, Objectives, and Learning Targets</p>	<p>Purpose of this PD:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ To equip teachers with knowledge and strategies to create a culturally responsive and inclusive classroom environment. ★ To help teachers recognize and value students' cultural backgrounds as assets to learning. ★ To support teachers in shifting from deficit-based thinking to asset-based teaching approaches. ★ To provide practical tools and activities for immediate classroom implementation. <p>Objectives:</p> <p>By the end of this professional development series, participants will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Define culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy and explain and connect their significance in student engagement and achievement. 2. Identify key principles of culturally responsive practices and culturally relevant pedagogy and apply them to lesson planning and classroom management. 3. Recognize and challenge deficit-based thinking while fostering an asset-based mindset. 4. Implement culturally relevant instructional strategies (e.g., collaborative learning, inquiry-based methods, and real-world connections) 5. Engage in self-reflection and goal-setting to sustain culturally responsive practices. 	

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	<p>Learning Targets:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ I can define and describe culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy. ★ I can analyze classroom scenarios and apply culturally relevant and responsive principles to improve student engagement. ★ I can identify ways to build meaningful relationships with students and families from diverse backgrounds. ★ I can develop instructional strategies that incorporate students’ cultural experiences and knowledge. ★ I can select texts that affirm Black students’ identities. ★ I can reflect on my own teaching practices and create a SMART goal for implementing culturally responsive and relevant practices. <p>→ Review the purpose/objectives/learning targets</p> <p>→ Encourage participants to reflect on the initial greeting activity and discuss its connection to the purpose/objectives/learning targets (a few people to share)</p>	
<p>Let’s Ground Our Conversation in Data</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Share school-specific literacy data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ NAEP Trends in Fourth-Grade Reading for Black and White Students ○ Reading Proficiency by Race/Ethnicity in Asheville City ○ IBJ Third-Grade Reading: Grade-Level Proficient (Achievement Levels 3, 4, & 5) 	

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

<p>Teaching Diverse Learners Using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Part 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Use the pre-readings, video, and pre-survey results for this discussion ★ Participants use the Triangle-Circle-Square Protocol to discuss the sheet (30 minutes) Use the “show timer” feature ★ Debrief the FactSheet <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What resonates with you? ○ What causes you pause? <p>Encourage the participants to use the language of the Triangle-Circle-Square Protocol.</p>	
<p>What is Cultural Responsiveness?</p> <p>Definitions of Culturally Responsive Teaching & Definitions of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy</p> <p>Point out the number of people who have researched this topic and how their research findings are similar!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Ask participants to reach each definition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Turn and talk to an elbow partner ○ What resonates with you? ○ What causes you pause? ○ Share with the group ★ Based on these definitions, what are you already doing in your classroom that aligns with culturally responsive teaching? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Brainstorm a list with the group ○ Capture the list on chart paper ○ Later, we will add to the list or remove items based on new learning (group strategies into categories) 	
<p>Key Principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy</p> <p>Highlight how these strategies create an equitable and student- centered learning environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Identify & Discuss: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gay (2010) outlined critical practices for culturally responsive teaching, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Having high expectations for all students, ■ Engaging their cultural knowledge and experiences, ■ Bridging gaps between home and school practices, ■ Educating the whole child, ■ Identifying and leveraging their strengths and 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Questioning normative schooling practices. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ How does this look in the classroom? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Foster Inclusion—Create a sense of belonging by valuing diverse backgrounds. ○ Cultivate Positive Attitudes—Encourage positive relationships and a growth mindset. ○ Increase Relevance—Relate lessons to real-world experiences. ○ Build Competence—Strengthen student confidence through rigorous and relevant instruction. ○ Positive Perspectives on Parents and Families – Recognize the value of family and community contributions. ○ Communication of High Expectations – Maintain high academic and behavioral expectations for all students. ○ Learning Within the Context of Culture—Integrate cultural references in teaching practices. ○ Student-Centered Instruction—Focus on students’ interests, backgrounds, and needs. ○ Culturally Mediated Instruction—Use culturally relevant teaching strategies. ○ Reshaping the Curriculum – Ensure the curriculum includes diverse perspectives. ○ Teacher as Facilitator—Guide and support student-driven learning. ★ Provide examples of how these principles play out in the classroom. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have participants select three principles they feel they are already implementing and write down specific examples of how they incorporate them into their teaching. Then, ask them to identify three principles they are not currently implementing or would like to improve upon. 	
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BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have them brainstorm actionable steps they can take to integrate these principles into their teaching practice. Encourage discussion and sharing among participants to generate ideas and foster collaboration. <p>★ Writing Activity: Based on the PD so far, write down your thoughts and reflections on the statement below. Include what resonates with you and what causes you pause. Invite participants to share with the group.</p> <p>Slide 27: Culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy shift the focus in educating students of color from perceived obstacles to opportunities for growth and success. Instead of reinforcing the ‘Deficit Model,’ these approaches emphasize students’ strengths, cultural assets, and potential, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.</p>	
<p>Group Brainstorm on Family Engagement (specifically for our Black families)</p> <p>Part 1</p>	<p>Let’s choose 1 Culturally Responsive/Relevant Strategy to Work on Together: Positive Perspectives on Parents and Families – Recognize the value of family and community contributions.</p> <p>★ Instructions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Small groups brainstorm ways to strengthen family engagement, with a specific focus on Black families at our school. ○ Discuss current barriers and opportunities for increasing communication and collaboration. ○ Share strategies with the larger group. ○ Once we go through the asset-based vs. deficit-based thinking portion of the PD, we will review this activity through the lens of asset-based thinking to update and replan. Part 2 <p>★ Notes: Encourage teachers to reflect on how they currently engage Black families and explore new inclusive, culturally affirming strategies that are responsive to their needs—guide participants in considering how systemic factors may impact engagement and how to address them proactively. After discussing asset-based thinking, we will revisit the brainstormed strategies and help them reframe them to</p>	

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

	<p>align with an asset-based mindset. This will ensure their approaches build on strengths, acknowledge cultural wealth, and foster deeper connections with Black families.</p>	
<p>Teaching Diverse Learners Using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Part 2</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Use the FactSheet and Groundwater+Approach readings: Culturally responsive pedagogy fact sheet.pdf REI+Groundwater+Approach+-+Printer+Friendly.pdf ★ Participants use the Triangle-Circle-Square Protocol to discuss the readings (30 minutes) Use the “show timer” feature ★ Debrief the Readings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What resonates with you? ○ What causes you pause? ○ How is your thinking beginning to shift? Spend the most time on this question <p>Encourage the participants to use the language of the Triangle-Circle-Square Protocol.</p>	
<p>Deficit vs. Asset-Based Thinking</p>	<p>Shifting from Deficit to Asset-based Thinking, Language & Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Funds of Knowledge & Why It’s Important: Review slide 23 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Review Community Agreements and add: “no blame, no shame, no judgment” of ourselves or others when sharing these deficit examples ◆ Reminders for Participants: Fish/Lake/Ground Water Analogy & Culturally Relevant Pedagogy & Culturally Responsive Teaching Definitions ◆ Present slides 37 - 39 → Activity 1 - Deficit Thinking/Language in Our Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ In a small group, discuss examples of deficit thinking/language that you have said or have thought concerning particular students/families/communities or what deficit thinking/language you have heard others say in your setting. ◆ Use Mentimeter to share out—www.menti.com—code: 4324 3487 → Share Language and Our Educational Practices: Terms and phrases to avoid that perpetuate deficit practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ What resonates with you? ◆ What causes pause for you? 	<p>Participants will require a device to share deficit language to create a word cloud (Mentimeter)</p>

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

<p>Activity 1: 20 mins Activity 2: 20 mins Activity 3: 30 mins</p>	<p>Shifting from Deficit to Asset-based Thinking, Language & Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Activity 2 - List of Stereotypes/Myths/Assumptions Related to Social Class or Black Students and Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ With a partner, list on poster paper stereotypes/myths/assumptions that we often have of individuals experiencing a) poverty, b) middle social class, c) upper social class, or d) Black students and reading. → What did you notice about the lists you created? → Materials: markers and poster paper <p>Shifting from Deficit to Asset-based Thinking, Language & Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Activity 3 - Assets-based Thinking, Language, Practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Youtube Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6HJUF2aH5k ◆ While watching the video, list all the family’s assets you see and hear. After watching, share the lists you developed with others at your table. Then, share with the large group. ◆ Cards: What does the research on experiencing poverty say? Debunking the myths/stereotypes/assumptions of families experiencing poverty → How do schools perpetuate “poverty?” How can schools disrupt the poverty narrative? → What resonates with you? What gives you pause? 	<p>Activity 2: Post the lists around the room</p> <p>A few volunteers share responses to the question</p> <p>Exit slips</p>
<p>What is culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Review slides 50 and 51 ★ Have participants discuss the slides <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What Resonates with You? ○ What Causes You Pause? ○ How has your thinking shifted? 	
<p>Next Steps</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Review Next Steps (slide 53) 	
<p>Lesson Planning Workshop</p>	<p>Let’s Design a Reading Lesson!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Instructions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Design or redesign a reading lesson incorporating culturally responsive and 	

BLACK STUDENTS MATTER: BRIDGING THE LITERACY GAP FOR BLACK STUDENTS

	<p>culturally relevant strategies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Present to peers/me for feedback.○ Invite me to observe your lesson <p>★ Share and have the participants use the “Culturally-Responsive Teaching Survey Questions” as a way to establish and maintain Culturally Responsive and Relevant practices culturally responsive teacher survey</p> <p>Encourage teachers to use what they’ve learned so far to make their lessons more inclusive.</p>	
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Thank everyone for participating!