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### Poverty, Literacy, and Race: A Middle School Teacher's Iterative Investigative Journey

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POVERTY, LITERACY, AND RACE: A MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER'S  
ITERATIVE INVESTIGATIVE JOURNEY

by

Beckie Tuttle

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Studies

(Teaching, Curriculum & Learning)

Under the Supervision of Professor Dr. Guy Trainin

Lincoln, Nebraska

September, 2020

POVERTY, LITERACY, AND RACE: A MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER'S  
ITERATIVE INVESTIGATIVE JOURNEY

Beckie Tuttle, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2020

Advisor: Dr. Guy Trainin

This study describes an iterative design process that helped me gain a better understanding of the problems (how motivation affects learning and gaining the trust of children that I worked with) I was inquiring about. The design process chronicles three iterations before reaching my final research question focused on building relationships with children of minoritized communities within their learning environment and integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into their learning. By combining these two strategies, the children in this study seemed to embrace being part of a culturally relevant experiment. The components of these iterations include pre-reading activities, read alouds, group discussions, journal writing, and an end of the semester project. I found that tailoring instruction to fit the textual, social, cultural, and personal lives of these children is mostly about seeing pedagogy through the norms and practices of their lives.

## Acknowledgments

When I started my doctoral program, I was extremely excited and also very intimidated. I felt intensely inferior to the other students because they all seemed smarter and better educated than I was. Academic writing did not come easily for me. My insecurities and self-doubts were the driving forces that made me work harder. I still remember how I struggled during my first course and how frustrating it was when I had to hire a tutor to get me through my shortcomings of technology. My will and determination helped me to overcome my fear of failing.

Without the push of my advisor, Dr. Trainin, I would not have dreamed of pursuing this degree. He believed in me when I did not. I am very grateful for his consistency and help along the way. His encouragement and insight have been invaluable throughout this journey.

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## Chapter I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflective piece that describes my growing understanding of my problem of practice and my research process. My program of study was part of an Ed.D. CPED (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate; [cpedinitiative.org/](http://cpedinitiative.org/)) cohort, which was developed for educators to address *problems of practice* to create and sustain effective teaching/learning contexts in the concrete realities of P-16 classrooms, work, and community. This approach allowed me to be actively engaged in my professional working environment while exploring theories, ideologies, and applications in sustained dialogue with peers and faculty of the University. The CPED program conceptualized scholarship of practice as “both substance and process,” critical to educators who can analyze, evaluate, model, and teach in a cross-section of educational settings (Shulman et al., 2006). When I set out on this path, I did not intend to change my problem of practice three times until it substantially transformed, but that is what happened. My focus shifted, changed, and changed again as I asked more in-depth questions and learned from what I was doing. What you will be reading is the growth in my learning from my first pilot conducted in October of 2017 to my final dissertation study. My study is not the final station in my journey since following my work on the dissertation, I will be back in a middle school reading classroom to use what I learned during this process.

The first iterations were crude. For example, with my first iteration, I used one subject. I had my rose-colored glasses on thinking I could teach this subject how to motivate himself to become a reader. I didn't consider all of the other components that had to fall into place to make this happen. During the second iteration, I was hyper-focused on building vocabulary with this set of subjects. I completely discounted the

importance of building relationships before any teaching/learning could be done. My third iteration involved relationship building. I assumed I could build relationships and also focus on vocabulary building, but the relationships were hard to build with this group of subjects. Instead of realizing that building relationship was a substantial part of my study, I was discouraged to have to do yet another iteration, thinking I had failed because I only focused on relationship building. I still had that tunnel vision of needing the subjects to “get something out of the study” besides establishing relationships- talk about crude thinking. The fourth iteration combined relationship building with reading and vocabulary building. Overall, the iteration was successful. At the end of the summer, they had all read books over the summer that probably would not have been read if they weren't in the study. They also built and established a community within the Center. At the time, I was focused on their reading skills, looking back, the community they built was the reason they read those books. With the last iteration I began to realize the importance of the relationship building that had to happen first. It took me four iterations to figure this out.

I hope that you read along in the spirit of each iteration as they became more refined. As I went along, I slowly began to see race, curriculum, and more nuanced research methods such as the importance of cultural relevance for my students. It was a transformative process for me, a self-discovery experience of how much I could persevere to accomplish something I consider worthwhile. However, my experiences within each iteration were noteworthy and, honestly, necessary to arrive at my dissertation iteration.



I began this research journey *knowing* that I wanted to focus my study on motivation and self-regulation. Current research on student classroom learning stresses the importance of both motivational and self-regulation components of academic performance (Garcia & Pintrich, 1994). My problem of practice asked the question, *Can one-on-one attention make a difference in convincing a child to read for pleasure?* Having done some background reading, I initially chose to focus on motivation and self-regulating as a learning tool while working with kids living in poverty [as I defined it then]. I was sure that during this study, I could teach children the skills to help them want to learn and self-regulate their learning. As my focus was on one child, I assumed I could take what I learned and bring it back to my classroom.

What I reflected on during this semester-long pilot study of Daniel was that I could not help but agree with Richard Milner, “There is indeed a deficit of learning when comparing kids living in poverty to kids who do not”(Milner, 2013). At the school where Daniel attends, the scores of any reading test are easy to divide into socio-economic classes. The students who are poor tend to score lower than the average to high economic students.

I have first-hand experience of living in poverty. I was not a good reader in elementary school, and I did not have the vocabulary background that my peers had. I grew up poor with a working mom that was gone when I left for school and when I came home. She worked continuously to support us. Because of this, nobody read to me or told me to do my homework. I remember struggling with reading out loud in the whole group. It was embarrassing. I had a teacher one time pull me in the back of the classroom where the coats were hung and told me that I needed to stop raising my hand to read because it

took so long for me to read a paragraph. This same teacher quickly got mad when I did not bring my reading log back signed. Even if I did read at night like I was supposed to, nobody was there to sign the paper. She never asked why my log was not signed. Those are some of the memories I have from the early years of reading and the ones I carried with me into teaching and my problem of practice. My struggles with reading are why I care so much about teaching reading. I knew from an early age that I wanted to be a teacher and treat kids differently than how I got treated. Being poor and having to go to school is a very lonely experience if you do not have teachers in your corner.

It didn't matter what motivation skills I taught Daniel, he needed help with vocabulary acquisition. He did not have the vocabulary skills that some of his classmates had. Somehow, I forgot what it was like being a childlike Daniel struggling with vocabulary and reading. I focused on finding a strategy to help motivate him to read and neglected the fact that he did not have the vocabulary to read the texts I gave him. Because of this realization, my problem of practice needed to change directions and create a new iteration that focused on vocabulary building instead of motivation and self-regulation. I also realized that going back to the classroom this fall, and I will have my eyes open to the student before looking at the curriculum.

As a teacher who had been teaching literacy for several years, I entered the new iteration with a plan to integrate vocabulary building and reading skills into my evolved problem of practice. My second problem of practice asked the question, *Can vocabulary knowledge mediate a link between socioeconomic status and word learning?* I did my study at a community center that had an after-school program. As the study went on, I ran into a significant roadblock while working with the children. I chose to complete this

study at an after-school program called the Malone Center for children living in poverty. When they arrived at the center each weekday, they already had eight hours of school and seemingly no desire to learn vocabulary and reading strategies from a stranger. So, I had to re-assess my study and move in a different direction. Before I could teach them any vocabulary skills or reading strategies, I had to build relationships with them.

In the middle of my second iteration, I changed my problem of practice to fit with the importance of relationship-building before I expected the children to learn the skills and strategies of any kind. I worked with the same students, but with a different agenda. Again, I read several articles about the importance of relationships with kids living in poverty, and I knew I needed to earn the trust of these children first. This study (see chapter 3) took an entire semester to complete. I was happy with the results but realized at the end of the semester that I had confirmed what almost every good educator already knows; relationships are necessary to create a successful classroom.

I now wanted to revisit the idea of teaching vocabulary skills and reading strategies for the children I had worked with at the Center. I wanted them, if possible, to maintain the reading they do in school over the summer so they would be ready for the fall semester. I decided to use the same students as the previous study since relationships had already been established. I would use the supplemental reading materials I originally planned for the vocabulary study. I thought if the students read all summer, they would possibly avoid the *Summer Slide* and gain some vocabulary and reading skills along the way.

My growth throughout these iterations shows my learning and refining of each iteration, which lead to a more nuanced understanding of what I needed to do next. The

third iteration allowed me to develop a study that not only maintained the relationships that were established in the second iteration but also involved the children in a summer-long reading workshop. As the summer progressed, I noticed the children wanted to read books that “looked like them.” We were reading from a supplemental series that was all non-fiction. Some books had people from minority communities in different roles in history. When we read one of these books, the interest level seemed to be more apparent. They would ask questions about the person and the story behind the book. These questions got me thinking about their interest level in reading books.

I recognized a need to start confronting the issue of race in my study. The children at the Malone Center are predominantly African American, and I did not know much about their worlds. The realization was that I needed more insight, more *windows* into their worlds. I needed to find texts where the children could find themselves, their families, and what their communities reflected and valued. When students read books where they see characters like themselves who are valued in the world, they feel a sense of belonging. I needed to see into their world using a window of these texts.

Holland et al., ((Holland et al., 1998) broadly define figured world as “socially produced, culturally constituted activities” (pp. 40-41) where people come to conceptually and materially/procedurally produce new self-understandings. Because figured worlds are peopled by characters from collective imaginings (e.g., of class, race, gender, nationality), people’s identity and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically in them. Holland et al.’s concept of figured worlds is therefore a useful concept to study identity and agency in education. It is not set on previous static notions of culture; it focuses on activity and emphasizes the importance of power (Urrieta, 2007).

Windows, according to Rudine Sims Bishop, help us develop understandings about the wider world. Students, as well as educators, need to learn about how other people conduct themselves in the world to understand how they might fit in (Bishop, 1990). I would need to diversify my reading materials so that, regardless of who I was working with, the children see a window into the range of possibilities in the world. I knew I had to create yet another iteration.

I researched more about the metaphor of *Windows and Mirrors* (Tschida et al., 2014). I discovered when children see themselves in books, it helps to build the vital skill of reading with comprehension and establishes an affinity with reading. I thought that children being able to see themselves in the books they read might help them feel relevant to what they read.

I realize now this was a necessary part of the process of changing my research to fit the children I studied, and it was the only way to discover what my focus should be going forward. With great relief, I landed on the topic for my iteration. I wanted to find out what would happen if I took a group of children and looked into the *Mirrors* of their culture through their eyes by having conversations with them about their home lives, what they did for fun, and what they thought about. What would be the result of children identifying with what they are reading because they can relate to the main characters that share the same culture or identity? I researched the term, culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018). I decided to focus on a new problem of practice question: *How would learning be more successful and meaningful to children if the curriculum was culturally relevant?*

The last iteration described in chapter five was designed to enhance the awareness of cultural relevance of the group members. I worked in and with the Malone Center. This study focused on co-creating a space for culturally relevant literacy to impact students. There was a new set of four girls that agreed to help me with this study. With their daily reflections and honest conversation, they were able to develop projects and knowledge of who they represented and who represented them. When the study was over, I noticed they seemed to hold their heads higher and walk a little more confidently. They each had a new way of looking at how school and learning could connect to their cultures and themselves. I hope that they take this newfound confidence into the next school year and let their light shine brightly enough to spill over onto others.

Throughout this dissertation, I used a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach. Within each design iteration, I used different methodologies that were also better refined as I increased my knowledge of theory and understanding of methodological rigor. I embedded specific methodologies to answer the design question for that iteration.

DBR is defined as a systematic but flexible methodology aimed to improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design, development, and implementation based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings and leading to contextual-sensitive design principles and theories (Wang & Hannafin, 2005).

DBR is a lens or set of analytical techniques that balances positivist and interpretivist paradigms and attempts to bridge theory and practice in education. DBR is an important methodology for understanding how, when, and why educational

innovations work in practice. DBR methods aim to uncover relationships between educational theory, designed artifact, and practice.

As I finished my study, I realized how much I learned and grew from this three-year experience. I have grown to understand three important things during my research studies. The first thing I realized was who I worked with were not defined by poverty. Another discovery was the children I worked with had different things happen to them than other members of society. The third thing was the children I worked with allowed me to switch my focus from only seeing the deficits to seeing the strengths of my students. The knowledge I gained from working with the students at the Malone Center allowed me to take on a different lens, both with teaching and my life. Feeling relevant does make a difference in any situation. With me returning to the classroom in the fall, I can be purposeful in my planning to not leave anyone feeling unrepresented in my classroom and have a way to triage those who I most urgently want to have feel represented.

## **Chapter II. ITERATION 1.0 MOTIVATION AND SELF-REGUATION**

Our blind spots create a lot of problems. What we see clouds our judgment; what we don't see bias our behaviors. Leonardo da Vinci said, "The greatest deception men suffer is from their own opinion" (Halas & da Vinci, 1989). I began this study thinking that I could give one-on-one attention to a child living in poverty and see positive results in raising his interest in reading. What I didn't take into consideration was the mismatch between his experiences as a reader and as a child that lives in poverty and school expectations. Because I researched vocabulary development, I knew about the vocabulary mismatch that comes with living in poverty. Building academic background knowledge is important to any successful reader, and with the children living in poverty, it is essential (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000).

I knew the importance of vocabulary building before I began this study. Looking back, I should have started with vocabulary building instead of focusing on motivation. I thought I could convince this student to read by simply teaching him some motivational strategies.

\* \* \*

One day while having a class discussion regarding which book would be our next read-aloud, a male student (Daniel) in my language arts class confessed that he had never read a chapter book. When he told me this, I was bewildered. I asked myself how he made it to 6th-grade without reading a chapter book? Daniel has a writing disability and has a lower reading level than his peers. He reads at a fourth-grade level and struggles with reading comprehension if he is not in a reading group that shares out loud what is read. He has a slower processing time when he reads by himself, but given time, he can



read what is assigned. Jim Trelease (1982) in his book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, noted that every time we read aloud to a child or class, we're giving a commercial for the pleasures of reading. Unfortunately, the older the child, the less he is read to-in home and in the classroom. A thirty-year survey of graduate students confirms how seldom they were read to in middle and upper grades (Gilbert & Graham, 2010).

### **Problem of Practice**

For my problem of practice, I asked the question, *Can one-on-one attention make a difference in convincing a child to read for pleasure?* I decided to give Daniel one-on-one attention, including reading to him, to see if individual attention would make a difference in his motivation to read for pleasure. Powel's (2015) research discovered that quality teachers made themselves more accessible to students. Some teachers go as far as to stalk their students if they fall behind or drop their class. I felt by giving Daniel one-on-one attention, I could feel more in control in making him want to read a chapter book.

### **Literature Review**

The following is a review of literature that examines the importance of motivation and self-regulated learning.

### **Motivation**

Motivation is an integral part of learning and is critical in helping students become and remain engaged in academic activities. Motivation is characterized as a circumstance that offers vitality to conduct, coordinate, and manage learning. Motivation includes an arrangement of convictions, observations, qualities, data, and activities that completely overlaps with each other. Motivation can prompt many practices, and it is

imperative to comprehend the significance of motivation in an instructive setting (Yilmaz et al., 2017).

Self-motivation learning occurs when a learner independently uses one or more strategies to keep themselves on-track toward a learning goal. It is vital to self-regulation because it requires learners to assume control over their learning (Como, 1993).

Furthermore, self-motivation occurs in the absence of external rewards or incentives and can be a reliable indicator that a learner is becoming more autonomous (Zimmerman, 2004). By establishing their own goals, students are more likely to persist through difficult learning tasks and often find the learning process more gratifying (Wolters, 2003).

According to McCarthy (McCarthy, 1990), recognizing the approach taken to motivate students during instruction will lead teachers to attempt to identify the successful motivational, instructional strategies for students. Teachers need to learn the conditions that will motivate students to be more driven to learn. How people learn and become more involved in the learning procedure continues to be accentuated in steady research. The learning process is diverse for many students. Students can learn simply by watching and listening. However, many other students must learn from a hands-on approach or by touching. It is understood that freely making choices and owning the responsibility for the impact of those choices is a learned activity. Amid actions of responsibility and accountability for those actions, an adolescent individual discovers to accredit the outcome of success or failure within themselves. As a result, a sense of empowerment and ownership is felt as they learn from their experiences (Jones & Shindler, 2016).

Schunk (Schunk, 1991) suggests a learning environment is where the individual learning contrasts of students are considered. Yet, all students are offered the same time, the same mode, and the same learning potential outcomes, and they are relied upon to accomplish the same objectives. In any case, a singular distinction is a crucial variable that exhibits issues for both the learner and the educator. In this way, attention to learning styles, learning strategies, and the locus of control and their parts in scholarly achievement are of an incredible significance for instructive analysts, instructors, and specialists (Akça, 2013). There is a fundamental correlation between the academic performance of at-risk students and the underlying expectation that pertains to the connection between personal characteristics, actions, and outcomes (Lefcourt, 1991).

According to Cokley (Cokley, 2003), African American students at all grade and educational levels have been the ethnic group most often at the center of this debate. The persistent academic underachievement of African American students continues to perplex most observers. These noteworthy incongruities in educational results have been persistent to the point that driving researcher on African American education, Gloria Ladson-Billings, has reframed the racial achievement gap talk as an education obligation that has gathered after some time. She characterizes this "obligation" as an unfulfilled promise that America owes to verifiably underserved and underestimated student gatherings; for example, African Americans and other racial/ethnic minorities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This research is essential to the field of education and is noteworthy as part of my research.

The purpose of this study was to enhance the understanding of the motivational, instructional strategies used to evaluate student success in the classroom. Motivation

strategies are a deliberate involvement that requires purposeful and strategic planning and enforcement. It includes contemplations and practices that impact student's decisions, endeavors, and perseverance in school motivation (Paulino et al., 2017).

History has shown that African Americans have made significant improvements in education to academic achievement. However, as a group, African Americans continue to remain high on the list of educationally at-risk. Studies share nationwide students from low-income families show a lower graduation rate out of high graduation rates reach new highs, but gaps remain (Education Week, 34(33), 18- 20). Achievement motivation theories suggest that students' performance and achievement goals are propelled by success in the classroom (Paulino et al., 2016).

Teachers can help meet their students' fundamental and formative needs by providing a conducive environment with the appropriate levels of support, structure, and engagement (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015). Literature has emphasized and supported the indicator of adequate schools for students creates a caring environment similar to their personal space at home. It's assumed students are treated with respect, care, and are nurtured. These attributes are seen as an extended family, allowing both teachers and students to interact with an engaged relationship that promotes positive learning (Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Cokley (Cokley, 2003) suggests that evidence shows that, despite poor academic achievement and economic disadvantage, a relatively accelerated capability and expectation of self-perception were indicative amongst African-American students. This finding is particularly challenging to explain in motivational terms because it is assumed that individuals who feel good about themselves will be more motivated to succeed. Factors that are understood and relate to the importance of identifying the

adolescent years assist educational leaders and teachers in highly effective learning environments (Uslu & Gizir, 2017).

Attitudes are early indicators of how achievement can be affected by motivation at a very early age (Nadirova & Burger, 2016). When working with minority students or students that come from poverty, attitudes are very apparent. To help improve or maintain a positive attitude, teachers have to be creative and purposeful. It is implied in various areas that the interaction between student and teacher can influence academic motivation. This is successful when teachers reformat their instructional environment by engaging innovative instructional techniques. In the absence of teachers understanding how relationships encourage and motivate, the deficiency of progressive abilities is hindered. Motivation is an engagement factor that filters into the behavior of students. The goals are for students to become enthusiastic about learning. However, when students are less engaged and are not as motivated, there is a window of losing interest in learning (Rugutt & Chemosit, 2009). My focus for this study is on Daniel becoming more enthusiastic about reading.

### **Self-Regulated Learning**

After Daniel becomes enthusiastic about reading, I want him to monitor or self-regulate his learning.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) is controlled by an interconnected framework of factors that determine its development and sustainability (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2008), and motivation is a critical factor in this framework (Wang & Holcome, 2010).

An examination of literature and research studies concerning SRL reveals that the term Self-Regulated Learning has evolved to mean many things, depending mainly upon the context in which it is mentioned. The label is often used to describe learners who are successful in the academic realm, but this is not the setting where this term originated. Research concerning academic self-regulation is grounded in the studies first conducted in therapeutic contexts. The initial purpose of these studies was to help participants gain control of problematic behaviors. In such regards, subjects often ranged from children to adults. Controlled experiments were conducted in various settings, including the workplace, military, and preschool to college classrooms (Pressley, 1979). In these initial days of self-regulation studies, subjects were typically taught strategies to help them regulate specific personal behaviors in some way (Patterson & Mischel, 1976). These psychological self-regulation strategies were generally designed to increase subjects' self-control, usually to alter dysfunctional behavior (Bandura, 1986). The success of the psychological experiments led educational psychologists to explore the benefits of using self-regulation strategies with students in academic settings.

It was during the 1970s and 1980s that SRL first began to be introduced into educational settings. Because of the success of the psychological model of SRL, skills were often taught in the educational realm using the same methods that had proven successful in the clinical settings. In the early days of self-regulated strategy training, aspects of self-regulation were taught to students explicitly, using specific strategy instruction. They were most often designed for use with children who exhibited academic or behavioral challenges (Leon & Pepe, 1983). The use of learning strategies to help children who were struggling in educational environments proved hugely successful. This

success, along with educators' continuous environments proved greatly successful. This success, along with educators' constant search for methods that assist all children in becoming successful learners, has increased interest in the study of SRL strategies and instruction.

The realization that the ability to regulate one's learning and behavior can be taught was soon followed by an understanding that strategy instruction in isolation does not automatically create successful learners. A growing body of research suggests that conditions surrounding learners significantly impact performance and behavior (Pressley, 1995). In addition to content knowledge and academic skills, students must develop sets of behaviors, skills attitudes, and strategies that are crucial to academic performance in their classes (Roderick et al., 2013). This awareness has led to the understanding that learners contribute actively to their learning; they are not passive recipients of knowledge (Pintrich, 1995). As a result of this understanding, educators have begun to focus less on the ability and conditioning of learners, and instead attempt to spend more time and effort restructuring the learning environment to create more opportunities for student learning and success (Rohrkemper & Corno, 1988).

Throughout the history of the study of SRL, learning strategies and interventions designed to lead to greater self-regulation have been explicitly taught to students in academic settings. However, there is an increasing realization that SRL strategies can and should be implicitly taught to students. Researchers and practitioners realize that learning environments can be constructed in ways that promote self-regulation. This belief has coincided with a shift of underlying theory guiding the use of self-regulatory strategies and instruction.

The origins of SRL and teaching, especially instruction geared toward the use of strategies to enhance self-regulation, was usually single strategy instruction, provided in isolation, geared toward changing behavior. Educational practice has witnessed an increased use of self-regulated teaching and strategies, not just isolated psychological laboratory settings, but in “naturalistic” educational contexts (Graham et al., 1992); (Randi, 2004). This practice has also involved the realization that if students are to be self-regulated learners, they need a variety of strategies that they can use in a variety of settings (Alexander & Entwisle, 1996). A deepening understanding of the teaching of SRL skills has been a result of or perhaps has resulted in a constructivist view of self-regulated teaching and learning. According to Zimmerman (Zimmerman, 1990), a self-regulatory perspective assumes that students’ functions depend on constructive efforts made by the individual to make sense of the experience and to optimize performance.

Research has strongly suggested that successful learners are self-regulated and that there are specific strategies that are used by successful students. Research indicates that these strategies may occur seemingly naturally in some students but can be taught to others. If research is correct, students who don’t automatically self-regulate can learn. This was my theory for Daniel. I wanted to teach him how to self-regulate.

## **Method**

For this iteration, I used a single case study (Yin, 1994), an intensive study of a single unit to generalize across a broader set of units. I used this design as a viable alternative to a large group study. Since a single case study involves repeated measures and manipulation of the independent variable, I determined this design would work best.



I decided to design this study with one person to see if one-on-one attention would make a difference in him wanting to read for pleasure. I thought if he could be a more confident reader, he might get better at reading. Daniel was a typical student that comes from poverty, meaning he arrived at school every day with worries on his mind that had nothing to do with school. You could see his fears on his face through his bloodshot eyes, classmates noticed his clothes were always dirty, and I observed how little he communicated with the rest of his peers. His reading level was two grades below his peers, and he had a writing disability. My goal was to give him one-on-one attention two days a week to work on reading skills using motivation as a guide to help become a better reader. By working one-on-one with him in this study, I wanted to play a role in helping reduce the effects of poverty on Daniel's educational path. I used the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich et al., 1993) to assess his motivation.

The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) is a self-report instrument designed to assess students' motivational orientations and their use of different learning strategies. The MSLQ is based on a general cognitive view of motivation and learning strategies (Pintrich et al., 1993).

I administered an MSLQ (Garcia & Pintrich, 1996) pretest to get a baseline of where Daniel was regarding motivation. Daniel responded to the self-report questionnaire (MSLQ) that included 56 items on student motivation, cognitive strategy use, metacognitive strategy use, and management of the effort. Daniel was instructed to respond to the questions on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true of me to 7 = very true of me) concerning behavior in the language arts class. Items were adapted from

various instruments used to assess student motivation, cognitive strategy use, and metacognition (Weinstein, Schulte, & Palmer, 1987).

Daniel and I spent an hour a day, two times a week, one-on-one, focusing on what keeps him motivated, and checking for understanding while reading. Our one-on-one time was used to talk about everyday life, and most importantly, work on techniques to become a better reader using motivation as a strategy. I was able to meet with him during his special education class, which did not interfere with language arts instruction.

We had an established relationship because we had a language arts class every day for two and a half hours. As a result of our relationship, it was easy to convince him we should pick a chapter book and set a goal to read the *entire* book. As previously mentioned, we were not going to have time in language arts class to read one-on-one, but Daniel had an intervention class that met later in the day, and his intervention teacher agreed to allow him to read with me two days a week. I, coincidentally, had that hour open for planning time. Little did I know by agreeing to read together was going to do so much more than reaching the goal to read a chapter book. His confidence in his reading ability seemed to rise after only two sessions. He even started to volunteer to answer questions in our language arts class. Shameka Powell describes sponsorship as a framework utilized to illuminate how and to what extent different students are offered educational opportunities for advancement . For eight years she interviewed over 90 participants and found out they learned to read and write because of “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enabled, supported, taught, modeled, as well as recruited, regulated, suppressed, or withheld literacy” (Brandt, 1998, p. 168). I didn’t want to be the one withholding literacy from Daniel.

Our reading sessions turned into talking about daily events and his video games, along with reading our book. I usually started by asking about his games because he liked playing video games, and he could go on and on about what level he was trying to beat. He, in turn, asked about my animals. This type of conversation would go on for around seven or eight minutes. We would then read and discuss at least one chapter before I sent him to his next class.

As the one-on-one sessions continued, I learned that his family (mother and brother) lives in a low-income apartment, and his mom works three jobs. Daniel is often left alone while his mother works. His brother is older and seems to be gone a lot. When Daniel gets home from school, his afternoons and evenings are filled with video gaming. Without any adult supervision, he does not read at home. This is the reality of poverty; the opportunities are reduced through no fault of parent or child.

As the weeks progressed, I noticed how comfortable he was with our casual conversations before we read and during our language arts class. I had preconceived notions of him not wanting to read and would eventually get bored with coming to my room during the sixth period intervention time. I thought it would become a forced issue, and I would have trouble getting him to participate. However, the time together was having the opposite effect. He appeared to enjoy reading the chapter book. He would smile when he walked in to read and asked questions when the plotline was unclear.

After I started working with Daniel, I realized I needed to re-assess my study. All this time, I was working on teaching a 6th grader how to use motivation to gain reading skills. Self-motivation occurs when a learner uses one or more strategies to keep themselves on-track toward a learning goal (Ladd & Sorensen, 2016). By establishing

their learning motivation from within to make progress toward those goals, students are more likely to persist through difficult learning tasks and often find the learning process more gratifying (Wolters & Mueller, 2010). Discovering how important motivation is to learning, I realized I needed to try and find ways to motivate Daniel to try and make his learning more enjoyable. I wanted him to be able to read a book on his own. I knew my research was not finished, but only beginning.

## **Chapter II Discoveries**

What I discovered from this study was that Daniel did benefit from this one-on-one time. He began not only speaking in my class, but other teachers acknowledged his efforts in their classes too. He decided in the middle of the study to start bringing his lunch to my room and eating so that he could get extra time either working on assignments or just to talk. If we had not done this study together, he would not have asked to join me during his lunch.

From my study, I also discovered that students like Daniel need both the “will” and the “skill” to be successful in the classroom (Pintrich, 2004). These components need to integrate into our models of classroom learning. I realized there is more to learning than being motivated and willing to self-regulate while learning.

After much reflection, I changed my focus from *motivating* students to concentrating on *skill-based learning*. This change allowed me to discover more research on why students of poverty seem to measure lower in reading comprehension and vocabulary skills. Daniel was approximately two grade levels behind his classmates in reading comprehension. I wondered how many more students were in this same predicament. I needed to go further with my research. I wanted students like Daniel to

have the same opportunities with reading as the others in the classroom. I was at the “now what” point of my research. I decided to talk to my advisor about my findings. We discussed that most children who live in poverty and struggle in school lack real-life experiences that enable them to compete with students who have built some background knowledge. If they lack the skills to break down words that are unfamiliar or cannot use context clues within the sentence to help figure out what a word means, the students living in poverty are more likely to struggle to keep up with the other students. What students already know about the content is one of the most reliable indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content (Marzano, 2004).

At the beginning of the study, I thought by using the MSLQ questionnaire and focussing on the strategies to keep Daniel motivated. I could help him improve academics, which would be enough to raise his student achievement. After the study, I realized that this was not the case. Daniel needed something extra to get him on the same “playing field” as the students who were not living in poverty and struggling as readers. I decided to focus on vocabulary building with children living in poverty in hopes that expanding their vocabulary would benefit their reading skills. I know that reading inadvertently builds their vocabulary, so I wanted to focus on vocabulary words while reading to expand their vocabulary knowledge.

I was leery of changing my problem of practice. I am a person who figures out what needs to be done and then does it. I don’t do well with having to rethink or second guess my decisions. I decided that accepting this decision would mean I was getting closer to what I wanted to accomplish, which was making it easier for kids like Daniel to be successful in the classroom. I didn’t realize that I was starting to grow as an educator

and as a more aware human being. I stopped thinking about the problem as a child-centered problem of how to help with Daniel's motivation and vocabulary building and started to see that there were conditions outside his control that impacted his ability and will to read.

### **Chapter III. ITERATION 2.0 VOCABULARY AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

This second iteration focused on the problem of practice question, *In what ways can multi-episodic relationship building over academic reading tasks serve as a catalyst for word learning in students of low SES?* The research shows vocabulary scores of students with high economic status vs. students of low economic status are quite different, and I decided to investigate why. At the beginning of the study, I focused on vocabulary building. However, not very far into the study, my biggest challenge was trying to convince the children to work with me. I didn't take into account that relationships had to be established between myself and the children—this iteration aimed at the challenge of gaining academic vocabulary while reading. I now realized I had to establish a relationship with them in order to have a chance for them to gain literacy development.

The achievement gap between children from high- and low-income is roughly 30 to 40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than those born twenty-five years earlier (Reardon, 2011). It appears between the 1990s and the 2000s that the income achievement gap has been growing, though the data are less specific for cohorts of children born before 1970 (Reardon, 2011). Many students come to school with limited access to academic vocabularies. Increasing vocabulary in school is a big deal: the size of a child's vocabulary is an accurate predictor of academic achievement and even upward mobility throughout a lifetime (Hirsch, 2013). Children's vocabulary acquisition is affected by numerous factors, including the number of words exchanged in the home environment, the quality of those words, language spoken in the home, the number of

books that have been read to a child, summer reading, and the amount of time spent in rich conversations (Mckeown & Beck, 2004).

### **Problem of Practice**

For my second iteration, my problem of practice asked the question, *In what ways can multi-episodic relationship building over academic reading tasks serve as a catalyst for word learning in students of low SES?* I focused on the vocabulary development of children living in poverty. These students represent a population of students that fall short of their peers in terms of literacy performance in the classroom (Benitez, 2010).

While researching vocabulary acquisition, I discovered that children living in poverty lacked the necessary skills to be proficient on standardized assessments. Teachers were possibly utilizing ineffective instructional strategies and methods (Measurement Incorporated, 2007). An *asset-based approach* (Barrett and Carter, 2013) would suggest a localized and bottom-up way of strengthening students' skills through recognizing, identifying, and harnessing existing 'assets' (things like skills, knowledge, capacity, resources, experience, or enthusiasm) that individuals and communities have which can help to strengthen and improve things for their learning. Instead of looking at those students need or lack, this approach could focus on utilizing the 'assets' that are already there. I wanted to uncover vocabulary strategies that could be incorporated into the classroom to help struggling students bridge gaps in their learning based on a lack of background or prior knowledge and use what they do know as their 'assets'.

- Having a strong vocabulary has been linked with success in multiple areas, especially reading. Students need firm receptive (comprehension) and



strong (production) vocabulary knowledge to become active readers (Cubukcu, 2008). As previously stated, children living in poverty are likely not to have the skills to break down words into familiar parts due to a lack of experience or background knowledge. Since poor reading comprehension is linked to poor vocabulary knowledge (Milner, 2015), along with multi-episodic reading to support their reading comprehension, low readers would arguably benefit from vocabulary instruction. Researchers have also suggested that reading impacts almost all aspects of education and is essential for academic success (Fisher et al., 2012). It made sense to me that my focus for this study would be vocabulary building and its connection to reading comprehension. My study seemed like a great idea in my mind and on paper. Unfortunately, the study implementation was not so great.

### **Community Center Study**

I implemented my pilot study at the Malone Community Center (the Center) located near a majority of the Title I schools in my town. In the spring of 2019, I successfully recruited ten children that attend this center for a “reading club.” This wasn’t an easy task. These children were at an after-school center and told me on several different occasions that they were not going to read any books because they had to read at school. I knew I needed to be creative in how I worked with these students. I know from past teaching experiences to develop good classroom habits; you have to develop a relationship with students first. As you read, you will notice a switch from focusing on vocabulary acquisition to relationship building.

While working with these children, I was reminded of what Gloria Anzaldua spoke about in her book, *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*. She described how she felt when people talked badly about her language. The kids at the Center often get corrected for using 'street language' in an after-school setting. If they can't use their 'street language' here, where *can* they use it? She eventually became an American scholar of Chicana cultural theory and feminist theory. She wrote a book loosely based on her life, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, on her life growing up on the Mexico-Texas border and incorporated her lifelong experiences of social and cultural marginalization into her work, along with developing theories about marginal, in-between, and mixed cultures that develop along borders. In this book, she talks a lot about the ways identity is intertwined with the way we speak and for how people can be made to feel ashamed of their tongues (Anzaldúa, 1987).

The kids at the Center, for the most part, speak English, but their cultures might look different to some. I am often reminded of what Anzaldua says about identity and culture and how language is a big part of who she is. When she was in elementary school, people were always telling her to control her tongue. She decided to deny herself of her true identity and edit herself. This took away her identity. The kids at the Center need to feel like their identities matter. I want to help remove the inner struggle to have their guard up by focusing on building relationships. Anzaldua goes on to say that the struggle of identities continues and that one day the struggle will cease, and true integration will take place. Maybe at the Center, we can have a safe place to integrate our beliefs.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review examines the importance of vocabulary and relationship building with children living in poverty. I was intrigued to find several studies that linked vocabulary learning and relationship with children living in poverty.

### **Importance of Vocabulary**

Vocabulary instruction is a well-researched topic. As I reviewed the literature that surrounded the topic of vocabulary, three recurring themes stood out. These themes include the impact of improving the vocabulary of children who live in poverty, the types of words that should be selected for vocabulary development, and the best practices for increasing students' vocabulary ((M. McKeown & Beck, 2006); (Nagy & Scott, 2000). The research concluded that while poverty influences some aspects of literacy development, some components do not seem to be affected. The research also found that a comprehensive approach to teaching vocabulary is the best practice to improve students' vocabulary (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001).

In order for students to succeed in school, they need to develop a strong vocabulary. My focus is on the area of language arts. Student success and achievement can be attributed in part to the amount of academic vocabulary knowledge of any students, no matter their socioeconomic status (McKeown & Beck, 2008).

For the past 20 years, I taught language arts to a majority of students living in poverty. While working with these students early on, I began to notice a difference between their academic vocabularies and those of students who were not living in poverty. The students living in poverty had a different set of experiences than other students. When starting a new week of academic vocabulary words, the students with

higher SES tended to have more of the life experiences associated with the terminology used to describe the vocabulary words. According to Biemiller (2003), kids living in poverty need extensive support to address gaps in their academic vocabulary knowledge if the goal is to increase their reading comprehension significantly. Because of my teaching experience with this type of student, I felt driven to research different vocabulary strategies to use as interventions. These students needed help with building background knowledge of new academic vocabulary before they could relate to these words and use them successfully to comprehend texts and improve their writing.

### **The Effects of Poverty on Student Success and the Achievement Gap**

Milner described poverty as a family of four who tries to survive on less than \$24,339 a year (Milner, 2013). Unfortunately, research shows for a family of four to make ends meet, they would need double the amount of money the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) income shows they need to survive (OECD, 2017). The FPL income numbers are used to calculate eligibility for Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program. Nineteen percent of children live in families that are considered officially poor (14,116,000) (Jiang et al., 2017).

The impact of growing up in poverty on educational achievement and attainment is devastating. A significant curriculum alignment/pedagogical alignment gap exists in connecting academics to the lives and interests of children living below the poverty line. This means that whatever we are currently doing in education through standard curricula is not helping.

James Gee in his book, *Situated Language and Learning: A critique of traditional schooling* says that the reason children that are poor have a hard time learning to read in

school is that school is about learning specialist varieties of language, in particular academic varieties of language connected to content areas (Gee, 2012). Some children bring “prototypes of academic varieties of language” (16) to school that they have learned from home. Some do not. The kids who do bring prototypes have what Tabors and his colleagues (Tabors et al., 2001) referred to as “early language ability.” Those who don’t bring early language abilities don’t get rewarded at school. Early language abilities include children doing pretend readings of books, that sound like the child is reading a real book, or children reporting at dinnertime what went on at school that sounds like a school report. The children growing up in poverty sometimes didn’t have this academic language and often struggled in reading academic language.

When teachers teach children who are poor only phonics and superficial literal meanings of words, it’s mostly done in vernacular language. Gee describes vernacular language as a native language that is used for face-to-face conversation and everyday purposes. Different groups of people speak different dialects of the vernacular, connected to their family and community. “Thus, a person’s vernacular dialect is closely connected to his or her initial sense of self and belonging to life” (15).

Some texts are written in vernacular varieties of language. Still, the vast majority of texts in the modern world are not written in the vernacular but in some specialist variety of languages that require academic vocabulary. People who interact in the vernacular only often have great trouble reading texts written in specialist varieties of language. This is another example of why kids living in poverty might struggle with reading. Can we blame the schools that pick the textbooks that are written this way? This

topic would be a great research endeavor for another place in time. Could the blame fall on the textbook publishers? Perhaps, but the blame would not fix the problem.

### **Achievement Gap and Low-Income Students**

The term “achievement gap” originated in the 1960s, when researchers began studying the disparity in academic performance between groups of students (Gewertz, 2007). As Education Week explains on July 7: “The Achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, drop-out rates, and college completion rates, among other success measures” (Ansell, 2011, July 7).

Historically, researchers used the term to understand differences in academic outcomes between students of different races. Still, lately, research has shown that achievement gaps are now growing fastest between students of varying income levels (Tavernise, 2012). The New York Times reported that while the achievement gap between black and white students has shrunk since the 1960s, the achievement gap between low and high-income families has grown by 40 percent

A persistent achievement gap continues to place students from low-income families at the disproportionately high-risk for dropout. The sheer presence of an achievement gap based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status implies that our educational system is unable to overcome initial differences and may exacerbate them. The long-term implications are far more consequential than an unfair system of education. Instead, the effects have profound consequences for life outcomes ranging from employment to health (Allen, 2008). The dropout rate among these students was ten times the rate among students from higher-income families (Hopson and Lee, 2011). Students who participated in the free and reduced-price lunch program (a crude measure

of poverty) were less likely to perform well in reading and math (Hopson et al. 2011), received low scores on standardized tests (Caldas and Bankston, 1997), and reported overall low GPA. The notion that the US education system can create a level playing field had been disproven (Porter, 2014).

According to Olmanson, Falls, and Rouamba, most students from White, middle-class families are offered schools that mirror their life experience, teachers who look similar, curriculum that represents their history, and inquiry-based instructional approaches that intertwine with their interactions at home. Black youth have been mostly denied those educational pathways (Olmanson et al., 2017). Instead, they have schools that try to deny or correct their life experiences. These teachers feel pressure to represent the educational system, an alienating curriculum that offers one pathway to growth, and drill and practice ways of teaching. Among racial and ethnic groups, African Americans had the highest poverty rate, 27.4 percent, Hispanics at 26.6 percent, and Whites at 9.9 percent (Mishel et al., 2012).

To give Black students and other kids that come from a poverty background, the chance to be held to the same standards as their White peers, the critical thinking and concepts pathways embedded in social ecologies need to be diversified (Olmanson et al., 2017). According to the Digest of Education Statistics (2015), a culturally inclusive curriculum should be offered. It would require teachers to practice culturally relevant pedagogy. This would be a daunting task for the 81% of US school teachers who have the lived experience of being White and thereby have been kept from an experiential understanding of what it means to navigate life and school as a person of color (Snyder &

Dillow, 2015). Yet, the task seems a modest one to communicate their curriculum via the spoken vernaculars of their students.

### **Educator's Role**

The role of the educator has increasingly changed, as research reported that students living in poverty are less receptive to traditional teaching methods. In response, frameworks for understanding students living in poverty were created and taught by school districts all over the country. Ruby Payne is one such developer and described poverty as a “culture in which specific rules are set in place” (Payne, 1998). She suggested that educational institutions operate from a middle-class set of norms and fail to communicate to students in poverty through ways in which they understand. Her work once followed closely (including in Lincoln Public Schools) has since been highly criticized and viewed by some as stereotypical and having no valid research to confirm her claims (Bohn, 2006). According to an article in *Teaching Tolerance*, strategies learned in workshops done with Payne’s theories as models did not lead to scaffolding students as individuals, which created the idea that everyone in poverty reacted, responded, and did things the same way (Van der Valk, 2017). Payne acknowledged that teachers seemed to find relief that the responsibility for student failure was the ‘culture of poverty’ (a term coined by Oscar Lewis in 1961) and not teacher instruction. It was essential for teachers to see both sides of this debate and could come up with a balance of how to view and understand kids living in poverty.

Ruby Payne’s two main “blind spots” were a focus on poverty, disregarding race and culture as a relevant category, and defining the mismatch between school and home



as a deficit, thus misunderstanding its origin. As I realized this, the centrality of race in the equation was just starting to occur to me.

The US system of education requires Black students to learn in environments that do not take into consideration their cultural relevance, divergent thinking, or student wellbeing (Olmanson et al., 2017). Measures of achievement do not attempt to assess these aspects of their lives. Because they have faced historical and present-day limits on access to these measures, the achievement gap can be followed back to more than 150 years. Later in my paper, this information will connect to my Culturally Relevant iteration.

One effect of poverty is that often, children who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds have limited academic vocabularies, which contribute to poor school performance. Winters (2009) claimed that:

Because limited vocabulary has been recognized as a critical factor in the achievement gap for students with disabilities, students of color, and English-language learners, teachers need to seek out and employ vocabulary development activities that provide access to students of all backgrounds and abilities (p. 688).

Researchers have acknowledged the vital role that academic vocabularies play in assisting in reading comprehension (I. L. Beck & McKeown, 2007). A study conducted in 1982 discovered that students needed between 12 and 18 encounters with a word to have a high chance of using it proficiently in reading, writing, and speaking (M. G. McKeown et al., 1985). Because of the importance of vocabulary, it is necessary to ensure that all students make adequate academic vocabulary gains. This relationship has

lasting educational implications for students with both high and low academic vocabulary levels.

Vocabulary level is related to socioeconomic factors (M. G. McKeown & Beck, 2015) Children that live in poverty often have limited vocabularies in comparison to their peers from a higher-socioeconomic household. According to the Handbook of Reading Research (Pearson et al., 2016), the vocabulary of high and low ability learners shows substantial individual differences and the differences can be attributed to socioeconomic status.

The research suggests several reasons that children from low socioeconomic households had lower vocabulary levels. Factors such as lower maternal education level, a higher number of children in the home, decreased access to literacy materials, lack of exposure to literacy and cultural experiences, amount of talk in the home, and a higher likelihood of being from a single-parent family all factor into decreased vocabulary levels (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001). Students growing up in poverty are at a disadvantage when describing academic vocabulary. Various studies explained why or how significant the disadvantage is (Nagy & Scott, 2000); (M. McKeown & Beck, 2006); (Oxford & Crookall, 1990), but it comes down to whether schools need to focus more on academic vocabulary. The more learned academic vocabulary, the higher the probability of entering professional life. In order to ensure that profession-ready students advance from novices to accomplished professionals, strong professional learning and growth systems (pro-learner pathways) must be in place to provide comprehensive support and tailored learning opportunities for each stage of their student career (C. Beck & Kosnik, 2014).

Given the critical role that vocabulary knowledge plays in reading comprehension, the issue of children from low socioeconomic homes having limited vocabulary needs addressed in the school setting. . There is little opportunity for these students to close the vocabulary gap unless the schools provide useful vocabulary instruction (Biemiller, 2004).

### **What the Critics Say**

In 2003, Hart and Risley referenced their landmark (Hart & Risley, 1995) study, which identified “remarkable differences” (p. 192) in the early vocabulary experiences of young children. In the same article (Hart & Risley, 2003), researcher/author Betty Hart described the results of their observation: “Simply in words heard, the average child on welfare was having half as much experience per hour (616 words per hour) as the average working-class child (1,251) and less than one-third that of the average child in a professional family (2,153 words per hour)” (p. 8). This study was one of the first to explicitly link vocabulary size to socioeconomic status rather than the presence of a language disorder. It established the importance of prior knowledge during assessment and intervention. This study also demonstrated the necessity of comparing a child to his speech community.

Since Hart and Risley’s study was published, critics have taken issue with how the data was collected and interpreted. Newer studies have found very different numbers. “Their study is commendable in many ways, but they just got it wrong, says Paul Nation, an expert in vocabulary acquisition at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (Nation and Coxhead 2014). Nation took issue with the idea that vocabulary growth can

be estimated from small samples of speech, especially when the samples do not contain the same number of words.

According to Susan Blum, the validity of addressing only the number of words children who are poor hear in the preschool years as the cause of their inadequate school achievement has been questioned by anthropologists, linguists, and educators (Sperry et al., 2018).

Douglas Sperry and colleagues sought to replicate Hart & Risley's 30-million-word gap research. The study was called a "failed replication." The researcher analyzed field recordings from five different communities that are poor and working-class. The lowest-income children recorded in South Baltimore heard 1.7 times as many words per hour as did Hart and Risley's "welfare" group. According to lead author, Douglas Sperry, while talking in an interview, said the wide variation "unsettles the notion that income alone determines how many words children hear" (Sperry et al., 2018).

The difference in vocabulary grows as the years progress, ensuring slow growth for children who are economically disadvantaged and accelerated growth for those from more privileged backgrounds. Though Hart and Risley are quick to indicate that each child received no shortage of love and care, the immense differences in communication styles found along socio-economic lines are of far greater consequence than any parent could have imagined.

### **Vocabulary Strategies**

The research suggested that educators provide students with rich vocabulary instruction. Rich instruction includes utilizing questioning, giving brief explanations, pointing, clarifying, and repeating when teaching higher-level vocabulary. There is an

agreement by researchers that for students to have the best chance of achieving ownership of a word, the instructional encounters provided to students must be rich, interactive, and multi-faceted.

Teachers working to increase the academic vocabularies of young children have utilized trade books read aloud to students to introduce, define, and discuss target words (I. L. Beck et al., 2005). Coupled with the use of trade books, researchers also advocated active involvement on the part of the learner (Cahill & Horvath, 2013). Studies have shown that when students are active participants in vocabulary instruction, more academic vocabulary words are learned (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000).

There are strategies to help build vocabulary knowledge in older students (grades four and up). There is strong evidence that supported the effectiveness of explicit vocabulary instruction that focused on teaching students the meanings of specific words (National Reading Panel, 2000). The evidence stated that explicit vocabulary instruction should directly teach the meanings of words that are important for understanding the text and concepts that students will often encounter (Stahl, 1986). Strategies included using both contextual and definitional information, giving multiple exposures to target words, and encouraging deep processing (National Reading Panel, 2000, (M. McKeown & Beck, 2006)). Activities that encouraged processing challenged students to move beyond memorizing dictionary definitions (I. L. Beck et al., 2008). These included *read-alouds* (Hoyt, 2007) and *sentence expansion* (Cudd & Roberts, 1994). Many academic vocabulary programs combined one or more strategies to increase students' understanding of words. Winters (2009) claimed that teachers' approaches to vocabulary instruction should be multipronged and include direct instruction of keywords,

incorporation of student-driven word-learning strategies, and extensive reading. Studies by Baumann, Ware, and Edwards (2007) and Lubliner and Smetana (2009) have shown the effects of a balanced approach to vocabulary instruction, where a combination of strategies was used.

Baumann and colleagues (2007) studied the effects of “a comprehensive vocabulary instructional program on students’ word knowledge and appreciation” (p.108). The authors based their experiment on the vocabulary instruction program designed by Graves (2006). This program consisted of four major components: exposing students to wide-ranging vocabulary opportunities, encouraging word consciousness, allowing students the opportunity to learn specific words, and multiple approaches to developing vocabularies. The authors designed a formative experiment that attempted to measure the effectiveness of these four concepts over one year with fifth-grade students. It was necessary to implement an effective teaching strategy or mechanism that would increase vocabulary development to expose students to material that includes Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words. There are three types of vocabulary words—three tiers of vocabulary—for teaching and assessing word knowledge. A word’s frequency of use, complexity, and meaning determines into which tier it will fall; Tier 1—Basic Vocabulary, Tier 2—High Frequency/Multiple Meaning, and Tier 3—Subject Related (Biemiller, 2004). One such strategy was read-alouds, which “encourage learners to observe the power of precise vocabulary; identify and appreciate onomatopoeia, literary language simile, and metaphor; and discern the meanings of unfamiliar words through context clues” (Biemiller & Boote, 2006).

Read-alouds can be effective in assisting upper-grade adolescents in acquiring and maintaining the vocabulary needed to be successful in vocabulary learning. The Commission on Reading concluded that “the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 23). Reading aloud is beneficial for increasing a student’s overall comprehension, and it allows vocabulary to be targeted within context (Hoyt, 2007). Jim Trelease states that there are only two efficient ways to get words into a person’s brain: either by seeing them or by hearing them (Trelease, 2017). In that same handbook, Trelease points out by reading aloud we also build vocabulary, condition the child’s brain to associate reading with pleasure, create background knowledge, provide a reading role model, and plant the desire to read (2017).

At the conclusion of Baumann and colleagues’ experiment (2007), the quantitative results revealed that students’ word knowledge increased. Students’ expressive vocabulary grew more than the authors expected, as shown by a comparison of the pretest and posttest. The author’s qualitative findings revealed that students used more sophisticated and challenging words. Students’ interest and attitudes toward vocabulary learning increased, and the students demonstrated the use of word-learning strategies independently and engaged in wordplay. The authors’ concluded that the students increased their word knowledge because they were taught methods to acquire new words and placement in a “vocabulary-rich environment” (p.120).

## **Method**

I used a narrative inquiry approach for this iteration. Narrative research originated from literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and education, yet

different fields of study have adopted their own approaches (Chase, 2005). Narrative inquiry is distinctive with its own definitions and a well-established view as both a methodology and phenomena (Clandinin et al., 2000). The idea of narrative inquiry is that stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature. According to Clandinin and Huber, narrative inquiry is the study of experience understood narratively (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). It is a way of thinking about, and studying, experience. Narrative inquirers think narratively about experience through inquiry. Narrative inquiry follows a recursive, reflexive process of moving from field (with starting points in telling or living of stories) to field texts (data) to interim and final research text (2010). Dr. Elaine Chan wrote an article called, *Teacher experiences of culture in the curriculum* (Chan, 2006). She used a narrative inquiry approach that I used to draw my ideas from for this section. Her story telling allowed a model for my story telling. During my narrative inquiry approach, there were multiple meetings between myself and the participants. The connections created between us provided a safe space to open up and share stories and experiences.

There is often a sense that stories are just something that is told to explain or make a point, and it would be easy to assume that stories are merely subjective accounts told in the classroom. However, during this pilot study, my narrative inquiry included: field notes, journals from the students, unstructured interviews, and storytelling.

The pilot study got off to a rocky start. With my teaching background, I expected this vocabulary iteration to be easy to conduct. I would conduct my research using interviews and a focus group with the students. I assumed I would have minimal trouble working with a group of students and implementing successful vocabulary strategies.



What I did not expect was to be working with a group of kids that had no desire to spend time with me and did not want me to teach them anything. I was not in my classroom, trying to conduct this research. I was at the Center working with students that were there for an after-school program, which meant that they had already had eight hours of school and did not want to have to “keep learning” after school at the Center. I was a stranger to them. From past experiences working with kids of poverty in *my* classrooms, I knew that they needed time to get to know and trust others. What I thought was going to be an easy three-month study turned into an eight-month-long journey.

As a veteran teacher that spent more than 20 years teaching in Title 1 schools, I know how to reach students who have more on their minds than school. What I didn't take into account was the study was not in *my* classroom. These children did not know or trust me, and they had already spent eight hours in the classroom. There was also no power in our relationship. I was not the teacher with the ability to discipline, nor did they have to be there. They volunteered, and I had to find a new way to engage them. They told me numerous times that they had no desire to be “learning” while at the Center. I tried unsuccessfully to convince them to read the books from the supplemental reading series that I wanted to implement.

I lost hope of thinking this pilot study was going to happen. I sought the advice of my advisor, who pointed out the difference between working with a group of kids who don't know me and working in my classroom full of students. He reminded me of how long I would spend creating a community in my classroom. He also pointed out that my students weren't expected to complete any curriculum work in the first week of being together because we were busy building a community/family environment. I learned this

“rule” a long time ago and knew how much easier it was to convince my students to complete tasks when a community was established in the classroom.

**Problem of Practice (revised)**

Upon realizing that the kids were not going to practice vocabulary strategies, I decided to go in a different direction with my study. My new problem of practice question was, *How does creating a relationship before implementing learning strategies impact kids living in poverty?*

I chose participants for my study based on the following criteria: a student that qualifies to receive free breakfast and lunch at school qualifies for free or reduced tuition at the center and teacher/staff recommendations.

I had originally wanted to create an intervention or a strategy that would allow teachers to teach vocabulary to students that have difficulty with new words and cannot rely on background knowledge to connect life experiences to the word. The strategy I thought I needed to create involved reading, however, I could not create any reading strategy or intervention until I developed a relationship with the students. That was the real barrier. Relationship building is difficult when working with kids of poverty (Brown, 2015). After building a relationship and creating trust among the group, I hoped to implement the Quick Reads program to help increase their reading skills.

I began by thinking back to how I approached the problem of students putting up walls at the beginning of every school year when I was an elementary teacher. The most important task before any curriculum could be learned was to build a community in my classroom. I knew that if a sense of community could be established, learning could happen (Blazer, 2011).

After researching and brainstorming, I went back to the community center with a new plan. I put the Quick Reads program aside and *talked* to the students. We did not have a set agenda developed; we just talked. I met with two sets of students (5 students in each section) for 30 minutes each three days a week. There was a group of girls who were in third grade and a group of boys in fourth grade. I did not plan the groups this way. They formed themselves organically after a few weeks of meeting within a large group. Some of the students lost interest, a few moved away and no longer attended the community center. Eventually, these two groups were the students who met on a consistent basis.

The two groups would meet for 30 minutes at a time, three days a week. They would talk about their school day, their schoolwork, what they did during the previous weekend, and what they were doing the following weekend. I never asked them to read or write anything, only to talk- to form relationships. I took notes in my journal to document what was discussed. The goal was to track relationship building, not the content. This routine went on for almost a month. We met, talked about several topics, and they would go back to the main room of the community center when the 30 minutes was over.

Finally, one day, one of the boys asked about a book their teacher was reading to them in their class called *Dogman (Dav Pilkey)*. I had not heard of this book before, but the way the student talked about it made me want to get a better idea of the book. I told the student that I would check into what this *Dogman* book was all about.

I decided to turn to the local library for help. I found out it was a series of books created by *Dav Pilkey*, the same author who created the series *Captain Underpants*. I knew that the series was popular and expected the same reaction to the new series that

interested the boys. I checked out the only copy of the book in our town library system and put a hold on the rest of the five books in the series. I also checked out other books that the librarian suggested for each age group.

When the groups met again, I showed them the books I had found. The boy group met first. They took one look at *Dogman* and asked if they could read it. On the outside, I was trying to maintain composure, but on the inside, I was very excited. Usually, this group of boys did not want anything to do with reading at the Center because they had to read in school. I had to convince them to meet with me most days because they would rather play basketball in the gym instead of meeting with me.

All five students were huddled around the book, giggling, laughing, and reading. When it was time to switch groups, the boys did not want to leave. I assured them they would get to read the next day again. Before they left, one of the boys requested a different book that he had been reading at school and was not allowed to bring home. The thing you need to know about being a kid living in poverty is that sometimes you don't share the same privileges as other kids. Not being able to take library books home to read is one of those privileges. Sometimes the books would not get returned due to various reasons, nor can their parents afford to buy the book, so some kids living in poverty didn't get to take books home to read.

That request of the library book led to other boys making requests too. I quickly wrote down the book titles and told them I would order them from the library. I told them to begin thinking about other books that might be out there that they want to read. I promised to try and request those as well.

There was a similar reaction to meeting with the girls that day. They, too, enjoyed the *Dogman* series, and each of them had additional book titles they wanted to read that were not part of the *Dogman* series. I honestly could not have dreamed up this scenario. I planned on them liking the *Dogman* book and maybe looking through the pages the day I brought that book to the center. I did not plan on these students having other books they wanted to read. This was my unconscious bias or stereotyping showing through. I assumed that since they didn't want to read with me, that they couldn't, wouldn't, or didn't read anywhere. What I should have heard was that they want to read what they want to read, and that they would rather not have to read what is prescribed to them. As Lillian Polite and Elizabeth Saenger said, "Acknowledging biases often opens doors for learning and allows people to consciously work for harmony in classrooms and communities (Polite & Saenger, 2002). I did a quick reflection of my thinking and stereotyping and opened my mind to the reality of these kids being capable of reading books that interested them. Because they got to choose their book, they became intrinsically motivated to read on their own.

In the days after this discovery, I began checking out books from the local libraries. The boys were happy to see the books they requested available to them at the Center. The boys always read in groups of two or three. The girls began reading by themselves and would end up either partnering when there was a good part of the book or reading whole group style when there was a "really good" part of the book.

I noticed a pattern forming with these two groups. They both requested graphic novel series. I didn't realize how many different graphic novel books were available, but it seemed that writers were doing a great job of getting books in kids' hands to read their

material. There were graphic novels with more words than pictures, there were some that had equal parts words and pictures, and there were some that had more pictures than words. There were books designed to meet a broad spectrum of reading levels, which created motivation, choice, and clarity that students could choose appropriate and motivating books on their own. A big part of their problem was access to books, not familiarity or lack of motivation.

We co-constructed a routine in each group. Before the snacks were implemented into the schedule, the students would sometimes complain they were hungry. I know when I'm hungry, I have a hard time concentrating. Providing a small snack for them was effortless on my part, and it kept the students focused on reading and not food. So, the sessions started by choosing a snack. The groups would then take turns and share something good that happened that day or the day before. It was essential to take the time to do this because it was part of establishing and then maintaining a community. It's also important to note that sometimes there were things going on that were negative. We were establishing a safe space at the Center. If they were comfortable enough sharing, they could share something that was worrying them. After sharing, they read. Before the groups finished, anyone who wanted to share what was happening in their book had the opportunity to share.

The reading groups continued to share something good at the beginning of the session, read their books, and share what was happening in their books at the end of the session. There were days when the students didn't want to read. When this happened, we would have a snack and talk about whatever was on their minds. It was important to recognize that there were days that our plan of reading for at least 20 minutes was

renegotiated. As an educator, I learned a long time ago that if something was bothering my students, pushing forward disregarding their needs was not constructive. It was better to address the problem rather than try to ignore it. The same rules apply to my reading groups at the Center. It was even more necessary to take the time to let them talk as we tried to build community. The following day, we would continue with our regular schedule.

Changing my project focus was not something I wanted to do. I thought I needed the students to help me complete my study on using vocabulary strategies to improve their reading comprehension. I did not want to take the time to build relationships with a new set of students. I knew in the back of my mind that building relationships is always the first step in a successful learning classroom, so I reflected on the success stories from my past teaching experience and began to accept this study as it was.

### **Significance of Relationships as a Foundation for the Learning Process**

Relationships with significant adults in their lives (parents and teachers) are young children's main resources for their own development (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006).

Students whose relationships with their teachers are characterized by high levels of support and low levels of conflict obtain higher scores on measures of academics and behavioral adjustment than do students whose relationships with teachers are less positive (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Prospective studies have found that a more positive teacher-student relationship is associated with a greater sense of school belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), lower levels of externalizing behaviors (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005), improved peer relationships (Hughes & Kwok, 2006), and higher achievement (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004).

A positive relationship with a teacher may be especially important to the school adjustment of students at higher risk for school failure due to family background variables (Gruman, Harachi, Abbot, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008) or academic or behavioral problems (Baker, 2006). According to Shameka Powell, (2017) educators, in numerous ways, can work to sustain a quality education for all students. One possible way is adhering to a critical multicultural education approach. Teachers engaging in multicultural education recognize that equality and equity are not the same thing (Powell and Henry, 2017).

The motivation to keep reading and to develop reading habits needed to be intrinsic. The children had developed a positive relationship with me. The relationship allowed them to let their guard down and read for pleasure. I wanted them to keep this motivation going and carry it into their classrooms to help them be more successful. I still wasn't paying attention to race being a critical factor in their success.

As the semester ended, I realized that yes, relationships are a necessary step. However, it took all semester to build these relationships. There was no time to teach any vocabulary and reading skills or strategies. I know I should have been happy with what I did. Relationships are hard to build. But I still wanted to find a way to try and enhance their vocabularies to help them be successful in their classrooms. Not only was the semester ending, but so was the children's school year. A majority of them were spending the summer at the Center. I worried about the so-called *Summer Slide* (Blazer, 2011) because there is no sort of reading program at the Center. What would they do all day?

I knew I needed to begin a new iteration for the summer. I would study the effects of summer reading on children at the center. I could also build on their vocabulary skills



while implementing a summer reading study. Along with building the children's vocabulary skills, what I hoped to accomplish was to create reading habits for the children in which they could use when they returned to school.

## Chapter IV. ITERATION 2.1 SUPPLEMENTAL READING DURING THE SUMMER

As the second iteration came to an end, I considered my findings and discovered a third design step. During my previous iteration, I switched the focus of vocabulary to relationship building. As that iteration came to an end due to summer break from school, I realized I had not been able to focus on vocabulary because I concentrated on building relationships. I concluded that focusing on relationships and not academic vocabulary was necessary to get me to this place in my research. However, I needed more time with the children to get back to academic vocabulary building. In my mind, I wanted them to go begin the school year with a base of vocabulary words that might help them with their curriculum.

As the semester ended, I began thinking about what the summer would look like for the kids. They were going to be out of school for two and a half months. Their days of structured reading and learning were ending. I decided to try and work with the same groups over the summer to complete my research. I wanted to use the supplemental reading materials I originally planned to try and avoid the summer slide. My third iteration asked the problem of practice question, *Can the Quick Reads program given during the summer help prevent the summer slide and build academic vocabulary while maintaining established relationships?* I knew I could concentrate on academic vocabulary lessons along with reading with them during the summer. This iteration would be a continuation of the previous one with an added measure of reading.

I researched how teachers approached the summer months with their students because I had several questions about students reading over the summer. There are

strategies to help lessen the gap created by the summer slide. I wanted to help the kids at the Center with this potential gap.

### **Problem of Practice**

My third iteration problem of practice asked the question, *Can the Quick Reads program given during the summer help prevent the summer slide and build vocabulary while maintaining established relationships?*

### **Literature Review**

The following is a review of literature that examines the effects of what is known as the summer slide with children living in poverty.

### **Summer Reading and the Role of Poverty**

In Heyn's (1978) landmark study of summer reading, hours spent reading, and books read in the summer were significantly related to fall reading achievement with spring reading achievements, family income, parental education, and household size controlled. Studies have replicated Heyn's (1978) original findings (Kim, 2004; Phillips & Chin, 2004). Both of these investigators controlled for spring scores and family income. They included a variety of additional covariates as controls (e.g., demographic characteristics, parents' expectations, teacher ratings, student attitudes toward reading). Phillips and Chin (2004) found that students who read more than 30 minutes per day in the summer had higher reading comprehension scores in the fall. Kim (2004) found a significant relationship between books read in the summer and fall reading comprehension scores.

The summer slide is defined as the loss of academic skills over the summer months due to reduced educational opportunities (Leefatt, 2015). Learning loss over

summer break is often due to an interruption in reading and math practice that causes students to lose academic skills learned during the school year—resulting in the need to reteach at the start of the next school year to recoup lost skills (Cooper et al., 1996). The summer slide is critical, given its cumulative effect, often resulting in the widening of the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Pitcock & Seidel, 2015).

What happened to students during the summer when they no longer had access to academic resources and instruction? The research found that the interruption of learning, often referred to as summer slide, impacted all students (Garst & Ozier, 2015). In a meta-analysis of 39 studies, Cooper et al. (1996) reported that students lost approximately one month of skills over the summer. In reading, McAlister (2014) found that summer loss is more significant as the students get older. Several studies indicated that summer learning loss is cumulative, and the effect over time equaled two years of lost learning by 6th grade (Pitcock and Seidel, 2015).

Despite summer vacation impacting the academic achievement of all students, specific student groups were particularly vulnerable (Cann et al., 2015). Outside factors such as income level, ethnicity, parent education level, English Language Learners (ELL), and home language were associated with increased summer slide (Sandberg Patton & Reschly, 2013). A review of the literature established a link between the summer slide and students' socio-economic status (Cann et al., 2015).

Zvock and Stevens (2015) reported that the effects of the summer slide were greater for students from poorer homes when compared to students from wealthier homes over approximately 11 weeks during summer break (Garst & Ozier, 2015). Vale and

colleagues (Vale et al., 2013) attributed 80% of the gap in academics between poor and wealthy groups to the summer slide.

Socioeconomic differences in reading growth rates were larger in the summer months than in the school year (Benson & Borman, 2010). According to the “faucet theory” proposed by Alexander and colleagues (2007), all children gained when they were in school because the resources needed for learning are available to them. Faucet theory depicted the school year as a time when the faucet of resources and instruction flow, but during the summer months, the faucet is turned off. However, when school was not in session, the resource faucet was turned off only for students from low-income families. They stop gaining or even lose ground while children from middle- or high-income families maintain or improve their skills. Summer learning resources differed in a variety of ways. Relative to children from middle-income homes, children from poor homes had fewer material resources (e.g., books) or physical resources (e.g., family support for literacy) in the home. They had less material or psychological resources in the community where they live (e.g., neighborhood libraries, learning from peers) (Holzer et al., 2007).

Several studies validated this theory. McGarry (McGarry, 2013) showed that during the school year, when students had access to resources and instruction, students who were poor made gains that were comparative to wealthy students. However, during the summer months, students from poor homes had access to fewer resources, which resulted in a loss of skills.

Research samples have shown that there was a strong relationship between family income and access to books and other reading materials in the home. Families who are

poor were far less likely than children from families who are wealthy to have ten or more books in their homes (Bradley et al., 2001). Lee and Burkam (2002) found that children from families who are poor owned an average of 38 books compared to an average of 108 books for children from wealthy families.

Family support for literacy is strongly associated with income. Burkam et al. (2004) found that parents who are poor were significantly less likely to read a book to their children in the summer between kindergarten and first grade than parents who are wealthy. A similar pattern was evident for taking children to a library or bookstore. Bradley and colleagues (2001) found that mothers who are wealthy were more likely than mothers who are poor to read to their children three or more times per week. Phillips (2011) found income-based differences in time spent in literacy activities that were larger for children ages six and older than for three- to five-year-old children. Neuman and Celano (2006) found that in libraries in neighborhoods that are described as middle-income, adult caregivers frequently assisted preschool children in selecting challenging reading materials. In libraries in neighborhoods that are described as poor, children received little guidance from an adult.

Regarding community resources, Neuman and Celano (2001) found that in neighborhoods that are poor, fewer books were available in stores, childcare centers, local elementary schools, and public libraries. Also, the available books were of lower quality.

### **Something to Consider**

Two considerations are theoretically important in providing books for students' summer reading, text difficulty, and interest. Regarding difficulty, efforts to assess

students' independent reading levels and provide them with appropriately leveled texts have a long history dating back to the McGuffey readers (Fry, 2002). When students were reading independently, especially if they were struggling readers, it was generally considered crucial to provide them with texts that are not too challenging, so they did not become frustrated and stop reading (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2018). Also, word reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension improved when students read texts at their independent reading level (O'Connor et al., 2010). An independent reading level is the highest level at which a reader has adequate background knowledge for the topics, and can access text quickly and with few errors (Almus & Dogan, 2016). There was an equally strong consensus among reading scholars to encourage voluntary reading outside of school. It was essential to provide students with books on topics that interest them (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013). Research has shown that students are more likely to comprehend texts that they rate as interesting. Also, students reported that interesting texts are more enjoyable to read and that they liked continuing reading those texts (J. T. Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

### **The Impact of the Summer Slide on the Reading Achievement Gap**

To close the achievement gap between students who are poor and students who are wealthy, the focus needed to be on the summer slide (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003). Children who are poor are at a disadvantage. In recognition of this reality, federal funding for interventions for economically disadvantaged students was initiated through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1966 (ESEA). The aim was to provide funding for supplementary educational interventions in the hope of narrowing the

achievement gap that existed between more- and less-advantaged students (McGill-Franzen & Goatley, 2001).

The summer slide occurred when students returned to school after summer vacation with diminished reading skills, presumably from a lack of adequate reading practice. The summer slide affected children from families of different socioeconomic groups differently. Research indicated that the reading achievement of children who are poor, as a group, typically declined during the summer vacation period, while the reading achievement of children from more wealthy families held steady or increased modestly (Hayes & Grether, 1983).

With the reauthorization of the (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) ESEA, the reading achievement gap rose on the agenda of national education. Federal funding for interventions that would narrow the achievement gap flowed, though this time with restrictions such that interventions must be informed by “scientific research,” which means that the focus was on younger students and on the development of basic phonological skills Hayes & Grether (1983). It was time to consider alternative strategies in the campaign to close the wealthy/poor reading achievement gap.

Researchers Hayes and Grether (1983) and Entwisle, Alexander, & Steffel Olson (1997) contrasted the reading achievement patterns in schools enrolling mostly students who are described as affluent. Those that mainly enrolled students that are described as poor concluded that equalizing educational opportunities and achievement was not working.

In both of these large-scale research studies, the achievement gap between children who are wealthy and poor was shown to grow dramatically across the



elementary school years (from less than one year's difference to almost three years' difference). Both studies were designed, so that data for estimating student achievement at the beginning and end of each school year (September and June) were available. This information allowed the researchers to estimate both the reading growth during the school year and the accumulating impact of the summer slide.

The negative impact of the summer slide on children who are poor was that long-term reading achievement led both sets of researchers to argue that efforts targeted at improving curriculum and instruction in schools classified as poor were unlikely to close the reading achievement gap. In the researchers' view, much of the school reform effort aimed at improving the reading achievement of children who are poor failed to focus on the child's summer slide.

However, Entwisle and colleagues (1997) analysis of the achievement gains made during the academic year (fall-to-spring comparisons) showed that high-poverty and low-poverty schools made substantially similar gains when school was in session. The effects of summer vacation (spring-to-fall comparisons) on reading achievement presented a very different pattern. Most of the large gap in reading achievement found in grade 6 could be attributed to the summer slide and the smaller initial achievement differences between the two groups of students when they began school.

Similarly, Borman and D'Agostino (1996) noted that across several large-scale evaluations of the federal Title 1 remedial reading program, there found a discrepancy between reported gains achieved by participating students, depending on whether the gains were reported for fall-to-spring or spring-to-spring testing. They note that 'substantially smaller annual [spring-to-spring] gains...suggest that the Title 1

intervention during the regular school year alone may not sustain their relatively large Fall/Spring achievement improvement” (p.323).

In other words, the effects of remedial reading instruction during the school year were diminished when the summer vacation period was included in the estimates of achievement growth. Since federal Title 1 funds are targeted to students from families that are poor, the summer slide phenomenon would produce just such discrepancies in estimates of program impact. Recognizing this discovery led the researchers to recommend that more considerable attention be paid to using Title 1 funds to provide alternative educational support programs for Title 1-eligible students during summers. According to Michael J. Puma (1997), few Title 1 programs have heeded that advice.

However, there are good reasons to be optimistic about the potential impact of improving the curriculum and instruction in schools that are poor, if only because so much work has demonstrated the difference that such improvements could make in student achievement (Hiebert, 1992). Moreover, indeed, we should not ignore the prospect of improving the quality of classroom reading instruction as a way of attempting to improve the reading gap between the wealthy and poor. Still, the scientific evidence of the accumulating impact of the summer slide on the achievement gap is very interesting.

### **Some are Reading, and Some are Not**

The research (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003) pointed toward several factors that might explain why reading during the summer months might be less common among children who are poor. First, elementary school children, especially children who are poor, reported getting most of their reading material from school or classroom library collections, and schools serving large numbers of these children had smaller, older, and

less diverse school and classroom library collections than other schools. Therefore, these children had a much more limited selection of books to read, even during the school year. Children attending schools that are described as poor also experienced more restricted access to more limited print resources (Sherry Guice et al., 2002). Not only did they have fewer books to select from, but they also had fewer scheduled visits to the library and more restrictions on how many books they could check out and whether the books can be taken home.

Family income is a powerful predictor of the number of age-appropriate children's books and magazines that were available in the home (Tamara Halle, Beth Kurtz-Costes, & Joseph Mahone, 1997). The families with the lowest income had limited financial resources, and book purchases fall into the "discretionary needs" category. One might hypothesize that the limited availability of children's books in communities described as poor is related to the problem of limited income-retailers stocking what they could sell. If books were discretionary purchases, then differences in retailers' display of books would seem likely to be related to the amount of discretionary money available to families in different communities. McGill and Allington pointed out that the problem of limited access to books and other reading materials in communities of the poor was a persistent one, both in and out of school (1993).

This access problem escalates in the summer months when children typically have no access to the book collections in their schools. Even schools that are considered poor that offer a summer school program, it seems that the school library is rarely open or available for use. Furthermore, unless the teacher in the classroom is teaching the summer school program, classroom libraries are off-limits as well.

Children who are poor exhibit a variety of achievement patterns during the summer months. Michael Puma and his colleagues (Puma et al., 2012) reported that higher-achieving students who are poor fared better than lower-achieving students. That is, lower-achieving children who are poor demonstrated a more significant summer slide. While family socioeconomic status and reading achievement were highly correlated, the report's findings suggest that their limited access to books during the summer months was not the only explanation of the consistent findings of substantial summer slide among the children who are poor.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) noted that there were a number of motivational and volitional factors that influenced reading behavior, especially voluntary summer reading activity. Children's beliefs about their efficacy, for example, were linked to past academic performance, including their experiences as more- or less-successful readers. It was readers with low reading skills who were most likely to be assigned texts that were too hard - texts they read with little fluency, limited accuracy, and lack of comprehension (1997). It is those readers who seemed less likely to exhibit the motivation to read voluntarily - during the school year or summer months.

For millions of children in America, when schools close for the summer, safe and enriching learning environments are out of reach, replaced by boredom, lost opportunities, and risk (After School Alliance, 2013; Cooper, 2013). Analysis of data from America After 3 PM study measured the extent of this problem, concluding that three-quarters of America's schoolchildren do not participate in summer learning programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2013, NSLA, 2010). These summer learning opportunities offered safe, structured programs that

provided a variety of activities designed to encourage learning and development in the summer months. However, according to *American After 3 PM*, 56% of children (an estimated 24 million) who were not participating in summer learning programs, would likely enroll in a program, based on parental interest (Afterschool Alliance, 2013). The report states that 43% of the estimated 14.3 million children who attended summer learning programs qualified for free or reduced-price lunches (Afterschool Alliance, 2013). Other findings from the study included:

- Thirty-five percent of African American, 29% of Hispanic, and 27% of children who are poor attended summer learning programs in 2008, compared to the national average of 25%.
- More than three in four African American kids (77%) and at least two in three Hispanic (70%) and kids who are poor (67%) would likely enroll in the summer learning program, based on parent interest.
- Eight in ten parents (83%) support public funding for summer learning programs.
- Fully 95% of African Americans, 91% of Hispanics, and 90% of parents described as poor support public funding for summer learning programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2013).

Discovering how important reading during the summer is, I knew I had to incorporate the Quick Reads program into their summer schedule. Not only could we read during summer, but the Quick Reads program helped build vocabulary too.

## **Method**

This study was also set up as a narrative inquiry study examining the implementation of the Quick Reads reading program that was initially set up for the past

iteration. I planned to use field notes, journals, interviews, and storytelling to decide what improvements to their reading and vocabulary building, if any, the students had from reading all summer. I had approximately two months of summer and planned to try out the series with these students and see how many books we could finish before summer ended. The Center had a week-long break between the end of the school year and the beginning of the summer session. I hoped that when the students returned, they would be willing to go along with my plan.

### Implementing the Program

The kids were excited to be back at the Center, and I was equally excited to see them. The first two days, we met using our regular schedule of getting a snack, talking about our day before, and reading personal books. We also added a walk before our sessions to get some fresh air and exercise. This seemed to get them focused on our group time. There is evidence that bouts of physical activity can improve cognitive function (Best, 2010), concentration (Taras, 2005), and academic achievement (Castelli et al., 2007). There is also evidence that physical activity breaks that include an academic component can improve time on-task in primary school students (Mahar et al., 2006). After the second day, I asked them if we could look at some different books. I told them they were part of a series that I was interested in using in my classroom and wanted their opinion on what they thought of the books.

They received journals to “take notes”, a new folder to keep them organized, and a schedule of what books we were going to read. I told them we wouldn’t do this every day. We would also have days in the week that were used for their chosen books. We decided as a group to read from the series on Monday and Wednesday and read from the

selected books on Tuesday and Thursday. On Fridays, we would play Rock, Paper, Scissors to choose which readings we would do. They were excited about the journals and folders. They were willing to try the supplemental readings.

I told the students the reason we should read this series of books is that the vocabulary content in each story is repeated several times so that students can learn them easier than if we were trying to memorize words. I explained that I wanted them to be able to read and comprehend what they were reading. I said reading in school will be easier if you can read and *understand* what you read. Vocabulary is a big part of understanding what is being read.

### **Sequence of Activities and Design Moves**

We started with the first book. It wasn't a smooth transition. The students thought the books were boring since they were non-fiction. I told them that sometimes books teach us things we might not know and that once we learn about the unfamiliar topic, we become more interested in what's being read. Thankfully, they accepted this rationale.

Thinking back, I strongly agree with the need to build relationships before trying to force a new idea or topic is the key to successful intrinsic learning in the classroom. We had been together for six months, and they knew I always had their best interests in mind. Without the relationship-building component, I don't think the transition would have been so fluid. Teachers can coerce students to "go through the motions" in the classroom because of the power differential but working with students in the center has shown me that the path that includes joint decision making, providing a rationale, and community can create a different way of learning.

The journaling wasn't part of the Quick Reads program, but I have always been a fan of writing in one. They were allowed a free page for every entry they made about the book they read. They had the choice to journal about their chosen book, but they were required to make a daily entry about the series book. They could share what they wrote but didn't have to. By the end of the summer, eight out of ten students were regularly sharing what was in their journal. The free pages were just that, free to do whatever they wanted to on these pages. They could write, draw, invent poems, or whatever else they wanted to create on these pages. The only rule was that I monitored the content of the free pages for appropriateness. I was intentionally trying to teach them to write about what they read so the comprehension could come easier. I hoped they would carry this skill with them into their next school year.

We continued with the book series and their chosen books until the summer break ended, and they had to go back to school. We didn't get as far as I originally planned, partly because we also journaled and had whole group discussions about what we read. Those discussions were necessary for both community-building and comprehension. Overall, I do believe this two-month study enhanced the students' summer reading.

### **The Outcome of the Summer**

As summer was coming to an end, I began to see patterns with specific children. They liked the non-fiction books in our supplemental reading series that told stories of people or cultures that they could identify with. This got me thinking about the term, Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2018). I had come across this term while I was researching the term, minoritized communities. I revisited this research after realizing that it might be pertinent to my study. Had I finally settled on an iteration worthy enough



for my final step in this dissertation? Could I focus on the effects of culturally relevant pedagogy for minoritized students? I realized the answer was yes.

As a White person who grew up in poverty, I remember not being able to relate to the stories other students shared in my classrooms growing up. My teachers did not attempt to include background information that would help with my understanding of the stories we read in class about experiences that were unfamiliar to me.

As a teacher I carried those memories from elementary school into my classroom so I would not forget to include the children of poverty. A majority of the time, the children of poverty included children of different races. I built background knowledge and tried to explain the unfamiliar topics to these children. It wasn't until I began working with Black students that I realized I needed to include cultural relevance into my curriculum. Race was at the heart of things, and there was a natural interest emerging.

Another thing I learned was that I could co-create curriculum with students to manage pacing, activities, and choice of text to create a motivated group of kids who were immersed in learning even when they had other options. This was a voluntary summer reading program after all, and I had no power over them to force this curriculum.

Research has shown that if a student does not have a strong vocabulary, he or she will likely have low language comprehension and reading skills, which will negatively impact all other areas of education (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2011). I thought I was developing an intervention to be used in conjunction with their regular curriculum to help bring the vocabulary gap some children living in poverty might have due to lack of experience or background knowledge. What I did was develop a different study altogether that included a way that allowed me to discover the process of relationship and

trust-building with kids living in poverty that involved a group of children reading throughout the summer to try and avoid what is referred to as the summer slide.

## Chapter V. STUDY 3.0 MY RESEARCH STUDY

The previous iterations led me to where I am now, my final design step in this iteration study. I once thought this research journey would be complete when I discovered how to build relationships with children in their learning environment. I now realize that along with building relationships, vocabulary building, and discovering reading strategies, the children need to feel relevant in what they are learning. They need to see themselves in the literature they read. They also need to be a part of the process of designing the curriculum through choice of text, process, and product.

My challenge in the preceding iterations was my preoccupation with what *I* wanted them to read. I didn't take into account what their interests were. It wasn't until the conversation in our small group one day turned to the children talking about a singer they heard on social media that I realized I needed to listen more and talk less. I had no idea who this was. They spent a great deal of time making sure I knew everything about this singer. The girls went on to tell me about how the singer's hair was just like one of the girls in our small group, which opened a discussion of their hair versus mine. This conversation then turned to searching for books about black girls' hair. I had never seen this much excitement from these girls. That day I realized they should relate more to what they are learning. I created a new problem of practice that asked the question, *How would learning be more successful and meaningful to children if what they were reading was culturally relevant?*

The conflicts within classrooms that arise from not sharing the same cultural, ethnic, and communal values as the teachers who educate these students include a rise in suspensions, defiant behaviors, and low academic expectations (Guthrie et al., 2013).

Knowing these facts, the next step in my study was to create a learning culture where children feel accepted in the learning environment by adding co-constructed culturally relevant pedagogy.

### **Problem of Practice**

As previously mentioned, from my past iterations, I realized that relationship building could only get me so far with the children from the Center. The children I worked with at the Center are African American and living in minoritized communities. Sociologist Louis Wirth (1945) defined a minority group as “any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (Wirth, 1945). African Americans and Hispanics are often incorrectly considered *minority groups*. However, they are actually *minoritized*. Acknowledging this difference keeps the focus on the situation out of their control rather than focus on being subordinate to another group (Howard, 2007).

While spending time at the Center, I came across their mission statement:

*The Clyde Malone Community Center was founded in 1955 through a reorganization of the Lincoln Urban League (the League). Initially founded during a time in our history when civil rights for African Americans were extremely limited, the League founders, both black and white, were determined to improve social and economic conditions and increase understanding between all races. They believed that enhanced understanding between all groups of people would create a better community. For decades the Malone Center has served neighboring families, youth, seniors and the Lincoln community with inclusive "social, cultural, education,*

*employment and welfare" services (Malone Community Center Visualizing History, 2001).*

Not only did this statement become part of my “awakening” to issues of race beyond just poverty, it allowed me to be confident with the decision to add culturally relevant pedagogy to my study.

When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when they see distorted images, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how devalued they are in the society they are a part of (Tschida et al., 2014). I decided to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into this iteration. For my problem of practice, I asked the question, *How would learning be more successful and meaningful to children if what they were reading was culturally relevant?*

Years ago, Gloria-Ladson Billings (1995) published “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” giving a theoretical foundation for resource pedagogies that were built throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Educators have been inspired by what it means to make teaching and learning relevant to the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of students from diverse communities.

Ladson-Billings called for “a culturally relevant pedagogy that would propose to do three things-produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order” (p. 474). Paris suggests asking ourselves if the research and practice being produced under the umbrella of cultural relevance and responsiveness is, indeed, ensuring “maintenance of the languages and cultures of African-American, Latina/o, Indigenous American, Asian American, Pacific Islander American, and other

longstanding and newcomer communities in our classrooms” (p. 94). The question to ask when considering sustaining pedagogies is: What is the purpose of schooling in a pluralistic society? We need to find ways of sustaining and extending the richness of a pluralistic society.

The findings of this case study will show educators how they can allow children of minoritized communities to feel included, to be a part of a pluralistic society. Those experiences could consist of a child that is the minority in a group setting, a child who has different beliefs than the majority of the group, or it could be someone excluded because of the clothes they wear.

To explore strategies that foster children’s voice, I designed my study to examine merging and creating culturally relevant pedagogy and possible strategies for employing the framework in the school setting. Homi Bhabha, in his collection of essays, *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 2012), claims there is a space ‘in-between the designations of identity’ and that ‘this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy’ (p. 4). According to Bhabha, Hybridity theory posits that people in any given community draw on multiple sources of funds to make sense of the world. Further, hybridity theory examines how being “in-between” (Bhabha, 1994, pg. 1) several different funds of knowledge and discourse can be both productive and constraining in terms of one’s literate, social, and cultural practices, and ultimately, one’s identity development. The notion of hybridity can thus apply to the integration of competing knowledges and discourses; to the texts, one reads and writes, the relationships one encounters, and even to a person’s identity enactments and sense of self. Some scholars

refer to this in-between or hybrid space as the “third space,” emphasizing the role of the physical and socialized space in which people react (Bhabha, 1994). I wanted the children at the Center to draw on the sources they learned at the center and use it to be successful in their classrooms at school and to make sense of the world. It is important for children to feel relevant and comfortable in any setting.

During this case study, I discovered how to design a culturally responsive/relevant environment so that children from minoritized communities could relate course content from school to his or her cultural context. I investigated three questions:

1. What is the process of building relationships with children through co-constructing community and curriculum?
2. What is necessary for a learning environment to become full of *Windows and Mirrors* (Tschida et al. 2014)
3. How is a culturally relevant pedagogy environment developed?
4. What are the outcomes of building relationships and presenting culturally relevant pedagogy?

Each child created an individual project based on the topic they picked and the books they read (see Method of Study). The individual projects began with a whole-group lesson to model expectations of the projects. Building on the whole-group lesson, we continued to explore their connections by completing two additional lessons in the unit.

By the time the study was over, I had observed that the children were more comfortable with identifying themselves in the culturally relevant pedagogy. This study was based on the theory that a culturally value-driven framework of learning allows

children living in minoritized communities to receive an education that promotes personal interest, meaning, and value to their communities (Gay, 2018).

Teachers teach a variety of students who bring an enormous range of diversity into the learning environment. There are no one-size-fits-all approaches to the work of teaching. Teachers must be mindful of whom they are teaching and the range of needs that students will bring into the classroom. Moreover, the social context that shapes students' experiences is vast and complexly integral to what decisions are made and why (Milner, 2011). The nature of student needs varies from year-to-year.

My motive for this study was to open the door to a study of larger magnitude and of lengthier time frame might yield. I wanted to push toward a greater awareness of cultural bias. By focusing on the goals Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed two decades ago, I could empower students not only intellectually but also socially, emotionally, and politically.

Teachers who practice culturally relevant pedagogy do so because it is consistent with what they believe and who they are and what their role is (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Teachers' conceptions guide their practices based on contextual realities and nuances inherent to and in their work (Milner, 2011). When I was a teacher, I practiced culturally relevant pedagogy because I believed in it, and I thought it was the right practice to foster, support, create, and enable students' learning opportunities. This case study showed the importance of incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy into the lives of these children.



## Literature Review

The following is a review of the literature that examines the effects of building relationships with children of minoritized communities and the importance of developing a culturally relevant pedagogy.

The demographics in the United States shift and student populations become increasingly diverse (Taylor et al., 2016). Meeting the needs of all students, who may not share the same cultural reference points, values, or goals regarding learning - can appear to be an impossible challenge. In 2012, 83% of full-time public-school teachers were White (while only 7% were Black, 7% were Hispanic, and 1 % were Asian) and may or may not consider the ramifications of such diversity for teaching and learning (Aud et al., 2012). In the fall of 2014, the percentage of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools who were White was less than 50 percent (49.5 percent). The number of White students decreased from 28.3 million in 2004 to 24.9 million in 2014.

In contrast, the number of Hispanic students during this period increased from 9.3 million to 12.8 million, and the percentage of students that were Hispanic increased from 19 to 25 percent. Additionally, the number of Asian/Pacific Islander students increased from 2.2 million in the fall of 2004 to 2.6 million in the fall of 2014, and the percentage of students who were Asian/Pacific Islander increased from 4 to 5 percent. From the fall of 2004 to the fall of 2014, the number of Black students decreased from 8.4 million to 7.8 million, and the percentage of students who were Black decreased from 17 to 16 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2014)).

The problem this inequity possesses is minority students often do not share the cultural, ethnic, and communal values at the teachers who educate them. This is not

suggesting that minority children need minority teachers; instead, these students need teachers who understand and value their cultural, ethnic, and communal values.

Academic performance gaps may result from classroom practices grounded within the “Whitestream” curriculum that often ignores - or is uninformed about - the cultural identities or perspectives of nonwhite students (Urrieta 2010). Therefore, strong consideration needs to be given in creating learning environments that not only promote academic equality and excellence but honor the culture and identity of each child.

According to Freire and Macedo (Freire & Macedo, 1987), simply teaching our students to be able to decode texts is not enough. They suggest that students, in order to be fully functioning as citizens and intellectuals, must be able to read the world and the messages it sends them, for their own protection, and so that they may be able to contribute toward making the world the kind of place that they want it to be.

Reading the world involves reading all sorts of texts: written, visual, and digital. For it is in these texts and the language that supports them that many negative and harmful ideas are transmitted (Casserly, 1987). A big part of being able to read the world is having the ability to understand the ways that the media and other major institutions shape reality in order to promote value systems that are ultimately detrimental to this generation of youth. It is important for everyone to learn the information presented to us as biased and needs to be understood as such if we are to process it meaningfully. Teaching diverse students how to process what is learned in a meaningful way will help them feel relevant to the conversation.

One of the most perplexing features of the studies and reports on student success that have emerged in recent years is that many were dominated by discussion of student

failure. Often, these documents included a section with a title like “Barriers to Persistence and Completion.” These narratives fixated on factors that identified students as “at-risk,” “vulnerable” or “disadvantaged” (Ogbu, 1992).

Most importantly among these factors were some variation of three partially overlapping identifiers: minority, poor, and first-generation (“Supplemental Material for The Complexity of Cultural Mismatch in Higher Education: Norms Affecting First-Generation College Students’ Coping and Help-Seeking Behaviors,” 2019). According to this work, more than ever before, public schools are having to demonstrate their ability to ensure that students with these backgrounds achieve.

One of the challenges of the achievement gap deficit model is that it does not acknowledge that the goal “achievement” is a mainstream White construction of knowledge that tends to alienate and de-motivate students from minoritized communities.

As previously stated, according to Gloria Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three propositions: a) Students must experience academic success; b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogues are knowledgeable about and supportive of the cultural norms of minority students, are sensitive to and confront the political challenges facing Black students and establish an affiliation and connectedness with students and their communities (Howard, 2003). They have high expectations for Black students, value the students’ experiences by linking them to curricula, and focus on students’ overall development (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

According to Sonia Nieto (Nieto, 2009), culturally responsive pedagogy includes:

- A mindset that respects and honors students' individuality as well as their cultures, experiences, and histories.
- A way to include these in curriculum and through teaching approaches
- A commitment to continuing to learn about one's students' individuality as well as their cultures, experiences, and histories
- A stance and a set of dispositions including
  - Engaging in critical self-reflection about one's values, biases, strengths, and limitations, and how these can affect one's effectiveness with students of diverse backgrounds
  - Valuing language and culture in word and deed
  - Insisting on high quality and excellent work from all students
  - Affirming students' identities while also expanding their world
  - Honoring families
  - Exemplifying a commitment to life-long learning (Nieto, 2009)

Django Paris (2012) took the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy one step further and offered the term and stance of culturally sustaining pedagogy as an alternative that supports the value of multiethnic and multilingual present and future (Paris, 2012).

According to Paris, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster - to sustain - linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schools. Instead of current policies and practices focusing on creating a monocultural and monolingual society, research and practice need to embrace cultural pluralism and cultural equality.

He offers this term as an alternative that supports the value of multiethnic and multilingual present and future. The term culturally sustaining requires that the pedagogies be more than responsive and relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people. It requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence.

Shameka Powell wrote in her dissertation, *Sifting for success: A grounded theory approach to sponsorship of Black student academic success* (Powell, 2015), about a yearlong, multi-sited ethnography of one urban and one suburban high school, exploring educator sponsorship of Black students' academic success. Powell found that teacher involvement in sponsorship-the process in which agents provide, stymie, or enhance access to valued resources for students- is shaped by how they read local racial disparities.

Through their sponsorship, teachers promoted the academic success of some Black students while thwarting the opportunities for other Black students, thereby exacerbating racial inequalities within their school. Powell generated a theory of sifting for success to define the ways in which teachers may conceptualize their sponsorships of students. Through engagement with institutional racism, teachers can center sponsoring relationships on race, racism, and education. More than merely talking about race, teachers engaged students in debates and lessons about the effects of racism. Even when students shied away from addressing racism, teachers explored it (2015).

In many educational circles, minoritized learners were often perceived as failing to understand the "true" meaning of education (Ogbu, 1992). Quite often, some educators

blamed students' family upbringing, dysfunctional communities, or poverty as the causes of their academic problems, ignoring or not being fully aware of the racial overtones of such claims. To offset these notions, it is important to identify and implement new learning models that improve student achievement broadly construed beyond standardized tests and school attainment. Although it is certain that variables such as poverty, family, and societal dilemmas affected students' learning outcomes, those factors are not the only reasons why "failure had become an option" for some students. When students no longer that school valued them or believed it was relevant or necessary, they perceived that education was unimportant (Ali & Murphy, 2013).

Culture is central to the way learning takes place (Gay, 2018). Culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centered approach to teaching that included cultural references and recognized the importance of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The approach was meant to promote engagement, enrichment, and achievement of all students by embracing a wealth of diversity, identifying and nurturing students' cultural strengths, and validating students' lived experiences and their place in the world.

Gay (2000) suggested that all educators take a more Culturally Responsive approach toward teaching, arguing that such an approach has the potential to bridge language and cultural gaps and therefore potentially lessen the barrier to learning that leads to gaps in between minoritized students (Ogbu, 1992).

Who are considered minoritized students? Over the past fifty years, Black, Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Native American students have been racially minoritized in U.S. society. The term "racially minoritized students" as opposed to

students of color or minority students is informed by Benitez's (Benitez, 2010) use of "minoritized" and similar to this usage is intended to refer to the "process [action v. noun] of student minoritization" (p. 131) that reflects an understanding of "minority" status as that which is socially constructed in specific societal content. People who are minoritized endure mistreatment and face prejudices that are enforced upon them because of situations outside of their control.

Emdin (2016) proposes a new approach to meeting the needs of culturally diverse students: reality pedagogy. Reality pedagogy is "an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural turf" (27). It recognizes the space outside the classroom and values the day-to-day experiences of students as part of the learning process. Reality pedagogy focuses on a shift in power relationships between teachers and students. Though the teacher maintains the role of presenting the content, the cultural identities and psychological, emotional, and academic needs of the students shape the content. Reality pedagogy requires teachers to "unpack their privilege" (15) recognize the power they hold in perpetuating institutional oppression, and reimagine the urban classroom as one in which students' cultural differences, languages, stories, and histories are not erased, but valued (Emdin, 2016).

Emdin's respect and devotion to the urban youth of our nation are apparent in every chapter. Also evident is his call for all educators, teachers, administrators, and policymakers to reflect on their own preconceptions about the students they work with and their communities. Emdin addresses what he refers to as the "problematic savior complex" (20) which is often inherent in teachers of students of different cultures. He argues that many teachers feel a sense of responsibility to "fix the kids who are poor." I

never felt the need to fix, only to empathize and guide these kids to success. This perspective incorrectly identifies the kids as broken. Instead, Emdin stresses, teachers benefit students the most when they recognize the personal biases they bring with them and adopt a worldview that embraces the brilliance of the student. A brilliance not often noticed through the lens of traditional school norms (2016).

### **Pre-service Education Training**

During my pre-service education, I do not remember taking a class on how to be a culturally responsive teacher. Considering the current social climate and the politically charged atmosphere in the nation, many teachers are aching to figure out how to talk about current events and issues related to diversity in their classrooms. However, many educators did not approach related issues such as Gender and Sexual Orientation, Ethnic and Racial Disparities in education, Cultural Diversity, Religion, and Socio-Economic Status and reported such learning was minimal in their educational training (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2010). Research conducted with pre-service teachers found students' knowledge of diverse cultures was marginal (Ladson-Billings, 2010) and revealed both in-service and experienced educators often employed a pervasive deficit model for lower academic achievement and perceived inadequacies (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Consequently, there was often a cultural disconnect between the research, teachers, and their students (McKoy et al., 2017).

As such, when working to advance educator preparation and better equip the next generation of teachers to advocate for educational equality, teacher educators and preparation programs must commit to fostering learning that examines how to meet the social and academic needs of diverse student populations (McKoy et al., 2017).



According to Villegas and Lucas, teachers must develop a knowledge and appreciation of diverse cultures and minoritized communities, explore how equitable and inclusive practices can be implemented in schools, and imagine strategies for challenging existing barriers (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Furthermore, teachers must have the opportunity to understand their evolving identities and how they influence action, counter or perpetuate biases or deficit practices, and expose or ignore injustices. When teachers are provided opportunities and spaces to be reflective, interrogate their assumptions, and investigate the realities of their biases, they are better prepared to consider how to promote equitable and inclusive classrooms and better positioned to be agents of change (Samuels, 2018).

### **Reading Difficulty**

Reading is a skill that is necessary for success in school and beyond it (Reschly, 2010); however, an astounding percentage of students from minoritized communities are not proficient in reading at their grade level. Difficulty with reading is one of the primary reasons students are recommended for grade retention or referred for special education evaluation; events that have been linked to later high school dropouts (Reschly, 2010). The Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that for children who were below the poverty line for at least a year and were not reading proficiently in the third grade, the proportion that did not finish high school rose to 26% (2011).

Students in classrooms across the United States are a reflection of the diverse people, perspectives, histories, and values in our society. Multiple studies have shown the power of using multicultural texts to address critical topics in classrooms - not only for students of color but for all students (Seo and Choi, 2015; Gay, 2018; Ramsey, 2004). Using literature as windows and mirrors is a strategy used for teaching multicultural

texts. The phrase “mirrors and windows” was initially introduced by Emily Style for the National SEED Project. A mirror is a story that reflects your own culture and helps you build your identity. A window is a resource that offers you a view of someone else’s experience. It is critical to understand that students cannot truly learn about themselves unless they learn about others as well (Style, 1988). According to Sonia Nieto, the field of multicultural children’s literature was born partly as a result of the awareness inspired by Nancy Larrick’s 1965 article, “The All-White World of Children’s Literature” (Nieto, 2000). Because of advocacy on the part of various communities, as well as the nation’s changing demographics, and the publishing industry’s recognition that their bottom line could improve if they were more inclusive, children’s books today reflect a much broader racial and ethnic representation than ever before.

Scholars of children’s literature have long stressed the need for turning a critical eye to the stories we tell, who is doing the telling, and who gets left out (Fox & Short, 2003). Such scholars have defined multicultural literature, encouraged pre-and in-service teachers to become familiar with diverse titles, and shared the power of exploring diverse text with children (K. L. Guthrie et al., 2013). In spite of these efforts, however, authors and illustrators representing diverse races, classes, religions, sexualities, abilities, and other areas of marginalization, when published at all are routinely left out of classrooms (Brooks & McNair, 2008). This means that for most students in the United States, the literature they encounter in school consists of mainly white, middle-class representations. Furthermore, some books may be written from outsider perspectives and therefore do not always represent a reality of those groups’ life experiences, or even perpetuate stereotypes (Seo & Choi, 2015).

Traditionally in many communities, excuses were rarely accepted to justify poor academic performance, despite documented obstacles associated with racism. A recent study from Northwestern University suggests that the stress of racial discrimination may partly explain the persistent gaps in academic performance between some nonwhite students, mainly Black and Latino youth, and their white counterparts (Levy et al., 2016). The team of researchers found that the physiological response to race-based stressors--be it perceived racial prejudice, or the drive to outperform negative stereotypes--leads to the body to pump out more stress hormones in adolescents from traditionally marginalized groups. This biological reaction to race-based stress is compounded by the psychological response to discrimination or the coping mechanisms youngsters develop to lessen the distress. According to the study, what emerges is a picture of Black and Latino students whose concentration, motivation, and learning is impaired by unintended and overt racism (Levy et al., 2016). Youth from minoritized communities might not be aware of their powerful history, and many accept the negative notion that failure is an option. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), many urban students refuse to live up to the ancestral legacy that paved the way for their successes, and they tend to embrace failure rather than success. Therefore, recognizing the important impact of culture and bridging the gap between where the student is academically and where educators want the student to be is essential (Ali & Murphy, 2013).

## **Method**

### **Action Research**

This action research took place at the Center. Action research in education is a research methodology designed to have subjects with particular teachers to investigate an

element of a particular activity with the aim of determining whether the changes can produce effective and positive improvements especially student learning (Mills, 2000).

Teaching is a craft. It's both an art and science, which is why great teachers (or researchers) always experiment and make tons of mistakes. One of the ways to figure out what's working is action research. Action research is where you can identify a question, test out a strategy, gather data, and determine if it works. The end result is something innovative and tied directly to the place where the research takes place. Action research dissolves the barrier between the participants and the researchers. The teacher (or researcher) actively participates in the situation while also conducting the research.

Most action research follows a similar process. The researcher starts out planning for research. Here the researcher begins with the inquiry, where you define a specific research question that can be tested. Next, the researcher conducts a literature review to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. The researcher then moves into the action phase. This is where you engage in multiple cycles of experimentation and data collection. After this, the researcher moves to analysis. The researcher then organizes the data and discusses with peers before eventually writing out the results. Finally, the researcher shares the conclusion with the world and reflects on his/her own practice.

Action research is a research approach that is grounded in practical action while at the same time focused on generating, informing, and building theory. These two components work in combination, each mutually informing and supporting the other. It is a constructivist approach to research that involves a process of collaboration, dialogue, and action among the participants. Reason and Bradley (2001, p. 2) stress that "action research is about working toward practical outcomes and also about creating new forms

of understanding, since action research without understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless.” They go on to emphasize other essential elements of action research: Since action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge, in many ways the process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals develop skills of inquiry and as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice.

Practitioners who engage in action research inevitably find it to be an empowering experience. Action research has this positive effect for many reasons. The most important is that action research is always relevant to the participants because the focus of each research project is determined by the researchers, who are also the primary consumers of the findings. Another reason is the fact that action research helps educators be more effective at their teaching and the development of their students.

### Setting

As previously mentioned, this iteration took place at the Center. Conducting this action research at the Center allowed affordances that are not possible in a classroom setting. The majority of children at the Center are African American. They arrive at the Center after a long day of school to an environment that is very different from a structured classroom setting. It took me some time to adjust to this setting. I am used to teaching in a classroom that is structured, quiet, and students that mostly wanted to learn what you were teaching them. I kept reminding myself that this was not my classroom, and these children were not my students in the school sense. They were my participants and collaborators at an after-school community center. The children’s attitudes were

relaxed in a way that I had to be inventive with my strategies. For example, on one particular day, it was unusually warm outside, and everyone from the Center was going outside to the park across the street. Kiah, a student in my study, had no difficulty telling me that she wasn't coming to the group today because everybody else was going to the park. I tried to reason with her, unsuccessfully. I settled for a compromise of her coming to the group to hear me read our chapter book, and then she could join everyone else at the park.

Being a part of this study wasn't mandatory, so keeping students excited about this research was crucial. For example, by co-constructing the book lists, their voices were heard, and their opinions mattered. I didn't set any guidelines for book selection. By allowing them this curricular freedom, I was able to create intrinsic motivation and engage them in ways they were not willing to do in their classroom settings at school.

### **Participants**

All four of the participants are African American.

Bianca, a fourth grader, was taller than most kids at the Center. She read at a fourth-grade level. She is strong-willed but extremely respectful to adults at the Center. If she disagrees with a peer at the Center, she usually yells or hits them. She has a behavior plan both at the Center and at school. She gets into trouble for fighting. She only has trouble with peers, not adults. She is from a traditional family of a mom, dad, brother, and sister. Her family has a lot of influence over her in the way she treats adults. She did her best to please me when she was working within our group. There were only a couple of times that her behavior got the best of her, and I had to send her out of the group.

Christine, a second grader, is a smaller child with long curly hair. She *reads*

words at a second-grade level but struggles with comprehension. She is a very sweet girl with a sensitive side. Her feelings get hurt easily, and it takes a while to convince her to stop crying when her feelings do get hurt. She seems to get along with everyone.

Whenever I arrive, she is always with the same group of girls, usually in a deep discussion about the day's events. She is an only child that lives with her mom. Her mom is supportive of her and tries to get to the Center once or twice a month to talk about her progress toward this study. Her mom works two jobs to make ends meet.

Katie, a fourth grader, is a ray of sunshine and is always smiling. She reads at the fifth-grade level. She is always happy, regardless of the day. Everyone at the Center likes her. She is very popular with the kids as well as the adults. She lives with her mom, her older brother, and older sister. Both her brother and sister attend the Center. All three of these kids excel in school. Her mom has two full-time jobs to make ends meet. This family is extremely close. Whenever Katie was not in our group, she was hanging with her brother and sister.

Kiah, a fourth grader, has crazy hair that she is always trying to manage with a pony-tail holder. She *reads* at a fourth-grade level but struggles with comprehension. She usually has a frown on her face because she is mad at someone or something. Sometimes she is mad at the van driver, sometimes it is her teacher at school, and sometimes it is someone at the Center. She has a behavior plan both at school and at the Center. When she meets her goal of all two's, she shares the goal sheet with me. I do not see the goal sheet when she has had some trouble that day. She lives with her mom. She has siblings, but they live with her dad and his family. Her mom works a lot and that leaves Kiah

home by herself sometimes. She seems older than she really is because of the time she spends by herself.

### **Collaborative Inquiry**

By using action research, the children and I were immersed in the process of collaborative inquiry as we tried to understand and alter conditions rooted within most school settings. Yes, they read on the floor, they ate snacks while working, and yes, when they needed a break, we took a walk or talked about whatever was on their minds. Taking off our shoes to read seemed like a little compromise that brought big amounts of joy to these children. I began to purposefully un-school the room where we worked. We worked a lot on the floor, and we turned the lights off to read. Luckily we had good windows to allow natural light. They were allowed to wear their coats. I know from past experiences that they have to remove their coat in their classrooms at school. This is a bone of contention to some students. Luckily, the no coat rule is non-existent at the Center. By making these little changes, the children seemed more relaxed and willing to participate in what I asked them to do.

### **The Study**

Based on my experiences teaching at Title I schools, I believe that children from different cultures have difficulty in school because educators traditionally have attempted to insert culture into education, instead of inserting education into the culture. I used this belief to guide my study.

The data was collected over the course of two months using a variety of strategies: field notes (my journal), interviews, the participants' reflections, and artifacts that will be created by the children. But this study actually started a year and a half ago. I



started my journey at the Center with a pilot study and a few kids that did not want to read with me. This case study would not have been as successful had I not begun my work with these students back then.

In order to collect valid data, I used multiple sources of evidence in order to construct validity. I used my field notes that were collected after each session, interviews with the children, and artifacts that were created by the children.

### **Data Sources**

*Journal.* Throughout the case study, I wrote field notes with an extensive description, reflection, analysis, and interpretation of the data.

*Interviews.* The children were asked various questions during this two-month process. I asked the same questions at the beginning of the project and the end. The interview was administered after the project completion to compare their thinking from beginning to end. I chose these questions to identify their interests and abilities. By asking these questions, I would determine their preferred way to absorb information and get an idea of what their learning styles are.

The interview questions included:

1. What kinds of learning projects do you like to do?
2. What are you most interested in learning at school?
3. What are some positive experiences you remember from past classes?
4. What are your favorite hobbies?
5. What are some favorite lessons and activities you like to do in school?
6. What kinds of family activities do you and your family enjoy?
7. What type of books do you like to read the most?

8. Does anyone in your family read a lot? Who?
9. Do you have books at your house?
10. What topics interest you when picking out a book?
11. How do you identify yourself?
12. What do you want people to know about you?

*Children's reflections.* Throughout this culturally relevant journey, the children kept a journal to reflect on their learning during this process. They were interviewed by me to help document their growth. I conducted separate interviews to capture (a) how children found relevance in texts they read (in school and/or on their own) and (b) how race, ethnicity, and/or gender influenced children's abilities to connect with the literature we are reading here, at the Center.

*Artifacts.* I wanted to use the children's culture as a vehicle for learning. Their individual project was used as a bridge to school-learning. Working on a project from beginning to end, especially one that involves accountability to other participants and the adult in charge, builds a sense of belonging.

## **Procedure**

### **Relationship Building**

The first step, the relationship-building process, was built on lessons from the previous iterations. The process of gaining their trust took a lot less time and effort because I have been at this community center for over a year. I wasn't a new person that they had to get to know. They were already familiar with me as I was with them. We began every session with a snack and a review of their day. The review could be school-

related or something that happened before school. If the conversation seemed to be going flat due to a slow day at school, or at home, we would talk about their favorites. What was their favorite YouTube channel, their favorite food, their favorite music, what they did for fun, along with various other topics. We did this routine for six days. On the sixth day, the conversation felt forced, and they were getting restless. First came the eye rolls when I asked them to talk about their day. Next, I noticed Kiah's head on the table, pretending she was asleep. Finally, after noticing Bianca's not so subtle attempt to sneakily look at her phone, I decided we needed to move on to reading books together. Reading books together was another way I was getting to know them. During the last iteration, book reading helped us get familiar with each other. I hoped it would work this time too. We did not yet have the relationship that allowed them to just come out and say, "let's move on" but I believe that being responsive to their behavior communicated that I was being attentive to them.

Building on the previous iteration, we began reading books they chose. Krashen (2011) emphasized the importance of free, voluntary reading (2011). According to Krashen, the secret of its effectiveness is simple: children become better readers by reading (2004). According to Allington (2010), providing free self-selected books to children from low-income families could help make gains in their reading achievement. The children from low-income communities to whom Allington provided free self-selected books gained reading achievement during the summer months. There were no lessons provided with these books, just reading during the summer months. This, in turn, fostered reading growth (Allington, 2013). The experimental evidence showed that the actual volume of reading activity is an important component in the development of

reading proficiencies. The research evidence led me to have the girls free read, that is to co-construct the curriculum. I wanted them to enjoy our reading time. The logic behind taking time to incorporate personal reading into this study was that I wanted them to create a habit of reading every time we met so they could eventually become habitual readers that could monitor their own reading.

It was easier in this iteration for them to choose books they wanted to read. The children knew that the children in the other iteration got to read books they picked on their own. It felt like they came prepared with mental lists of books they wanted to read. There were no guidelines or stipulations to what they could read. I ordered the books from the public library system. The public library system has done a very good job working with me to borrow books for these children. Luckily, I knew the librarian, Susan, who is in charge of children's literature from some classes I had taught previously. I spoke to her one day while I was picking up books, early on in the project. She asked me why I was picking up books about the Civil Rights Movement. I explained to her about the project. In under one-minute, she named about 20 books that would fit my subject area. From then on, Susan and I texted and emailed back and forth about different topics the girls wanted to investigate. She would find books and put them on hold for me. The library had recently implemented the rule of no fines for late books for children in the grades kindergarten through middle school. This rule enabled us to keep the books longer at the Center without worrying about a fine. This partnership allowed me to not have to go at this alone.

We met three days a week for one hour each day in our designated room. *See Figure 5.1.*



Figure 5.1 The Sign

They grabbed their personal reading book and a snack. I kept the books with me after a previous iteration mishap of letting them take the books home. It was easier for me to keep them so the children would have books to read at the center. I provided a snack, knowing that after a long day at school, they needed some food. The snack also served as an incentive to get them to read. I started each day by reading a book to them for twenty minutes. The book selection consisted of picture books that had African American children as the main characters. We spent another ten minutes lightly discussing the message of the book. This left about thirty minutes to read their self-selected books. According to Kelly Gallagher in his book, *Readicide How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About it*, overteaching books not only prevent students from achieving reading flow, it creates instruction that values trivial thinking over deeper thinking and damages our students' prospects for becoming lifelong readers (Gallagher, 2009). Gallagher says to focus on finding the "Sweet Spot" of instruction; the instruction found between over teaching and under teaching. By having a "light" discussion about

the book, the girls were able to spend less time listening to me guide them in understanding the book and more time reflecting on the content of the book.

The books they chose were typically graphic novels that had White girls (or boys) as the main characters. According to Gallagher, in schools, high-interest reading is being squeezed out in favor of more test preparation practice. Sustained silent reading time is being abandoned because it is often seen as “soft” or “nonacademic” (2009). Since this iteration took place at the Center, high-interest books were essential. I continued reading to them at the beginning of each session but began integrating books that were purposefully written about times in our history that shined a light on African Americans. We discussed the *Hidden Figures* Women (Shetterly, 2016), the girls that had to carry water on their heads back to their villages, and we disagreed on how fun or not fun it would be to take the bus everywhere while living in a busy city.

One day I noticed they seemed to be losing interest in listening to me read picture books. Katie usually had a lot to say during the discussion we had after reading, but on this particular day, she said close to nothing. I also noticed the heavy sighing coming from Kiah who usually seemed to enjoy the books I read. Bianca had asked to go to the bathroom while I was reading, which she never does. I decided these students were ready to move on to something else. This is another example of the girls helping construct this curriculum by signaling they were ready to move on. I discovered that the role of the teacher is not to charge forward with my plans, but instead have a plan while listening and observing student needs and readiness.

I began to read a chapter book that Susan had recommended called, *Stella by Starlight*, by Sharon Draper. This author was familiar to them because of her popular

book, *Out of My Mind*, which was a read-aloud in schools a few years ago. I was worried about the story's content, but after voicing my concerns to the Center director, he gave me permission to read the book. This book addresses life in the segregated South in 1932, as seen by a young 11-year-old growing up African American in Bumblebee, North Carolina. The plot includes the Ku Klux Klan and segregated schools. When I began reading this book, I noticed the girls' attention seemed to perk up. After reading the first chapter, the discussion lasted 40 minutes. The discussion of other books we had read lasted about 15 minutes at best.

Their intrigue led to inquiries about segregation, slavery, laws in the 1930s, and general interest in this time period. As we continued to read from this book at the beginning of every session, the girls became investigators of this time period. These four girls are very strong-willed and opinionated about what they think is right and wrong. They couldn't understand why things happened to certain people just because of the color of their skin.

They would arrive at the Center with these Google searches and books from their school libraries they wanted to read. I remember one day when Christine showed me the Google search she printed off at school. She had heard from her teacher that Ruby Bridges was born in a log cabin. She googled this and sure enough, she was born in a log cabin. So she printed off the information she found and brought it to the Center. She wanted to know where that log cabin was (New Orleans). She spent the next 15 minutes trying to locate the cabin on the internet. One day Bianca wanted to show the short video, *Hair Love* (Cherry & Smith, 2019). It is about a dad that had trouble fixing his daughter's black hair. After watching the video, I learned that it takes four hours to braid Bianca's

hair. A picture book that allows Black girls to see themselves in the pages is *Happy to Be Nappy* (Hooks, 1999). This book describes all types of black hair, but does it in a positive, appreciative way. Another great children's book by the same author, Bell Hooks, is *Skin Again* (Hooks, 2017). This picture book sends the message of skin coloring is only the covering, it does not tell the person's story. Katie brought a book from her school library about a young girl named Malala Yousafzai who is an activist from Pakistan. After reading this book, she wanted to do further research. She found out that Malala was shot three times for talking about schoolwork. Kiah showed us a book about the Children's March during the Civil Rights Movement and then proceeded to research the Jim Crow laws. I liked the direction these topics were headed. I still hoped the girls would choose current topics. My hopes began to fade as the girls focused on the Children's March books Kiah kept discovering.

The graphic novels we were used to reading were cast aside for relevant chapter and picture books and Google searches. There were many days the girls would bring in these titles of books that they Googled and did not have at their school libraries. These books included mostly books about the Civil Rights Movement and segregation. After Kiah brought in the book about the Children's March, she realized that her library only had one of several books that were on this subject. She also discovered that when she Googled these books, she found most of them on YouTube being read out loud. She was delighted to be able to read books without having someone buy them or check them out at the library. This discovery led to the other girls searching for books they wanted to read about these two topics.



Katie came to the Center one day disappointed because her elementary school library did not have any books or information about the Ku Klux Klan. After helping her with a Google search, we realized there are no books about the Ku Klux Klan made for children. I asked Susan, the librarian, for suggestions on what to do. Katie was genuinely interested in this topic and I did not want to disappoint her with having to choose a different research idea. Susan suggested she read a chapter book called, *Witness* by Karen Hesse. This book is set in a Vermont town that recently had the Klan move into their area. Although this book was a grade level above her reading level, we agreed she would be able to tackle it. I allowed her to take this book with her to read at home. Her sister helped with reading the book. Katie also found a book called *Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence by the Southern Poverty Law Center*. Fortunately, we found this book in PDF form on the internet.

Bianca, although interested in the Civil Rights Movement, explored different topics and ideas while the other two girls focused on this topic. Christine was content with reading books about Ruby Bridges. Susan was a big help in finding books for her. She would put them on hold for me and I would check them out.

As I previously mentioned, my initial plan for this case study was to get them interested in a topic that they could relate to as Black girls. I wanted them to investigate a *current* topic that they could relate to as well as to see into the *window* and connect with their culture. I wanted the children to relate to someone/something from their culture and use that relationship to create something that made them feel relevant to today's society. I had previously mentioned the topic idea of segregation to my advisor when I was trying to come up with ideas the children could research. We decided that segregation happened

so long ago, and the children would need something more recent to research to make a connection to relevance in today's society.

The thought of the children not connecting to things that happened in the 1930s was far from the truth. They were interested in the back story of what happened to "their people", the phrase they started using to discuss this time period, that I would have had a hard time trying to persuade them to pursue other topics.

### **Reading Levels and Topics**

We continued reading *Stella by Starlight*, discussing what we read and carried on with personal reading. It was time to move on to the next step of the project which was to determine their reading levels. In order to find books that they could read without frustration, I needed to have an idea of what they were capable of reading. I used the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-4), (Dunn & Dunn, 2007) which showed a range of reading levels they could use to find books to read depending on interest.

I administered the PPVT-4 at the beginning and end of my study to determine academic growth. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - 4th Edition (PPVT-4) is designed to measure the receptive (hearing) vocabulary of English-speaking adults and children. While no specific content areas are described in the manual, the authors declare that the test is designed to cover a broad range of English-language content (Dunn & Dunn, 2007).

The PPVT-4 is a norm-referenced language assessment tool that can be used to:

- evaluate English-language competence;
- Measure language learning in second-language speakers;
- determine the appropriate level and content for educational instruction;

- identify language deficits due to injury or disease

### Topic Selection

After I administered the PPVT-4, the students and I began topic selections. We read a book together to model what they will be working on individually for the first step in their project. The book we used was *Separate is Never Equal* by Duncan Tomatium. After we completed the lesson, I interviewed each student to determine their topics of interest. I already had a good idea of what interested them but wanted to be sure to include their opinions.

I introduced them to different topics (current) that might interest them. The various topics included:

a) *Fighting prejudice and discrimination against people with learning disabilities:*

The goal is to make them aware of prejudice and discrimination aimed at those with learning disabilities.

b) *Native American diversity:* Students will learn about customs and traditions such as housing, agriculture, and ceremonial dress.

c) *Designing a Social Action Project:* Guidelines for getting young students involved in making a change in their world.

d) *Religion:* Bringing in various picture books about different religions and creating a project about the one the student most identifies with.

e) *Hip/Hop and Poetry:* Students are encouraged to perform songs that have been deemed school appropriate and non-offensive.

f) *Different cultural foods menu quiz*: Students get to create a menu quiz for their favorite food from their culture. Other students will benefit from learning different types of food eaten by different cultures.

g) *Rally against homelessness*: Learning about homelessness and civic engagement by writing letters to officials to produce awareness.

Ali and Murphy (2013) claim that educators must incorporate activities that provide authentic learning experiences where a student's personal interests and culture are connected (Ali & Murphy, 2013). By introducing these topics, I hoped to spark some ideas to get a sense of what interests them. The children already knew what they wanted to research and seemed annoyed that I was making them look at other topics. The problem (or so I thought) with their topic choices was that they all stemmed from the Civil Rights Movement era. I wanted their individual projects to help the girls relate better to their school classrooms and to feel like they were relevant. I kept moving forward with my plan to find more current topics.

### **Culturally Relevant Books**

The third step introduced the girls to culturally relevant books based on the current topics that interested them that were available to kids their age. Kids need stories to reflect their own experiences as well as the experiences of others. Tschida and colleagues (2014) coined the term "Mirrors and Windows" The concept of a book acting as a mirror implies that readers see something of themselves in the text. Such a book reflects back to readers portions of their identities, cultures, or experiences. When readers are able to find themselves in a text, they are therefore validated; their experiences are not so unique as to never be experienced by others (Seo & Choi, 2015).

To move readers to view worlds that are not their own, books must also act as windows, allowing for readers to spend time observing the lives of others (Purnell et al., 2007). Readers need books that show them their place in our multicultural world and teach them about the connections between all humans.

I met with Susan and came up with a list of books that I used to introduce topics of cultural relevance to the girls. By sharing these books with the girls, I hoped some of them would see a mirror by seeing their story in a book. *See Figure 5.2.*



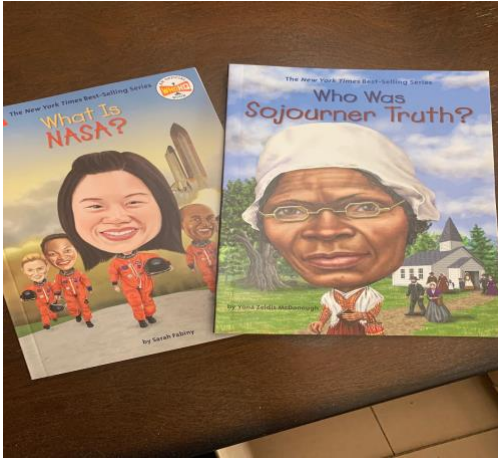


Figure 5.2 The books

As previously stated, the girls already knew what they wanted to study. Before the last book was discussed, Bianca (grade 4) interrupted me with questions about JoAnn Morgan, the only woman NASA engineer for Apollo 11. Although JoAnn wasn't black, Bianca was fascinated by the fact she was the only woman. Christine (grade 2) was very excited to share what she had been learning about Ruby Bridges in school and wanted to continue learning about her for this project. Katie (grade 4) was so intrigued by the Ku Klux Klan, that she would not even look at another possibility for a project. Kiah (grade 4) was a very strong-will girl. She was investigating women's rights and came across Sojourner Truth and knew they were "somehow related" because they were both "black, beautiful, and strong." There was no way I was telling her she had to pick a different topic. My favorite teacher mentor once told me, *Sometimes when we construct learning, there is a moment when a teacher hands the learning to the learner.*

After choosing their topics, they picked books from the public library. They each selected three to start. I wanted them to be accountable for their own learning, but I played a role in getting them started on this learning journey. I helped them reserve the books and I picked them up when they were ready.

The first assignment was the same for everyone, but after that, they chose what to do next. The first assignment was ‘read and check’ the book they chose in relation to their topic. I gave the girls a timeline of how many pages to read and when to stop and ask questions about what they read. The girls answered the questions in a whole group setting. As a teacher, this ‘read and check’ design was helpful to students in my classes when I wanted them to read with a purpose. Students reading for a purpose allowed them to comprehend what they read on their own. After the first assignment, they were given instructions for the individual projects. With some guidance, they were to create a project to identify how they connected themselves to this topic.

### **Individual Projects**

After the initial whole group lesson, I introduced the individual project to bridge their investigation into learning with how they see themselves in this topic.

For the project, the girls created a piece of work using the topic of study. Whether due to culture, socialization, preference, or learning needs, children respond differently to different types of content (Biggs, 2001). Each project used a unique method of a skill or concept related to the child’s topic. Examples of possible projects were:

- Writing a paper
- Creating artwork
- Creating a performance
- Lecturing about what you learned

To further process the material, we held whole-group discussions and answered questions about what was learned as the children were working on their final projects.

A typical workday began with me arriving at the Center to pick them up from the gym. They would run over to me and ask if it was “time to go be Black”. See Figure 5.3.

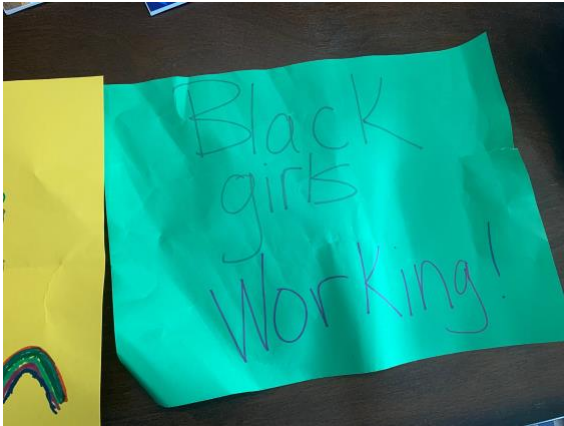


Figure 5.3 Working

The first time I heard this I had to stop from laughing out loud. This question made me think about how comfortable they were with this project, that maybe they were able to “be Black” and were comfortable “being Black” and curiously that it was me, a white woman, who provided them space “to be Black” despite the cultural and racial difference. I could use my privilege as an adult and as an educator to allow them to discover who they were. Before we started working on the final projects, each day we read from our chapter book, *Stella by Starlight*. This shared experience of the book reading brought this group closer together. They seemed to be nicer to each other. The girls smiled at one another and didn’t argue about who was sitting where while listening to the book. They can relate to this book, they are young like the characters in the book, they are all African Americans, and they have developed this sense of empathy for the characters that have been mistreated. After reading a chapter and a quick discussion, they worked on their projects.



The road to working together to complete their projects wasn't an easy one. I noticed that when they got frustrated or ran into a problem, they became mean to each other. Screaming at each other was very common at the beginning of this study. They did not seem to have strategies to handle academic frustrations productively. We had a lot of conversations and role-playings that helped build productive coping strategies. Gradually, I began to notice a softer tone when they spoke to each other. As they gained empathy for the characters in the book, their empathy for each other was more apparent. Christine was a sensitive second grader whose feelings got hurt easily. One day Christine was upset about something that happened at school. When asked what was bothering her, she burst into tears. This wasn't the first time she had done this. The normal reaction from the other girls used to be an eye roll or heavy sigh. This time, however, Kiah moved to Christine's chair and sat with her until Christine was able to tell us what upset her. The problem seemed trivial to me, but for a second grader, it was serious. One of the girls at her school had made fun of her shirt because she had worn it already that week. Kiah made no mention of the silliness of Christine's problem. She sat with her for the rest of the hour. I pulled Kiah aside after the other girls went to the gym. I told her how proud I was of her and asked her why she sat with Christine. Kiah didn't know why she felt bad for Christine. I gave her a hug and sent her to the gym. Robert C. Solomon (1973) explains that emotions are not occurrences, and do not happen to us. He also suggests that emotions are rational and purposive rather than irrational and disruptive, are very much like actions, and that we choose an emotion much as we choose a course of action (Solomon, 1973). Kiah chose her action by sitting with Christine and not engaging or

making fun of Christine's emotions and feelings. Christine was then able to focus on not reacting to the anger she felt, and she could focus on Kiah's compassion toward her.

Solomon (1973) goes on to argue that emotions have been taken to be feelings or sensations. Emotions are intentional; they are "about" something. He goes on to say that we might wish to say emotions and moods are "about" the world rather than anything in particular. He suggests that emotions are normative judgments. An emotion is a marker of value to an object, action, or situation. Furthermore, in his writing, Solomon is very careful to distinguish a feeling from emotion, feelings are not emotions. Solomon explains this discrepancy through the following reasoning: First, emotions (and not feelings) are about something. Secondly, emotions in the moment cannot be distinguished into feelings. Third, emotions can last while no feelings do. Finally, feelings may persist beyond the experiencing of an emotion (Solomon, 1973).

That is, for example, anger (a feeling) may be felt in reaction to a negative event such as being made fun of because of what you are wearing. Being made fun of can be shown that the choice of being angry at the situation (the voluntary feeling) fits all aspects of Solomon's argument. Anger is a reaction chosen by an individual when prompted by an outside factor, and therefore because anger is rationally chosen by an individual, one is directly responsible for their own anger entirely. According to Solomon, "It is clear our emotions are our own doing." Fear, joy, grief, love, hate, pride, and shame are all emotions that we have and are able to recognize in others. Kiah recognized Christine's feelings of hurt, or maybe anger were real for Christine. By not acting on those feelings, Kiah was able to take the sting out of what Christine was feeling.

Another day, while they were reading their independent books, Bianca didn't know what a word meant from her book. Normally, someone would say with a laugh, "You don't know what that means?" But that day, Katie, who is at a higher reading level, simply told her what the word meant. Bianca and Katie then had a pleasant conversation that involved why Katie knew that word. I could see the girls being more empathic and kinder to one another.

If something happened outside our time together and there was an argument with another child or adult from the Center, they had a hard time letting it go. Again, modeling better behavior and role-playing were necessary to help them talk to each other in a pleasant way. During one work session, Bianca and Kiah had been fighting at school before they arrived at the Center. I knew something was wrong by the way they greeted me when I got there. They were short with their greeting and refused to make eye contact with me. I let it go, hoping that once we started working on their individual projects, they would be able to work together. As soon as we got to our workspace, they began calling each other names and throwing things at each other. I asked them to stop and tell me what was going on. They were arguing about something that had happened at lunch and were unwilling to let it go long enough to work in our group. I told them that if they weren't going to be nice to each other they couldn't work in the group today. I sent them back to the general public space and told them I would see them the next day. I worried that all of our hard work toward being nice to each other and treating each other kindly was ruined. I didn't want to destroy what we had built in our relationship. I had never done anything that severe before. I was frustrated with their actions. I asked myself if they were behaving like this at school? I worried that I had made a mistake by sending them back to

the general public space. How much damage had I done to our relationship? About 10 minutes later, both children arrived back at our workspace with the director of the Center. They were in tears, they explained how sorry they were, and they asked to come back to the group. I was shocked. These girls were both on behavior plans at school and at the Center. They didn't apologize very often, let alone cry because they made a mistake. I hugged them both and brought them back to the group.

Before the director left for the day, he pulled me into the hallway and shared with me that recently, one of the girls got into trouble on the van ride from school to the Center. Normally her reaction would be a full-blown temper tantrum blaming being someone else. But after the van driver asked her to stop doing whatever she was doing, the tantrum didn't happen. She did say some things she shouldn't have, but after she got to the Center, she apologized on her own to the van driver. The director said he had noticed little changes in all four of the girls. They give eye contact more when talking to an adult, they don't yell as much as they used to, and they're smiling more.

I told the girls what the director said after he left. I asked them why they were acting differently. They didn't have an answer right away. But while working, Katie said that she thinks she acts differently because of what she learned about the Klan. She said she feels more "Black" now and not in an embarrassing way. I asked her why she would ever feel embarrassed about being Black, and she didn't have an answer. I began to realize that day that this project was having a bigger impact than I thought it ever could.

### **JoAnn Morgan and the Apollo 11 - Bianca**

Along with a written report and Google Slide presentation, Bianca worked on a model drawing of the Apollo 11 spacecraft. She not only researched JoAnn Morgan, but

she also researched the first flight that landed humans on the moon and decided to create a drawing replica of the spacecraft. Her final project was a written report about Morgan that included the spacecraft drawing. At first, she wanted to do a Google Slide presentation about Morgan and her achievements, but at school, she was working on a research paper for writing class. I suggested she work on a Google Slide presentation along with her paper. She could research facts for her paper and create a Slide presentation on what she found. She has a creative side to her, and I wanted to be sure she was able to use it for this project. She asked her schoolteacher if she could research JoAnn Morgan for her research assignment and was excited when the teacher agreed. *See Figure 5.4.*



Figure 5.4 Apollo

Remember, Bianca, struggles with behavior issues at school. When she would arrive at the Center after school, she seemed excited to show me her progress in this paper. I hope she showed this same excitement at school while she was working on her research. I took this to mean that my idea of culturally relevant material woven into a child's school day was making a positive impact on Bianca. There were days that she

would come to the center visibly annoyed because the writing time at school had been shortened or skipped entirely that day due to testing. She would slam her backpack on the table and sigh and start complaining about not getting to work on her paper, Slide presentation, or drawing. I could tell she was invested in the paper and allowed her to work on the project while I read aloud from our chapter book. Sometimes this appeased her and sometimes she just stayed annoyed.

The Slide presentation turned out to be a good thing for Bianca. She could work on this while she was at the center during times when she was not meeting with our group. This allowed her to be focused on something that took her out of the drama in the gym where she hung out most of the time. She tends to get easily annoyed at others and this presentation was a good distraction for her. One of the Center workers commented on her good behavior one day while I was meeting the girls for the group. The worker said that Bianca focused on that presentation so much that she was starting to lose her reputation of being a trouble starter.

### **Ruby Bridges and School Integration - Christine**

Christine was busy researching Ruby Bridges and the integration of schools. She decided that for her project, she would first read the book, *Let's Read About Ruby Bridges* out loud and then talk about what it would be like to be Ruby during that time. Christine is a very sensitive girl and this project was ideal for her. Her empathy for Ruby and the other students experiencing school integration helped her understand what it was like back then and how far "her people" had come. One day I was helping her read an article in Google about Ruby Bridges. She stopped in the middle of the article to point out the differences between colored schools and white schools. She could not

comprehend why the black children had to go to those schools that had dirt floors, no windows, and no desks - only chairs. She said it wasn't fair and that she would never go to one of those schools. The other girls heard her say this and stopped what they were working on to look at the pictures that showed the differences between schools. All four girls were full of questions about why this happened. The chapter book we read talked about the two different schools, but I think they needed to see a picture of the schools to get a better idea of how different the two schools were.

This discovery led to more searches about segregated schools. The girls were mad. They did not know why this happened. I reminded them about segregation and how "separate but equal" was not equal. We spent the rest of the hour together looking at video clips of the Children's March (Marshall, 2019). They were intrigued at the thought of children skipping school to protest their rights.

Learning about the Children's March protest led to conversations about the recent protests they have seen and heard about on television and social media. This conversation turned into research about the Black Lives Matter protests (Farrag, 2018). Comparing this protest to the Children's March protest made the girls sad. They were excited to learn about the Children's March and the changes that happened because of it. They were sad to learn that in the year 2018 black people were still protesting for equal rights.

That brought up conversations that their parents have about being black and not having the same rights as white people. They discussed stereotypes that some people have toward black people. I saw this as a chance to turn our conversation back to their projects. I reminded them how brave the people in their projects were and to use this

thinking to drive their projects. Stereotypes were broken for each of the people they researched. They agreed and began working on their projects again.

Christine's project turned out to be reading the original book but instead of only talking about how it felt to be Ruby Bridges, she created a timeline/fact sheet about her life. She included a vocabulary sort that she shared with her teacher. Although she borrowed this idea from something she found on the internet, she recreated the sheet with the help of Katie during work time. *See Figure 5.5.* Her final presentation was to present the book and timeline/fact sheet and vocabulary sort to the Malone Center kids and staff.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Ruby Bridges: Vocabulary Sort

Cut apart the words and definitions. Mix them up and match them back up again.

<b>Equality</b>	The quality or state of having the same rights for all people.
<b>Segregation</b>	A separation of people into different public areas because of their race or other differences.
<b>Desegregation</b>	Working to change laws and end the separation of people into different public areas.
<b>Integration</b>	Bringing people together that were previously kept apart, and providing all with equality.
<b>Protest</b>	To show a strong disagreement of something by making a statement in a forceful way.
<b>Courage</b>	The ability to do something that you know is difficult or dangerous.

Figure 5.5 Ruby Bridges

Her teacher included Christine's vocabulary sort on their Google Classroom home page. The students were invited to complete the word sort. When she told me this, you could see how proud she was that her work was shared with others. I think she shared this story with all of the staff members at the Center.

Christine said her mom wanted to hear her read the Ruby Bridges book and asked if she could take it home to read. I had a strict rule of books staying with me and not going home. From my past iterations, I learned that letting them take the books home



doesn't mean the books will come back. I made an exception to that rule. My hope was that by allowing her this book, Christine and her mom would find other books to read together. Christine needed extra help to raise her reading level to grade level. Reading with her mom would help with raising her level.

### **Ku Klux Klan - Katie**

Katie researched the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). I was leary of this topic, but after speaking to her mother, we both agreed to proceed with caution and supervision. The KKK was not elementary school topic friendly. This group was very violent and the books that we came across had a lot of violence and adult situations. Katie and I proceeded carefully. While researching this topic, she came across the women of the KKK. She couldn't believe women were a part of this. Her project developed into a "podcast" about what she learned. The "podcast" was recorded on her phone. The plan was to "broadcast" it at the Malone Center to the older kids.

While researching her topic, she came across some articles that eluded that the KKK still existed. She asked me why people were still a part of the KKK. We had a rich discussion about hate in this country. She decided that it is easier to just get along with everybody instead of trying to fight or kill people. I asked her how she could convey this message in her project to make other people aware. She decided to use quotes in her podcast that she found from various influential people. The quotes she included were from Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, and Maya Angelou. She took this project one step further and showed these quotes to her classroom teacher. Her teacher thought the quotes would look great in their classroom and hung them up. *See Figure 5.6.*

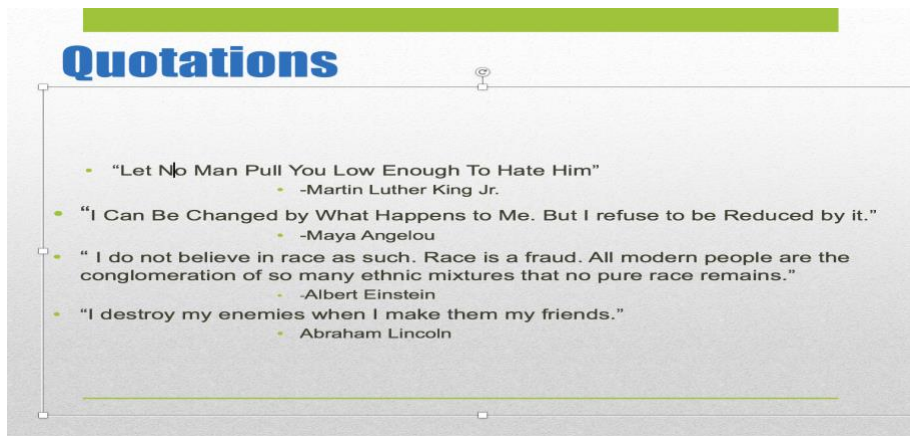


Figure 5.6 Quotes

While she was at school, she had a computer class that taught her how to create a PowerPoint presentation. She used the research information for her project and created a PowerPoint. I asked her who her audience was, and she simply said the world. *See Figure 5.7.*

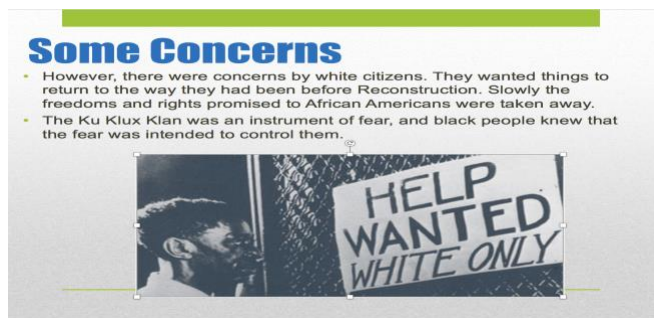


Figure 5.7 Concerns

She designed the PowerPoint to be delivered as her “podcast.” That allowed her to rehearse her podcast material as she was creating her PowerPoint and fulfilled her grade requirement for computer class. Along the way, I noticed her researching other things besides the KKK. For instance, she found a quote by Maya Angelou that said something about being changed by what happens to her, not reduced by it. This led to her wanting to

know more about Maya Angelou. I found myself not wanting to deter her from this, but also wanting her to get enough information for her project. Several times during this project, I saw the girls, on their own, researching other culturally relevant topics that allowed them the mirrors that they had not been looking at before. This was not planned, but a happy accident that led to the girls identifying themselves with what they were researching.

While creating her podcast, she discovered that she really enjoyed creating podcasts. This realization led to all four girls perfecting their skills as podcast creators. The three older girls had smartphones, so it was easy to have a “recording studio” any time they wanted. At first, the podcasts consisted of their favorite music, or favorite food. But as they got bored with these topics, they started creating recordings of their conversations about their research.

One afternoon, after we were finished with the group, the girls were still upset about the separate black schools being desperately unequal to the white schools during the Civil Rights Era. Normally, if I felt they needed more time in our designated room, I would stay so they could finish their discussion. But this day, I could not due to time constraints. I sent them back to the gym where the other students were. The four girls began to create a recording of their discussion about unequal schools. Others were listening to them perform. There were a few white kids along with others in the gym listening to the recording. The white kids took offense to what the girls were saying. They thought this information was not true and began to argue with the girls. One thing led to another and Bianca ended up hitting one of the white kids. The violence of any kind is not allowed at the Center. If violence occurs, it’s an automatic suspension from

the Center until a parent meeting can be set up. This is not Bianca's first offense. She has been suspended before. Her mother normally waits a few days to set up a meeting. But when she got suspended this time, Bianca and her mother were at the Center the next day making a plan for her to be readmitted. Her mother mentioned in the meeting that Bianca talked with her the previous evening about what happened and how wrong it was for hitting someone. By her reflecting upon this situation the way she did, I could see her attitude changing from an angry girl, to a happier one.

Katie felt as though this was all her fault because it was her podcast that started this. Again, I had to reflect on this and smile because Katie was gaining empathy that wasn't there before.

### **Sojourner Truth - Kiah**

Kiah chose to create a Google Slide presentation about Sojourner Truth. She was fascinated by the fact that Sojourner wasn't her real name. Kiah started calling herself by her first name and changed her last name to Truth. She designed her presentation for her 4th-grade class. I think her classroom teacher uses a lot of Google Slide presentations because Kiah's presentation included a background vocabulary section along with a summary and background history. She included a legacy slide toward the end of the presentation. I asked her why she chose to talk about Sojourner's legacy. She said in social studies class, she is learning about people who are legacies in the United States and thought she could add Sojourner to the list. *See Figure 5.8.*

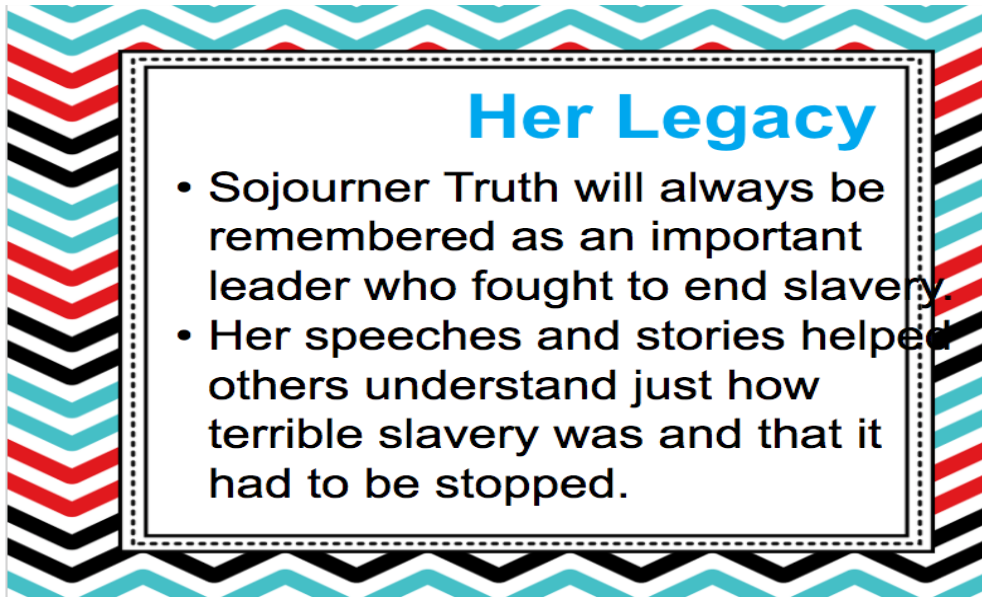


Figure 5.8 Sojourner

Kiah, too, has a behavior plan at both school and the Center. She told me one day that when she is being “good” at school, she can go to her SPED teacher’s room and work on her project. I asked her how her teacher knew about this project. Kiah told her teacher about her project so the teacher would know that Kiah was going to start “being black” in the classroom. When I asked her what that was going to look like, she told me she was going to pay more attention in class so she could do something “Truthy”. I asked her to clarify what she meant by “Truthy”. She said she wanted to be like Sojourner Truth which meant she was a girl who “preaches her truth”. When I asked her what that meant, she said she wants people to be treated fairly so if she started treating everyone fairly, she could tell other people to do it. If she didn’t treat people fairly, she could not preach her truth.

I noticed after that conversation, her behavior goal sheets started to improve. She still had bad parts of the day, but overall, her goal sheets were “all 2s” which meant she

was keeping her behavior in check. Generally, her goal sheets were about 50% good and 50% needs improvement before she began this project.

As she researched her project at the Center, I noticed when she had a good day at school, she had a good day at the Center. She would smile, say hi, and seemed interested in working on her project. On her bad days, she refused to do any work toward her project, and she would barely look at the rest of us in the group. I began pointing this out to her early on in the project. At first, she would get more frustrated and usually end up leaving our group before the hour ended. As the weeks continued and her bad days were less frequent, I could talk to her about her behavior without her getting too upset.

Did researching Sojourner Truth really make this big of an impact on her behavior? I believe part of the reason she was turning into a happier person was her learning about Sojourner. I believe she saw herself in Sojourner and this gave her inspiration to do better. I also think that building a relationship with the other girls and myself in the group allowed her to feel relevant. The girls treated each other equally, they cared about each other. The girls were passionate about their projects and it showed in their everyday life. They developed this sense of belonging and I believe Kiah thrived in this environment.

#### **PPVT-4 Results**

While the children worked on their projects, I individually re-tested their PPVT-4 tests. I used the same testing answer sheet (used a different color pen) to compare their answers. What I liked about this test was that it is a vocabulary-based test. Kids living in minoritized communities don't always have the same vocabularies as kids their age due

to lack of background knowledge. What this test showed me was that because of the reading and discussions they were doing, their vocabulary base was increasing.

I recorded their reading levels as a criterion-referenced score that is the highest reading level at which a student is 80% proficient at comprehending material with assistance. A range of readability levels from which a student should select books to read. A Percentile Rank (PR) of 50 is considered a national norm.

- Katie's percentile went from 75% to 79%.
- Bianca's percentile went from 66% to 72%.
- Christine's percentile went from 37% to 48%.
- Kiah's percentile went from 53% to 61%.

I also re-interviewed each student with the questions I asked at the beginning of the study. Overall, the children's answers were similar except a few did stand out.

1. *What do you want people to know about you?*

Katie	I'm smart
Bianca	I'm going to be a Scientist
Christine	I like to read
Kiah	I am going to get rid of my behavior plan at school

The previous answers were answers such as their favorite foods.

2. *What are you most interested in learning at school?*

Katrina	History
Bianca	Science
Christine	History
Kiah	History

All four of these girls didn't have an answer to this question during the first interview.

3. *What types of books do you like to read?*

Katie	Non-fiction
Bianca	Biographies
Christine	True stories
Kiah	Books about real people

The previous answers to this question were all titles of graphic novels.

**Impact on the Girls**

I see how much the girls grew over this time together. Our shared time before reading actually happened went from a struggle to find something good to share their day, to having to set a timer so that they would get some reading time in and not just talk about their day. Academically, they share more stories from what happened at school. Their reading levels have all improved. The two girls that have behavior plans have improved their behavior and their daily sheets are taken home to parents at the end of the day to show those improvements. Before this time together, most of the behavior sheets would “get lost” on the way to the Center from school. The girls would volunteer to read in front of the class whereas before they would not. They would talk about their reading in class as a positive, not negative experience.

They seem to have a better sense of belonging after focusing on this Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. They all four studied the history of their people and found out their people’s struggles were far more important than what the girls think struggling is today. When conducting the interviews, I noted that Bianca said that she talked more to her mom about “that time when the Black kids got sprayed with hoses.” She said her mom was fearful that something like that could happen again. Bianca used this discussion as a reason why not to misbehave in school. Although this is an extreme example, the history of that time period has influenced her. They listen more and complement each other in their work. They don’t say derogatory comments about themselves or the Center as often as they used to. During the interview, Kiah talked about her new shoes. I said they were cute, and she said that one of the girls at the Center had a pair just like hers. She said this in a positive way. What you don’t know is that when this study first began, Kiah came to the room one day completely upset about a girl in the gym having the same shirt as her.



Her anger continued to fester until I sent her back to the gym before group time was over. This change in her attitude is apparent most days at the Center. The girls' behavior has improved as well. The girls are nicer to each other as well as toward the kids at the Center. They brag about being nice to people on the bus and in the common space at the Center.

### **Unforeseen Circumstances**

Due to the craziness of the world, they didn't get to present their projects before the Malone Center was shut down temporarily. The Malone Center was unfortunately forced to shut down at the beginning of March due to the pandemic known as COVID-19. This virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. In order to keep the virus from spreading, the city had to go into lockdown. The girls and I had briefly spoken about the pandemic and what it could look like if our state implemented rules about social distancing. I don't think any of us were ready for the directive to close our schools and everything else in our city that wasn't essential. I assumed the Malone Center would be able to stay open because in my eyes it was essential. But the virus was spreading quickly and there was no choice but to lock the doors until our city got the all-clear. The city made the decision to close everything but the grocery stores, hospitals, Dr.'s offices, pharmacies, restaurants and bars (take-out service still open), and gas stations. In order to help stop the community spread of the virus, people could not meet in groups of ten or more. The Malone Center was open one day and closed the next. The understanding was that the Center and the schools would open again after spring break. That meant there would be a two-week shut down and then the children would be back in school and at the Center after school. Well, the virus was stronger than anticipated and the decision was

made to close down places like the Malone Center and schools indefinitely. Schools throughout our state moved to an online learning platform. The universities and community colleges closed their doors and shifted to an online learning system as well. The Malone Center did eventually open up again to a small crowd of students who had essential working parents that had nowhere to leave their small children while at work. The guidelines of no more than 10 people in a group were enforced which meant including the workers, there could only be 10 people in each area of the Center. The four girls that I worked with in my study did not return to the Center. Their parents lost their jobs and were home so there was not a need for the girls to attend the Center.

Luckily, for my study, the girls finished their projects before the Malone Center shutdown and only have the presentations left. When the world is right again, we will reconvene and have a big celebration and present the projects to the staff, parents, and children at the Malone Center.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of building relationships with kids from minoritized communities and implementing culturally relevant pedagogy into their learning. The effectiveness of their learning was based on my observation and the children's perceptions of the projects created. In addition, the effectiveness of the study was determined by the interviews at the end of the project and the project artifacts created by the girls.

## Chapter VI EMERGENT THEMES IN THE DATA

The emergent themes of my research developed early on in my pilot studies. I knew research has shown that no one teaching strategy will consistently engage all learners. I believed that the key was helping students relate lesson content to their own backgrounds. Emergent themes began to form while working on this case study.

One of the themes that developed was the *Knowledge of Cultural Identity*. I read a lot of research and decided on the Windows and Mirrors (Tschida et al., 2014) concept would be most beneficial to the girls and myself. The concept of a book as a mirror implies that readers see something of themselves in the text. Such a book reflects back to readers portions of their identities, cultures, or experiences. While working on their projects, the girls began to show growth in both academics and emotionally. The projects that attended to mirrors and windows created this space.

The projects with mirrors also provided a *Space for Identity*. The girls voiced their opinions on what they thought was right and wrong. They were confident when speaking about their projects. They walked into the room with purpose every day when the group started. They shared stories from their homes that were not shared before. They seemed comfortable with who they were.

Another theme that emerged because of this project was *Building Relationships*. The girls began to influence each other in the group. When Christine discovered in her research that Ruby Bridges was a student that got good grades, even in a time of segregation and unequal schooling from White people, Bianca and she began researching together with the conditions of Black schools versus White schools. Bianca's project was based on the accomplishments of JoAnn Morgan, and both Bianca and Christine were

amazed that Morgan was a successful engineer in the times when women were not seen as equals to men. Bianca and Christine don't have too many things in common, but this project brought them together.

The final theme emerged toward the end of our time together. The overall project provided the student's *Knowledge of Their Cultures*. Their individual projects left the protected space of the Malone Center and spilled out into their classrooms, their families, and helped create goals for themselves. By sharing what they learned, they continued to learn about themselves. As the girls worked on their individual projects, some shared their findings with their teachers. Christine's class was studying the Civil Rights Movement. She shared her research on Ruby Bridges with the class. Her teacher sent a note with her to the Center complimenting Christine on all of her hard work.

Katie decided that she wanted to learn more about the unequal treatment of people of color. She got the ok from her classroom teacher to research this topic for her research paper at school. She also shared her KKK findings with her family. She told me one day her family spent "an extreme amount of time" watching videos of KKK demonstrations. She said by the time they were finished watching videos, her brother and sister were making plans to go to Washington and see where the protestors marched.

Kiah would come to the Center after a weekend at her dad's house (she lives with her mom). Her dad helped her read books about Sojourner that were "stupidly hard" to understand. Kiah loves spending time with her dad but doesn't get to do it on a regular basis. Her individual project gave her and her dad time together.

## Necessary Components

Although I didn't directly answer each of these questions, I did demonstrate in my writing how these three questions guided my case study.

1. *What is the process of building relationships with children?*

I spent time getting to know these girls. Showing up on a regular basis ensured me the time I needed to get to know them. I asked questions about them. According to Entwisle and Hayduk, children who are able to successfully navigate early social environments in school get off to a better start and continue to profit from their social knowledge and experience as they progress through elementary and middle school (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988). These conversations were necessary because they liked sharing information about their days. When they talked, I listened and gave them my attention. According to Cicchetti and Lynch, the emotional connection between adults and children in schools is an important factor in children's school performance (Cicchetti et al., 2000). When they were reading, I sat down with the girls one-to-one at least once a week and just talked. It was our chance to discuss what was on their minds. It was a way for me to show the girls that I'm here to encourage and cheer them on. I took notes during sharing time because I didn't want to forget things they told me. They got the individual attention they needed. I shared things about me. I shared pictures of my animals. I talked to them about my dissertation and how sometimes I wanted to give up. I never promised more than I could do. I was also at the Malone Center two days a week for a class that I was teaching. There was a group of kids that got tutoring services from pre-service teachers. The girls saw nothing wrong with coming into the room where we tutored and talked to me. I explained to them that I needed to work during this time so

they could not be talking to me while I worked. Most days they chose to stay in the tutoring room and read. That meant that I saw the girls five days a week most weeks. I also tried to teach them how to be decent kids. If there was trash on the floor, pick it up. If someone needs help, help them. Be nice to everyone, even if you don't like them. All of these strategies worked together to help build successful relationships with these girls.

2. *What is necessary for a learning environment to become full of Windows and Mirrors*

(Tschida et al. 2014).

I believe by providing the children ample amounts of culturally relevant books and information, the children were able to see themselves in their mirrors. By identifying with something that is in a book, they were able to feel valued or relevant. Freire suggests that students develop a critical consciousness and that they move beyond spaces where they simply or solely consume knowledge without critically examining it. The idea is that teachers create learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate (more fully) in the multiple discourses available in a learning context by not only consuming information but also through helping to deconstruct and to construct it (Freire & Freire, 1998). The world looks different depending on who or where you are, and kids need to practice understanding multiple points of view. The study of texts that reflect their own identities, experiences, and motivations (mirrors) and also provide insight into the identities, experiences, and motivations of others (windows) can move kids toward more nuanced perceptions of the world around them.

We not only talked about what books are relevant to their mirror, but we also discussed various windows to look through to be aware of other types of people in their lives. When looking at different books we asked ourselves these questions:

1. *Gender/Gender Roles*-Are the main characters mostly boys or girls? How are they portrayed?
2. *Race/Ethnicity*-Are all the main characters people of color? How are they portrayed?
3. *Family Structure*-Are there different types of family structures represented?
4. *Social Class*-Are the main characters from the Middle Class or another class?
5. *Community*-Are there books set in different types of communities?
6. *Ability*-Are there characters who are differently abled? How are they portrayed?
7. *Nationality/Language*-Are there characters who are from other countries, or who speak a language other than English?

By having this set of questions, it was a nice reference to be sure we were reading books not only to feel relevant in our cultures but how other people were being represented.

3. *How is a culturally relevant pedagogy environment developed?*

Some of the strategies I used to help guide my culturally relevant strategies were:

1. I incorporated the girls' cultural strengths into the learning process.
2. I linked the girls' histories and worlds to their learning.
3. I had high expectations for each girl.
4. I valued and made use of the culture the girls brought to the group.
5. I used explicit directions instead of being general with my expectations.
6. I made an effort to connect with each girl by getting to know their

Interests.

7. I encouraged them to be a community of learners.
8. I exhibited a genuinely caring attitude toward each girl.
9. Early on, I established a friendly environment.

A diverse area is an ideal laboratory in which to learn the multiple perspectives required by a global society and to put to use the information concerning diverse cultural patterns and cultural relevance. McCutchen and colleagues point out that educators who create culturally relevant learning contexts are those who see students' culture as an asset, not a detriment to their success. Teachers actually use student culture in their curriculum planning and implementation, and they allow students to develop the skills to question how power structures are created and maintained in society (McCutchen et al., 2002). Children who learn to work and play collaboratively with others from various cultures are better prepared for the world they face now and in the future. The guiding and learning strategies that draw on the social history and everyday lives of children and their cultures can only assist this learning process.

I think the environment is constantly developing. By allowing the students to identify with what they felt was relevant, opened up the path to a culturally relevant environment. If doing this in a classroom setting, the teacher would have to provide a lot of support to the students while they were trying to find their relevance. Once found, the teacher's job would be to guide and support their journey.



**Figures**

*Figure 5.1:* This sign, made by Katie, hung in our designated meeting room.

*Figure 5.2:* These books were read for individual projects. The Stella by Starlight book was read aloud.

*Figure 5.3:* This sign, made by Bianca, was hung up on the outside door to our designated room.

*Figure 5.4:* This slide is from Bianca's presentation on JoAnn Morgan, Apollo.

*Figure 5.5:* This worksheet was created by Christine for her final project.

*Figure 5.6:* Katie found several quotes for her Ku Klux Klan final project. This slide was taken from her final project.

*Figure 5.7:* This is another one of Katie's slides for her final project.

*Figure 5.8:* This is a slide from Kiah's final project, Sojourner

**Reflection**

Irvine (2001) asserts that “teacher knowledge and reflection are important considerations when designing and implementing a culturally responsive lesson.” I feel as though the reflection is the best way to learn and grow as a person. Being an educator before this series of iterations allowed me to reflect upon both personal and educator growth. As an educator, I strive to adapt my practice to meet my students’ needs, instead of expecting all of them to assimilate to the type of schooling that you hear about in typical school settings. At the Center, I had the chance to adapt my classroom practices to fit a majority of students, not just a handful. I learned, with intention each day, to change the environment and to change the rules of the game.

When the system has worked so well to convince the child that s/he is a failure, the child needs to know, to learn, that failure is human, but it does not define the person’s worth. Giving these girls a platform to show what they can do when they see relevance to their learning, allowed them to see success that they had not seen very often in a school setting. At the Center, I modeled vulnerability by letting the girls see my mistakes, my humanity, and showed them that even when we don’t have it all together, we are still good enough. There were days at the Center when things didn’t go as planned. There were times when they didn’t feel like working on their projects. These were the days I embraced because their vulnerability shined through during these days. They let their guard down and seemed comfortable with themselves. They were ok with just hanging out and not having to act a certain way. This taught me to be ok with plans changing. There was a learning curve to being able to construct the curriculum through choice and flow of lessons.

These children also taught me the importance of cultural relevance. As soon as I learned personally about these girls and their history allowed me to facilitate discussions instead of delivering content to them. While discussing the Civil Rights movement, I was able to use what they already knew to bring them to places of understanding while keeping them grounded in their sociocultural knowledge. Taking the time to learn where they came from before this discussion, helped guide the rest of our planning for their projects.

I will use this experience to move back into the role of a classroom teacher. During my study, questions were developed to help keep me continually staying focused on the subject of cultural relevance. These questions in my classroom will help guide me to build a culturally relevant classroom.

These questions included:

1. How well do I know my students?
2. Does my classroom reflect my student body?
3. How do I invite and involve families?
4. How do I help students and myself develop a positive racial and cultural identity?
5. Is there a space created for the sometimes-difficult conversations about current events and culture?
6. How will I find a balance of embracing students' native language and still teach reading with validity?

Along with developing culturally relevant questions to help guide my teaching, I explicitly explored with them about humiliation and shame while giving them space to explore their own triggers. Two of the girls I worked with were on behavior plans. Some

days were better than others. When the behavior plans reported bad behavior, the girls were eventually able to reflect on their behavior in a positive way instead of putting the blame on someone else. This took time, and encouragement from me as well as the other girls in the group. They were allowed a safe space to discuss what happened and usually were able to process things in a positive way. I shared how to celebrate their strengths and how to show empathy in times of need. We learned how to discover together that what feels like a weakness in ourselves looks like courage in others. Kiah was known to have an obvious opinion. As in, she gave her opinion, even if you didn't want it. Most days, the other girls in the group gave her a look or said something when they felt she had gone too far with her opinion. One day, however, Katie actually asked her opinion on what she thought Katie should do about this "annoying girl" at school that wouldn't stop touching her hair. Kiah seemed very happy to intervene on Katie's behalf. When Bianca realized Katie had to deal with her hair getting touched too, they came up with ways of politely asking other people to stop doing that. They had a fun discussion of what they really wanted to say to the "hair touchers" and what they actually were going to say to them.

I learned how to address and then shatter the stereotypes associated with our own identities. I feel like I was able to create a safe, empathetic space for the girls to make mistakes, learn from each other's differences, and embrace their vulnerabilities in ways that made them more confident, mature, and strong.

These girls taught me how to give them the benefit of the doubt, showed me that they deserved respect, and trained me on how to support them unconditionally. I, in turn, taught them how to be responsible for their own learning and gave them the pathway to

confidence to strive to be better in all parts of their lives. They found their voice and are now unafraid to use it.

The most rewarding aspect I found in completing this work was getting to bear witness to the growth and development of these girls. I watched them blossom from unsure girls to brave young adolescents. I trusted them enough to give them the space they needed to become their best selves, and their best selves are what they became.

I am returning to the K-12 classroom this fall. This experience has allowed me to discover that letting go of the control of a classroom does not mean losing the structure of the classroom. I learned that students crave structure and consistency which is completely different than having control over the classroom. I no longer need to hold all the cards in the classroom. My students will now have the freedom and self-direction to question. There will be routines and procedures in place that guarantee consistency and respect for all.

I realized that in the past, I was using structure and control interchangeably and I needed to lean more toward structure with this group of girls. I am grateful for this realization that will be utilized in my classroom. I discovered that students must be able to choose, but they must be clear on the expectations and goals for the lesson. Their voices need to be heard. They need to see themselves in their learning. They must know how to be successful, where to go for help, and be responsible for themselves. All of this I learned from working with the Malone Center girls.

As I think about going back to the classroom, I am eager to use what I learned on this journey. Without the experiences of the last two years at the Malone Center, I fear I would still be trying to control my students and teach them the way I think they should be

taught. I now have a clearer picture of the importance of guiding instead of controlling their learning. Although this was the hardest thing I have ever done, the benefits are going to be worth it.

During this study, I only had a short time to develop relationships with these girls. I was able to not only build relationships, but also earn their trust enough to convince them to read not only what *they* wanted to, but also what *I* wanted them to. I got the results I wanted in a reasonably short amount of time. Imagine being able to create this type of relationship-building and enact it in a classroom full of middle school kids. This could be a skill that both teachers and students could work on throughout the entire year.

To develop this kind of working relationship in a classroom would be ideal because of the longer amount of time a teacher has with their students. If the focus was on relationship building first, and curriculum second, the struggle between teachers and students would seemingly be less. Middle school-aged kids, in my opinion, need to have these connections to teachers. What I learned from this experience about the importance of gaining kids' trust is that it is worth the time and effort it might take to build relationships. This experience showed me that it is possible to connect with students and help them be successful, both in class and outside of school. For middle school students, the success they have in class will help successfully guide the rest of their education.

Personally, I developed a sense of worth that wasn't there prior to this study. At the beginning of this journey, I liked the idea of getting an Ed.D. I wasn't planning on finishing because I didn't think I could do it. I thought I would take some classes, learn a few good teaching strategies, and head back to the classroom. Something happened after I finished my core classes. I wanted to keep going. I knew I could learn so much more by

researching my problem of practice. I knew the value of what I could take back to the classroom after finishing this degree. While talking with other educators, I was able to contribute to our conversations.

I have always enjoyed being a teacher. Teaching comes naturally for me. Now, as I head back to the classroom, I am more confident which means my students have the best possibility to succeed. Am I glad this is over? Yes. Would I do it again knowing what it takes to finish? Yes. Am I a better educator and person because of this journey? Yes.

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