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Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Classroom

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The Impact of Culturally Responsive Teaching on Student Engagement

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This action research study investigates the relationship between culturally responsive teaching and the impact on student engagement. For six weeks, the researcher implemented culturally responsive teaching strategies in a virtual first-grade classroom. The participants included fourteen six- and seven-year-olds who attended a public school in Northern Virginia. The instruction was completed in a virtual setting due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start and conclusion of the study, students were given a survey to measure the class climate. Student engagement was observed daily and documented on a weekly observation tally sheet. The study found that implementing culturally responsive teaching in the classroom improved student engagement and built a positive class culture. The researcher recommends further studies on culturally responsive implementation in a physical classroom across multiple grade levels to validate the study results.

The Impact of Culturally Responsive Teaching on Student Engagement

As our nation's demographics continue to change, students are growing up in a nation that has become more culturally diverse. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and other racial minorities will make up a majority of the population by 2060. People with two or more races are projected to be the fastest-growing racial group, followed by Asians and Hispanics. Because diversity continues to grow across our country and in our schools, it is imperative educators understand the role culture plays in education today and how they can meet the needs of a diverse student population. One approach to meeting the needs of diverse learners and improving student engagement is called culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as a framework that supports instruction based on a student's cultural background and life experiences (Gay, 2010). Teachers learn about their students' cultures and embrace them as they create instruction.

For various reasons, educators across the nation struggle to implement culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. A growing concern is that many educators face the challenge of both managing students' behaviors and creating an engaging class culture (Farinde-Wu, Glover, and Williams, 2017). One reason there continues to be a gap in managing student behaviors and creating an engaging atmosphere is that educators lack the understanding of cultural differences that allow them to build relationships with students. Additionally, as educators build relationships with their students, they demonstrate they value their culture, and students feel welcome and connected to their learning environment (Wanless & Crawford, 2016). Misunderstanding of cultural differences in the classroom results in student motivation and engagement gaps. While creating an engaging atmosphere in the classroom is essential, the inclusion of all students is equally a necessity. By including students of all racial, cultural, and

economic backgrounds, we can ensure that students receive an equitable education and feel accepted in their learning environment.

The purpose of this action research is to identify the benefits of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and its impact on student engagement in a diverse student population. Research indicates that culturally responsive practices are a practical way to affirm diversity, positively affecting academic achievement and student engagement (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). If students feel culturally accepted in their learning environment, then they will become more engaged and demonstrate higher academic achievement levels. Through this project, the research examines the effect of culturally responsive teaching on student engagement.

The following literature review examines CRT practices. The literature review was organized to define CRT from the viewpoint of prior researchers. The characteristics of CRT pedagogy are demonstrated as well as benefits for and arguments against CRT. The literature review concludes with various approaches research has shown to be effective in implementing CRT successfully.

Review of the Literature

Culturally Responsive Teaching

While the definition of culturally responsive teaching continues to gain recognition, researchers have a central meaning. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is interpreted in many different ways but is most often defined as a teaching intervention that fosters good relationships between educators and students of different cultures as they engage in all aspects of the learning environment (Tabataze, 2015). In the simplest form, culturally responsive teaching is often referred to as a strategy that builds connections between school culture and home culture. In addition, Gay (2010) identifies two characteristics of a culturally responsive learning environment:

1. An inclusive environment that embraces students' languages, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds into the learning that occurs in the classroom.
2. An ability to make connections between the school environment and the culture in which students live.

Sleeter & May (2012) identify CRT as a multicultural approach to teaching students from diverse backgrounds in culturally responsive ways without diminishing poverty, family dynamics, and community violence. Even though culturally responsive teaching can have varied definitions, it is an element of education that reflects on students' everyday life experiences and looks for ways to build connections between the home and school culture.

Characteristics of a Culturally Responsive Teacher

Establishing characteristics of a culturally responsive teacher can be difficult as researchers have used different terminology to define culturally responsive teaching. A common

characteristic is culturally responsive teachers reflect on the cultural backgrounds represented in the classroom while enhancing diversity and affecting student engagement (Okoye-Johnson, 2011). Likewise, researchers consistently find culturally responsive teachers modify their teaching approaches to promote inclusivity and cultural responsiveness (O'Leary et al., 2020). These approaches can be demonstrated by building a student-centered classroom and allowing students to engage in a meaningful and safe learning environment. Furthermore, Wu, Glover, & Williams (2017) outline several attributes of a culturally responsive teacher:

- Cultivates meaningful relationships with their students and parents.
- Believes all students can excel academically regardless of cultural or linguistic background.
- Encourages active teaching that supports cooperative learning.
- Increases student motivation, enthusiasm for learning, and academic achievement.
- Connects instruction to students' cultural backgrounds.

Although culturally responsive teaching requires flexibility and effort, Bonner, Warren & Jiang (2018) find that CRT characteristics require teachers to be responsive to the students they serve in the classroom as this practice leads to equity in education. Culturally responsive teachers understand that diversity is inclusive of everyone, not just a single color or culture. In summary, researchers alike find that a culturally responsive teacher's characteristics first and foremost embrace students' culture and make it relevant to their learning

Benefits of Culturally Responsive Teaching

As children enter school, they are expected to engage in cultural practices that are often much different than their own (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2015). Therefore, researchers have questioned for many years how teachers can benefit some of our youngest learners. Toppel

(2015) found that one of the most significant benefits of culturally responsive teaching is that it connects students' experiences of the real world with literature and learning taking place in the classroom. According to Cummins (2011), research studies have shown that schools can significantly reduce the negative effects of a socio-economic disadvantage by ensuring students have access to a rich print environment that allows them to engage with literacy. Furthermore, providing students with literature in which they can relate to builds cultural practices that allow culturally diverse students to connect content knowledge to their lives outside of school. Paris & Alim (2014) argue that relevance in the curriculum cannot, alone, ensure students will be prepared to live in a diverse, global world. However, they believe that culturally responsive teaching can help students develop a positive cultural identity while learning the standard curriculum.

According to Ford & Russo (2016), research in the past decade has shown that CRT demonstrates a correlation between student engagement and cultural acceptance. Several scholars argue that diverse student identities based on social class, language proficiencies, and disabilities are often excluded from mainstream settings (Osher, Cantor, Berg & Steyer, 2018). However, through culturally responsive teaching, these student identities are accepted.

As research continues to show that educational experiences may discredit students of color, resulting in psychological distress and absenteeism (Cholewa, Goodman, West-Olatunji, Amatea, 2014), culturally responsive teaching pushes educators to examine new ways of engaging students in diverse settings. In the past, a traditional way of duplicating learning for all students in the same environment is being transformed through CRT to engage students and close achievement gaps for students of color. Likewise, Toppel (2015) found racial and culturally diverse students are empowered when content knowledge connects learning to their

lives outside of school. Unlike a traditional classroom, which tends to be teacher-directed, CRT allows students to solve problems in a way that relates to their personal experiences.

Culturally responsive teaching impacts diverse student settings and, as research demonstrates, is essential in our nation today. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and other racial minorities will make up a majority of the population by 2060. People with two or more races are projected to be the fastest-growing racial group, followed by Asians and Hispanics. As research shows, diversity in many forms is on the rise, and teachers must find ways to embrace strategies that engage the ever-changing student population. Wanless (2016) finds that culturally responsive teaching is beneficial as educators are beginning to incorporate culture in learning, improving the opportunity to build a positive classroom environment for students of diverse backgrounds.

In summary, the most prominent benefit of culturally responsive teaching is that it fosters good relationships between educators and diverse students as they engage in all aspects of the learning environment. Culturally responsive teaching provides an opportunity to break down racial barriers in the school (Patterson, 2012) and promote a class culture of acceptance for all students. Ultimately, culturally responsive teaching allows students an opportunity to represent their backgrounds and learn to work effectively in a community.

Arguments

The effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching is questionable for some researchers as they feel teachers are often unaware of outside factors that impact student engagement. For example, Milner (2016) questions how CRT can impact student engagement unless teachers examine external factors that hinder students' ability to engage in their learning environment.

Zeptke and Leach (2010) likewise agree that outside factors often impact minority students, particularly as they often lack the socioemotional support necessary for success in the classroom.

Another common argument that's been recycling for years is that research shows a significant gap between teacher education curriculum in culturally responsive teaching and classroom management, a disconnect that may hinder them from successfully implementing CRT in the classroom. In agreement, Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons (2010) question if teacher preparation programs are sufficiently preparing teachers to implement CRT in the classroom. Bennett (2012) also found that teacher preparation programs and staff development opportunities are essential in preparing teachers to meet the needs and learn to be culturally responsive to diverse student populations. Byrd (2016) agrees with prior research findings on the benefits of CRT, but questions if culturally responsive training alone would impact teachers from experiencing classroom management and academic achievement.

Research findings demonstrate that misunderstandings between teachers and diverse students can impact the effectiveness of CRT strategies. Teachers are often unaware of how diversity affects the way students' actions are interpreted and the ways interactions can occur with students (Dray & Wisneski, 2011). Prejudices and biases likewise can impact discipline decisions and the way teachers interact with their students. Research findings parallel the idea that unconscious assumptions and fears are responsible for the traditionally disproportionate number of suspensions for students of color (Mayfield & Wade, 2015). When prejudices and biases can be eliminated, student suspensions may decrease, which will lead to better attendance and higher student engagement.

In summary, several researchers have found valid arguments that question the impact of culturally responsive teaching on student engagement. A common theme was that as diversity

continues to grow in classrooms, a lack of multicultural understanding can magnify teachers' difficulties with classroom management and student engagement (Tuncel, 2017), leaving culturally responsive teaching as a questionable strategy. Although researchers questioned the benefits of CRT, most of them ultimately implemented CRT in their classrooms and found success in student engagement.

Approaches to Teaching Culturally Responsive Teaching

When it comes to approaching CRT in the classroom, researchers agree relationships are essential for success. An integral part of CRT that builds student engagement is the ability to foster good relations between educators and students of different cultures as they engage in all aspects of the learning environment (Tabataze, 2015). For CRT to impact student engagement, it is imperative teachers take a mindful reflection of their cultural understandings as they learn to implement culturally responsive practices. Culturally responsive teachers learn about their students' cultures, embrace those cultures in the classroom, and use them to frame instruction so that everyone can be successful in school (Gunn et al., 2014). Ultimately culturally responsive teachers must continually reflect on Public Law 114-9 (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015). Public law 114-9 states all children will have a significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education to close the educational achievement gaps and ensure equity for all (United States Dept. of Education, 2015).

Through this literature review, it was evident that meeting the needs of our diverse student population is an essential role for teachers in reversing the negative trends that impact student engagement (Boutte, 2012). As the rapid climb of diversity contributes to student populations, teachers need to be prepared to manage and engage a diverse classroom (Lew &

Nelson, 2016). The researcher will implement culturally responsive teaching in the classroom to determine its impact on student engagement.

Methods

Two guiding questions focused on the research and determined a relationship between culturally responsive teaching and student engagement. Can culturally responsive teaching impact student engagement in the classroom? Can culturally responsive teaching improve instruction by building an inclusive class culture? As student engagement decreased during virtual learning as a result of the national COVID pandemic, students were less engaged in their learning and building relationships with each other. Many students began to isolate compared to when they were physically in the classroom and were no longer involved or present for virtual learning at the close of the previous school year. The researcher's goal was to understand the impact culturally responsive teaching has on student engagement at the start of a new school year of virtual learning. Student engagement was documented using multiple student surveys to better understand students' feelings and whether they felt more engaged in their learning after using CRT strategies. Finally, a weekly observation tally chart was used to measure attendance and student engagement.

Participants

The research study participants were first graders in a virtual setting due to the ongoing COVID19 pandemic. The study participants were enrolled in a school district located 25 miles west of Washington, D.C., serving multiple diverse suburban communities with a population of over four hundred seventy thousand people. Currently, 89,500 students are enrolled in the district that is known for its transient and diverse population. The action research took

place in a school with over 800 students currently enrolled 100% virtually during the study. The school demographics were 41% White, 24% Hispanic, 22 % Black, 9% Asian, and 4% Mixed Race. At the start of the study, 22% of the study population was entitled to free and reduced nutrition services, and 86% of incoming first-grade students meet their literacy benchmarks (Virginia Department of Education, 2019).

One first grade classroom was selected to take part in the action research. The class had fourteen diverse students who elected to remain virtual for the entirety of the study despite any district changes aligned with CDC recommendations for a safe learning environment. The control group consisted of seven girls and seven boys between the ages of six and seven. The control group's ethnicity consisted of 29% Black, 22% Mixed Race, 21% White, 14% Asian, and 14% Hispanic. All of the students were native English speakers; however, 43% had more than one language spoken in multi-family living arrangements.

Data Collection

Throughout the action research study, various data collection tools were used to gather baseline data that examine the impact culturally responsive teaching had on student engagement in a virtual first-grade classroom. The study collected quantitive measures for a six-week period. The researcher used the first week to collect baseline data, and the following five weeks, culturally responsive teaching was implemented.

The researcher collected data through student surveys, weekly engagement observation forms, and formative assessments. Formative assessments were created to align with the first-grade standards of learning that demonstrated student understanding of the content knowledge. Furthermore, the formative assessments provided the researcher with evidence of the impact of culturally responsive teaching on student understanding and engagement.

A student survey that consisted of four questions relating to class culture and student opinions was designed by the researcher to gather data (Appendix A). The surveys were used on week one, week four, and week six to measure the impact culturally responsive teaching had on student engagement over time. The surveys were created to measure students' levels of acceptance, safety, and interest in their classmates and the learning environment. The researcher used student survey questions to understand better their perspectives and how learning about other cultures makes them feel. Each question was related to culturally responsive teaching practices and the impact they have on student engagement.

A weekly engagement observation form was utilized to gather data related to student engagement, attendance, participation during live instruction, and participation during asynchronous learning. The researcher documented students' frequency of not being engaged or present for live teaching and their frequency demonstrated during asynchronous learning. The weekly observation form permitted the researcher to collect data that correlated to the impact of culturally responsive teaching on student engagement throughout the week.

Procedures

Fourteen students who elected to remain in the virtual setting were selected to participate in the study. Student engagement, participation, and attendance were documented daily for two weeks and were documented with an online spreadsheet (Appendix B). Subsequently, in weeks two through weeks six, the researcher implemented culturally responsive teaching strategies in the classroom, and student engagement, participation, and attendance were documented with a similar spreadsheet (Appendix C).

Each day a 20-minute morning meeting was held that allowed time for students to share their thoughts and feelings and learn about each other. Learning stations and an online multicultural classroom library allowed for differentiation students could relate to and make connections to their personal lives. Students created a visual museum that portrayed how they could relate to characters and traditions in a selected story. Math games that represented various cultures and aligned to the state standards were implemented throughout the week. The researcher encouraged cooperative learning in online breakout rooms where students were encouraged to collaborate and process the learning standards together. By week six, parents have received six weekly newsletters that inform them of the content being learned in the classroom. Parent support was encouraged and utilized as mystery readers who could share a story related to their culture. The researcher observed and continued to document changes in student engagement after culturally responsive teaching strategies were implemented (Appendix C). Throughout the six weeks, data was collected that correlated with student engagement. Student surveys, interviews, and formative assessments were used in the six-week study. The researcher used formative assessments weekly in small groups to get a more reliable source of student knowledge and engagement than when they were in asynchronous learning, and class assignments were occasionally completed by another family member. Evidence that demonstrated classroom engagement and student participation was documented through classroom observation and online participation during asynchronous learning.

Findings

Data Analysis

Throughout the study, data was recorded to identify the impact culturally responsive teaching has on student engagement. The researcher used student surveys to measure class

climate and a daily tally chart to record students' frequency of engaged behaviors through their virtual learning sessions. Students received a value of one point for being engaged in each Language Arts or Math session in which they were present and engaged in their learning for a maximum of 2 points per day or 10 points for a 5-day school week. To be identified as engaged, students had to participate in class discussions and complete their classwork independently and with a group.

**Table 1**

Class Culture Survey #1

**Table 2**

Class Culture Survey #2
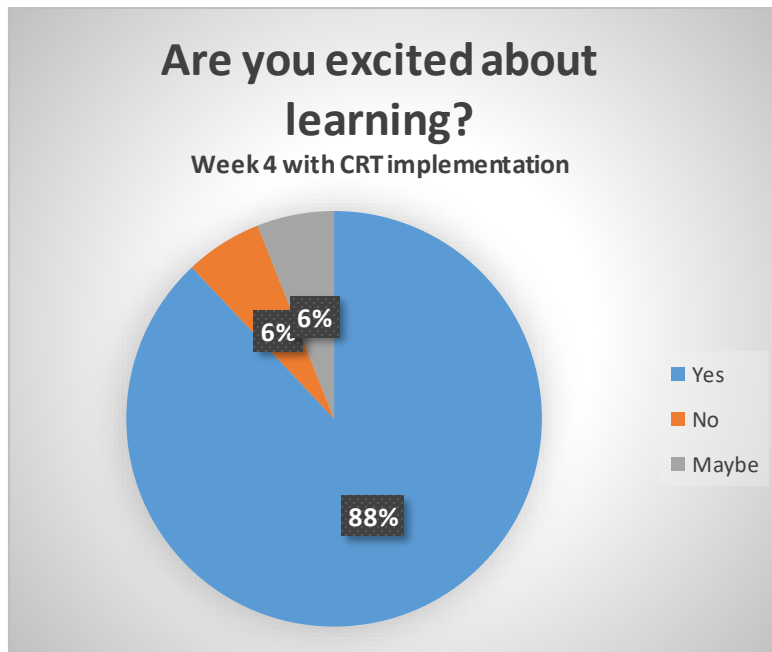
The data from students' class culture surveys (Table 2) provided evidence that the class culture had improved by implementing CRT strategies. Table 2 shows 88% of students were excited about their learning after CRT was implemented and felt empowered to learn (13% increase in the yes category).

Table 3

Class Culture Survey #3
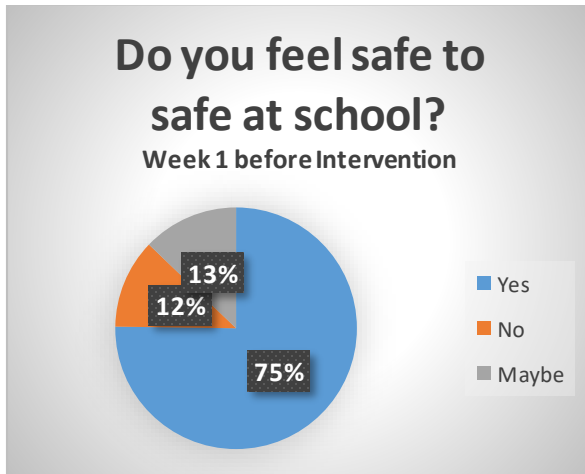
Table 4

Class Culture Survey #4
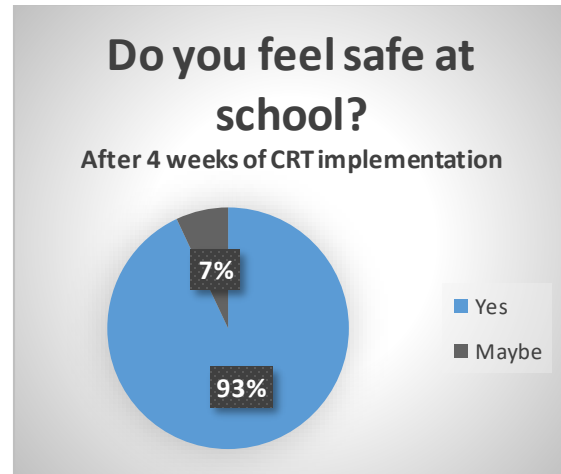
The data from students' class culture surveys (Tables 3 & 4) also provided evidence that the class culture had improved by implementing CRT strategies. Table 4 shows that over 90% of the students felt safe at school, which significantly improved before implementing CRT strategies (18% increase in the yes category).

Students scored anywhere from 0-10 points when taking the class culture survey (Table 5), with ten points meaning students felt safe and excited about their learning. The researcher used the student surveys in week one and week four to determine the impact culturally responsive teaching had on class culture. Week 1 CRT strategies had not been implemented. Weeks 4 and 6 included CRT strategies. In analyzing the class culture results shown in Table 5, on average, students gave considerably higher rankings for feeling safe and excited about learning in week 6 than week 1.

Table 5

Class Culture Survey Results
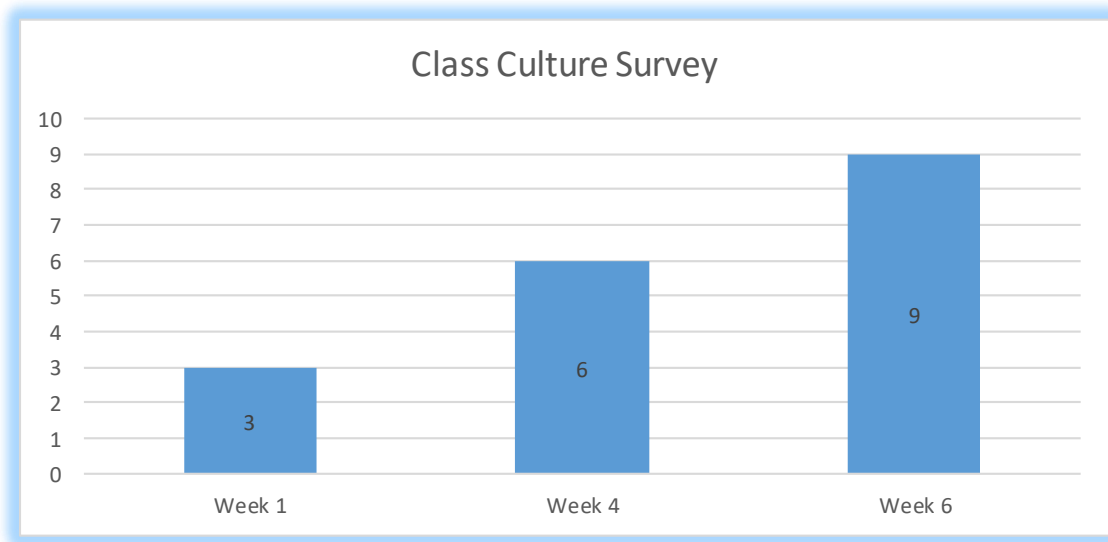
The researcher then looked at the results of the daily student engagement tally sheet. The researcher collected weekly baseline data that did not include CRT strategies for two weeks, and then intervention data that utilized CRT strategies were collected for four weeks. Immediately after students began to use CRT strategies, the frequency of engagement began to accelerate. At the end of the six weeks, the average weekly engagement points increased to 9 points. More than three-fourths of the students were able to increase their engagement behaviors by forty percent, and twenty-five percent of the students continued to be fully engaged in both the Language Arts and Math after CRT strategies were implemented.

Table 6

Weekly Student Engagement Observations #1
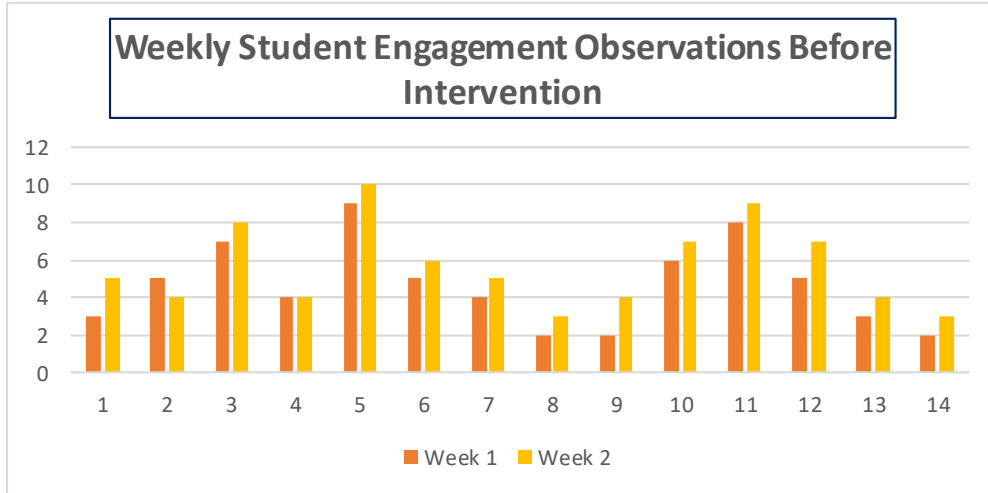
Table 7

Weekly Student Engagement Observations #2
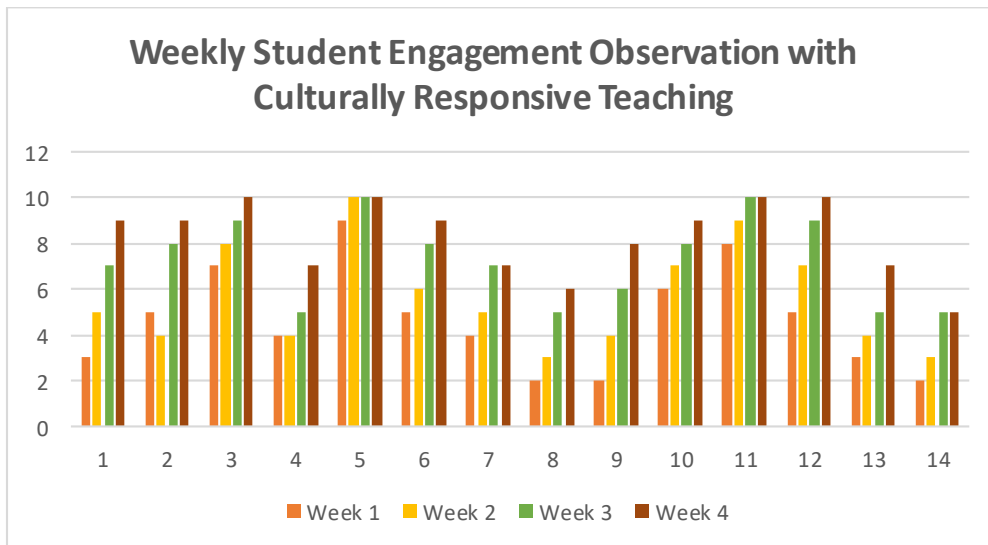
Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The study results suggest that culturally responsive teaching strategies helped improve student engagement and class culture. As shown in Table 6, baseline data was collected over two weeks, and the average daily engagement points were 5 (50% of the possible ten engagement points.) Students spent their entire Language Arts and Math instruction periods under direct virtual instruction with few group collaboration opportunities due to allotted virtual learning time. As the results demonstrate, nine students demonstrated poor engagement behaviors while five students were frequently engaged and present in their learning.

After CRT strategies were implemented for four weeks, Table 7 indicates that thirteen students showed a consistent rise in student engagement. Students who were reluctant to share in class discussions began sharing their thoughts and feelings by relating them to their own lives. Many students started coming to the optional morning meetings to share their daily writing journal and eagerly await the day's story. Two students showed minimal engagement as they could participate and engage fully in their learning before the study began. One student showed minimal growth to CRT implementation as he had unreliable attendance. The study provided the researcher with adequate understandings of how CRT strategies can improve student engagement and create a positive class culture.

Limitations of the Study

Throughout the study, a handful of limitations were present. One limitation in the study was reliable internet for students to engage in virtual learning. Several students on various days did not have accessible internet while culturally responsive learning was happening. This prohibited students from engaging in our daily zoom sessions and accessing their daily learning

plan. Most of these students also had difficulty completing their lessons and using proper internet etiquette when engaging in synchronous learning.

Another limitation of this study was a lack of parental/caretaker support. Most parents were working full-time jobs at the same time their children were engaged in their learning. Some students were enrolled in daycare centers and engaged in their virtual learning plans with several other students around them and one caretaker to meet an entire group of students' needs. In the first two weeks of virtual learning, students learned how to navigate the system and submit classwork for feedback. Without parental/caretaker support, students struggled to keep up with the workload.

Some students did not have adequate supplies such as a working technology device, notebooks, and headphones, that served as a limitation to staying engaged. Each student was offered a device to borrow from the school division, but several appeared to be out of date and often needed updates so students could access the online learning platform. Weekly student packets that contained writing papers, math manipulatives, and other learning tools were readily available as a drive-up service at the school. Unfortunately, some parents didn't pick up a learning packet, so their children had to rely on seeing the document online when the researcher shared it with the class.

A final limitation was the students' learning environment. The levels of noise and distractions that came from students' learning in their home environment limited their ability to participate in their learning and stay engaged. It was difficult for a few six-year-olds to focus on their learning when their toys and siblings demanded their attention. As student expectations were communicated, and culturally responsive strategies began to engage students, the distractions from home began to decrease.

Further Study

When hybrid in-person/virtual learning begins to happen for students, the researcher plans to further the research by implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies in the classroom and sharing strategies with other grade levels. By implementing CRT strategies in the classroom, the researcher will have more time to see student engagement over the entire day than the two synchronous virtual learning sessions. Another suggestion for further study is to implement this study in a classroom with a high percentage of second language learners. Although the researcher had a diverse group of students in the study, having second language learners and students from various demographics could impact the study results. More data could be collected to demonstrate how different variables influence student engagement by conducting further research on CRT implementation.

Conclusion

The research study suggests that culturally responsive teaching can positively impact student engagement and class culture. Data analysis of the study results demonstrates that culturally responsive practices support instruction as students are more engaged in their learning. Through morning meetings that built class culture, relatable literature, and purposeful grouping, the researcher observed an improvement in student engagement. Through observational data collection, the researcher was able to identify the study results that were significant enough to encourage others to implement CRT strategies in their classrooms to improve student engagement.

Now more than ever, it's essential for teachers to address the needs of the steadily increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Jackson, 2012) and notice the benefit culturally responsive teaching has on students from all walks of life. When students are not given the opportunity to connect their learning with their life experiences, engagement can decline and impact students from reaching their full academic potential. As schools across the nation continue to research strategies to meet diverse learners' needs, they might suggest that no other strategies should be considered than culturally responsive teaching. Research clearly shows the benefits culturally responsive teaching can have on students from all demographics and life experiences.

Through this literature review, it was evident that meeting the needs of our diverse student population is an essential role for teachers in reversing the negative trends that impact student engagement (Boutte, 2012). As the rapid climb of diversity contributes to student populations, teachers need to be prepared to manage and engage a diverse classroom (Lew &

Nelson, 2016). The researcher will resume implementing culturally responsive teaching in the

classroom to continue to impact student engagement.

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Appendix A

Class Culture/Safety Survey (Week 1 & Week 6)

1.   Are you excited about learning this year?

- o   Yes, teach me everything!

- o   Maybe, I am feeling a little unsure or nervous about learning.

- o   No, school is not exciting for me at the moment.

2.   Do you feel safe in your new classroom?

- o   Yes, I feel safe and welcome to be myself.

- o   Maybe, I am still getting to know my new friends and teachers.

- o   No, I do not feel safe or welcome to be myself at this time.

3.   What would make learning more fun this year?

4.   How can I help you feel safe in the classroom?

Appendix B
Engagement Tracker
Weeks 1 & 2 before CRT is implemented

DAYS

Student	1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8	9	10								
S1																			
S2																			
S3																			
S4																			
S5																			
S6																			
S7																			
S8																			
S9																			
S10																			
S11																			
S12																			
S13																			
S14																			
S15																			
S16																			
Total																			

Appendix C
Engagement Tracker
Weeks 3, 4, 5 & 6 CRT is implemented

DAYS

Student	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
S1																				
S2																				
S3																				
S4																				
S5																				
S6																				
S7																				
S8																				
S9																				
S10																				
S11																				
S12																				
S13																				
S14																				
S15																				
S16																				
Total																				