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### Exploring Culturally Responsive Teaching and Student-Created Videos in an At-Risk Middle School Classroom

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# Exploring Culturally Responsive Teaching and Student-Created Videos in an At-Risk Middle School Classroom

## **Cover Page Footnote**

We thank the teacher and his students who gave us entree into their classroom. Thank you!

## Exploring Culturally Responsive Teaching and Student-Created Videos in an At-risk Middle School Classroom

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### Abstract

As the United States public school classrooms encounter notable shifts in student demographics and increased access to technology, teachers face the dual challenges of cultural and digital differences as they attempt to build relationships with students and develop responsive and relevant instruction. Framed by culturally responsive teaching (CRT), this qualitative study explored how one middle school teacher and his students in two summer school English classes interacted with and responded to novel technology-based instructional approach that sought to connect the students' lives outside of school to the classroom. The findings suggest that involving the students within this culturally responsive teaching approach using student-created videos informs the contribution of both the teacher and the students for connecting home and school contexts with a CRT framework.

### INTRODUCTION

As public school student demographics become more diverse (Taie & Goldring, 2017), classroom experiences can stand in direct contrast to students' lives outside of school. Emdin (2016) explains that "urban youth are expected to leave their day-to-day experiences and emotions at the door and assimilate into the culture of schools" (p. 25). This cultural disconnection between home and school contexts attributes to academic achievement difficulties, boredom, and increased dropout rates among adolescents (Larson & Richards, 1991).

In addition to cultural disconnections, there are also technological disconnections between home and school. A 2015 survey noted that tweens (ages 8-12) reported spending an average of 4.6 hours daily on their screens, and teens (ages 13-18) reported their daily screen time on average as 6.7 hours with both tweens and teens reporting that more than 40% of this time was spent on mobile devices (Rideout, 2015). A recent consumer survey of over 6,100 teens noted that three out of four teens reported owning an iPhone with Snapchat being the social media platform of choice (Piper Jaffray, 2017). Despite the ubiquity of mobile technology, its use in the classroom has been more a matter of contentious discourse than broad adoption (Cochrane, 2014). A recent report noted that over 70% of all content and work within public schools is paper rather than digital (Harold, 2018). The present changing demographic and technological landscape is positioned to widen

the gap between home and school, requiring the exploration of novel approaches to address this expanding chasm between diverse teens and middle school teachers.

Despite the dramatic increase of teen use of mobile technology (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortei, & Gasser, 2013), the identified need for strengthening the academic attainment of diverse student populations at the middle school level (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007), and the plethora of research noting the efficacy of connecting students' home and school contexts to enhance academic success (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), there is scant work that explores how the teens' mobile technology use outside of school can be leveraged by the middle school teacher to provide the opportunity for students to bring their lived experiences into the classroom. Therefore, this study embraces the assumption that mobile device video recording of students' lives (much like a snapchat story) can be a powerfully effective tool within the culturally responsive pursuit of relevance in middle school classroom instruction.

Therefore, in this study we explored how one teacher and his at-risk summer school students interacted with and responded to student-created iPod videos using familiar mobile devices, iPods, to bring students' lived experiences into the classroom. It was anticipated that this strategy could serve as a tool for a culturally responsive teacher aiming to build relationships and relevance with his students.

## Theoretical Framework

As recognized throughout the literature, the transformation of the student population, both culturally and digitally, is introducing an ever-widening gap between teachers, classroom instruction, and students (Gay, 2010; González et al., 2005; Henderson, 2011). For a number of years, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a) has been noted as an efficacious framework for informing and addressing the learning challenges provoked by the gap between the students' home and school contexts.

CRT demonstrates the importance of recognizing, valuing, and utilizing the languages and cultural identities shaped by students' families and communities in classroom instruction (Banks, 1999; Gay, 2010; González et al., 2005). Focusing on the classroom setting and the teacher's efforts, Villegas and Lucas (2002a) define CRT as the act of engaging students in the construction of knowledge and building on students' personal and cultural strengths. According to Villegas and Lucas (2002a) this process involves "helping students access prior knowledge, and build on the students' interests and linguistic resources, use examples from their lives, and create different paths to learning by using varied instructional activities" (p. 110).

This CRT framework requires teachers to adopt a sociocultural consciousness, which allows them to understand "that people's ways of thinking, behaving, and being are deeply influenced by such factors as race/ethnicity, social class, and language" (Villegas & Lucas, 2002b, p. 22). This approach requires gaining an affirming attitude toward students from diverse backgrounds. This means that teachers not only understand differences, but they celebrate, value, build upon, and expand those experiences through their interactions with the students in class.

Therefore, CRT strategies are positioned to create relevant and effective learning encounters for ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students. Gay (2010) posited that to be culturally responsive means to incorporate students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and learning styles into classroom instruction so student strengths can be celebrated and expanded further through the learning process. In other words, when teachers

use student experiences in the classroom for the basis of instruction, students' lives are validated and they become empowered.

Further, CRT suggests that when teachers know their students' interests, hobbies, favorite activities, and strengths, they can systematically tie the child's interests, concerns, and strengths into their teaching, thereby enhancing student motivation to learn (Mahatmya, Lohman, Brown, & Conway-Turner, 2016; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). Moreover, in a multimodal environment, culturally responsive teachers' acknowledgement of students' home digital literacy and their use of these skills to incorporate and expand that knowledge in the classroom are essential.

## Literature Review

When scholars explore CRT within the rapidly changing, demographically and technologically transformed context of the public school classroom, they focus on four distinct areas of research. The existing research related to this study focuses on CRT as it relates to teacher-student communication and digital identity within the middle school context.

### Teacher-Adolescent Student Communication

When considering teacher-adolescent student relationships within the CRT framework, researchers have studied how communication can enhance relationships in the classroom. Two factors that researchers have identified as building relationships between adolescent students and teachers include a teacher's approach to revoicing students' understanding and a teacher's use of self-disclosure of a sharing of information from their personal lives.

O'Connor and Michaels (1993; 1996) have defined revoicing as a linguistic structure of reported speech that is characterized by a verbatim or modified repetition of others' utterances to align oneself in relation to the students' current understanding. In other words, revoicing is when teachers use the same or similar words as the adolescent students to describe the content of the students' accounts. Revoicing can be used to open up opportunities for mutual understanding (Shein, 2012). It can also be used to rephrase or translate students' responses into specific academic terms. For example, a teacher can use some of the student's

words, but reframe them so they match the conceptual understanding that the teacher intends for the students to learn. When teachers revoice students' formulations of meaning, they show students that their thoughts and meaning-making are valuable.

Researchers have also noted that teachers can establish trusting relationships with students through self-disclosure, which is defined as the teacher sharing personal and professional information about him- or herself in a believable way (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Studies reveal that when teachers appropriately self-disclose their own personal information, experiences, and perspectives, they help to build a positive learning community that can enhance students' classroom participation (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Rouse & Bradley, 1989). Rouse and Bradley's (1989) study, conducted in a rural middle school, found that teacher self-disclosure of personal stories relating to classroom content was very effective in creating an atmosphere conducive to personally relevant discussion with students. Further, they found that teacher self-disclosure created a warm sense of natural sharing because students revealed themselves in ways that fostered mutual understanding and bonding with their teacher (Rouse & Bradley, 1989).

Along these same lines, Goldstein and Benassi (1994) found that teacher self-disclosure led to more frequent student participation. Self-disclosure from one person, which in turn elicits self-disclosure from another, is called the reciprocity effect (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Prior studies have shown that when teachers self-disclose in a believable way, adolescent students are more likely to also open up and self-disclose parts of their own lives. Thus, these studies suggest that teacher self-disclosure can lead to the reciprocity effect, where students feel safe and welcomed to share about their own lives in the classroom.

In sum, research has found that when teachers self-disclose in their classrooms, they model the importance of bringing personal lives into the classroom and therefore facilitate a direct connection between students' lives outside of school and inside the classroom contexts.

### **Adolescent Digital Identity**

When considering CRT within the contemporary multicultural and digital context, one must

consider the divide that exists between how adolescent students communicate and explore their identities at home using technology versus the traditional communication practices typically used in the classroom. With recent advances in technology, there is a notable divide between older teachers who did not grow up with technology and younger students, who have had access to technology throughout their lifetimes (Bauleke & Herrmann, 2010; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Palfrey and Glasser (2008) refer to modern-day adolescents as "digital natives."

Jones and Fox (2009) conducted a study of the Internet use of various generations. The study found that approximately 93% of all children surveyed aged 12-17 used the Internet (Jones & Fox, 2009). A 2015 survey noted that tweens (ages 8-12) reported spending an average of 4.6 hours daily on their screens, and teens (ages 13-18) reported their daily screen time on average as 6.7 hours with both tweens and teens reporting that more than 40% of this time was spent on mobile devices (Rideout, 2015).

Studies show that the digital environment in which adolescents participate offers an extension of their physical world (Palfrey & Glasser, 2008). In other words, though students have a personal identity in the physical world, researchers have found that numerous aspects of adolescents' identities are developing simultaneously, and their physical world identity is supported by the lives they lead in digitally mediated ways (Alvermann, Marshall, Mclean, Huddleston, & Joaquin, 2012; Palfrey & Glasser, 2008). More and more, young people are using digital outlets like Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat to share personal information and to create content that expresses their identity to their friends, family, and the world (Davis, 2013; Palfrey & Glasser, 2008; Piper Jaffray, 2017). Using digital literacies in the classroom provides a space for students to explore and examine their identities within a familiar mode (Alvermann et al., 2012; Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Recent research surveying middle school students also noted an overwhelming positive response (80%; N = 451) to the potential of utilizing mobile devices in their school work (Bartholomew & Reeve, 2018). In this research middle school students noted that they readily utilized mobile devices for sharing information and photos with friends. Such device usage aligns with the developmental needs for a sense of belonging and emotional connectedness of this age group. Since digital

media informs the many facets of student identities, and adolescent identity and learning are indistinguishably connected (Gay, 2010), teachers who aspire to be relevant and build relationships with their adolescent students must seek to address not only the students' home identities, but also their digital identities, within classroom instruction.

In sum, the research suggests that aiming to be culturally responsive in their increasingly diverse adolescent classrooms, middle school teachers must open a space in the classroom to incorporate students' preferred modes of communication so their physical and digital identities can emerge. Therefore, this study, embracing the assumption that mobile device recording of students' lives can be a powerfully effective tool within the culturally responsive pursuit of relevance in middle school classroom instruction, introduces a "Snapchat-esque" strategy of student-created videos.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to explore how middle school students and their teacher interacted with a novel technology-based approach, specifically using iPods to create videos of their lives outside of school, within the culturally responsive pedagogical pursuit of relationship and relevance in the classroom. Given the nature of this study as continuous discovery for the purpose of developing new concepts from the data within one setting, an exploratory case study design was adopted (Davies, 2011; Streb, 2012). This study explored the interactions and meaning-making of participants within one diverse middle school classroom through semi-structured interviews with the teacher, student-created iPod videos with narration, and classroom observations. This study addressed the following questions: (a) How do the teacher and students respond to the multimodal technology strategy of student-created videos of their home context? and (b) How do the students' and teacher's interactions with and around the multimodal strategy inform culturally responsive teaching within the increasingly diverse and technologically connected classroom?

## **The Context and Participants**

The middle school in which this study took place was located in a large urban/suburban community composed of a variety of ethnicities

and socioeconomic statuses with an increasing multiethnic, foreign born, and African American population. Due to the participating middle school teacher's interest in pursuing culturally responsive teaching with his two ethnically diverse eighth grade summer school English Language Arts classes, these classes were selected as the context for this study.

The summer school classes were obligatory for all eighth grade students in the district who had failed two English courses during the previous 2012-2013 school year. Each of the classes was 135 minutes long, with one 5-minute break, and met Monday through Thursday over 8 weeks. The first class met early in the morning with 13 students, 10 of whom participated in this study. The second class met in the late morning with 8 students, all of whom participated in this study. The curriculum for both summer school English Language Arts classes was designed to enhance literacy skills and focused study on using mentor texts and students' personal narratives as the basis for writing development.

The 21 students attending the two summer school English classes were invited to participate in the study. Each student was enrolled full time in one of the two summer school English classes. Of these 21, 18 students (15 males, 3 females) consented to participate in this study. The three students who did not participate in the study were excluded because they did not return their parental consent forms. Of these 18 students, seven self-identified as White, five self-identified as Multiethnic, four self-identified as African American, and two self-identified as Hispanic, and all qualified for free or reduced lunch. These students were enrolled as middle school students requiring additional Language Arts work in Grade 8 before they would be eligible to enter high school. Each brought into this classroom uniquely personal stories that included past challenging school experiences. These included a male African American student who had been kept in middle school for several years beyond what is typically expected, a female student who had arrived from Puerto Rico in the past year and was navigating a new school and new academic language while her home language was Spanish, and a male multiethnic student who expressed both reluctance to be in summer school and a desire to get to high school while working odd jobs. All reported familiarity with the mobile devices (iPods) that were used within this study. Further, they reported having used mobile devices to communicate with family

and friends outside of school.

Unlike the participating students, the teacher of these classes, Mr. Simms (pseudonym) was a Korean male who moved to the US at age four when he was adopted by a White couple living in a suburban area on the east coast. Mr. Simms held a master's degree in Teaching and Curriculum, had eight years of experience in teaching middle school English, and was a fellow of the Freedom Writers Foundation. His stated goal for his students during this eight-week summer school class was to "interrupt their identity formation" so they could begin to "see themselves as writers" through composing their own personal narratives.

### Data Collection

To begin, data were collected that provided for a description of the instructional context in which the teacher and students were interacting. During the first week, Mr. Simms was interviewed after class in a relaxed setting by the researchers. This 1-hour semi-structured interview (Ayres, 2012) using prompts such as "describe your students," sought to garner his perceptions of his relationships with the students, his knowledge of the students, and how he approached teaching his culturally diverse, at-risk middle school students.

Also, during the first week the researchers observed in his classroom for at least an hour at a time for several days at varying times of the class session, taking field notes that described the context as well as on how and when Mr. Simms and the students interacted on information related to their lives outside of the classroom and the types of responses invoked. For example, if a student spoke of something related to a context outside of school, the researchers noted the teacher's responses and the subsequent interaction.

As narration of photography has been found to be particularly efficacious in school settings for exposing and exploring students' lives (Allen, 2012; Dollinger & Dollinger, 1997; Strickland, 2012), student-created iPod videos of their lives outside of school were sought. During the second week of the summer school session, researchers gave the students iPods that were packaged within a secure bag containing a USB cord and the iPod. All were coded with a barcode for identification. Furthermore, for safety reasons and IRB compliance, each iPod

was programmed to only allow limited access to the Internet. Each bag was recorded with the student's name, and a brief instruction sheet was handed out which requested each student to capture a four-minute video including photos, narration, and video clips that would show the teacher what his or her life was like outside of school.

First, the students' familiarity with the device, as well as their approach to using such a mobile device in school, were explored by asking them during one class session to create a one- to two-minute narrative of their life outside of school. Each created a narrative, averaging one minute, of their lives outside of school. Second, students were instructed by the researchers to take the iPods home and over one night capture their lives outside of school, to share with their teacher. At the end of that school day, participating students took the iPods home with the instruction to capture videos, photos, and narration of their lives outside of the classroom to be shown to their teacher. Students returned their iPods the following school day, and their videos were uploaded onto the web using the specialized and secure software, VoiceThread.

Over the subsequent weekend, the student-created videos were made available to the teacher using VoiceThread. He was asked by the researchers to view each video and interact with what he was seeing. Following this request, he viewed all of the student-created videos and provided oral or typed comments as he watched each one. The student videos and teacher comments were transcribed verbatim.

During the remaining six weeks of the summer school session, the two researchers observed teacher-student whole group discussion as well as conversations between teachers and students in the classroom multiple times a week for at least one hour, noting instances where any participating student referenced his or her context outside of the classroom. During each observation the following interaction characteristics were noted: the talker initiating the interaction (teacher or student), whether out-of-school context was mentioned, whose context was mentioned (teacher's or student's), and the description of the context.

To track the evolution of culturally responsive understandings between the teacher and students throughout the course of the summer school session, the teacher was also interviewed

after class on the last day of the session using the same interview prompts used in the interview the first week. This one-hour post-interview also took place in the early afternoon in a relaxed setting.

### **Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

The resulting data were systematically analyzed in three coding cycles (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, the teacher's pre- and post-semi-structured interviews, student-created iPod videos with the teacher interactions, and classroom observation field notes were read and re-read by the two researchers. Individually, the researchers analyzed the transcripts of the videos and the teacher interviews using open coding in which patterns, key words, and phrases were coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers met frequently to compare coding to ensure similar patterns were interpreted. Next, these coded phrases and key words were organized into categories, which resulted in themes that were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Subsequently, the findings were organized by the research questions.

Throughout this process, the data were triangulated with the field notes, interviews, observation records, and researcher reflections. The observation field notes met strong inter-rater reliability ( $r = .95$ ) that was calculated by matching the content of the interaction noted to be connecting with a context outside of school, who initiated this topic, and whether or not the topic was incorporated into the subsequent lesson, and if so, how. In addition, member checking was also employed for trustworthiness necessary in qualitative work (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers met frequently with students and the teacher to clarify and check all recorded understandings throughout the data collection period.

### **Findings**

Informed by culturally responsive teaching, which promotes intentionally valuing students' contexts within instruction, three themes emerged. First, the teacher's and students' intentions to connect home and school contexts was revealed. Second, relationships were revealed. Third, relevance was defined. Furthermore, when the findings were interrogated by the research questions, the complex process of culturally responsive teaching, which included students' voices and

knowledge, emerged. The research questions were:

- (a) How do the teacher and students respond to the multimodal technology strategy of student-created videos of their home context? and
- (b) How do the students' and teacher's interactions with and around the multimodal strategy inform culturally responsive teaching in the increasingly diverse and technologically connected classroom?

### **Teacher's Intention to Connect with Students**

This study took place within a classroom where the teacher had a great desire to connect with his students. The data revealed that he was intentional in his practices to reveal how he related to the personal lives of his students so that he could begin to show students how their lives were valuable to classroom learning. The intentional desire to make meaningful connections with students was noted primarily in the teacher's post-interview. The teacher stated, "That was what it was all about: to try to get them to use their personal stories, the real life stories that they lived, as a pivot point for academic rigor and everything else" (Personal Interview 1). When the teacher discussed his ideas of relationship building in the classroom, he indicated, "I try to be interesting and interested. So I'll tell the anecdotes about my dad and my mom. I'll tell stories about growing up, or I'll tell stories about classroom experiences. [Stories] hold our attention, get our attention and it's very human, natural." This intention to connect with students framed how the teacher responded to students' personal accounts in their iPod videos and in classroom discourse.

### **Students' Intentions to Connect with the Teacher**

The participating students, although voicing reluctance at first to engage in the mission of creating a video of their lives outside of school, took the iPods home, and overnight 15 of the 18 students produced 5-10-minute videos that included views of their homes, neighborhoods, work settings, and their relationships. To illustrate the array of content, three videos are described here.



One male African American student shared what his typical afternoon might be like. His video showed him out and about in his neighborhood. He rode the bus to the grocery store for breakfast foods, and he narrated his connections to various places as the bus passed by. Then, he rode to go visit his grandmother. He also shared parts of his bike ride through his neighborhood, showing and narrating relevant experiences at his church, some of his favorite restaurants, and even the layout of his house. His video concluded with a quick look at the yardwork he recently helped his dad out with and a description, “I just cut the grass today. A little plant, a little tree, flowers. I do this up myself.”

A Hispanic male student shared how his life was “a little different than as you see.” He shared how he enjoys walking around his neighborhood – especially with his dog, who was currently sleeping. He showed his guitar and accessories and shared that he is about to start lessons. He took his audience on a tour of his bedroom to see his television, video games, Pokemon cards, and hats and talked about the significance of each.

A multiethnic female recorded time with her friends on the front porch and lawn of her family’s home. Each friend took turns interviewing the others with questions like, “What do you like to do during your free time?” She and her friends shared about things like going to the mall and enjoying cheerleading practice. They also shared the different states in which they have lived and the chores for which they are responsible at home. They also were recorded leading others in a cheer as cheerleaders do. Further, they saw her mother walk by and greeted her.

### Relationships Revealed

The relational interactions seen in the classroom, in the students’ multimodal narratives, and in the teacher’s interactions with the students’ videos included the students’ personal relationships and the teacher’s personal relationships (Table 1). As CRT, evidenced between teachers and diverse adolescent students, is the focal point of this study, the ethnicities of the students are indicated within these findings.

**Students’ relationships.** In the student-created iPod videos, personal relationships were frequently highlighted and discussed. In 13 student-created iPod videos,

students focused on their personal relationships with immediate and extended family and friends (see Table 1). Most showed and described their relationships with immediate family, for example, mother, father, sister, and brother. Some students mentioned or described their relationships with extended family members such as grandmother, grandfather, aunt, cousin, uncle, and sister’s husband. Four students mentioned friends and described them with the words, “hang out,” “cool,” “talk on the phone,” and “best friend.” Most students mentioned or described family members who lived with them or with whom they regularly interacted. Some expressed their emotions when talking about family members using the adjectives “love,” and “like.” For example, one White male student said, “I love my mom and my sister. They’re awesome.”

Table 1

#### *Relationships Portrayed by Students and Teacher*

Student Relationships (iPod videos)	Teacher Relationships (VoiceThread) “That reminds me of . . .”
Mom	Mother in Korea
Dad	Dad
Sister	Sister
brother	Brothers
Grandma	Baba (grandma)
Grandpa	
Sister’s husband	
Nephew	
Friend	Friends
Like	Reminds me
Love	Growing up
Work	
Church	Church
Neighborhood	Neighborhood
Hang out	Secret spot
Dogs/ Cats	Boots (cat from childhood)
	Wife
	Kids
	Adoption

As students showed and talked about their relationships, they often narrated details about their family lives and included descriptions of the activities in which they were involved outside of school. Some described what their parents did

for work. For example, an African American male stated, “This church is where my dad works. He works as the deacon.” Other students described their siblings’ hobbies. For example, a Hispanic male said, “And this is my sister’s husband’s car. Building this one right now. It’s coming along.” Some talked about the activities they do with their family or friends. For example, a White female talked about her baby brother: “And there’s Blaze. He’s crying. I’m going to babysit.” A Multiethnic female talked about “hanging out with my brothers and my friends.”

Students also showed and talked about the objects or activities that reminded them of their extended family. One White male showed a photo of his family at Disney World describing that family memory. Another White male described, “This is my grandfather’s boat. Symbolizes him [sic] because when we go up [to visit], we race down stuff with it.”

In their videos, all of the students situated their relationships within their personal out-of-school contexts. Fourteen of the students captured videos and described their relationships within the private context of their homes. These included students’ images, videos, and narrations of the living spaces in their homes, bedrooms, outdoor property, and favorite hang-out spots at home. Two of the students filmed and described their relationships in the context of their community. For example, one African American male videotaped himself riding the public bus and his bike around his community. He narrated what a typical afternoon in his life was like, which included spending time with his grandmother.

**Teacher’s relationships.** The teacher also portrayed his relationships throughout his interactions. Both in the classroom instruction and when interacting with the students’ videos, the teacher talked about his own relationships with his immediate and extended family. He typically talked about his relationships through personal stories. He provided details about his birth parents in Korea and his adoptive American parents. He told stories about his siblings, his wife, children, and friends. He often used activities or experiences to describe his relationships with immediate and extended family. For example, in one classroom conversation, the teacher described his upbringing by describing his adoption.

When interacting with the students’ narratives, he also frequently used phrases like “reminds me,” or “growing up,” to preface his stories, which he connected to the relationships portrayed by the students. When he talked about his relationships with students, he typically used their experiences or the classroom discussion as a springboard leading to his own relationship stories. For example, when a multiethnic male student showed an image of his weight bench, the teacher responded with, “You remind me of my brother, who always liked working out and has a good sense of humor.” In another example, a White male showed and described his cat, named Rip, and the teacher responded, “We used to have a cat named Boots when I first came to my American family with my sister from Korea, and this cat was a crazy cat.”

### Relevance Defined

How the students’ home contexts were engaged within the classroom and with the teacher exposed how the students and the teacher defined relevance. The students revealed aspects of their lives outside of the classroom that they found to be relevant enough to share with their teacher. The students showed and talked about the hobbies they enjoy, the activities they participate in, their personal collections and favorite material objects, and the places they enjoy going. The teacher revealed his pursuit of relevance with the students through his revoicing what the students chose to share.

**Students’ relevance.** Irrespective of race, ethnicity, and home circumstances, the teacher-student interactions revealed distinctive definitions of relevance, or the connecting of school content to their lives outside of school. Within their first video created in the classroom, the students’ descriptions of their lives outside of school were replete with listing of objects and activities at home – the highlights of their lives. These descriptions were qualified across all students by stating that they did not see the value of the teacher knowing about their home life and that the teacher would “probably not understand.”

The observation data further revealed the students rarely initiated a contribution to class discussions that included relationships or events from their lives outside of school. Any connection to their lives outside of school was

rare and minimally expressed. On the rare occasions when the students brought their outside of school lives into the class discussion, they listed an event or object with little, if any, elaboration, clearly mimicking their in-class videos. For example, in a class discussion about rules in the classroom and in society, the topic of bullying came up. One White female briefly stated, “Bullying is a problem in society.” When the teacher asked for some examples of bullying, students merely listed some responses: “blackmailing,” “teasing,” and “effects cause suicide.” They did not elaborate and were not asked to.

**Teacher’s relevance.** For Mr. Simms, however, relevance was noted in a different way from his students. The teacher’s intention to build relevance within his responses to the Table 2

### *Teacher’s Revoicing for Relevance*

Participant	Student	Teacher’s Response
African American male student	This church is where my dad works. He gives—well, he works as the deacon. And we don’t really go to church that much. I play for the basketball team. I tried to get a job there cleaning it up... but they said no, and pay them more.	Oh my gosh, I know exactly where you are. <i>I go to church right down the road from where your dad serves as the deacon. . . .</i> And it’s funny, that very path, that sidewalk you’re on, I’ve run several times with some friends of mine.
White male student	And that’s a tree my dad planted. Yeah. Dad’s actually deceased, so that’s not the best topic to talk about.	Well, it’s great to see the front yard . . . and the tree that . . . your dad planted. I know you mentioned the other day that your dad had died when you were four. <i>So I immediately made a connection with you because my own mother in Korea had died</i> when I was four.
White female student	I like to dye my hair different hair colors. Being different makes me happy.	And the <i>whole hair dying thing</i> ; I can certainly relate. When I was in high school I would <i>dye my hair</i> different colors. <i>I guess I was working through some things. So I guess I had a bronze color, copper color. What else did I have?</i>
African American male student	I am a big wrestling fan. I really like to watch wrestling. I like to play wrestling video games.	I’m glad you shared this one, because <i>it reminds me of my own growing up</i> . For some bizarre reason, <i>my dad and I, when we’d get up on Sunday before church, and we’d be waiting for mom to get ready and everything, he’d have on the TV, and invariably, it’d be WWF, or something like that. . . . Looks like we have something in common.</i>

students’ videos and instruction revealed a pattern of revoicing the students’ words.

In Mr. Simm’s responses to the students’ videos, he revoiced student experiences as a connection. For example, when one African American male student showed his church and talked about his dad serving as the deacon, Mr. Simms responded, “Oh my gosh, I know exactly where you are. I go to church right down the road from where your dad serves as the deacon.” Mr. Simms continued talking about his own church experience and how he frequently runs on the sidewalk on which the student is videotaping. Such a revoicing appeared consistently within his responses to their videos and class discussions (see Table 2). Such a revoicing merged the students’ words with his story.

## Discussion

When Villegas and Lucas (2002a) discuss what it means to know students well within the CRT model, they focus on the importance of understanding students' lives outside of school and in their communities, and on students' relationships to the subject matter, their perceptions of school knowledge, and belief in the potential of schooling to improve their future lives. With the ever-widening gap between adolescent home and school contexts, CRT continues to be valuable to their academic achievement. Informed by the CRT value of pursuing relationships and relevance, the data revealed how middle school at-risk students and their teacher connected home and school contexts by employing a technology-based strategy using iPods, revealing students' relationships, and the vital interaction between teacher and students for instructional relevance, bridging the gap between home and school that remains so prevalent in today's schools. The resulting process exposes the contribution of both the teacher and the students for connecting home and school contexts with a CRT framework.

### CRT Perceptions: A Complex Process

Prior studies discuss the importance of promoting culturally responsive teaching, yet little work has been done to explore how students are contributing to the essential pursuit of relationships and relevance building within a CRT context. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) and Gay (2010) invite teachers to integrate students' contexts into the classroom curricula in order for cultural relevance to occur.

The findings of this study revealed that bridging home and school experiences is more complex than simply inviting students' lives into the classroom. When the students were asked to share about their lives outside of the classroom in a digital mode while inside the classroom context, their perceived home-school disconnection prescribed, and therefore limited, the information they chose to share. This invoked their school experiences of not connecting their home context with school.

The bridge that connected the students' home context with their school context appeared to be the digital activity that occurred outside of the classroom. The key issue was not just the content, nor the assignment, but where the

digital assignment was created. Therefore, it may be suggested that teachers locating home-school disconnections can help bridge the contexts by providing the students the opportunity to communicate their home context outside of the classroom, which can be accomplished through a digital platform like the iPods used in this study.

### Teacher Interactions with Students' Contexts: Informing CRT

In addition to considering where and how middle school students can share their home contexts within the classroom context, this study also illuminates the power and potential of teacher-student interactions around their personal stories of lived experiences outside the classroom. The teacher's responses to the students' videos revealed a distinctive response pattern known as conversation formulations of self-disclosure (Farini, 2012). Gay (2010) describes the personal as powerful and explains that teacher self-disclosure is purposeful in three ways: 1) to model sharing life experiences, 2) to lead the way and build a classroom climate that makes it easier for students to share and analyze their own stories, and 3) to demonstrate competence takes time and does not happen instantaneously. Therefore, in CRT, teacher self-disclosure of stories and experiences can pave the way for positive teacher-student relationships because stories provide a "powerful means for people to establish bridges across other factors that separate them (such as race, culture, gender, and social class)" (Gay, 2010, p. 3). During the post-interview, the teacher talked about his intentions to self-disclose information about his own life in order to catch students' attention and show connections. This intention aligns with McBride and Wahl's (2005) study that concludes that self-disclosure is effective at not only catching students' attention but also in creating confidence and motivating students. Prior studies typically look at self-disclosure through a positive light, noting how teacher self-disclosure can elicit greater student participation and has the ability to help create a warm atmosphere conducive to personally relevant talk and ultimately building relationships (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Rouse & Bradley, 1989; Zardeckaite-Mutaliaitiene & Paluckaite, 2013).

CRT notes that teachers build relationships with their students not only so they can utilize students' cultural contexts for classroom

instruction, but also because positive teacher-student relationships help students, especially those considered at risk, to feel connected to school (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a). The teacher in this study attempted to build relationships and show connections through self-disclosure. The key component here was the interaction of stories. As the student shared a story, the teacher connected his story, and such a connection begins to bridge the gap between diverse students' home and school contexts. The result suggests that the contribution of both students and teacher stories is necessary, and the interaction of these is important for building relevance and relationship – vital to CRT.

### **Technology's Potential in Connecting the Home-School Disconnection**

The bridge that connected the students' home context with their school context appeared to be the digital activity that occurred outside of the classroom. Peter and Valkenberg (2006) suggest that when communicating digitally, students may disclose more about their lives than if they were communicating through traditional modes. The present study confirms that students are likely to share personal information using videos, so long as their digital authoring occurs outside of the classroom. The iPod videos provided a digital space where the participating middle school students could express themselves in what prior research suggests is a highly familiar mode of communication (Alvermann et al., 2012; Valkenburg et al., 2005). A major advantage to this technology-based approach was that it gave the student participants the freedom to share the parts of their lives outside of school that they felt were most relevant and meaningful to their teacher.

Culturally responsive teaching asserts that teachers need to know their students well in order to establish positive relationships, which help students feel connected to school and “provides extra motivation for students who would otherwise disengage from school” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002a, p. 80). Through their home-created videos, the students offered the teacher information regarding their familial relationships and their favorite activities and hobbies. Further, each student represented his or her life in a unique mixture of photos, videos, and narrations. The iPod videos project allowed the teacher access to parts of students' lives that

were never otherwise revealed in the classroom.

### **Implications**

As teachers experience increasingly diverse student populations and digital advances, the value of cultural responsive teaching and using technology takes center stage in pedagogical training and development. Despite this limited study with one teacher in one school, this study suggests two key implications.

First, this study's findings suggest that using student-created videos created outside of the classroom focused on their home contexts may provide the teachers with the opportunity to see their students' lives outside the classroom. The student-created videos were rich with narratives and visuals that brought their world to the teacher. This project trumped their default position of disconnecting home and school contexts, providing a platform for relevant and responsive classroom instruction.

Second, the teacher's interactions with the students' videos appeared to be an important component of this study. This study revealed that a teacher's investment in CRT and use of student-created videos which may bridge students' home and school contexts needs intentional work in interaction strategies which promote such valued connections. Further research is needed.

### **Conclusion**

As Ayers (2001) so aptly noted, when teachers become students of their students, they gain the necessary information to make instruction personally meaningful and relevant. Despite the CRT value of student voice, to date there is scant research that includes the students' contribution to creating a culturally responsive classroom. Given adolescents' familiarity with and use of digital technology for communicating their social lives (Bartholomew & Reeve, 2018), this study sought to explore students' approaches to connecting their home contexts by equipping them with familiar digital technology, iPods, with the mission to bring their out-of-school lived experiences into the classroom. This technology-based approach equipped and engaged middle school at-risk students to record and bring their home context to the teacher. Further, the teacher's interactions with the students in this study's findings suggest that relevance and relationships in the classroom

need to be further examined to strive to effectively bridge students' home and school contexts for enhancing relevance within the middle school classroom. The future challenge is to equip teachers to translate home-school disconnections into a usable understanding of their students' environments and lives as both the students and the teacher pursue relevance within their school setting.

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Table 2

*Teacher's Revoicing for Relevance*

Participant	Student	Teacher's Response
African American male student	This church is where my dad works. He gives—well, he works as the deacon. And we don't really go to church that much. I play for the basketball team. I tried to get a job there cleaning it up... but they said no, and pay them more.	Oh my gosh, I know exactly where you are. <i>I go to church right down the road from where your dad serves as the deacon. . . .</i> And it's funny, that very path, that sidewalk you're on, I've run several times with some friends of mine.
White male student	And that's a tree my dad planted. Yeah. Dad's actually deceased, so that's not the best topic to talk about.	Well, it's great to see the front yard . . . and the tree that . . . your dad planted. I know you mentioned the other day that your dad had died when you were four. <i>So I immediately made a connection with you because my own mother in Korea had died when I was four.</i>
White female student	I like to dye my hair different hair colors. Being different makes me happy.	And the <i>whole hair dying thing</i> ; I can certainly relate. When I was in high school I would <i>dye my hair</i> different colors. <i>I guess I was working through some things. So I guess I had a bronze color, copper color. What else did I have?</i>
African American male student	I am a big wrestling fan. I really like to watch wrestling. I like to play wrestling video games.	I'm glad you shared this one, because <i>it reminds me of my own growing up</i> . For some bizarre reason, <i>my dad and I, when we'd get up on Sunday before church, and we'd be waiting for mom to get ready and everything, he'd have on the TV, and invariably, it'd be WWF, or something like that. . . . Looks like we have something in common.</i>