CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CONTEXT

By

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To my big brother, Anthony

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 4

LIST OF FIGURES 7

ABSTRACT 8

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION 10

Context 10
Research Questions and Procedures 14
Significance of Study 15

2 LITERATURE REVIEW 16

Chapter Overview 16
Background 16
What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching? 18
A Case for Culturally Responsive Teaching 18
Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching 20
High expectations 20
An asset-based approach 21
Caring, respectful teacher-student relationships 21
Meaningful, purposeful learning 22
Critical consciousness and cultural competence 22
Findings from Empirical Studies of CRT 23
Actualizing Culturally Responsive Teaching 27
Examining Culturally Responsive Teaching through Practitioner Research ... 29
Reflection 29
Collaboration 30
Changing Instructional Practice for Improved Student Learning 31
Purpose for the Study 31

3 METHODOLOGY 32

Chapter Overview 32
Case Study Design 32
Practitioner Research 33
The School Context 35
Participant Selection 37
Data Collection 41
Field Notes 42
Written Responses to Reflective Prompts 43
Researcher’s Journal 44

Data Analysis 46
Credibility and Trustworthiness of Study 47
Researcher Background and Perspectives 49

4 FINDINGS 52

Chapter Overview 52
Affirmation 54
Affirmation of Experience 54
Affirmation of Learning Styles 57
Affirmation as Distinctive to CRT 59
Adaptability 59
Adaptability in Teaching Diverse Groups 60
Adaptability in Teaching Diverse Individuals 63
Adaptability as Distinctive to CRT 65
Achievement 66
Achievement from Expectations 67
Achievement from Empowerment 69
Achievement as Distinctive to CRT 72
Defining Culturally Responsive Teaching in Our Study 73
Our Backgrounds 74
The Literature 75

5 IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH 77

Chapter Overview 77
Summary of Dissertation 77
Implications for Others 78
Implications for My Own Practice 79
Observing CRT in Practice 80
Constructing Meaning for CRT 80
Learning from the Literature 80
Reflecting On Learning 81
Recommendations for Further Research 81

APPENDIX

APPENDIX: INFORMED CONSENT 83

LIST OF REFERENCES 85

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH 91

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure page

3-1 Sample from field notes. 42

3-2 Sample email exchange of written reflections. 44

3-3 Sample reflection from researcher journal. 46

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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With increasingly diverse student populations in schools and classrooms, educators continually seek the most effective ways to meet the instructional needs of all learners. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a pedagogical approach that holds promise for increasing engagement and raising achievement for Black students. Drawing upon the research of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and other scholars, culturally responsive teaching identifies the unique culture-based experiences, perspectives, and assets of students and incorporates these into planning and delivery of instruction.

The purpose of this study was to examine how knowledge of CRT is constructed and applied by an early childhood educator in her daily practice. To gain insight into how CRT is actualized in an early childhood setting, I engaged in a collaborative inquiry case study with a veteran prekindergarten (Pre-K) teacher in her classroom. Data were collected through field notes and written responses to reflective prompts. While many characteristics of appropriate instructional practice were evident, data analysis revealed three distinctive features of CRT—affirmation, adaptability, and achievement—in the classroom environment. This study has

implications for other educators who are interested in the ways culturally responsive teaching may be actualized in early childhood settings.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Context

As a form of social capital, education is a valuable asset that can be leveraged and passed on through generations of those who possess it. A quality education opens doors of advantage, as it provides a foundation for individuals to understand and fully participate in a democratic society—socially, economically, politically, and philosophically. In the United States, the purpose for education and the determination of what is important to teach continue to be greatly influenced by values that are perceived as normative by the dominant society (Flinders & Thornton, 2009). Perhaps not surprisingly, many students who are from racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups not reflective of the dominant society matriculate through school systems from year to year without truly becoming beneficiaries of education as a form of social capital (Devine, 2008; Rury, 2002). Gaps in achievement and educational attainment that are correlated to race, present a complex dilemma for educators to study and to address.

Founded on a premise of meritocracy, many educators embrace the perspective that, with intelligence and hard work, any child can learn and achieve. In order to level the playing field, so to speak, a standard, common curriculum is offered to all students. One notable criticism of a standard curriculum, however, is that it is typically founded upon relatively narrow definitions of knowledge, literacy, and achievement which do not include the values, perspectives, or funds of knowledge of those outside of the dominant societal group (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Rury, 2002). Indeed, diverse ways of thinking and knowing are sometimes deemed inferior and treated as skills that need to be untaught (Devine, 2008; Howard, 2010; Powell & Rightmyer, 2011). Consequently, schools continue to impose narrow standards of learning and implement

limited methods of instruction, even for students from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. In most cases, gaps in achievement are not closing.

For Black students in particular, the academic achievement gap is a common, persistent, and thorny issue in educational contexts across the country. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), the academic achievement of Black students in Florida lags significantly behind that of their White peers in both reading and mathematics. In 2011, Black students in 4th grade scored 25 points lower in reading than White students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCES, 2011). In 8th grade and 12th grade, the gaps were 22 points and 20 points respectively (NCES, 2011). In mathematics, again, Black students scored lower than their White peers on the NAEP, with gaps of 23 points for 4th graders, 29 points for 8th graders, and 23 points for 12th graders (NCES, 2011). Assessment results in my local school district mirrored the statewide disparity in achievement, with gaps of more than 30 points in both reading and mathematics between Black students and their White peers (Florida Department of Education, 2011). Other indicators, such as graduation rates, participation in accelerated coursework, and passing rates on advanced placement exams, highlight stark differences in learning outcomes for Black students.

Despite multiple years of achievement data to refute this belief, there remains a dogged adherence to an assumption that equal inputs, namely standardized curricula and instructional methods for all students, will logically lead to equal educational outcomes. An argument is often made that gaps in achievement are more a function of socioeconomic status than race. However, even when social class is accounted for, the achievement of Black students still lags behind that of their White peers (Howard, 2010). The disparity in achievement between Black students and

their peers is a significant social justice issue, and the examination of effective methods and strategies to address this issue is of critical importance.

In recent months, much attention has been given to early intervention as a strategic means of offsetting learning gaps that are so pronounced in the later school years. State, local, and federal resources are being leveraged to develop, enhance, and expand early childhood programs. As the Title I Director in a large school district in the State of Florida, I, along with other District Title I directors, have received guidance indicating that high quality preschool education will be a key area of focus under the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Inclusion of strategies and resources to support prekindergarten (Pre-K) programs in plans for Title I services is strongly encouraged. In my local school district, over $700,000 in Title I funds have been targeted to support supplemental Pre-K classes at schools with the highest percentages of students on free or reduced lunch.

Notably absent from discussions and plans for early intervention to improve learning outcomes and narrow achievement gaps has been a description of specific ways in which learning experience will be adapted to meet the needs of Black students and the ways early childhood educators will learn to make these adaptations. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is one approach that holds promise for raising the academic achievement of marginalized populations, including Black students (Howard, 2003). Rooted in a social justice perspective of education, CRT draws upon significant aspects of students' culture in order to facilitate engagement, learning and achievement (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt & McQuillan, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Through the establishment of high standards quality for learning and student work (Lattimore, 2005; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003) and the presentation of rigorous instruction (Merry & New, 2008; Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson,

2008), CRT creates an environment in which there is a positive impact on students' social and emotional well-being as well as their academic performance (Brown, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Merry & New, 2008; Weinstein et al., 2003).

The actualization of CRT in classrooms is dependent upon teachers with a disposition to critically examine and challenge traditional methods of teaching and learning that reinforce and perpetuate inequitable achievement outcomes for Black students (Howard, 2003). Furthermore, the actualization of CRT is contingent upon teachers' ability to access meaningful, relevant professional learning experiences to acquire and develop the pedagogical knowledge and skills that are characteristic of CRT (VanDeWeghe & Scherff, 2005). Yet, the intentional study of CRT, particularly in early childhood settings, had not been conducted in my school district. To support teacher learning that involves critical reflection and challenging traditional methods of teaching and learning with CRT, one approach that holds promise is practitioner research. .

Practitioner research is the systematic, intentional study of one's own instructional practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). The structure of practitioner research provides a powerful framework within which teachers may engage in critical, reflective dialogue to better understand their own teaching practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). Practitioner research was introduced in my school district through a partnership with the University of Florida, and many educators in my district are familiar with its benefits. As previously stated, there is an emphasis on supporting quality early learning with federal funding. Currently, there is also a focus in my school district on increasing achievement of Black students through CRT. As the Title I Director, these conditions afforded me a ripe context in which to conduct my study in an early childhood setting to understand what culturally responsive teaching means and how it might be actualized in our school district. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand

how early childhood educators make sense of the construct of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) through a collaborative inquiry case study.

Research Questions and Procedures

The following research question(s) guided this study:

- How do early childhood educators define culturally responsive teaching through engaging in collaborative inquiry?
- What insights do early childhood educators gain into the ways culturally responsive teaching may be actualized in an early childhood setting?

To gain insights into these questions, I engaged in a collaborative inquiry case study with a veteran Pre-K teacher who exhibited a passion to deepen her understanding of culturally responsive teaching. This inquiry was situated in her classroom and its adjoining planning area. During this study, we met formally 8 times. The duration of each meeting was approximately 90 minutes. As part of each meeting, we read about or discussed the applicability of CRT in early childhood settings. In addition to our discussions, we spent time engaging with students during their math/science and discovery, literacy circle, and learning center time. Throughout this study, I systematically documented our work together to capture our process of constructing meaning for CRT and how it was actualized in a Pre-K classroom.

To document our work, data were collected in two ways. First, I made audio-recordings of each meeting, as well as instruction and other interactions in the classroom. From these audio-recordings, I later took field notes. Second, between formal meetings, we created written reflections to capture what we were learning and to note questions we still had about this pedagogical approach. I collected these reflections. Although it was not used as a data source, I also kept a researcher journal to capture my reflections on each meeting and classroom observations. The researcher journal was used to make plans for facilitating subsequent

meetings, and it also proved useful for illuminating patterns and themes during the process of data analysis.

Significance of Study

Professional learning opportunities, targeted specifically for early childhood teachers to critically examine and challenge traditional methods of teaching and learning with CRT, do not currently exist in my local school district. New knowledge and insights that are generated through this study can be significant in informing the structure and content of professional development offerings, specifically aligned to support the strategic goal of narrowing achievement gaps in my district. By situating this study in an early childhood context, an opportunity was presented to critically examine methods of instruction that can narrow gaps in learning and achievement that often begin to manifest even between very young children in schools. Moreover, by documenting the understandings and applications of CRT as they emerged through this collaborative inquiry case study, our work can be shared for the mutual benefit of other early childhood educators. To date, much of what has been written about CRT is focused on instruction with older children. This study can add to the existing body of literature, not only by raising implications for applying CRT in early childhood education settings, but also by capturing the authentic learning of early childhood educators in the process.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Overview

This chapter focuses on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) as a relevant and essential topic in the discourse around a persistent achievement gap between Black children and their peers. The review of literature serves first to situate CRT within the current educational landscape. Secondly, presents the conceptual and empirical literature that informed this study, to highlight key characteristics of CRT and to frame it as a promising instructional approach with implications both within and beyond the school setting (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Next, it describes conditions and dispositions that are integral to the actualization of CRT. Finally, it describes how teachers' understanding and application of CRT may be supported, facilitated, and enhanced by insights gained through collaborative inquiry, a form of practitioner research. A connection is made between the bodies of literature on CRT and practitioner research to illustrate how changes in teacher practice to reflect CRT cannot be mandated or realized by simply following a script. Rather, authentic and lasting change in instructional practice must be scaffolded by professional learning that allows teachers to construct and re-construct pedagogical knowledge within a meaningful context, through critical reflection and dialogue (Cochran-Smith, 1995a). Discussion of the literature focuses primarily on CRT as it relates to the achievement of Black students.

Background

In the United States, formal schooling has long been viewed as a vehicle for ensuring that all members of a diverse populace can contribute to social and economic progress and participate in a democratic government (Rury, 2002). A standard, common curriculum is thought to be beneficial in that it can provide practical, foundational knowledge and gatekeeping skills that all

students will need in order to be successful (Dimitriadis, 2008). Present day manifestations of the standard curriculum include pacing guides, common assessments and, most recently, Common Core State Standards. Closely tied to standardized curricula, there are also common, predictable pedagogical practices that can be observed in classrooms, regardless of the diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and instructional needs of students. Persistently disparate achievement outcomes, particularly between Black students and their peers, hint at disadvantages to one-size-fits-all instructional practices.

Since the beginning of the common school movement, both the purpose for schooling and the determination of what is important to teach have been greatly influenced by the values of the dominant society (Flinders & Thornton, 2009). Indeed, diverse values, perspectives, and funds of knowledge are sometimes deemed inferior or even detrimental (Devine, 2008; Howard, 2010; Powell & Rightmyer, 2011). By applying and imposing narrowly defined and limited standards of learning and success, schools may inadvertently play a role in perpetuating rather than eliminating gaps in achievement.

In the United States, White, Protestant, middle class values and perspectives are dominant and perceived as normative (Dimitriadis, 2008; Devine, 2008). Education is one form of cultural capital that reflects these values. Parents who are part of the dominant group are often able to leverage their resources to ensure that this capital is passed on to their children (Devine, 2008; Rury, 2002). Not all parents, particularly those who are poor or from ethnic minority groups, possess this same cultural capital, and thus inequities are inherent. To address these inequities, while holding to the aspiration of quality learning experiences and high achievement for all students, some educators have tapped into the power of culturally responsive teaching.

What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a means to increase engagement and academic achievement of marginalized groups of students (Howard, 2003). Rooted in a social justice perspective of teaching and learning, CRT challenges traditional notions of knowledge and ways of knowing that are considered normative. Pointing to a racial and cultural mismatch between some students and their teachers who rely solely on traditional classroom practices, CRT calls for teachers to effectively and consistently incorporate aspects of their students' unique cultures into instruction (Osborne, 1996; Stairs, 2007). By respecting and building upon the cultural knowledge and skills that students from diverse groups bring, CRT supports all students in making relevant connections between their everyday life experiences and the formal content to which they are exposed at school. CRT is also referred to as instruction that is "culturally relevant" (Derman-Sparks, Cronin, Henry, Olatunji & York, 1998) and "culturally congruent" (Au & Blake, 2003). In this study, the term "culturally responsive" (Gay, 2000) is utilized intentionally to reflect both a conscientious and active approach to meeting the needs of Black students.

A Case for Culturally Responsive Teaching

The educational experiences for many Black children have been characterized by discrimination, inequities, and limited opportunities (Rury, 2002). Federal education policies from the 1950s to 1970s attempted to remedy some of these social and educational inequalities through programs to build cultural capital, provide educational experiences and resources, and open access to opportunities. Still, sanctioned racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic isolation—such as "White flight"—in schools and neighborhoods continue to this day (Grant, 2011), and patterns of inequity in access and achievement also persist.

Poor and minority children are daily exposed to a hidden, or null, curriculum in schools and classrooms (Eisner, 1985). This hidden curriculum may be characterized as that which is not explicitly taught but which yields powerful lessons due to its pervasiveness. In schools with large populations of poor, Black children the hidden curriculum tends to include compliance, punishment, and control. These elements are deeply rooted in a middle class, cultural hegemony that permeates traditional schooling, and they frequently marginalize the very students who are at the greatest academic disadvantage (West-Olatunji, Behar-Horenstein, Rant & Cohen-Phillips, 2008).

An existing, and largely uncontested, deficit perspective toward the academic ability of Black students is one of several factors that underlie continued gaps in achievement. One way this deficit perspective has been reinforced is through state and federal educational programs, such as Title I, that are based on what Ladson-Billings (1999) identifies as stemming from a "deprivation/disadvantage paradigm." However unwittingly, teachers who work in high poverty, high minority schools often provide low level, poor quality instruction which stems from a mindset of low expectations (Boutte, 2008; Rist, 2000). Black students seem to be particularly vulnerable to the impact of ineffective teaching. In many schools with majority poor, Black student populations, the percentage of children demonstrating grade level proficiency in reading and mathematics is strikingly low. Even within integrated schools, the achievement of Black children tends to lag behind that of their peers in other ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups.

Inherent to CRT are pedagogical characteristics that counter deficit-based approaches to educating Black students. Its benefits can improve outcomes for Black students socially and emotionally, as well as academically. Key characteristics of CRT, particularly for Black children, have been highlighted in the literature.

Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching

High expectations

One fundamental characteristic of CRT is the setting of high expectations for learning (Lattimore, 2005; Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). This involves clearly communicating expectations, providing the appropriate scaffolding and support, and holding students to a standard of high quality work (Howard, 2010; Powell & Rightmyer, 2011). The curriculum is not “dumbed down,” as some might argue. Rather, the development of critical thinking, reasoning, communication, and application of knowledge in various contexts is apparent through rigorous instruction (Merry & New, 2008; Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008) that is also highly engaging and meaningful for learners.

In her ethnographic study at two schools undergoing restructuring to improve academic performance, Lipman (1995) cites the setting of high standards as a common practice of teachers who were particularly successful with Black students. In contrast to many of their colleagues, who held low expectations for the achievement of Black students, these teachers demonstrated a genuine belief in the ability of all students to learn and perform at levels beyond basic competence. Consistently low level instruction in schools and classrooms with large numbers of Black students is the manifestation of a deficit-based view (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007). It is important to note that this is not reflective of CRT.

As a result of high expectations, CRT positively impacts student learning. Howard (2003) posits that increasing the academic achievement of culturally diverse students is perhaps the most important goal of CRT. The rigorous instruction which is characteristic of CRT raises the quality of student work and the level of students’ thinking and problem solving, as well as the ability of students to articulate their thinking (Matsumura et al., 2008).

An asset-based approach

Stairs (2007) states: "The underlying assumption of culturally responsive pedagogy is that diversity is an asset that enriches the learning of all students, not a deficit to overcome" (p.38). A characteristic of culturally responsive teachers is their ability to identify and maximize the unique strengths of Black students. Cultural differences, including background experiences and learning styles, are not treated as negative or inferior. Rather, they are incorporated as funds of knowledge, or "conduits for teaching more effectively" (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Hollie (2001) observed, for example, how culturally responsive teachers capitalized on different learning styles by establishing classroom arrangements conducive to movement, collaborative learning, and performance related activities. Other evidences were culturally relevant literature and other strategies to acknowledge students' history and cultural identity (Gay, 2010; Hollie, 2001). Such an asset approach not only affirms and validates Black students (Gay, 2000), it can build understanding and relevance, increase engagement, and raise learning for all students.

Caring, respectful teacher-student relationships

Another critical component of CRT is developing and nurturing positive teacher-student relationships. The learning environment is characterized by a sense of care and psychological safety that facilitates engagement and learning in the classroom (Brown, 2003; Gay, 2002; Gay, 2010; Weinstein et al., 2003). Students know that if they experience difficulties, they can count on the teacher to provide appropriate support and encouragement to help them achieve identified learning targets. So, while teachers are academically demanding, they also treat students with warmth and respect (Osborne, 1996). Students are motivated by their teachers' authentic passion for what is being taught and their excitement about how students are learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

As part of CRT, teachers employ various methods to learn about the unique cultures of groups of students, while also recognizing and honoring the individual differences among their students in respectful ways (Stairs, 2007), and they effectively use this knowledge of culture to inform instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Teachers' interactions with students are both respectful and equitable. Classroom management and interactions with students are guided by processes and relational influence, rather than words and actions that are confrontational, controlling, or embarrassing to students (Osborne, 1996). These positive teacher-to-student relationships also impact students' interactions with one another, and they go beyond the school to families and the community (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

Meaningful, purposeful learning

Meaning making and relevance are powerful motivators and rewards in the process of learning. Thus, the mere impartation of information, disconnected from purposeful context, is not indicative of CRT (Gay, 2002; Merry & New, 2008). Particularly for Black students, engagement and meaning making may be best facilitated in classrooms environments with hands-on learning activities, project-based learning, collaborative structures, and study trips (Lattimore, 2005). While serving to address different learning styles, CRT promotes problem solving, creativity, and other higher order thinking skills (Lattimore, 2005).

Critical consciousness and cultural competence

CRT benefits Black students by empowering them to think critically about their world (Gay, 2002; Lipman, 1995). Culturally responsive teachers engage students in discussing, reflecting upon, writing about, or even taking action on complex issues that have relevance and significance to their lives (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). They feel a strong moral responsibility to challenge inequitable practices and policies within schools. They

are committed to providing an education for all students which enriches their lives and which helps them recognize and embrace their role as valued contributors in a diverse society.

In addition to raising their critical awareness, CRT can empower Black students through developing and maintaining their cultural identity, which may be discounted or discouraged in school (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). When de-culturization occurs as a part of the schooling process, it can negatively affect students' social and emotional well-being as well as their learning and academic performance (Gay, 2010; Merry & New, 2008). Conversely, CRT draws upon various aspects of students' culture in order to facilitate engagement, learning and achievement. It does not require students to sacrifice or trade uniqueness of cultural identity for academic excellence (Lipman, 1995). In fact, a goal of CRT is to help students maintain cultural integrity while simultaneously learning and applying knowledge at high levels (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

For all of its benefits, CRT remains largely absent from daily instruction in most schools. Findings from some of the empirical literature highlight benefits for Black students when CRT is implemented. The literature also points to potential barriers and challenges for teachers in actualizing CRT.

Findings from Empirical Studies of CRT

One characteristic of CRT is the perception and incorporation of culturally-based learning styles as assets and conduits for effective instruction (Gay, 2000, 2002, 2010; Hollie, 2001). In a correlational study, Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan (2008) examined verve as a variable in the achievement of Black middle school students in reading and mathematics. The study notes that verve, which is characterized by high energy and expressiveness, has been identified as an important component of the learning style for Black children (Boykin & Cunningham, 2001). One key finding of this study was that Black students had significantly higher verve than White

students, as measured by a Child Activity Questionnaire. Another key finding was that students with higher verve had overall lower academic achievement, as measured by the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Serpell & Cole (2008) had similar findings in their quasi-experimental study with Black third grade students. Groups of students were presented stories under four different conditions, some with music and movement and others without. It was hypothesized that students would perform better on a task of story recall if they were instructed under conditions that included movement and syncopated music, in contrast to learning conditions with movement and classical movement, movement with no music, or no music and no movement. The findings confirmed the hypothesis, as students exposed to conditions of movement and music had higher story recall and higher engagement during the story. Despite these and other findings, teachers often have a different frame of reference about what constitutes good classroom management and appropriate behavior in the classroom. Consequently many teachers may view verve as a distraction and a deterrent to learning, rather than capitalizing on it as a tool for engaging Black students. There are, however, teachers who are earnestly examining how to enhance Black students' learning and achievement with specific content in addition to improving their overall engagement.

Shealey (2007) used the socio-cultural nature of language and literacy acquisition as a theoretical framework in her qualitative study of CRT in reading instruction at an elementary school with a predominantly Black student population. Her study took into account the critical role of students' dialect and language used at home in effective communication, teaching, and learning at school. Consistent with other research, her study found that CRT in reading instruction is characterized by explicit instruction, effective modeling, and learning tasks that are set within a meaningful social context. Additionally, she found that teachers exhibiting CRT

explicitly expressed care for their students through their words, actions, and attitudes. A recommendation of this study was that teacher preparation programs and teacher professional development should include opportunities for teacher reflection on attitudes and beliefs about teaching with cultural responsiveness, as well as effective instructional strategies.

In a qualitative study of CRT in mathematics instruction with preservice and inservice teachers, Okpokodu (2011) included opportunities for reflection through the reading of selected texts on CRT and written prompts. Participants revealed that they had always thought of math content as neutral, or a universal language. They did not perceive how mathematics could lend itself to culturally responsive teaching, because they believed math content in the classroom had nothing to do with culture. Participants identified standardized curricula and high stakes testing as factors that seem to serve as barriers to CRT. Most notably, participants indicated concern that there was a lack of good models of CRT in math classes. Atwater (2010) had similar findings in an explanatory case study of CRT in science classrooms with preservice teachers. Participants expressed a belief that race had little or no bearing on achievement. Their meritocratic perspective was that individual effort was the determining factor in student achievement. Thus, the need to construct meaning for CRT in science classrooms became apparent. Despite awareness of students who were culturally different, participants reported few, if any, instructional adaptations they made for students. To a great degree, school culture, including perceptions of which students were viewed as capable of learning science, influenced and impacted how they taught. As in the Okpokodu (2011) study, participants reported that they not seen examples of CRT in other science classrooms, and they expressed a need to see concrete examples of it in action. One recommendation from this study was for mentor teachers in CRT

to support others. Another recommendation was that teachers have time to reflect on constructs of race, their positionality as teachers, and implications for instruction.

The element of teacher reflection, which was echoed in studies by Shealey (2007), Okpokodu (2011), and Atwater (2010) as critical to CRT, is central in a study by Hyland (2009). Combining action research, discourse analysis, and critical interpretive analysis, this study examined the practice of a second year, White teacher as she worked to implement CRT in a school with a majority Black student population and a history of academic underachievement. A continual challenge was to recognize, but not succumb to, a deficit discourse that was part of her school culture. Through interaction with the researcher, who acted as a critical friend to push her thinking, the participant made significant changes to her instruction. Moreover, she increased her awareness of internal and external factors that could serve as barriers to CRT.

Mere awareness of the components and benefits of CRT is, of course, insufficient to improve learning and achievement outcomes for Black students. The power lies in its actualization in the classroom. However, many teachers have not been prepared with the specialized pedagogical knowledge and skill that are essential to CRT (VanDeWeghe & Scherff, 2005). While most teachers espouse the conviction that all children can learn, not all have assumed the "whatever it takes" stance to ensure that all children *will* learn. Typically, this is not due to laziness, ill will, or lack of sincere concern. Instead, it is because of teachers' belief and insistence that all children should be treated the same, fairly and equally. For those who ascribe to an ideal of education as meritocratic, the notion of adapting instruction for students based on race, socioeconomic status, or other factors may seem anathema (Weinstein et al., 2003). However, a dogged adherence to a mindset of "color blindness" results in the marginalization of diverse students whose unique learning needs cannot be met by teachers who don't see them.

Guided by existing conceptual and empirical literature, this current study examines one teacher's process of constructing meaning for CRT. Unlike the teacher in the Hyland (2009) study, the participant in this study is a veteran teacher. Nevertheless, she faced the same issues of teaching in a predominantly Black school with a pattern of academic underachievement. She also had to make an intentional choice to resist a deficit discourse that can permeate a school culture in order to actualize CRT with her Pre-K students.

Actualizing Culturally Responsive Teaching

In order for CRT to be actualized, it is necessary for educators to break the uncomfortable silence around issues of race, culture, and poverty (Ruggles-Gere, Buehler, Dallavis & Shaw-Haviland, 2009). Crucial conversations about assumptions, biases, and deeply held beliefs about children from racially and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds are needed. Productively engaging in such conversations to improve learning outcomes for Black students requires a significant shift in teachers' thinking, as well as the ways in which they relate to one another and their students (Ruggles-Gere et al., 2009). This is, by no means, a simple and straightforward process.

Even for those who are in philosophical agreement with the purpose and value of CRT, enacting it can be a complex and challenging process. It calls for educators to engage in deep and ongoing reflection about the way they view themselves as well as their students. It also means taking purposeful action to transform classroom processes and instructional practices such that students of diverse cultural backgrounds can connect to learning through relevant content, strategies, and materials. The actualization of CRT is dependent upon teachers with a disposition to critically examine and challenge traditional methods of teaching and learning that reinforce and perpetuate inequitable achievement outcomes for diverse students.

The existing culture in most schools may not be conducive to CRT for three important reasons. First, it requires a professional learning environment characterized by ongoing critical reflection, decision making, and problem solving around issues of race and culture to improve instructional practice. Through critical reflection, teachers are able to deeply understand and value the cultural capital and other assets diverse students bring to the classroom while becoming liberated from prejudicial and stereotypical thinking (Howard, 2003). Secondly, CRT hinges on teachers' ability to honestly confront their own beliefs and how their values and experiences shape their instruction of diverse learners. This can be difficult, as deficit-based notions and behaviors are surfaced through increased self-reflection (Howard, 2003). Finally, CRT calls for courageous action that will both challenge and change school policies and practices that marginalize diverse learners. This means empowering teachers to de-construct and reconstruct lessons and units of study to facilitate meaning making and understanding (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). It also means affording teachers flexibility to adapt instruction in ways that effectively engage and raise the achievement of all students, even if there must be a departure from the recommended norms for pacing, lesson structure, materials, and assessment (Howard, 2003).

Lipman (1995) suggests that the wisdom and insights of successful culturally responsive teachers are of great value in the discourse around educational change and improvement. Through experience, these teachers' belief in their power to positively impact the learning of all students has been affirmed. This is worth considering, since teachers' sense of efficacy is closely related to their effectiveness (Ball, 2009). By raising and learning from the voices of those with knowledge-in-practice of CRT, teacher leadership for increased achievement of Black students can be developed and supported (Lipman, 1995). Insight may be gained in how to

support such teacher learning and leadership by examining the pedagogical practices of teachers who effectively implement CRT.

Examining Culturally Responsive Teaching through Practitioner Research

Practitioner research can provide a strong platform for enhancing instruction and, subsequently, improved learning outcomes for students (Borko, 2004). Practitioner research has been defined as the systematic, intentional study of one's own instructional practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). Primarily, practitioner research focuses on improving teacher practice for increased student learning and achievement. In addition to determining what students need to learn and identifying ways to determine that learning has occurred, teachers may grapple with the question, "What do we do when students aren't learning?" (DuFour, 2004). Deliberate study through inquiry can yield fruitful insights to help answer this question. Three elements that are common to practitioner research—reflection, collaboration and collegial discussion, and intentional focus on changing practice to improve instruction—can optimize the study and implementation of CRT, particularly as it relates to the achievement of Black students.

Reflection

Reflection plays a significant role in the process of learning, as it fosters increased understanding through analysis of observations and experiences (Albers, 2008). As learners make sense of experiences through reflection, knowledge is deepened and new insights emerge. Teachers may receive an added benefit when provided a structure for engaging in reflective dialogue with others (Camburn, 2012; Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & López-Torres, 2003; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). Reflection that is situated within a social context may facilitate lasting changes in teacher practice, as there is a culture of shared understanding and mutual support (Camburn, 2010). This is especially true when the reflection is generated and guided by the teachers themselves (Hoffman-Kipp et al., 2003). This reflection may be prompted by analyzing

students' work, reviewing curriculum materials, disaggregating and discussing student assessment data, or debriefing a lesson observation. In each case, individual and collective reflection supports the generation of new knowledge and innovative approaches to instructional dilemmas (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). Through reflection, teachers continuously study their practice in order to determine what needs to be changed and in what ways (Albers, 2008). In this collaborative inquiry case study, written reflections were a primary data source.

Collaboration

The element of collaboration is an important component of effective instructional practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). The absence of collaboration and support from colleagues poses a great challenge to lasting change in teacher practice. Conversely, a teacher's sense of efficacy can be strengthened and enhanced when she perceives herself as part of a team with collective responsibility for meeting the diverse learning needs of all students (Stoll et al., 2006). Through collaboration, teachers can mutually develop and implement strategies to appropriately address these needs (Albers, 2008). Other benefits of teacher collaboration in include increased problem solving capacity, teacher empowerment (Vescio et al., 2008), and prevention of burnout that results from teacher isolation (Stoll et al., 2006; West-Olatunji et al., 2008).

It is important to note that authentic collaboration does not automatically occur when teachers come together. One essential ingredient is shared values, such as a moral commitment to ensuring that all students—regardless of racial or socioeconomic background—receive quality instruction that meets their needs (Stoll et al., 2006). Also important to authentic collaboration are shared norms (Vescio et al., 2008), which establish a context for working and learning

productively together. In this collaborative inquiry case study, participants collaborated during scheduled meetings and in other informal ways.

Changing Instructional Practice for Improved Student Learning

Reflection and collaboration create an environment that is conducive for teachers to focus on improved student learning. Ultimately, it is highly effective teaching that leads to increased student learning and achievement. An important point here is that significant and lasting change in instructional practice cannot be externally imposed. Teachers may comply with curricular mandates they don't necessarily understand or support, but there is power when knowledge of effective, impactful teaching for students is constructed by teachers in practice (Albers, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Student-centered changes to teaching practice can encompass class routines, ways of interacting with students, and physical arrangement of the learning environment, as well as specific instructional strategies. Such changes can be overwhelming for a teacher working to implement them in isolation. However, as in this study, such changes and can be actualized within the supportive structure of collaborative inquiry. .

Purpose for the Study

This study drew upon the literature on CRT and practitioner research that has been reviewed in this chapter. It documents the experience of two early childhood educators engaging in a collaborative inquiry to explore ways CRT may be actualized in an early childhood classroom with a large percentage of Black students. The intent was not to simply implement a predetermined set of "culturally responsive" instructional strategies. Rather, it was to examine the changes in teacher knowledge and practice when the meaning and methods of culturally responsive teaching are constructed, drawing upon the literature as well as a teacher's knowledge in practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). In Chapter 3, I will describe the methodology for this study.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand how an early childhood educator made sense of the construct of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in her unique context. Central to the work of this study was the construction of a contextually meaningful definition for CRT that was grounded in the existing literature as well as early childhood educators' experiences in practice. This chapter outlines the methodology that was utilized to address the research questions:

- How do early childhood educators define culturally responsive teaching (CRT) through engaging in collaborative inquiry?
- What insights do early childhood educators gain into the ways culturally responsive teaching may be actualized in an early childhood setting?

First, I provide a brief overview of case study design and a description of practitioner research, highlighting its usefulness for examining complex issues with implications for improved professional practice and offering a rationale for the employment of a collaborative inquiry case study. Next, I describe the school at which the study was conducted, to contextualize the criteria for participant selection. Finally, an outline is provided of the processes and procedures used for data collection and analysis, including a description of steps taken to ensure trustworthiness of the study. This includes a discussion of my background and how it influenced my perspectives.

Case Study Design

Case study is a qualitative research methodology that involves the identification and exploration of a specific activity, event, or issue of interest (Creswell, 2013; Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010). A case study is distinctive in that it involves one or more individuals bound by time or place (Creswell, 2013; Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010). Primarily, a case study is employed to gain deeper insight and understanding to answer research questions (Creswell,

2013; Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010). In that a case study is deeply rooted in a particular context, it may prove fruitful in yielding insights and implications for similar contexts (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Additionally, since a case study incorporates the perspectives of participants, it lends itself to an examination of how these perspectives inform their practice. Of particular interest in this case study was the process of constructing meaning for CRT in an early childhood classroom. As a means to scaffold the process of constructing meaning and actualizing CRT in an early childhood setting, this case study intentionally incorporated essential elements of practitioner research.

Practitioner Research

Teacher inquiry has been described as "systematic" and "intentional" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Through engaging in this type of inquiry, teachers adopt a stance as reflective learners who are open to instructional changes and improvements that are prompted by insights gained through critical and systematic study of their professional practice. In this case study, the participant was actively engaged in examining her instructional practice related to CRT.

Teacher inquiry offers a departure from traditional notions that practicing educators should solely rely on the findings and implement the recommendations of external experts (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). In contrast to educational research paradigms that cast teachers in a passive role, it empowers teachers in three important ways. First, it research liberates teachers to explore answers and solutions to wonderings and instructional dilemmas that inevitably arise as part of their teaching (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Since the questions stem from teachers' own passions and issues that have personal significance for them, there is a greater likelihood that new learning will be applied in the classroom. Secondly, teacher inquiry positions teachers as lead change agents for continuous instructional improvement (Avis, 2003). As research is carried out within authentic classroom settings, teachers are able to actively integrate their

knowledge for, in, and of practice to make timely, informed instructional decisions to enhance teaching and learning each day (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010). Third, teacher inquiry builds teachers' efficacy by equipping them with both theoretical and practical knowledge to confidently advocate practices that facilitate effective teaching and learning, while challenging underlying assumptions and practices that do not serve the educational needs of all students (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Moreover, through inquiry, teachers become creators and generators of new professional knowledge (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010).

Teacher inquiry is an iterative process, which begins with the identification of an area of focus or problem of practice. The researcher then generates "wonderings," or meaningful, relevant questions to investigate through intentional study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). These questions or problems are derived from and directly related to the researcher's own work, are focused on teaching and learning, center around issues about which the researcher is passionate, and are within the researcher's ability to influence, change, or control (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). Appropriately defined as systematic and intentional, practitioner research involves well-planned, thoughtful collection and recording of data and other information within authentic contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). Insights are gained through a process of self-reflection, as well as description, analysis and interpretation of multiple and varied forms of data (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010). Finally, the researcher's findings, insights and recommendations for action are shared with others orally and through writing. A written record of the researcher's findings contributes to the existing body of literature for promoting deeper understanding and improvement of professional practice.

Educators may independently engage in inquiry, as they systematically seek out insights and solutions for their professional practice dilemmas and questions. However, there are benefits for the practitioner researcher who taps into and draws upon the knowledge and experiences of others. Borko (2004) raises the pertinent perspective that professional learning for teachers is both an individual and sociocultural process. That is to say, change in instructional practice is not only the result of individual construction of new knowledge, but it is also largely driven and sustained through social interaction (Borko, 2004). Through collaborative and collegial dialogue, practitioner researchers gain access to perspectives that can challenge assumptions, uncover biases or blind spots, and raise questions and possibilities that had not been considered.

The School Context

Brook Pine Elementary (pseudonym), located in St. Petersburg, Florida, is part of the Pinellas County School District. Brook Pine serves approximately 550 students in grades Pre-K through fifth. The student population is largely homogeneous, with 85% Black, 9% White, 4% Hispanic, and 2% identified as mixed race. More than 90% of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged. Brook Pine's instructional staff is predominantly female (86%) and white (67%). Approximately 60% of the instructional staff members are in their first five years of teaching, and only 17% have more than 15 years of teaching experience.

For school year 2013-2014, Brook Pine Elementary is designated as a Priority school under Florida's Differentiated Accountability (DA) system. This classification reflects a school grade of "D," based on student performance in reading, writing, and mathematics on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). After receiving a grade of "F" in 2010, Brook Pine's school grade had improved each year, from a D in 2011 to a C in 2012. However, the overall percentage of students achieving at or above grade level on the 2013 FCAT was

disappointingly low in reading (25%) and mathematics (15%). In contrast, the percentage of learning gains among the lowest-performing students was greater than 50% in both reading (73%) and mathematics (55%).

As a Priority school, Brook Pine receives Instructional Support Model (ISM) visits from a district team, which consists of the Executive Director for Elementary Education and subject area content specialists. During ISM visits, a review of progress monitoring data is conducted, and there are classroom walkthroughs to observe instruction and student engagement. Recommendations are made for appropriate next steps, which could include defining a particular focus for embedded coaches or adapting the schedules and assignments for supplemental instructional personnel. This system of monitoring and support is designed to ensure that schools identified as underperforming are making continuous progress toward goals for improved learning outcomes for students.

Because of its high percentage of economically disadvantaged students, Brook Pine receives an allocation of federal Title I funds. These funds make it possible for the school to provide a variety of supplemental resources and services which include additional personnel who deliver differentiated, intensive instruction during the school day, instructional technology to extend student learning beyond the regular school day, opportunities for ongoing teacher professional development, and supports for meaningful engagement of families and the school community. Each Title I school develops a school improvement plan, in which there is a description of specific goals and strategies to address the learning needs of all students, particularly those most at risk of not meeting identified grade level achievement standards. A Title I budget plan is also developed, in which an alignment is shown for how these additional

funds will be strategically leveraged as a tool to improve learning outcomes for all students and narrow proficiency gaps between subgroups.

In addition to its Title I allocation, Brook Pine has also received School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds for the past three years, for the purpose of implementing comprehensive school reform strategies, such as extending the school day and year for all students and providing recruitment and retention incentives for effective teachers and school leaders. One of Brook Pine's key initiatives under the SIG has been to increase student achievement and narrow learning gaps by focusing on early intervention through high quality Pre-K programs. It was in one of the school's two Pre-K classrooms that this inquiry was conducted.

Participant Selection

The purposeful strategy of criterion sampling (Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010) was used to select the participant for this inquiry. As the purpose of the study was to explore the concept of CRT in early childhood education settings, it was essential to select a teacher who demonstrated a passion for this work. I began by identifying Title I schools at which the majority (50% or more) of the student population is Black. From among these schools, I selected schools located within the same geographic area as the Title I Center. Selecting schools in close proximity was intended to maximize convenience for meeting. I made personal contact with the principal of each of the selected schools, either by phone or in person, to share the nature and purpose of my study. I then asked each principal to identify early childhood teachers at their school (grades prekindergarten through second) who exhibited an interest in the achievement gap, culturally responsive teaching, and/or practitioner inquiry and who may be interested in participating with me in in a collaborative practitioner inquiry study.

A letter of invitation to participate was hand-delivered to principals for distribution to their recommended teachers. The invitation to participate letter contained a brief explanation of

the nature and purpose of my study. The letter also included the anticipated timeline for the study, tentative meeting dates, and information about how component points toward educator recertification may be earned for participation. Responses to the invitation to participate were provided by returning a tear-off portion of the letter to me. From among teachers who expressed interest, five participants were selected using the following criteria:

- Current year's class is majority (50% of more) Black
- Has two or more years of successful teaching experience at a Title I school
- Statement of intent to participate was returned by the deadline
- Statement of intent to participate indicated agreement to attend and engage in a number of meetings where we would unpack and discuss the construct of CRT

The number of participants was intentionally limited to adequately capture the diversity and complexity of the learning experiences (Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010).

It is important to note that originally, I had planned to work with all 5 teachers who expressed interest in this work and meet with the group within a professional learning community structure to engage in collaborative inquiry into the construct of culturally responsive teaching. However, circumstances for these teachers changed dramatically when subsequent to selection of five participants for this study, the Florida Department of Education released its list of the 100 lowest performing elementary schools (L100s). It is a requirement of all L100 schools to implement an additional hour of instruction each day. Having their work day extended by one hour, coupled with the daily challenges of working at a school under state oversight, some of the selected teachers declined to participate. Throughout the changes described above, there was one early childhood teacher who consistently expressed her desire to study the concept of culturally responsive teaching, whether it was before, after, or during school. Thus Kathleen (pseudonym), a veteran Prekindergarten teacher at Brook Pine Elementary, was selected.

Although Kathleen and I had not worked together before, we had previously met. In the course of this case study, a friendship was formed between us, which facilitated informal communications related to our inquiry beyond formal meetings at school. These included emails and messages on Facebook. Initial conversations centered on our individual backgrounds and interests. We discovered, for instance, that her son and my daughter had been elementary school classmates. I also discovered that one of my former second grade students was currently serving in the capacity of a co-teacher in Kathleen's classroom.

Kathleen and I formally met eight times, from January 2014 through March 2014. Additional, informal communications continued into April 2014. The duration of each formal meeting was 60 minutes. We met from 10:20-11:20 on Tuesday mornings in Kathleen's office and planning area, which adjoins her classroom. Since the students had physical education and lunch during this time, we had a consistent, uninterrupted block for discussion. The formal meeting time was followed by additional time in the classroom for math/science and discovery, literacy circle, and learning centers with the students. Our work together unfolded in three distinct phases. Throughout all three phases, care was taken to ensure that our professional collaboration maintained the core elements of critical conversation (Vescio et al., 2008) and self-reflection that lead to changes in instructional practice for improved student learning and achievement.

During phase one, which encompassed the first two meetings, we engaged in the essential groundwork of setting purpose, building rapport, and developing shared accountability for our professional learning. These components have been identified as key to creating and sustaining meaningful collaboration (Borko, 2004; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). In these meetings, we shared our professional background with each other, including our teaching experience and

philosophy about teaching. We also discussed the purpose and design of the collaborative inquiry case study, particularly that it would include components of critical dialogue, reading selected articles related to CRT, and completing written reflections.

Insights gleaned from the literature on CRT were instrumental in understanding how CRT is actualized in an early childhood setting. The first article we read was "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Critical Ingredients for Teacher Reflection," by Tyrone Howard. This article was our "homework" after the first meeting, and we agreed that we would discuss it during the second meeting. We used the Four A's Protocol (National School Reform Faculty, 2007), as a tool to facilitate discussion about the content of the article. This involved Kathleen and me selecting passages from the text that we wished to **a**gree with, **a**rgue with, or **a**spire to, and identifying an **a**ssumptions made by the author. Such protocols are specifically designed to help readers dissect and digest text, clarify and deepen their thinking, and discuss implications for their work. However, because our ability to engage in honest, critical conversation seemed to occur naturally, such protocols were not utilized with subsequent articles.

During phase two, which included meetings three through eight, there was an emphasis on cultivating knowledge about CRT and its implications for our professional practice. The concept of culturally responsive teaching had not been systematically examined in our local school district; therefore, we were not constrained by preconceived notions or prescribed strategies. Rather, we were able to actively and authentically engage in inquiry to generate new professional knowledge. In these meetings, we typically started with a brief, two- to three-minute check-in, during which we talked briefly about what was happening in our work and/or personal lives. This was followed by discussion of questions or insights that arose, first from our written reflections, secondly from readings, and third from observations in the classroom. The

amount of time devoted to discussion of each of these components varied between meetings, ranging from ten to twenty-five minutes depending on how they pushed our thinking, helped inform our understanding or CRT, or raised new questions or issues we wanted to further explore or clarify. At the end of our formal meetings, we began to prepare for the students to return to the classroom.

During phase three, the focus of our work was on constructing the meaning of CRT in an early childhood context and determining how our learning would be effectively articulated to others. Although we did not meet formally during this phase, our communication continued via emails, Facebook, and phone calls. We also continued to spend time together working with students in the classroom. Our verbal communications consisted of sharing the examples and non-examples of CRT we had become increasingly proficient at noticing through our inquiry. Our written communications consisted of writing and rewriting a definition of CRT, based on insights that continually emerged through observations, discussions, and reflection.

Data Collection

Typically, case study and practitioner research rely on qualitative data collection methods. This type of data collection occurs in natural settings, focuses on the views and perspectives of participants, and situates the researcher as a data collection instrument (Dooley, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Plano-Clark & Creswell, 2010). A benefit of this approach is that it involves collection of data from more than one source, allowing for affirmation or deeper understanding of findings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Creswell, 2013). In this study, data were collected from two main data sources: field notes and written reflections. I also maintained a researcher's journal, which was utilized as a tool to facilitate formative and summative data analysis.

Field Notes

As a co-participant in this inquiry, it was critical that I be fully engaged as a learner. Rather than taking handwritten field notes, audio-recordings were made of conversations with Kathleen and of our interactions with students. The audio-recordings captured comments and questions raised during our critical dialogue. The recordings also captured statements and questions. This included student to student and student to teacher dialogue during learning activities in the classroom. After each meeting, the related recordings were saved using unique identifiers such as "Kathleen_2.25.14." Figure 3-1 illustrates a sample from my field notes. Later, field notes were typed from the audio-recordings, and the field notes were saved using the same identifier as the audio-recording from which they were taken.

> Kathleen: Yesterday we talked about our heart. Who remembers how big our heart is? Show me.
>
> (Students make fists and hold them up.)
>
> Kathleen: The size of our fist. So, my heart's bigger because I'm older. A baby's heart is even smaller than your heart because they are babies. And when you're born, the first thing the doctor checks is if your heart is working. That's how important it is. Some mommies went to the doctor and they heard two heartbeats. Alexis, what do you think is going to happen there?
>
> Alexis: She's going to have two babies.
>
> Kathleen: Just like our friend, Mrs. Davis. She's got twins in her tummy.
>
> Tae: Sometimes when I be at my mom's house, we be sleep and she always shut the lights out and close the door.
>
> Kathleen: That's why we have quiet time, and that's why we have nighttime because the heart can't work hard all the time. Thank you, Tae.

Figure 3-1. Sample from field notes.

Once typed field notes were saved, the accompanying audio-recording was erased. Since the field notes were dated, a chronology of conversations could be documented during data

analysis, particularly the emerging understanding of CRT and its actualization in the early childhood setting. After being organized into themes, selected statements, questions or observations taken from field notes were used to inform and guide conversations during subsequent meetings. For example, a statement was made during a meeting about the preference of many minority students to work and learn in groups, rather than on individual tasks or assignments. This led to a discussion of whether this was true for our students and, if so, how it might be actualized.

Written Responses to Reflective Prompts

Our knowledge and understanding of CRT continued to evolve, during and between formal meetings. To capture our reflections and emerging insights between formal meetings, I collected our written responses to three reflective prompts:

- At this moment, I would personally define CRT as…
- New insights I gained about CRT today are…
- Something related to CRT I am wondering about is…

We shared our written reflections in response to these prompts with each other between meetings via email. Figure 3-2 illustrates a sample email exchange. As with the audio-recordings, written reflections were saved with a unique identifier. In addition to the name of the participant and date, the written reflections were also identified with key words or phrases that summarized the essence of the reflection, such as "Mary_3.4.14_TeachingtoStrengths" or "Kathleen_1.28.14_CultureandLearning."

<52@gmail.com> wrote:
After reading your response I see what you are saying. My time with them is school hours but I truly hope that what we share together carries over to their family life and stays in their little lub dub hearts forever. This is my gift to them.

Mary Conage <conagem@yahoo.com> wrote:
I LOVE what you said about including their cultural references. That is huge. Tell me what you mean by "in an educational setting?" I'm asking because I think (at least from working with you) that what is taught sometimes goes beyond what may be considered an educational setting.

<52@gmail.com> wrote:
"Culturally responsive teaching in Early Childhood Education means recognizing the importance of including students' cultural references and interacting in ways that emphasize the many things they know and can do so that they motivated to learn more. It is understanding what young people need to be healthy and successful and caring enough to figure out how to provide it for them in an educational setting." How does this sound?

Figure 3-2. Sample email exchange of written reflections.

As with the field notes, excerpts from written reflections were copied, pasted, and organized into categories or themes that seemed to emerge. In addition, written reflections guided the selection of pertinent research articles related to CRT. These readings provided a theoretical framework and empirical evidence to support or push our thinking as our understanding of CRT was being shaped. Selected readings included the following:

- Carter, N., Hawkins, T. & Natesan, P. (2008). The relationship between verve and the academic achievement of African American students in reading and mathematics in an urban middle school. *Educational Foundations*, 22(1/2), 29-46.
- Howard, T. (2003). Culturally relevant pedagogy: Ingredients for critical teacher reflection.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159-165.

Researcher's Journal

In addition to the field notes and written reflections described above, I documented my questions, thoughts, and insights while making sense of CRT as a practitioner researcher

engaged in collaborative inquiry with Kathleen. To capture this data, I kept a researcher journal. Journal entries were of two main types. One type of entry consisted of notes I jotted down to help me recall important elements that could not be captured on an audio-recording. For example, I noted facial reactions and physical behaviors, descriptions of tasks in which students were engaged, and artifacts or resources at learning centers or on the classroom walls. These entries were dated so that they could later be used to provide enriched context for related field notes. In a second type of journal entry, I reflected on specific moments during my conversations with Kathleen or particular events in the classroom that seemed to facilitate our understanding of CRT. I primarily used these reflections to capture my wonderings and thoughts about applications and implications for CRT beyond this study. For instance, I reflected on educator disposition, the types of environments that may be ripe for the study of CRT, and methods for meaningful professional learning about CRT. Immediately following each meeting, I spent 5 to 10 minutes writing contextual notes. Other journal entries were written at various times throughout the day and evening. Finally, during the data analysis phase, I used the journal to create memos that helped identify themes and illustrate distinctive features of CRT that were observed. Research journal entries were saved by unique identifiers, such as "Conage_2.11.14_Reflection." Figure 3-3 shows a sample journal entry.

One thing I want to talk about is how their perception of "school" is being shaped. I wonder what will happen if their Kindergarten experience is completely different. Will they still believe that they are smart and capable?

I notice that the students in Mrs. class are learning how to be taught in the traditional way, and I wonder if this will give them an advantage, so to speak.

I need to remember to ask if she follows her kids and how they do. I wonder if there's a Kindergarten teacher we could infect. :) Maybe ?!

Figure 3-3. Sample reflection from researcher journal.

Data Analysis

According to Dana (2013), "The process of data collection and data analysis do not exist independently of one another and proceed in a chronological lockstep manner. Rather, these processes are iterative in nature. (p. 50). Hence, practitioner researchers engage in two types of data analysis—formative and summative. Formative data analysis took place throughout the inquiry study, as I reviewed data that had been collected in between each of our meetings. As the different kinds of data were read and re-read, individual quotes and excerpts were copied and pasted from their original sources and organized into broad categories or themes onto new Word documents. The number and nature of these themes changed several times during the data

collection process, so each new Word document was dated for tracking. To a great extent, formative data analysis served to guide the focus of conversations during the meetings Kathleen and I had together. As noted earlier, the amount of time devoted to discussion of written reflections, articles, or observations varied depending on how each one challenged our thinking or moved it forward. The emerging themes from the data informed our discussions and, reciprocally, our discussions led to the evolution of key themes.

After my final formal meeting with Kathleen, the process of summative data analysis began. I started by organizing and reviewing the entire data set that had been collected over the course of the study. For this review, I used the Word documents that displayed the data by categories and themes, rather than going back to the original source documents. Initially, I struggled to clearly identify what "story" the data could tell. However, I decided to use my two research questions as the starting point for an organizational template to help me make sense of the data. First, excerpts from field notes, written reflections, and journal entries were organized according to the research questions they best seemed to address. Secondly, the words and phrases that related to each research question were analyzed to look for common patterns. I made note of which pieces of data seemed to be extraneous to the overall set. The data were further organized by assigning codes to identified patterns of words and phrases from field notes and written reflections. During summative analysis, I also referred to relevant literature on CRT to help with interpretation of themes and, if appropriate, to refine codes that I had assigned. During the final phase of data analysis I referred to my research journal for potential implications of the key findings.

Credibility and Trustworthiness of Study

One criticism of qualitative data analysis, from proponents of positivist theoretical frameworks, is that qualitative findings cannot be verified or validated (Anfara, Brown, &

Mangione, 2002; Cox, 2012). Lincoln & Guba (1985), however, reframed traditional notions of reliability and validity for qualitative research as trustworthiness. Disputes over terminology aside, the standard of rigor within qualitative research may be noted in the systematic processes for identifying a site for inquiry, selecting participants, and engaging in data collection and analysis. And while the unique contexts in which a case study or teacher inquiry takes place do not lend themselves to generalizability, qualitative researchers often do examine applicability of their findings through review of existing literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some specific practices that lend credence to the trustworthiness of qualitative methods are triangulation, peer reviewing, member checks, sufficient time spent in the field, and disclosure of researcher bias (Anfara et al., 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Specifically, in this study, I employed triangulation, member checks, and disclosure of researcher bias. Regarding triangulation, data were collected using three different methods: field notes, written responses to reflective prompts, and a researcher journal. As part of my analysis, I looked for general congruence among these three data sources. Regarding member checks, I shared major themes with Kathleen for her feedback as they emerged and changed. I also sent her sections of Chapter 4 of this dissertation as it was being written, to check the accuracy with which I was presenting our work and the insights gained about CRT. This process of member checking allowed for clarification of misinterpretations, and it served to ensure that both of our perspectives about the experience were being reflected fairly and accurately. Regarding researcher bias, it was critical for me to take a reflective approach throughout the inquiry. I continually took into consideration my personal history, including my unique cultural and work background, that could influence the way I perceived or interpreted words, actions, and other phenomena during the study (Creswell, 2013). I was particularly careful to use ideas from the

existing literature on CRT as a reference, rather than to drive or dictate our inquiry and conclusions. Perhaps most pertinent to this study, my views and experiences as a Black woman are essential to disclose. Issues of race, whether subtly or overtly, have greatly shaped my perspectives. The two primary lenses through which I see myself situated in this inquiry were memories of my own learning experiences from kindergarten through grade twelve and my work as an educator in a public school system. To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, I end this chapter by sharing my own background and perspectives that led me to this study, so the reader can understand my position within this work.

Researcher Background and Perspectives

As a child, I remember hearing of race riots at the high school my older siblings attended because there were some who preferred that their neighborhood schools remain all White. I couldn't comprehend the fear and hate associated with racism, and I didn't want to be bused to a school far away from my home. However, I had no choice. Although we never moved, I attended three different elementary schools due to changing school zones. Between my five siblings and I, we graduated from three different high schools. While our parents were supportive of our education and taught us to always strive for excellence, I could sense their distrust and cynicism toward the school system and most teachers. They believed they had to advocate for us, because White teachers would only provide a quality education for us if they knew someone was watching. Over time, I came to adopt that same belief and, unfortunately, I endured experiences that only reinforced it. A most memorable example was when a teacher asked me if I was sure I was in the right class on my first day of her advanced placement elective course.

I owed my resilience as a student to the support of my parents and a few unforgettable teachers who I knew sincerely cared about me and who taught me like they believed I could

learn anything. Just as these special teachers ignited and stoked confidence and a genuine passion for learning within me, I want to be a catalyst for creating conditions in which other children, particularly Black children, can also benefit from affirming and engaging learning experiences that lead to academic success. Throughout my educational career, it has been my purpose and goal to position myself as an advocate for the quality education of Black children. The experiences and perspective I have gained over the years, from teaching in my individual classroom, to supporting multiple classes in a school, to serving multiple schools in the district have been invaluable. For one thing, they have given me the courage and confidence to question underlying reasons for persistently disparate achievement results between Black students and their peers, even when socioeconomic status is considered. Secondly, they have driven me to seek solutions and promising practices to address this concern, which is a particularly thorny issue in my local school district.

A most significant factor in my perspective in this study was my intersectionality as a Black person who attended schools where the education of Black children felt enforced more than embraced, as a Black person who experienced academic success throughout school in spite of the absence of culturally responsive instruction, as an agent of a school system that is seeking solutions to persistent gaps in achievement between Black and non-Black students, and as a Black woman who cares about issues of racial equity in education as a matter of social justice. I know that issues of race, inequities, and underachievement of Black students are not easy or pleasant to explore. Indeed, I brought to this study a bit of the old cynicism and skepticism about whether the findings would matter. I believe this study and its potential impact on instructional practice in my district will depend largely on my ability to engage with other educators in meaningful, collegial professional learning. When respectful, collegial relationships exist, there

are just certain questions one can ask. There are certain observations one can make. And there are uncertainties and vulnerabilities that can be disclosed. I engaged in this study with a desire that its findings might provoke questions, discussions, decisions, and actions that lead to more effective instruction and increased achievement for Black children.

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I describe and analyze my experience of examining culturally responsive teaching (CRT) with another early childhood educator. Our common interest in CRT made it a fruitful subject for exploration. The research questions guiding our study were:

- How do early childhood educators define culturally responsive teaching through engaging in collaborative inquiry?
- What insights do early childhood educators gain into the ways culturally responsive teaching may be actualized in early childhood settings?

My inquiry partner, Kathleen, brought a practical perspective from twenty-five years of teaching kindergarten and prekindergarten (Pre-K). One of her passions is to continually learn and apply new knowledge to meet the needs of her young students. My perspective was from thirteen years teaching first and second grade, as well as fourteen years serving in various curriculum, staff development, and supervisory roles at the school and district level. One of my passions is to study and advocate effective instructional practices, particularly those that can lead to improved learning outcomes for Black students.

During my first formal meeting with Kathleen, we agreed that spending time together in the classroom with students would be an important part of our inquiry. Other components of the inquiry would be collegial discussions and written reflections, which would be informed by the literature on CRT as well as by insights gained from our experiences and observations. Consequently, this inquiry was conducted primarily in Kathleen's Pre-K classroom and its adjoining teacher planning area. We discovered that we held in common a constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning, which greatly facilitated our ability to engage

collaboratively in this inquiry without disrupting the established classroom culture, practices, and processes.

In many ways, Kathleen's classroom looks and sounds much like any typical early childhood classroom. There is clear, abundant evidence of what is described in the early childhood literature as appropriate practice (Kessler, 1991; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1986). Three such indicators are caring teacher-student relationships, a thoughtfully structured, child-centered environment, and authentic, developmentally appropriate tasks that facilitate discovery and learning. As Kathleen and I engaged in this inquiry, these three elements also emerged as key indicators of CRT.

On the surface, CRT appears to be synonymous with what is generally considered good instructional practice. However, our work together revealed distinctive features of CRT that are embedded within and inextricably connected to caring relationships, thoughtful classroom structure, and authentic, appropriate learning tasks. These distinctive features are affirmation, adaptability, and achievement. The presence of these essential characteristics in Kathleen's teaching make good instructional practice even better, specifically as it relates to supporting and enhancing learning in her class of young, predominantly Black students.

This chapter presents, in turn, affirmation, adaptability, and achievement as three essential features that emerged through this collaborative inquiry and informed our understanding of CRT. For each feature, I first provide a definition and description in the context of this study. Following the definition and description, I draw from field notes and written reflections to relay noteworthy experiences from our inquiry that are illustrative of each feature. I then discuss how we perceived each feature as being distinctive to CRT. I conclude this chapter by summarizing how collaborative inquiry, informed by the literature, helped us

construct meaning for CRT and gain insight into how it may be actualized in an early childhood setting.

Affirmation

In the context of this study, affirmation means positive, respectful regard for students and their culture. Affirmation is preceded by acknowledgement of differences, which precipitates responsiveness through pedagogical actions to address those differences. Therefore, affirmation cannot be exhibited where there is "colorblindness," or an insistence that children's race and culture do not matter in the classroom. Rather than ignoring, dismissing, trivializing or vilifying such differences, teachers show affirmation by intentionally drawing upon the strength of diversity. Affirmation is demonstrated by recognizing and incorporating the unique assets, perspectives, experiences, and learning styles of students and using these as a platform from which to teach (Gay, 2000; Hyland, 2009). Affirmation is taking students' current knowledge and connecting it to new knowledge in ways that are relevant and meaningful. Beyond merely telling Black students that they are capable of learning, affirmation involves empowering them to see themselves as capable learners and as essential and valued contributors to the process of their learning (Becket, 2011). I will now share experiences from our inquiry that shaped our understanding of affirmation as an essential and distinctive feature of CRT in an early childhood classroom.

Affirmation of Experience

At designated times during the day, Kathleen's students get to select from a number of centers for learning through exploration, discovery, and dramatic play. There is an Art Center with a two-sided easel, paper, paints, and brushes for children to design and create. There is also a Science Center, with baskets containing leaves and other specimens for children to handle or examine using magnifying glasses. At the Listening Center children can listen and read along to

stories on tape, and at Blocks they can experiment with assembling a variety of structures using three-dimensional figures of assorted sizes and shapes.

Among these and other centers, Housekeeping is particularly popular. It features some of the typical early childhood classroom furniture, including dresser drawers, a stove and oven. There are also dishes, pots and pans, and assorted articles of clothing for dress-up. Only one of the baby dolls in the Housekeeping Center is White. The rest are black or brown-skinned, as are the large majority of students in the class. Other objects that are a familiar part of her students' home lives have also been added to the center, including cell phones, television remotes, brooms and dustpans. It is important to note that these items were not added because of assumptions on Kathleen's part, but rather by observation. She shared, for example, "You know what? My kids love to clean up. I just keep a whole thing of little dust pans and stuff that you get at the dollar store, and they love it." (FN_1.17)

One day during Center time, Kathleen pointed out a group of children who were in the kitchen. Rather than cooking, they were playing beauty and barber shop. A few students were sitting and patiently waiting to get their hair done by the little girl who was the serving as the cosmetologist and barber. She would first drape a large shirt around each child as they took a seat in the stylist's chair. Then she would commence to do their hair. All the while, the children were engaging in purposeful, socially constructed conversation which included laughter, giving directions, and following directions. They were also practicing the social conventions of taking turns, identifying and utilizing an available service, and providing a service.

I was somewhat surprised by the intensity of my emotional, mostly nostalgic reaction to this observation. I reflected on this in my journal:

> I could immediately connect to what the children were doing. I remember how Mom used to straighten our hair in the kitchen on Saturday to get us ready for church on Sunday. I have to laugh…Mom *still* does hair on her back porch sometimes. (MJ_2.8.14)

I was aware that there are many other Black people who still “do hair” in their homes, with or without a license, for one reason or another.

As a Black woman, I absolutely understood the cultural and social significance of a good hairdo. Kathleen was not able to relate to this through personal experience as I was. Nevertheless, she was well aware of its importance and implications for her students’ self-esteem and, consequently, their ability to engage in learning. There was an incident in which a student was dropped off at school without having her hair combed. It appeared that the child’s hair had been hastily gathered together and loosely tied with a band. By the time she arrived at school, the band had started to fall off and her hair was completely disheveled. Kathleen didn’t pretend not to notice the child’s hair or impose other values with words such as “We are not here for a fashion show. We’re here to learn.” Instead, she affirmed what she knew was culturally important by fixing the child’s hair. Kathleen explained to me, “Even at their young age, they notice when someone is not being cared for.” (FN_2.11)

Although toy straightening combs and barber’s tools are not included in the list of materials for dramatic play in a Pre-K classroom, Kathleen recognizes and respects this type of experience-based dramatic play for her students. Rather than questioning their choices or attempting to redirect them to something more “appropriate” for housekeeping, she affirms their culture-based experience. More specifically, she affirms their ability to apply specific academic, social, and behavioral skills—such as speaking and listening, sharing, and working cooperatively—in culturally relevant ways. Care is demonstrated through Kathleen’s acceptance of her students’ experience as legitimate knowledge.

Affirmation of Learning Styles

Kathleen's classroom environment is characterized by a high level of energy. With the exception of rest time, the room is always abuzz with the sound of lively conversations, music, singing, and laughter. There are designated times for children to choose from a menu of different activities to engage in small group or independent learning. Given the freedom of choice, they are self-directed and focused as they move about during discovery and center time. Scheduled around the times for learning centers and discovery, there are whole group activities during which the children all gather on a large, colorful rug near the front of the room. This gathering area is a place for reviewing expectations and processes, engaging in discussions to support and promote learning, or sharing a read-aloud. It also serves as the unofficial dance floor where another insight about affirmation emerged. It was the day we listened to "The Letter S Song," by Have Fun Teaching.

As soon as the hip, funky beat started, there were eighteen little bodies wiggling, jumping, twisting, turning, and boogying. Two older bodies—Kathleen and mine—also joined in. The children chanted along excitedly, as the rapper spoke the lyrics. "S is a consonant, a letter of the alphabet. S is a consonant, a letter of the alphabet." Then they repeated in choral response to the rapper's lead:

Rapper: I saw a snake.

Students: Snake, snake, snake

Rapper: In the sun

Students: Sun, sun, sun

Rapper: It liked to slither

Students: Slither, slither, slither
(FN_2.11.14)

While the children danced and chanted, Kathleen moved about watching their mouths and listening. She said to one student, "I don't hear you." To another, she asked, "Can you feel the air? Sssss." When the rapper directed, "Write an uppercase S in the air," Kathleen modeled the gesture.

In my journal, I wrote of this experience:

> It was more than just getting the wiggles out. There was teaching and assessing happening. Through music and movement, the children were actually practicing letter-sound recognition, use of language, and vocabulary. I especially loved how, when the song was over and Kathleen said, "Okay let's take a seat," several of the children said, "Ssssseat!" I guess the lesson ssssunk in. ☺ (MJ_2.11)

This activity was ripe with instructional verve, a characteristic that is associated with higher academic performance for Black children (Carter, Hawkins, & Natesan, 2008; Gay, 2000).

To say that the children in Kathleen's class respond well to music and movement would be an understatement. The integral role of music in this classroom is based upon Kathleen's recognition of how it helps her students learn. She is intentional in her efforts to learn about her students, including their culture-based communication patterns, behaviors, and interests. I captured in my field notes an instance in which four students were sitting at a table together coloring. One of the children started singing, "Take Me to the King," a popular gospel song I recognized from church. The other three students joined in the singing. Although other students could hear them, no one seemed to be bothered by it. The singing was treated as just another conversation that was happening. For these young students, musical and bodily-kinesthetic learning styles are affirmed as much as verbal or logical styles. In Kathleen's classroom, the use of music is not simply based upon an essentialized notion that "all Black people love rhythm" or that "Black children are just more active." Beyond stereotypical conceptions associated with

"acting up" or providing entertainment, music and movement are affirmed as legitimate means for learning.

Affirmation as Distinctive to CRT

The experiences described above were instrumental in helping us discern affirmation as an element of a caring teacher-student relationship that is distinctive to CRT. The subtle, but critical, difference is that affirmation goes beyond care that encourages and reinforces only those things about children that are important, familiar or convenient for the teacher to do her best teaching. We determined that affirmation requires taking deliberate action to understand and incorporate diverse perspectives and funds of knowledge that are essential for all students—in this case, Black students—to do their best learning. In one of her reflections, Kathleen wrote:

> "We are all born, raised and enveloped in culture, and it is central to learning. It effects how we communicate with each other, the way we receive information and helps shape the thinking process of groups and individuals." (KR_1.24)

This acknowledgement, followed by her intentional, responsive action, illustrates our conception of affirmation as it relates to CRT. Closely related to affirmation is a second feature that is distinctive to CRT. It is adaptability.

Adaptability

In the context of this study, adaptability means the propensity for making modifications or enhancements to instruction to address children's perspectives, funds of knowledge, assets, needs, and interests based on their culture. Adaptability is preceded by acknowledgement that existing structures, practices, or strategies have been ineffective in yielding high levels of engagement and achievement for diverse students. To be clear, it is not the rejection or absence of structures and processes that facilitate learning. Rather, it is having the capacity to detect or anticipate factors or issues within existing structures and processes that serve as barriers to learning (Lenski, 2005). Adaptability, then, is demonstrated through a teacher's ability to

effectively remove, minimize, or navigate around barriers, whether context specific or systemic, to optimize learning for her students. It involves exploring and employing multiple means to assess and address students' educational needs, without compromising or watering down the expectation of excellence in achievement and demonstration of knowledge (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). I will now share experiences from our inquiry that shaped our understanding of adaptability as an essential element of CRT in an early childhood classroom.

Adaptability in Teaching Diverse Groups

Of the eighteen children in Kathleen's Pre-K class, only one is White. One is identified as mixed race, and the rest are Black. The majority of students are from families in poverty. Several live in single parent families, and some are being raised by family members other than their parents. All of this notwithstanding, the curriculum she has been provided is exactly the same as for any other Pre-K class for four-year-olds. There is no differentiation within the curriculum, materials, or assessments to address disparities in learning experiences and cultural capital that already exist prior to children entering preschool.

Kathleen is not naïve about such opportunity gaps, and she does not operate under an assumption that mere access to an early childhood education program is sufficient to compensate for these gaps. She is very knowledgeable of the standard structure and curriculum for the early childhood program she is responsible for implementing. However, she is not limited by it. Instead, she is purposeful in providing supplemental, enriching experiences that help her young students make connections between what they learn in class, what they live at home, and what they may observe in the world around them. She takes intentional action to address foundational inequities that could lead to subsequent gaps in achievement for her students.

One important way in which Kathleen adapts and extends the learning experience for her students is through study trips. "I mean, I take more field trips than anybody," she admits. I

hold a memorable image in my heart and mind of her walking down the sidewalk, pulling a red Radio Flyer wagon that was filled with a cooler and other supplies. Behind her was the class of four-year-olds, holding hands with their partners as they walked in pairs. They were heading back to school after spending the morning at the nearby Boyd Hill Nature Park. Before leaving the park, she said to the children, “Okay, my friends, line up. Come on, we’re gonna be the leaders. We’re out in the community.” (FN_2.25) There was no pushing, running, yelling, or straying. They simply followed her, walking like they believed what she said about them being leaders.

Once we were back in the classroom, there was an opportunity for the children to reflect on what they had just seen, heard, and learned. The invitation to share was simple: “What’s one thing you remember about the trip that you want to share?” A portion of the discussion that followed was:

Atterio: The bird, his eye was hurt.

Kathleen: The bald eagle had an eye injury. But I think it was happy that someone found it. That’s why you don’t play with sticks.

Chantel: The bald eagle.

Kathleen: When else have we talked about the bald eagle?

Chante: Money.

Kathleen: The symbol of the eagle is on some money, and it’s the national bird.

Chantel: It’s strong.

Ricka: They can see things far away, and they can pick ‘em up with their claws.

Dontae: Somebody got poked in the eye.

Kathleen: The bald eagle was injured in a storm. Remember we talked about weather. Storms can be dangerous for animals.
(FN_2.25)

This kind of conversation, facilitated by shared educational experiences outside of the regular curriculum, can greatly enhance learning for students from diverse backgrounds. However, providing such experiences takes thought, time and intention. There are permissions to be obtained. There is a cost, both for transportation and student admissions. With four-year-olds, there are special harnesses that are required for any trips on buses, and it takes quite a bit of time to get every child safely secured. These might be sufficient reasons to forego such learning activities for some teachers, but not for Kathleen. As she and I talked about the planning and preparation required for the Boyd Hill study trip, she reflected:

> I just see that as minor. It's the experiences that I want them to have, and I want them to be a part of. I don't want that to be an issue. It can be, but I have staff that always helps me, and we just get through it. So, today we walked because it is so close…and, again, the buses are very expensive. Just coming around the corner would be a hundred dollars. But this is what we like to do in Pre-K, and this is what we are supposed to be doing with them…getting them out into the community, letting people see us and where we're from, and what we can do. (FN_2.25)

This perspective is consonant with the literature that describes successful teachers of Black students as those who find ways to extend learning beyond the classroom through positive, meaningful interactions with families and the community (Hyland, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The affirmation Kathleen's students experience in the classroom is reinforced as she helps them to view themselves as part of a larger community. A sense of pride, shared responsibility, and confidence is fostered when students see that they are trusted to be positive representatives of their school to others. Moreover, it gives members of the community the opportunity to connect and contribute to the learning of her students in positive ways. Ultimately, the enriching, shared experiences outside the classroom will strengthen students' learning in the classroom (Becket, 2011).

Without question, it can be challenging to actualize the kind of instructional adaptability that is essential for effectively reaching and teaching diverse students. However, the culturally responsive teacher finds a way to do what she believes is necessary to meet her students' needs, even when it means working around existing practices and policies. Adaptability, then, is revealed largely through a teacher's resilience and persistence. A disposition toward these characteristics is revealed in Kathleen's thoughts about doing what it takes to make learning meaningful for her students: "I'm here to do my job, and I don't let anything get in my way. If I want my children to be able to experience something…I mean, it's just…there's no stop sign." (KR_1.17)

Adaptability in Teaching Diverse Individuals

Even within relatively homogenous classrooms, there are individual students who have unique instructional needs based on diverse cultural experiences and perspectives. In some cases, students' academic needs go undetected if they are quiet and compliant, even though they are not performing very well academically. In other cases, obvious misunderstandings and conflicts arise with teachers when diverse students manifest culture-based behaviors that are not consonant with what is considered normal or acceptable (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; McLoyd, 1998). In either case, no adaptations or modifications are made to instructional practice to address unique learning needs. Often there is a heavy reliance upon specialized services and supports outside of the classroom to address the needs of underachieving children from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Although the work of adapting instruction for individual students can be time consuming and tiring, culturally responsive teachers do not relinquish this responsibility to others, even when dealing with the most challenging students. In Kathleen's class, Darius is one of these students.

Darius is not a student one could easily miss. His activity level alone makes him stand out. While other students are intently focused and engaged during whole group, centers, or discovery time, Darius may be crawling, climbing, or flitting from one area to another. He expresses his displeasure or frustration, which is often unpredictable and unexplained, by whining, crying or flopping down on the floor. Yet, Kathleen never called the office to have him removed from the class. She recognizes the obvious differences in Darius' attentiveness, self-regulation, and interactions with others. However, she still expects him to observe, listen, learn, and respond when addressed. Through the many conversations we had about Darius, we gained valuable insight into Kathleen's process of observing, gathering information, and making accommodations to engage him more effectively. I noted key ideas from her thinking aloud. For example, she shared:

> I'm trying to figure out if it's a sensory or behavior issue…he'll sit in front of the iPad forever…but, a voice or like a story or something…He's almost five…he knows his letters, but he has no interest in writing his name. (FN_3.4.14)

I noted that she applied this knowledge by using the iPad as an incentive for Darius.

> There's a mother, the boyfriend, and there seems to be one sister, maybe two, and they have a dog. They just moved. Somehow they were able to get a special permit to keep the dog. He gets up in the middle of the night, pulls stuff out of the refrigerator and cooks stuff. He uses the microwave, and he and the dog eat. (FN_3.4.14)

I noted that she was continually attempting to draw information from knowledge of Darius' home life.

> He does have language, and it's come out more and more, but he has like a scripted language where he uses the same thing…he has expanded it a little bit…but his behavior overrides the disability. (FN_3.4.14)

I noted that she did not simply dwell on barriers, but quickly shifted her focus to his strengths and what he *can* do. In reflecting on this, I wrote:

> She doesn't just see him as a behavior problem. She sees him as a person who she cares about. I mean, she even knows about the family dog! ☺ She didn't just talk about everything Darius can't or won't do. She also talked about what he does know and what he can do. I could see the wheels turning when she talked about him. She was trying to figure out what to do next. (MR_3.7)

One of the most significant things learned through this inquiry is that CRT requires being a student of one's students, primarily through ongoing observation. This is not with a negative connotation of judgment or expectation that the students might do something wrong. Instead, it is the kind of observation that serves two main purposes. One purpose, as stated in my discussion of affirmation, is so the teacher can identify and incorporate things that will help students see themselves—to recognize and feel proud of what they know, what they love, and what makes them unique. The second purpose for carefully studying students is to glean knowledge and information to help better address their learning needs. Based on this ongoing assessment of students' academic and socio-emotional needs, a culturally responsive teacher demonstrates adaptability by exploring alternative ways to meet their needs.

Adaptability as Distinctive to CRT

The experiences described above were instrumental in helping us discern adaptability as an element of a structured, student-centered learning environment that is distinctive to CRT. Often teacher's editions or other instructional materials provide suggestions for "reaching all learners." It is understood that, when it comes to effectively engaging students with diverse backgrounds and learning needs, one size does not fit all. However, the range of fruitful alternatives is often limited, and teachers may find that the recommendations for differentiation are nothing more than variations on traditional approaches that have been proven unfruitful. We determined that, if best practice means making sure each student's instruction is the right size,

then adaptability means providing a tailored fit. In one of our very first meetings, Kathleen stated, "That's the value of teaching. The more you do it the better you get. This kind of work is just ongoing." (FN_1.28) Her perspective, accompanied by ongoing, student-focused improvements in her instructional practice, illustrates our conception of adaptability as it relates to CRT. Adaptability is directly linked to a third feature that is distinctive to CRT. That feature is achievement.

Achievement

In the context of this study, achievement means that students are able to demonstrate proficiency at levels that meet or exceed established expectations for learning. Achievement is preceded by a teacher having clear understanding of educational goals and objectives for her students, and it is fostered by her unwavering, high expectations for learning (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Learning goals and expectations for demonstration of knowledge are made explicit for students, so learning becomes purposeful and progress toward proficiency targets can be recognized and celebrated. Achievement is demonstrated through students' performance on standard measures of proficiency. However, achievement is encouraged and scaffolded in multiple, culturally meaningful ways before and between formal assessments (Becket, 2011; Brown-Jeffy, 2011; Gay, 2000). It involves students' appropriately and effectively applying knowledge to reason, to make decisions, and to solve problems. It also involves students approaching learning tasks with confidence, and knowing how to seek and utilize resources to facilitate learning. I will now share experiences from our inquiry that shaped our understanding of achievement as an essential element of CRT in an early childhood classroom.

Achievement from Expectations

Students' participation in the Pre-K program is voluntary, as they have not yet reached the age for compulsory school attendance in Florida. Nevertheless, it is Kathleen's intention and expectation that the students in her class will learn. The children always seem ready, as though they expect to be asked what they are thinking and learning at any time. There is a saying that is frequently used with them: "We're growing up, not down." Although there is a great sense of freedom and joy in her classroom, Kathleen does not baby her students or let them do whatever they want. On the contrary, she is consistent, prompt, and firm in addressing actions and attitudes that don't align with agreed upon expectations for working and learning together. In my journal, I reflected on the day I met the children and immediately sensed a classroom culture that had been established as a community of learners:

> When I met the children, what really stood out to me was how they didn't treat me like anyone special. As they filed into the room, coming back from lunch, several of them greeted me with, "Hi, Ms. Mary," as though they had known me all along. Some just smiled, and others didn't give me any acknowledgement besides a glance. All of them made their way to the front of the classroom and took their places, sitting cross-legged on the large, colorful rug. Intuitively, I knew I was supposed to take a seat on the floor with them. I was going to be a part of their learning community…nothing more, nothing less. That felt good. (MR_1.17)

Kathleen treats instructional time with her students like a precious commodity. Her manner is calm and congenial, but she conveys a sense of urgency that makes her adept at maximizing time, not simply managing time. Instruction during whole group time is fast-paced, and class processes are characterized by smooth transitions and connectedness between activities. I surmised that, "Her protectiveness of time is one way to remove barriers and excuses that might hinder or derail learning." (MJ_2.8) Her position was simply stated that, "We are here to get ready for Kindergarten, and I am here to make that happen." (KR_1.24)

The establishment and reinforcement of high expectations serves to provide everyone in the classroom with a common currency for social and academic success. However, the critical complement to setting high expectations is Kathleen's methods for scaffolding students to meet those expectations. Her teaching frequently includes modeling, even with tasks that involve students' choice. She has children practice by "acting out" what appropriate behaviors look and sound like. She also uses pictorial representations to which students may refer so that they may be self-directed in making decisions. She described this in one of her written reflections:

> During the year I model, this is what walking in the classroom looks like as I model walking around the room. They are not sure of what is expected unless they see, hear and feel what an "inside voice" or "quiet" really means. I point out what they're doing. They don't know they're doing it, unless they're told what an "inside voice" is. I point out acceptable behavior: "I like the way Wayne is looking right at me," "Bill is sitting crisscross, and he is showing me that he is ready to learn." I praise: "Nice job, Robert." I don't allow put downs. We are all getting ready for Kindergarten. I point it out again and again, and then they'll know. (MR_2.5)

Besides scaffolding students' learning of important social and behavioral skills to prepare for Kindergarten, Kathleen also facilitates their acquisition of critical academic readiness skills through periodic, quick games like "Letter or Number?" which is briefly described in the following excerpt:

Kathleen: We're gonna play our game. (She holds up a card that shows the number 9). Letter or number?

Kasha: Number…nine.

Kathleen: (to the class) Let's show it. (Students hold up fingers to show "nine".)

Kathleen: (Looks around at what students are showing) Four and five. (She holds up a card with the letter "Q.") Letter or number?

Drake: Q.

Kathleen: (to the class) What sound does the letter "q" make? (FN_3.4.14)

By conducting frequent, informal assessments such as this, she is able to monitor progress toward learning goals and provide ongoing practice for students. Confidence is fostered in students as expectations are made explicit and reinforced consistently. Moreover, as learning is recognized and celebrated, students are empowered to make choices that they know will help them keep moving them closer to meeting or exceeding expectations.

Achievement from Empowerment

In the context of this study, empowerment refers to the sense of efficacy and confidence that is observable in student's words and actions. Empowerment is demonstrated when students are self-directed and self-regulated in their learning and behavior. Their motivation to engage in classroom activities is intrinsic. Empowerment is first preceded by a teacher's ability to involve students in identifying purpose for learning and their role in the process of learning. Secondly, it is preceded by a teacher's ability to increasingly surrender responsibility to students. One clear example of this is in the dynamic, reciprocal teacher-student interactions in Kathleen's classroom. She positions herself as "a guide on the side", rather than "a sage on the stage." This is particularly evident in classroom discussions, which are authentic, conversational and strikingly filled with questions that are posed *by* the children. Kathleen reassures students that they could and should wonder and ask questions rather than just passively waiting to be told things. Moreover, many of the questions posed *to* children require them to reflect and think critically instead of simply giving the "right" answer. This kind of reciprocity challenges the conception of the teacher as the sole keeper of knowledge and the notion that one way of thinking or perceiving is superior to another. It empowers and encourages children to draw upon their experience and understanding to practice applying knowledge.

An example of this empowerment was when we were singing and dancing to, "How Many Ways Can You Carry a Beanbag?" The song starts out suggesting ways to carry a

beanbag, such as on your head or knee or foot. Then it invites children to think of other ways to carry the beanbag. The children did not simply look to us as the teachers to show them what to do. Although some children did mimic what other children did, many actually urged us to look at them and mimic what *they* were doing. We affirmed that they were capable of thinking, making choices, and leading just as the teachers were.

While reviewing my field notes, I was struck by part of the discussion in a class meeting during which it was necessary to review the agreed upon expectations for safe behavior:

Kathleen: Walking feet…This is so important. Even mommies say that at home…walk. Eric (pseudonym), do you remember why?

Eric: If you run, you might hurt yourself and you might bleed.

Kathleen: And what would you hurt yourself on in this room?

Eric: Pointy things…and wood. You always walk. You never run.

Kathleen: Where *would* you run, though, Eric?

Eric: Outside.

Kathleen: Outside at recess and PE.
(FN_1.21_14)

As I reflected on this, I noted the evidence of empowerment which occurred during that very brief exchange. Kathleen could have simply had the children recite or repeat the rules, perhaps with a reminder of externally imposed consequences for not following them. Instead there was scaffolding to draw upon background experience ("Even mommies say that at home…walk"), apply knowledge ("Where *would* you run?"), and think critically ("Do you remember *why*?"). As simple an incident as this seemed to be, it was one of the most poignant in helping me understand the applicability of CRT in an early childhood context. Kathleen's young students are absolutely given voice and choice within their classroom learning environment.

However, empowering students does not translate to chaos in the classroom, nor does it equate to loss of respect for the teacher. What it does, instead, is to nurture and establish a sense of efficacy in children that is fundamental to academic excellence.

Throughout this inquiry, we saw four-year-old children who were empowered to test or prove things they had heard or read about, but had not experienced. For example, one day Kathleen shared a read-aloud story about a white rabbit that jumped into different cans of red, yellow, and blue paint. Each time two different colors were mixed, the rabbit would emerge from a can drenched in a new color. The children could see from the illustrations that red and yellow made orange, that blue and yellow made green, and that blue and red made purple. After reading the book, Kathleen said, “I wanted to read this one because, today in Art, you’re going to be mixing colors, and you’ll be able to see if that’s true.” (FN_1.21) During discovery time, the children not only produced the colors they had seen in the book, but they also experimented with other color combinations. They felt empowered to experiment and create, which extended their learning far beyond just having listened to a story.

Students were also empowered in ways that allowed them understand how learning can extend beyond the classroom. Kathleen is masterful at helping children make connections between school experiences and children’s home lives. She often does this by assigning what she calls “VPK homework,” or voluntary prekindergarten homework. This typically entails things children could do with minimal support from an adult and with objects they could easily find and use. These homework assignments are not graded, but are simply meant to help children connect traditional academic content to their lives. She wants them to see how the things they learn about in class can be applied in other contexts, and vice versa. One example was to predict which of their toys might sink or float and then test them out to see. Another

instance was after the read-aloud story about a woman who made a quilt. Kathleen explained, "People love to make quilts, especially for children when they are babies." She then told them that their homework was to answer either "Where is my quilt?" or "Do I have a quilt?" They were given a choice, she expressed, because "Sometimes you just have a blanket." (FN_1.28)

Perhaps my greatest insight about how empowerment relates to achievement is that the primary objective of CRT is student learning, not merely keeping order and control through systems of rewards and punishments. In studies by Cinisomo (2009) and McLoyd (1998), it was noted that teachers with a low sense of efficacy tended to provide more limited learning experiences and less positive feedback. They perceived behavior management as the primary objective. When a classroom environment is solely teacher-directed, students are denied valuable opportunities to develop self-regulation and intrinsic motivation, both of which are related to learning and achievement. Kathleen is clear and consistent in communicating to students the behaviors and attitudes she knows will help them be successful in school and in life. However, simply having students comply with classroom and school rules is not sufficient for her. She also wants to ensure that her students learn how to learn. This requires an ongoing process of modeling, practicing, affirming, and weaning, through which she builds an increasing sense of autonomy and responsibility in her young students. I captured this notion in her written reflection: "I think when you show a child you're worthy, that's empowerment." (KR_1.28)

Achievement as Distinctive to CRT

The experiences described above were instrumental in helping us discern achievement as a feature of authentic, engaging teaching that is distinctive to CRT. A recent U.S. Department of Education study shows, for example, that 71% of white children entering kindergarten could recognize letters, compared with 57% of African American children (Anderson, et. al.).

This statistic hints at an inherent fallacy in defining curricula or teaching practices as “good” when underachievement persists for racially identifiable groups in classrooms, schools, or districts. Kathleen is aware of disparate achievement outcomes that are associated with race. She recognizes that students approach and enter into the learning journey from different starting points based on multiple factors, including their cultural experiences and perspectives. Yet, she refuses to accept failure as a given for certain students. This reflects a rejection of deficit-based thinking, which is characteristic of CRT (Howard, 2003).

If there is skepticism about whether high expectations and empowerment can be actualized in an early childhood setting with an impact on achievement, the Kindergarten Readiness data for Lakewood Elementary could provide some evidence. This data reflects participating children’s proficiency in areas which include cognitive, socio-behavioral, and physical skills, as an indicator of their preparation to be successful in Kindergarten. For school year 2012-2013, the students who participated in Lakewood’s Pre-K program had a 100% Kindergarten Readiness rate. Where CRT occurs, high academic achievement for all students is a possible outcome, even in an early childhood setting.

Defining Culturally Responsive Teaching in Our Study

Reflecting on the distinctive features of affirmation, adaptability, and achievement, our co-constructed definition of culturally responsive teaching in early childhood settings became:

> Culturally responsive teaching in an early childhood setting means recognizing the importance of including students’ cultural references and interacting with them in ways that emphasize the many things they know and can do so that they are motivated to learn more. It means understanding what young people need to be healthy and successful and caring enough to figure out how to provide it for them (KR_3.7.14 and MR_3.7.14).

Two essential ingredients of engagement in collaborative inquiry enabled us to discern this definition. First, the diverse backgrounds we brought to this research worked in concert with

each other to enable this definition to emerge. Second, our reading of the literature as a part of our collaborative inquiry pushed us to see the ways the various components of culturally responsive teaching that emerged for us had deeper meaning.

Our Backgrounds

The professional learning through this inquiry had great relevance because it was directed by us, many of the insights that shaped our understanding were gleaned right within the classroom context, and new knowledge could be applied immediately. This construction of knowledge together worked well because we each brought something unique to the inquiry -- different perspectives and experiences. These different perspectives and experiences served to push and balance our construction of knowledge about CRT in early childhood settings.

For example, perhaps because of my lack of experience with Pre-K, most of my questions and insights about CRT were provoked by things I saw or heard while I was with Kathleen and the children in the classroom. After each in-class experience, I would sit in my car and try to quickly write new wonderings that had been provoked by my observations and our interactions. Having time to ask Kathleen questions during our formal meetings was critical to my sense-making process. I desperately needed that practical, "in the moment" perspective to contextualize aspects of CRT I had encountered only through reading. I was very aware of my insufficient knowledge *in* practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) related to teaching very young children. Rather, what I brought to this collaborative inquiry was knowledge *for* practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) from the many readings I had done about CRT.

Unlike me, Kathleen was very familiar with the processes and practices of daily instruction with Pre-K children. Through many years of teaching experience, she had learned

how applying knowledge *in* practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) enabled her to make necessary adaptations to instructional approaches to better match the educational needs of her students. Consequently, her wonderings and new learning about CRT were prompted primarily by insights gleaned through our readings and from answering the many questions I had. As often happens in teaching, explaining things to me forced Kathleen to engage in critical analysis of and reflection upon her instruction. In the process of communicating her thinking, some of the specific attitudes and actions that were part of her pedagogical practice became more explicit to her.

In sum, dissecting the "how" and "why" of enacting culturally responsive teaching within a pre-kindergarten classroom that is more than 94% Black was critical to our ability to define CRT in this study. A strength I brought to this work was my knowledge *for* practice. A strength Kathleen brought to this work was her knowledge *in* practice. Together, through collaborative inquiry, we were able to generate knowledge *of* practice, defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) as occurring when "teachers make problematic their own knowledge and practice as well as the knowledge and practice of others" (p. 273). Teachers create this kind of knowledge as they focus on raising questions about and systematically studying their own classroom teaching. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) suggest that "what goes on inside the classroom is profoundly altered and ultimately transformed when teachers' frameworks for practice foreground the intellectual, social and cultural contexts of teaching" (p. 276). Such was the case in this inquiry.

The Literature

One important aspect of our generation of knowledge *of* practice in this study was carefully considering the literature as a part of our inquiry process. For example, as affirmation, adaptability, and achievement began to emerge as important features of culturally responsive teaching, we were perplexed by the ways what we were learning about CRT was any different

from ordinary good practice in early childhood settings. Our wonderment in this regard was greatly addressed by our consideration of Ladson-Billings' (1995) article, "But That's Just Good Teaching."

In this article, Ladson-Billings challenges the assertion that CRT is just good teaching by posing the provocative question of "why so little of it seems to be occurring in classrooms populated by African American students" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159). Reading this piece and Ladson-Billings' depictions of academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness within it helped us discern distinctive features of affirmation, adaptability and achievement that were much more than "just good teaching," and very particular to the actualization of CRT in the pre-kindergarten classroom within which our study took place.

In this chapter, I shared the ways Kathleen and I came to define CRT through engagement in collaborative inquiry as well as the insights we gained about the ways CRT can be actualized in early childhood settings. In the next and final chapter of this dissertation, I share the implications of our work together for others as well as for myself and my future practice.

CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand how early childhood educators construct meaning for culturally responsive teaching (CRT) through collaborative inquiry. In the final chapter of this dissertation, a summary of the study is presented, including an overview of each chapter in the dissertation. Following this summary, there is a discussion of the implications this study has for others as well as the implications it has had for my own personal practice and my ability to promote culturally responsive teaching within my district. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Dissertation

To complete the capstone project requirement for my professional practice doctoral degree in the Curriculum, Teaching, and Teacher Education Program area in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida, I engaged in a collaborative inquiry with a veteran teacher in her Pre-K classroom to better understand Culturally Responsive Teaching and how it might be enacted in early childhood settings. This dissertation provides a report of our work together to better understand and define CRT as it plays out with very young children.

Chapter 1 introduced the study including the research questions that guided our work together:

- How do early childhood educators define culturally responsive teaching through engaging in collaborative inquiry?
- What insights do early childhood educators gain into the ways culturally responsive teaching may be actualized in early childhood settings?

To create the landscape for this study, Chapter 2 reviewed the literature on Culturally Responsive Teaching. This review summarized characteristics and benefits of CRT that were common across the literature. Additionally, Chapter 2 presented a review of the literature related

to practitioner inquiry, specifically highlighting how the critical components of teacher reflection, collaboration, and a focus on improving instructional practice can serve as supports for actualization of CRT in classrooms.

Chapter 3 described the methodology used in this study, which was a form of practitioner research called collaborative inquiry. A description was provided of the school context in which the study was conducted, followed by a discussion of methods for participant selection, data collection and analysis. Chapter 3 concluded with a description of my background and perspectives as a researcher in this study.

Chapter 4 reported the findings of this study. These findings included the articulation of three distinctive features of CRT that emerged from an analysis of our data: affirmation, adaptability and achievement. Each of these features were defined and illustrated. Chapter 4 ended with an articulation of the definition of CRT we co-constructed through our work together and an analysis of the ways this definition emerged through the process of collaborative inquiry.

Implications for Others

Through reading the findings of this study as reported in Chapter 4, early childhood educators are provided with concrete examples of the ways culturally responsive teaching can play out with young children as well as the sense two educators made of CRT within this unique context. Much of the existing literature on CRT draws from studies situated in elementary, middle, or high school classrooms (Atwater, Freeman, Butler, & Draper-Morris, 2010; Brown, 2011; Shealey, 2007; Zewelanji & Cole, 2008). Yet, the need for effective instruction for diverse learners is no less essential in preschool. Children begin to develop a sense of identity that is related to their race and culture as early as two years old (Hirschfield, 2008; Katz, 2003). Moreover, achievement gaps that are correlated to race begin to emerge as early as kindergarten (Brown-Jeffy, 2011). Findings from this study may prove useful for early childhood educators

and others who want to understand how culturally responsive teaching could mitigate race-based disparities in achievement for young children.

In addition to learning about the ways CRT might look like in an early childhood setting, this study illuminates the nuanced differences between what good teaching is in general and what culturally responsive teaching is specifically. Hence, this study could be used a springboard for further discussions about the importance of CRT as a discrete construct separate from "good teaching" and the ways CRT can effectively engage, empower, and result in high achievement for diverse learners (Becket, 2011; Gay, 2000; Hyland, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1999). My inquiry partner in this study had years of experience successfully implementing elements of appropriate practice in early childhood classrooms. Yet, her knowledge of practice was further deepened while exploring and defining CRT as a discrete construct. As CRT is presented as more than "just good teaching" in this study, the findings of this study might serve to inspire other educators to deeply explore for themselves the personal meeting CRT might hold for their practice.

Implications for My Own Practice

Deeply exploring the personal meaning CRT holds for my own practice was also an outcome of this study. The most important part of my work role is to advocate, facilitate, and evaluate effective practices for increasing achievement of economically and educationally disadvantaged students. As disclosed in the discussion of my background and perspectives, I believe my impact as an instructional leader depends largely on my ability to engage with other educators in meaningful, collegial professional learning. This study afforded me the opportunity to develop new knowledge in and of practice, which I have already been able to apply by developing a professional learning component about Culturally Responsive Teaching. This component, which I presented to teachers and school leaders over two days during the summer of

2014, was designed based on essential ingredients that guided my learning through this collaborative inquiry. Specifically, the professional learning component involved observing and analyzing CRT in practice, constructing meaning for CRT through collegial discussion, reading relevant literature on CRT, and reflecting on learning through writing.

Observing CRT in Practice

Observation of daily instruction in the classroom was central to my learning in this study. I wanted to provide the valuable experience of observing CRT in practice for participants in the component. In order to do this, I collaborated with a colleague to create videotapes of teachers working in classrooms with diverse student populations. Using video segments which highlight specific evidences of CRT, I guided participants through a process of taking notes, analyzing data, and identifying patterns.

Constructing Meaning for CRT

After identifying patterns observed from segments of instruction, participants were not simply told what CRT means. Instead, they worked in small groups to share patterns that were identified and construct a definition for CRT based on these patterns. Definitions generated by each small group were shared with the larger group and common themes or patterns were noted.

Learning from the Literature

In order to scaffold collegial discussions that are grounded in research, as well as experiential knowledge of participants, selected articles on CRT were used to provide a common theoretical base. Readings included seminal articles by Ladson-Billings (1995), Howard (2003), and Brown-Jeffy & Cooper (2011). A jigsaw structure was used, in which different sections of articles were assigned to different readers. Then key ideas from each section were shared with others. Using the literature, I facilitated the process of uncovering distinctive details of CRT that may not be immediately discernable from "just good teaching," such as affirmation, adaptability,

and achievement. Distinctive features of CRT were noted as they emerged. Based on the readings, participants were invited to discuss and revise their earlier definitions of CRT.

Reflecting On Learning

As a concluding activity, participants in the professional learning component provided written responses to three reflective prompts. These are the same reflective prompts that were utilized in this study. They are:

- At this moment, I would personally define CRT as…
- New insights I gained about CRT today are…
- Something related to CRT I am wondering about is…

Participants were encouraged to share their insights about CRT with others and to pursue answers to their wonderings as part of their ongoing professional learning.

Recommendations for Further Research

Much of the existing literature on CRT is based on studies *of* teachers through observations, interviews, and surveys. In contrast, this study was conducted *with* and *by* teachers. The power of engaging in professional learning that has personal relevance and significance cannot be overstated. Therefore, one recommendation for further research is additional inquiry conducted by teachers, guided by their own wonderings about CRT, and within their own unique classroom contexts. The likelihood of teachers internalizing and actualizing CRT is greater when new knowledge and skills can be readily implemented to enhance learning through improved practice.

Initially, this study was to be structured within a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Another consideration for further research would be to examine CRT through practitioner inquiry, within a PLC consisting of three to five early childhood educators who have a shared passion for CRT and its potential to improve student learning. In this study, knowledge and understanding of CRT were enhanced through the collaborative inquiry of two educators.

Knowledge and application of CRT could be supported to an even greater degree through professional collaboration within a larger team.

A final recommendation for further research is to apply the methodology used in this study to examine CRT in classrooms with older children. Insightful perspectives could be provided by teachers who are responsible to prepare students for annual standardized assessments of learning. As these educators work to construct meaning for CRT in their context, it would be interesting to note what distinctive features of CRT emerge and how those features might relate to affirmation, adaptability, and achievement.

This study was designed to document the experience of early childhood educators as they examined CRT in their context. A structure of collaborative inquiry supported critical, collegial discussion and deep reflection that was guided by relevant literature. This study provided evidence that CRT can be actualized in an early childhood setting, and distinctive elements of CRT—affirmation, adaptability, and achievement—emerged in the process. Findings from this study raise the question of how classroom teachers and other practitioners may be supported in their understanding and implementation of CRT. My commitment is to continually grow in my own knowledge so I can effectively support CRT as a means to close achievement gaps and improve educational outcomes for diverse learners, particularly Black students, in my school district. This study served as the beginning to greatly expanded work to help all educators, no matter what their context, understand the ways CRT can be personally meaningful to them and to their students. As a practitioner scholar, this has become my mission, and I will continue to work to achieve this goal.

APPENDIX
INFORMED CONSENT

Dear ________________________:

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida. As part of my capstone project, I will be offering a professional development experience about Culturally Responsive Teaching for select Title I schools, and using the process of practitioner inquiry to document what we learn about Culturally Responsive Teaching through this professional development endeavor. I am inviting you to participate in this inquiry because you have been identified as an educator with an interest in culturally responsive teaching and/or professional learning community work.

Participants will be asked to engage in a professional learning community (PLC), which will meet a total of 8 times between October 2013 and February 2014. Each PLC meeting will take place for 90 minutes after the regular school day, and will consist of readings, activities, and/or discussions about Culturally Responsive Teaching.. The schedule of PLC meetings is enclosed with this letter. PLC meetings will be audiotaped. Only I will have access to the tapes, and any personal identifiers will be removed as I take field notes from the recordings. The tape will then be erased. You will also be asked to provide written responses to reflective prompts at the end of each PLC meeting. Your identity will be kept confidential.

As a participant in the PLC, you will earn 10 component points toward recertification. There are no anticipated risks. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the PLC at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at 893-2988. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant rights may be directed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611; (352) 392-0433.

Please sign and return this copy of the letter in the enclosed envelope. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give me permission to report contributions you make to discussions during our PLC meetings as well as written reflections produced at the end of each meeting anonymously in the final manuscript to be submitted to my capstone project committee as part of the requirements for my program completion.

Mary R. Conage

____

I have read the procedure described above for participation in the PLC: Making Sense of Culturally Responsive Teaching. I voluntarily agree to participate in the PLC and I have received a copy of this description.

______________________________ ___________
Signature of participant Date

PLC Meeting Dates and Times

Tuesday, October 15th
Tuesday, October 29th
Tuesday, November 12th
Tuesday, December 3rd
Tuesday, January 7th
Tuesday, January 21st
Tuesday, February 11th
Tuesday, February 25th

All PLC meetings will be held from 3:30-5:00 at the Title I Center. The address is 2499 25th Street South- St. Petersburg, Florida.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mary R. Conage graduated from Eckerd College in 1986 with her bachelor's degree in elementary education. She graduated from the University of South Florida in 2002, earning her master's degree in elementary education, with an emphasis in mathematics and science. She also completed certification in Educational Leadership at the University of Florida in 2006. She received her Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Florida in the fall of 2014. Mary began her teaching career at Northwest Elementary in St. Petersburg, Florida in 1987. She taught first and second grade for thirteen years. She served in various teacher leadership roles, including curriculum representative and demonstration teacher. After earning her master's degree, Mary accepted a position as a math staff developer for Title I schools. One year later, she was appointed by the superintendent as elementary mathematics supervisor. After serving in that role for three years, she was appointed as director of the Title I program, a position she currently holds. Mary's research interests are culturally responsive teaching, early childhood education, and job-embedded professional learning. Mary resides in her hometown, St. Petersburg, Florida.