Who I want you to be: Three portraits of culturally competent teachers improving the mental health of students

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Who I want you to be: Three portraits of culturally competent teachers improving the mental health of students

by

Jennifer Wells

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Curriculum and Instructional Technology)

Program of Study Committee:
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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2018

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DEDICATION

For Mia and Riley- Thank you for being exactly who you are.
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I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. -Audre Lorde

First, I would like to offer my sincerest gratitude and appreciation to my committee for their endless support and encouragement: Katherine Richardson Bruna, Carl Smith, Ellen Fairchild, Connie Beecher, and Kere Hughes-Belding. A special thank you to Katie for your endless patience and mentorship. You are the epitome of women raising up other women. I am forever grateful.

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Thank you to all of my friends and family that made this possible. Your love, support, and encouragement made a world of difference.

Endless thanks to the three exceptional teachers that were willing to not only commit so much of their time to me but for letting me into your worlds. I am a better person for having learned from each of you. You genuinely are exceptional.

I firmly believe that you are who you surround yourself with in life. There is an ever growing group of strong and inspirational women that I have the absolute honor of calling my friends. You are women that unapologetically challenge the system and inspire me on a daily basis. You fuel my fire to be a better woman and activist. There are so many of you, and I hope you know who you are.

Finally, to tell my children thank you is an understatement. As if having a single mom is not challenging enough, you walked the academic journey with me for the last five years. There were times of sacrifice and struggle, but we are undoubtedly stronger because of it. I could not hand-picked more amazing children if I tried. You both make the world a better place. Mia- You are a beacon of beauty inside and out. Your heart and passion for others inspires me to be a better person. Riley- You are love and light. You have an enormous heart and endless compassion for everyone around you and you, too, inspire me to be a better person. I love both of you to the moon and back.
ABSTRACT

There is a lack of critical research addressing racism as a dynamic of mental health in schools. In the critical view, US schools mirror a social system built on an ideology of white supremacy; the US school system may perpetuate racial trauma for students of color. Teachers who demonstrate culturally competent identities in practice have important roles to play in counteracting racial trauma and promoting the mental health of students of color.

This qualitative study explores how culturally competent teachers make sense of their identities, how they make sense of their students’ identities to build relationships, and how they understand student identities contributing to mental health. Extending Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), this dissertation proposes a new framework for understanding cultural competence at the intersection of racism and mental health, Critical School Mental Health Praxis (CrSMHP). CrSMHP challenges models of resiliency which put the onus on the victim to overcome circumstances. It instead targets the root cause of the traumas, oppressive social systems and their perpetuation in schools. Cultural competence in CrSMHP focuses on dismantling oppressive systems through systematic critical reflection and practice.

Using portraiture, this dissertation paints the stories of three culturally competent teachers in order to illustrate the lived experience of such critical reflection and practice. Common to the lived experience of each teacher are the following practices: the intentionality of relationship-building, the encouragement of a climate of critical questioning, and the embedded nature of activism. These practices help further define a 5-point implementation plan for CrSMHP as a profession-wide approach to confronting the mental health dimensions of racism-derived racial trauma in US schools.
PROLOGUE PORTRAITURE

Seasons have changed as this was written. Today the birds sing a beautiful choir outside of my open bedroom window. This morning is pleasantly peaceful and still. Thankfully the heat has subsided so I am able to enjoy a day with the windows open and subtle breeze dancing through my bedroom that also has doubled as my dissertation writing space for the last many months. Without having yet ventured outside, I can tell that it is overcast from the dim light creeping through my dusty white blinds, though, as I type, I can see a spotlight of sun reflecting off the rain soaked grass in my backyard. My two black furry canine writing companions are asleep, one beside me and the other sprawled across the cool hardwood floor. I try to get as much done before they decide to wake up and play across my computer with what I have determined is their way to tell me it is time to take a break.

While I engage in this work, I am filled with passion and trepidation; this work is meaningful but it is also complex. As a white woman focused on how race and culture impact youth mental health, I also find myself wrestling with imposter syndrome. Is this work mine to be doing? Yet I strongly feel that fighting inequity should never fall only on the shoulders of the oppressed. I remain cognizant as I head forth of the need to do more listening than speaking and to constantly be open to my own critical reflections as I strive to be a stronger advocate for youth and communities of color. For example, it is important to note the immense privilege I have as a white woman. While I experienced traumas as a child, these have nothing to do with the privileges I am afforded because of my skin color. When I go to the store I can find make-up and band-aids in my flesh tone. I can drive down the street and am not profiled by law enforcement. I do not have to worry about my son wearing a hoodie and being killed if he gets scared and runs from police. I am not regularly witnessing acts of racism in my immediate space.
I feel strongly that I do not get to negate the stories of others simply because they are not my own. I cannot change my identity as a white woman, but I do feel an obligation to use my privilege to advocate for systemic equity.

Another example of white privilege is shock with the use of terms and phrases that point out systemic racism – “white supremacy,” “white washed,” “dismantling the racial hierarchy,” etc. These are not familiar vocabulary in the area of school mental health. The critical lens they represent did not take root within mainstream bodies of educational literature until the mid-1990s (Ladson-Billings, 1998); diffusion into school mental health work has taken longer. The point of using a critical lens is to illuminate the truth, and the truth can sting. I ask my white colleagues who read this dissertation to interrogate the way my use of these terms and phrases make you feel. If you feel uncomfortable, threatened, or outraged, consider this: the point of social justice work is not your emotional safety. Consider further, consider always. Get over it and get on with it.

The break is over. More work remains. I see sunlight through the clouds.

-Jennifer Ulie-Wells
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: WHO TEACHERS ARE AND WHO THEY THINK THEIR STUDENTS SHOULD BE

“The way racism works: I blame you for not being who I think you should be” (Stivers, 2015)

In August 2017, white supremacists and Nazis descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia to protest the removal of a confederate statue from the city center. Approximately, 250 young males, mostly Euro-American in appearance, uniformed in white polos and khaki pants, carried torches as they marched through the University of Virginia chanting “You will not replace us! Jews will not replace us! White lives matter” (Heim, 2017). Over the course of the weekend these White nationalists were met by anti-racist protesters. Their encounter resulted in violence. A white nationalist drove his car into a group of protestors, and a 32 year-old woman was killed.

At a press conference on the same day, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, blamed the white nationalists as well as the protestors for the violence, “You had a group on one side that was bad, and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent.” His remarks were met with swift responses by the media and the ensuing controversy focused the country on the nature of racism and institutional discrimination. Trump’s message echoed a long history of many in power, protest is not welcome. It implied that conformity to the dominant culture is the expectation and any challenges will be resisted.

A similar power dynamic is recognizable in schools across the nation when students do not look, act, and sound as expected to by those in power. Many of those in positions of power represent the white dominant culture (The Department of Education, 2016) with little to no training on cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995), mental health (McGee & Stovall, 2015), or racial trauma (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011). Trump’s dismissive comment giving shared blame to the oppressors and the oppressed was an example of blaming the victim (Jernigan &
Daniel, 2011). This defensive response perpetuates racism and creates a mistrust between disenfranchised communities of color and those with power.

Racism, and the mistrust it creates, is endemic across all settings, including classrooms. There is a noticeable absence in the critical research, however, that explores how teachers’ identities in relationship to their students’ identities impact the potential for (mis)trust, fuel racism, and contribute to student mental health. Brown (2008), for one, offers an important critique of traditional research related to racism, perceived discrimination (mistrust), and mental health. He asserts that most research at this intersection is done by white researchers with white experiences and privilege without giving attention to changing the oppression versus putting the onus on the oppressed to overcome. Basically, he suggests that communities of color have a role to play in helping the health system tease apart illness and mistrust and racism. (Brown, 2008, 2003). Hardy (2013), for another, challenges the focus in the health system on the behavioral issues of family dynamics, substance abuse, and psychology rather than the societally systemic issue of racial trauma.

This dissertation will add to the research on the relationship of mental health and racism by taking the critique into schools. It uses three portraits of teachers to illustrate what cultural competence looks like as an association between how teachers make sense of who they are and how they make sense of who their students are in order to build relationships. This exploration contributes to the gap in research on the impact of marginalized identities on the mental health of students and the role of teachers in their relationships with students, sharing power in the classroom, and activism towards challenging oppressive systems. To be culturally competent has to be more than simply knowing inequity exists. Teachers and schools need to be moving away from racist ideology that blames the victim and towards being social justice advocates resisting
and intentionally dismantling the oppressive systems that are traumatizing children of color in American schools.

**Problem Statement: Whiteness, Racism & Mental Health in US Schools**

My point of departure in this dissertation echoes that of critical educational scholars: schools in the United States were not designed to benefit students of color (Fernando, 2012). They are the products of a society built on the principles whiteness (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1993). Peggy McIntosh (1988) defines whiteness as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p. 1), which is afforded to whites and not to persons of color. This privilege translates into power and advantage in a structure of difference (Stivers, 2015). The privilege of whiteness extends into classrooms. Racism is perpetuated when students of color do not look, act, or learn in the same ways (Stivers, 2015) as the predominantly white teaching force (The Department of Education, 2016). When youth of color cannot engage in a system designed to benefit them, they are often “marginalized, blamed, and ignored” creating racial traumas (McGee & Stovall, 2015). There is evidence citing that greater student connectedness to school results in an increase of positive student outcomes (Weist et al, 2009). To feel school connectedness, students need to feel safe and respected in their learning environments (Masko, 2005; Murrell, 1994). Children seek the adults in their lives to protect them from racism (Masko, 2005).

The whiteness of US society is also reflected in its teaching force. In US K-12 classrooms, 82% of teachers are white. In urban contexts, this is in stark contrast to the student population. By 2024, more than 53% of students will be of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This racial and cultural “mismatch” can negatively affect classroom relationships (McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Rothenberg, 1997) when students are subjected to ongoing teacher
bias resulting from the mismatch. Students, for example, can be subject to weathering, the long-term physical, mental, emotional and psychological effects of racism (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Weathering results when students continue to experience trauma through racial harassment, witnessing racial violence, or through experiencing institutional racism. This may lead to symptoms of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, humiliation, poor concentration, and/or irritability (Turner & Richardson, 2016). Understanding these mental health dimensions of racism is an important part of critical education efforts towards equity, specifically in teacher preparation programs, professional development, and school policy. Today, there is no substantive focus on how schools impact the mental health experiences for youth of color.

**Background of the Problem: Mental Health and Educational Equity**

The racial, cultural, and/or social identities of groups in the U.S. were socially constructed to create stratification between non-white and Eurocentric identities (Roediger, 2005). Historically, schools have been places where such hierarchy exists. Systemic racism works within schools to oppress students of color (Fernando, 2012). Racism and discrimination lead to negative health outcomes (Guzman, Goto & Wei, 2016; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Briggs et al, 2015; Graham et al, 2011; Jernigan & Daniel, 2011; Cokley et al, 2011; Brown, 2008, 2003; Gee et al., 2007; Landrine et al., 2006; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Kessler et al., 1999; Taylor & Turner, 2002). The implicit bias of teachers and administrators can result in having low expectations and oppressive stereotypes when working with students of color, specifically in how they respond to student behavior (Hill et al, 2014). African-American children, in particular, are under-identified and under-served for mental health issues in schools (Williams et al, 2016). This inequity is alarming and renders schools not only potentially
ineffective at helping students of color reach their full potential but also contributing to the erosion of their mental health.

Youth mental illness is a barrier to educational success. For example, Guzman et al (2011) indicate that mental health problems in first grade are one of the strongest predictors of lower achievement as measured by test scores in fourth grade (Guzman et al, 2011). The odds continue to increase for dropping out of school (Wagner et al, 2006), delinquency, gang membership, substance abuse, committing violent acts, and incarceration (Reid, Patterson & Snyder, 2002). Up to 70% of incarcerated youth, for instance, suffer from mental illness (Goncalves, 2016). Addressing how teachers view and understand racial, cultural, and social identity needs to be a priority in the conversation for improving student mental health.

**Purpose: Are You Who I Want You to be?**

There is a noticeable absence of critical research evaluating how culturally competent teachers construct meaning of their own racial/ethnic identities and how those teaching in culturally competent classrooms make sense of their students’ in relationship building (Harding, 2005). Studies are absent from the literature that critically attend, particularly, to the intersection of race and mental health in classroom settings. My dissertation asserts that there is a need to situate teacher and student identities within a greater discussion about how teachers can be contributing to the mental health of their students. The three portraits I share illustrate key features of cultural competence for mental health. They are rich stories of teachers that build strong relationships with students, have empathy, create spaces of acceptance and healing, and are advocates of students through intentional resistance of oppressive systems. They are unafraid to challenge an unjust system. Culturally competent teachers challenge a standard model of
resiliency that asks students to rise above their circumstances (Brown, 2008). Culturally competent teachers don’t blame the victim. They actively advocate to dismantle the inequitable and oppressive system. Through this advocacy for social justice, they create spaces of healing from racial, cultural, and social traumas and improve student mental health.

**Research Questions**

This study aims to improve understanding of racism, in schools, as a mental health issue by highlighting cultural competence as a matter of identity relationships between teachers and students that promote well-being. Its implications target the design and implementation of more specific and effective approaches to teacher training as well as the development of a critical school mental health community.

In order to achieve the purpose of my dissertation, the research questions I used to guide my study are the following:

- What are culturally competent teachers’ understandings of their identities?
- How do these teachers understand their identities as contributing to their ability to build culturally competent relationships with students?
- How do these teachers understand student identities as contributing to students’ mental health?

To answer these questions and enhance educational policy and practice, I conducted a qualitative, phenomenologically-informed research study to explore the characteristics and experiences of culturally competent teacher identities, how these contributed to student-teacher relationships and student mental health. Since there is minimal research that focuses on the
Intersectionality of racism in schools and mental health, I used a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. This choice reflects my belief that it is important to focus on deconstructing the oppressive system rather than put the onus on the marginalized to overcome oppressive circumstances. I also used Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) to provide a framework specifically oriented to increasing professional cultural competence. Since RCT has primarily been used in therapeutic and not school settings, and only occasionally in the same conversations as CRT, my use of RCT with CRT is a contribution to the field. Using both frameworks, I also propose a new framework, Critical School Mental Health Praxis (CrSMHP), to challenge school mental health systems to acknowledge the role of oppressive systems and give focus to redesigning those systems and providing intensive cultural competence training, focused on power and empathy, as a method to improving youth mental health.

I chose portraiture to give voice to the unique experiences of each participant. Understanding how and why culturally competent teachers are successful with racially, culturally, and socially diverse students is complex, and requires an intensive methodology that pays attention to even the smallest of details to make sense of the phenomenon in this study. Portraiture is an amalgam of science and art that provides for empirically-based descriptions while also paying attention to subtle human emotions and details (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). Unlike other qualitative methodologies, portraiture discourages the researcher from being an outsider looking in, but rather encourages engagement with participants as part of the meaning-making and the generation of “life drawings” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This complex and intensive methodology intentionally seeks the “goodness” of the participants in illuminating how they make meaning and understand the phenomena in question (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). Using interviews, observations, and artifacts, I present three portraits of
teachers to illuminate the characteristics and experiences of cultural competence and the intersection of racism, mental health, and educational equity.

**Definition of Terms**

The following ideas are central to the work of this dissertation, so I provide them and their definitions here:

- **Culturally competence** A set of behaviors, attitudes and policies that allow a teacher to successfully teach students of different cultures (Diller & Moule, 2005).

- **Cultural identity** “A living, dynamic, changing, flexible set of values by which we may define our identity” (Fernando, 2012).

- **Critical research** “Critical research seeks to explain social inequalities through which individuals can take actions to change in justice” (Comstock, 1982)

- **Educational equity** “The construction of multiple views of difference in which disparate markers change their meanings and gain (or lose) currency across contexts, thus having distinct consequences for students’ identities and schools’ responses to them.” (Artiles, 2011)

- **Identity** “Personal identity is a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways. It is how one answers the question “who are you?” Or, my identity is how I define who I am.” (Fearon, 1999).

- **Mental health** “A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (World Health Organization, 2001).

- **Praxis** “It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection; only then will it be a praxis” (Freire, 2002; Furman, 2012).
**Racial identity**  
A socially-constructed classification of persons based on appearance with historical context of discrimination (Fernando, 2012).

**Racial trauma**  
Racial oppression, discrimination and/or harassment resulting in physiological, psychological and emotional damage (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011).

**Racism**  
“Any program or practice of discrimination, segregation, persecution, or mistreatment based on membership in a race or ethnic group” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Racism is rooted in power. (Bonilla Silva, 2014).

**School connectedness**  
“Engagement, bonding, belonging, attachment, and commitment related to school. It has been described as feeling positively about education, a sense of belonging in the school environment, and having positive relationships with school staff and other students” (Jimerson, Campos & Greif, 2003; Libbey, 2004).

**Social identity**  
How individuals identify themselves according to their social group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

**Whiteness**  
“Quality pertaining to Euro-American or Caucasian people or traditions” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter one discusses the problem of racial trauma perpetuated in schools and how it impacts student mental health. It presents the background for the dissertation as teacher portraiture of how culturally competent teachers make sense of their identities and their student identities and the influence of the identity relationship on student mental health. In chapter two, I provide a comprehensive literature review to define identity and explain the identity stratification that leads to racial and cultural trauma. I then use Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory frameworks to introduce the Critical School Mental Health Praxis framework. Chapter three addresses the methodological approach of portraiture and my research design. In chapter four, I present three teacher portraits that illuminate how culturally competent teachers build relationships with
students the phenomenon of a shared power dynamic between teachers and students, and the importance of activism in being culturally competent. The final chapter provides a discussion of my research findings, their implications, and directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW: A CRITICAL LENS ON SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

Hegemony has construed the historical discrepancy of power and privilege associated with oppression in the U.S. In the 1800’s, Francis Walker, chief of the US Census Bureau, commissioned research to find biological inferiority. This led to his declaring a hierarchy comprised of four forms of humanity: “All non-white races, all women, southern as opposed to northern Europeans, and lower classes within superior races” (Roediger, 2005). This “research” was biased and skewed to intentionally create and perpetuate inequities between racial, cultural, and social identities and maintain supremacy as whiteness (Roediger, 2005).

In the 1800’s, whiteness referred to primarily northern Europeans. Today, whiteness is the social construction that refers to those from European ancestry with light or white melanin in their skin (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013) with benefits, privileges, and protection (Brown, 2008) reaching beyond just those with northern European origins. A white identity has been granted to primarily those with European ancestry delivered with protection from consequences of implicit bias and stereotypes. It is important to note that at no point has our government had a day of reckoning to address the privilege and oppression deeply embedded in American policy and legislation. Today, the United States is still operating within an inequitable system that subjugates non-white, non-European, and many other marginalized identities while granting power to those primarily representing white, Eurocentric identities. “White privilege, like any social phenomenon is complex. In a white supremacist culture, all white people have privilege, whether they are overtly racist or not” (Wise, 2005).
Schools mirror the dynamics of society in regards to race and culture perpetuating a discrepancy of access and opportunity (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011; Cokley, 2006; Cole-Taylor, 2003; Langhout, 2005; Nicolas et al., 2008; Yirenkyi, 2003). Critical theory recognizes school curriculums as one way to maintain the narrative of white supremacy while silencing the narratives of communities of color that challenge the power of dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Students of racial and cultural minority groups often times attend underfunded schools, have less qualified teachers, learn in larger class sizes, and receive limited supports (Briggs et al, 2015; Hill et al, 2014; Condron, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2004, 2007; Oakes, 2005). They witness increased amounts of violence, receive poorer educations, and experience higher levels of racial harassment and discrimination (Cokley et al, 2011; Massey 2006; Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Children of color are overrepresented in special education, suspensions, and school disciplinary referrals (Mason-Williams, 2015; Artilés & Trent, 1994; O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Rocque, & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

**Racism as a Mental Health Issue**

There is an abundance of research that argues that perceived discrimination, racism (Masko, 2005) and stigma increase negative mental health outcomes (Guzman, Goto & Wei, 2016; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Briggs et al, 2015; Graham et al, 2011; Jernigan & Daniel, 2011; Cokley et al, 2011; Brown, 2008, 2003; Gee et al., 2007; Landrine et al., 2006; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Kessler et al., 1999; Taylor & Turner, 2002), including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation (Guzman, Goto & Wei, 2016). This overt and covert racism leads to racial traumatic responses ranging from hypervigilance and vulnerability to the constant state of fear due to racial identity (Daniel, 2000; Truong & Museus, 2012; Jernigan & Daniel, 2011;
Carter, 2007; Carter, Forsyth, Mazzula, & Williams, 2005). McGee & Stovall (2015) emphasize that dealing with the emotional and psychological stress of the “systemic and everyday racism can be taxing and exhausting,” resulting in racial battle fatigue. They, more specifically, define racial battle fatigue as a response to trauma and the experience of stress symptoms” (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Masko (2005) captured student stories of teachers and administrator reactions. The responses were classified into: 1. Leave it alone; 2. No response or inaction; or 3. One word against another. She suggests that these adult responses reflect teachers’ own discomfort and unwillingness to get involved. They teach students of color that racism is not an issue which causes students to repress their anger. The lack of response to witnessed racism is a form of systemic oppression. These responses cause students to feel disrespected by teachers, create a sense of racial unfairness in comparison to their white peers, and result in negative social and academic outcomes (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011). Langhout (2005) offers several examples in her research of school personnel having negative stereotypes about students of color leading to inappropriate focus on disciplinary sanctions for the students and resistance from the students (p. 128-130). Students witnessing racism against other students is a form of secondary trauma (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011, p. 131). When school personnel fail to protect children from feeling emotionally and physically unsafe, they further damage a child’s personal and intellectual growth (Masko, 2005, p. 347) in a form of continued micro-aggression (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011; Cokely, 2006; Jernigan, 2009; Langhout, 2005; Morris, 2007; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). There is further research and advocacy that needs to be explored at the intersection of racism and mental health wellness (McGee & Stovall, 2015).
Identity in a Critical Orientation

“Identity refers to an understanding of who we think we are and who we think others are” (Trent, 2013; Danielewicz, 2001). There are two basic approaches to understanding identity. Essentially, one approach asserts that our understanding about ourselves and others derives from social interactions; the other emphasizes its basis in cognitive functions.

Identity Theory took shape in the 1930’s with the writings of George Herbert Mead. “Society shapes self (which) shapes social behavior” (Mead, 1934). His work revolved around the notion that identity was shaped based on the social groups and networks to which an individual belongs (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The other approach is represented by cognitive social psychologists that posit that identities are cognitive in nature, reflecting basic stored information chains that “serve as the frameworks for interpreting experience (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

One early criticism of identity theories, regardless of social or cognitive orientation, has been a lack of attention to marginalization and power through historical, cultural, and social discourse (Trent, 2013). Stereotypes contribute to power and privilege for individuals with white & Euro-centric identities (Wallace & Brand, 2012) and shape social interactions as well as individual psychology and cognition. Members of negatively stereotyped groups can fear being reduced to the stereotype resulting in “hampered achievement” also known as the stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). Given the well-documented over representation of behavioral referrals, disciplinary action and identification of special education services for children of color (Skiba et al, 2002; Alexander, 2010; Williams, 2015), there needs to be more examination of how teachers and their students understand identity especially in relation to power, privilege, and perceptions.
of school performance. In what follows, I further detail identity-making as a process that can be understood with a focus on racial membership, in particular, in addition to its broader, and intersectional, cultural, and social components.

**Racial Identity**

Among critical scholars, it is taken for granted that race was socially constructed for political, historical, and economic reasons (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2001, 2012, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Fernando, 2012; Brown, 2008; Bell, 1973, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994). Races were invented, manipulated and reinvented to serve the dominant white culture (Brown, 2008). One of the challenges of racial identity is that it is often presented as fixed, oversimplified, and generalized (Fernando, 2012). It was created as a way to protect white interests and benefits (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Schools are not immune to the consequences racial hegemony. School systems were created based on white supremacy as evident through white washed curriculum which refers to a lack in representation of the countless persons of color that have made extraordinary contributions to America (Tatum, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998), biased high stakes tests, and discipline policies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). They continue to be underrepresented by teachers of color. According to the United States Department of Education (2016), over 82% of teachers are white while 49% of students enrolled in K-12 public schools are Latino, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native or multi-racial1. A large body of research attests to what may result from this “racial mismatch” of teachers and students. The racial bias of teachers can result in students of color receiving less praise

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1 The racial categories are those used in the Department of Education (2016).
(McGrady & Reynolds, 2012), having higher levels of disciplinary infractions (Alexander, 2010), being labeled as emotionally disturbed (Williams, 2015), experiencing discrimination, and low teacher expectations (Hill et al, 2014). Teachers are underprepared to effectively work with students of color and understanding systemic and individual racism impacting youth (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

**Cultural Identity**

Because of the intersectionality of racial identity, it is important to understand cultural identity as a separate phenomenon. Cultural identity accounts for a more flexible identity that represents a person more specifically and accurately than a general racial identity. Fernando (2012) describes cultural identity as “something that is difficult to define or pin down, something living, dynamic and changing – a flexible system of values and worldviews that people live by, a system by which we may define aspects of our identities and negotiate our lives” (p. 113). Racial identity labels can be overgeneralized into cultural identity. For example, people that immigrate to the United States from India, China, and Korea all potentially share the label of Asian-American yet their cultural experiences are very different. Most teacher preparation programs require one cultural diversity course which has proven ineffective at improving teacher’s attitudes about culturally diverse students and their ability to use culturally responsive pedagogy (Kumar & Lauermann, 2017).

Schools create identity confusion when students are forced to conform to the dominant culture over their cultural identity (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Cultural mismatch “asserts that inequality is produced when the cultural norms in mainstream institutions do not match the norms prevalent among social groups which are underrepresented in those institutions”
(Stephens & Townsend, 2015). When schools operate under a deficit model driven by bias and stereotypes contribute to outcomes (Kumar & Lauermann, 2017). The disconnection between school expectations and home values can create disadvantage and traumas for those not of the dominant culture. Researchers suggest the need for a critical approach in teacher preparation programs (Kumar & Lauermann, 2017).

**Social Identity**

Social identity is defined as a perceived sense of belonging and/or membership to a group (Tajfel, 1978; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Bernabe et al, 2016). Not all social groups are perceived as equal. Therefore, social hierarchies have developed based on the weights and value of each social group (Capelli, 2000) with whiteness given the most power. Social identity membership contributes to member attitudes, behaviors (Van Dick & Wagner, 2002), trust, motivation, performance, and citizenship (Bernabe et al, 2016; Abrams, Ando, & Hikle, 1998; Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Haslam, 2001). With teachers’ lack of understanding and preparation to work with diverse populations, marginalized groups are viewed with lower social standing (Mana Emda & Mana, 2009; Brown, 2000; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; van Knippenberg, 1989; Kumar & Lauermann, 2017). Social stratification can create anger, disgust, and feelings of threat towards the higher status group making it more challenging to build relationships and trust (Mana Emda & Mana, 2009; Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000). Research indicates that being marginalized and treated as substandard can be devastating to an individual’s mental health (Briggs et al, 2015; Hilmers et al. 2012; Moore & Roux, 2006; Zenk et al. 2005; Zhang & Anderson, 2010).
Central Theoretical Frameworks: CRT & RCT

In the absence of research that uses a critical lens to help teachers understand their own identities in relation to that of their students in an effort to build relationships and improve student mental health, this section will explore two frameworks, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) to begin to address the need to focus on the causes of oppression in schools rather than the oppressed. This section will also use these frameworks to develop a new framework that I call the Critical School Mental Health Praxis Framework (CrSMHP) which lays the foundation for my study. CrSMHP combines the critical components of both frameworks while strengthening the gaps they present individually. I will discuss each theory independently before offering a further analysis of how the frameworks complement and challenge each other. Then I will provide a description on how the Critical School Mental Health Praxis (CrSMHP) Framework utilizes the strengths of both for the purpose of giving attention to the root of the cause of racial trauma in schools. The expansion of CRT to mental health constitutes a major contribution of my dissertation. Without dismantling an oppressive system, marginalized groups are not afforded healthy learning environments.

Critical Race Theory

What is it?

CRT “is a movement designed to study and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT was born in the 1970’s from legal scholars and activists after a noticeable stall in the advances of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). According to Taylor et al (2009), the group leading the charge included Derrick A. Bell, considered the founding father of CRT, Charles Lawrence,
Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberle Crenshaw (p. 2). The 1980’s developed as “an activist union between critical legal studies and radical feminism” (Brown, 2008). Scholarly work using CRT strived to document, and describe, how race, racism, and power infiltrated all identity classifications and systems of order, including schools. In this way, it sought to analyze racism and oppression across a variety of contexts (Yosso, 2006), to broaden social awareness, transform relationships of power and privilege (Brown, 2008; Delgado and Stefancic, 2000, 2001), and thus empower persons of color and their white allies to dismantle a system of racial injustice (Graham et al, 2011; Fay, 1987).

CRT reminds us that race is socially constructed and endemic (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Soloranzo & Yosso, 2001). Inequities are present in a Euro-centered curriculum (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013), disproportionate numbers of students of color facing extreme disciplinary measures (Alexander, 2010), and disconnected relationships between students of color within a predominately white teaching population (McGee & Stovall, 2015). CRT argues that racial inequities can cause mental illnesses from exacerbated stress, and that typical definitions of mental illness do not account for racial stratification therefore making them ineffective for use with non-white populations (Brown, 2003). In the mental health context, African-American and Latino families, for example, report a mistrust and a concern over professional competency in working with their race which may decrease the likelihood of mental health treatments being used (Gonzales et al, 2011).

**Why is CRT important?**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides educators with a lens to explore and assert why simply recognizing these sources of inequity is not enough. This theoretical framework
challenges practitioners to acknowledge the hegemony of identities and recognize the danger of power dynamics between teachers and students in a classroom (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRT does not, however, inherently provide direction for building culturally competent relationships (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It recognizes that systems are filled with inequities and inherently racist. Unlike many previous theoretical frameworks, it questions the power of the larger system rather than putting the onus on persons of color to make step-by-step progress (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

As an intervention into mono-cultural curricula, using CRT allows for an analysis of practice and ideologies through a race conscious lens to create questions and address the traumas in communities of color (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Masko (2005) confirms that racism is a widespread mental health issue for children, yet there is minimal research addressing the importance of how persons interpret race shapes perspective which is especially concerning for those using a privileged lens to make decisions for ethnic minorities (Graham et al, 2011). Students feel a greater sense of purpose and can develop strong relationships when they feel that they belong to a larger community (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Brown (2008) presents the challenge in that most institutions operate with a value system and foundations based on the dominant culture typically absent of racially diverse representation, making it difficult for students of color to feel connected in many school communities (p. 55-56).

**CRT: Teachers as change agents**

Research is clear that in order for students to have healing from racial trauma there need to be authentic relationships that genuinely seek to understand the racialized experiences of the students (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Jordan, 2010). This makes it vital that young people feel heard
and supported in their vulnerability of sharing to prevent re-traumatization from a school professional negating experiences of racism whether as micro aggressions or systemic oppression (Masko, 2005). Yet CRT reminds us that challenging the master euro-centric narrative comes with discomfort and unease for those within the dominant culture (Graham et al, 2011), giving more need for intentional praxis to deconstruct the oppressive system throughout most schools and institutions (Creswell, 2007).

One of the tenets of CRT is social justice education and praxis. Social justice education and praxis may be an identifier for teachers that are more culturally competent. Swalwell (2013) uses the social justice education definition of “a teacher transforming policies and enacting pedagogies that improve the learning and life opportunities for typically underserved children (p. 16-17). CRT argues that, as a teacher, knowing about inequity is not enough, and there needs to be intentional resistance that challenges and creates action to change inequity. Without the praxis and social justice education the onus continues to fall to the student to rise above circumstances while leaving the oppressive system continuing to create traumas for marginalized youth. In CRT, a culturally competent teacher challenges the status quo, shares power with students, provides opportunities for counter storytelling. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

The goal of social justice provides a liberating way to respond to the oppression of marginalized populations through empowerment and exposing interest convergence, change that occurs only when white dominant culture has something to gain (Yosso, 2006). Since race is intimately intertwined in the history and development of the United States, hegemony and racism are going to have to be directly addressed with a revisionist (Graham et al, 2011) and praxis approach. CRT challenges researchers to also include action steps in their work to support
deconstructing the colonial systems (Graham et al, 2011; Creswell, 2007). It is not enough to research or teach about racism without contributing to disrupting and dismantling the white patriarchy.

**Relational-Cultural Theory**

As discussed in the previous section, CRT studies and focuses on the inequities of race, racism, and power, especially within systems such as schools. It asserts that simply knowing about racial stratification and power differentials is not enough and action to eliminate stratification and power dynamics is necessary. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) gives direction on how to balance power between students and teachers while increasing relationship building.

**What is RCT?**

Relational-cultural theory (RCT) raises awareness of the importance of social justice in creating professionals that engage in their own reflective work to be advocates of change. It focuses on the quality of relationships recognizing that healthy relatedness and connectedness are essential to healthy development (Eible, 2015). It was pioneered in the 1970s by Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Judith Jordan, and Jan Surrey at Wellesley College (Duffey & Trepal, 2016; Trepal & Duffey, 2016; Duffey & Haberstroh, 2014). Lenz (2016) defines RCT as “a contemporary psychodynamic framework for understanding human development based on the assumption that individuals’ happiness and well-being are a product of the degree to which they participate in growth-fostering relationships” (p. 415).

According to Jordan (2000), the seven tenets of RCT are:

1. People grow through and toward relationship throughout the lifespan,
2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning,
3. Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterize growth,
4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships,
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth-fostering relationships,
6. In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit.
7. One of the goals of development from a relational perspective is the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the life span (p. 1005).

This feminist theoretical framework was developed from the absence of research understanding how relational experiences contribute to the mental wellness for women, persons of color, and marginalized men (Comstock et al, 2008; Miller, 1976). RCT contradicted traditional counseling ideology that valued independence and autonomy as markers for mental maturity and wellness (Comstock et al, 2008; Miller, 1976), arguing that emotional growth develops through human connection rather than separation (Duffey & Trepal, 2016; Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Somody, 2011; Jordan, 2001, 2010). RCT theorists (Jordan, 2010; Miller, 1976, 1986) suggest there are five outcomes of having connection: 1. Increased sense of zest in relationship (energy and vitality), 2. A greater understanding of self, other and the relationship, 3. An enhanced sense of worth, 4. Increased productivity, and 5. Desire for more connection (Comstock et al, 2008, p. 282).

**Why is RCT important?**

The concept of mutual empathy was first defined within the RCT model in 1981 as the ability to facilitate change by “feeling the responsiveness of the other person” (Jordan, 2010, p. 4). It requires a safe space that allows for vulnerability (Haskins & Appling, 2017) and is more dependent on attitude and engagement than communication technique (Jordan, 2009). Hartling (2003) articulates that counselors using an RCT approach “demonstrate relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies by being attuned to disconnections on interpersonal and
sociopolitical levels (Comstock et al, 2008, p. 285) allowing for increased empathy to client’s racial, cultural and social identities.

These disconnection strategies are used to maintain perceived emotional safety and can be driven by society (Jordan, 2010; Comstock et al, 2008). Society is racially, culturally and socially stratified, and oppresses marginalized groups which can create traumas and make growth-fostering connections more challenging (Comstock et al, 2008). Haskins & Appling (2017) assert that “RCT emphasizes the role of power dynamics on well-being and the role these dynamics have on perpetuating shame and feelings of unworthiness” (p. 88). This has strong implications for a classroom when considering the importance teacher-student relationship and the potential positive outcomes that could emerge from a strong and healthy relationship.

**RCT: Teachers as healers**

RCT theorists argue reciprocal empathetic and growth-fostering relationships help individuals transform and heal (Purgason et al, 2014; Comstock, 2005; Comstock, Daniels, & D’Andrea, 2006; Jordan, 2001). The RCT approach provides opportunities for therapists to increase cultural awareness by hearing stories, beliefs, and worldviews from clients and offering an empathic response while exploring different life experiences (Comstock et al, 2008). When the amount of time a child spends in school is considered, there are implications that an empathetic, connected, authentic, and empowering environment can contribute to the mental health of a child. The challenge becomes transforming school systems and environments that have been built on whiteness into climates that intentionally use a critical lens to dismantle implicit biases and policies.
While RCT was designed as a therapist-client framework, it is important to consider the implications in a classroom within a teacher-student framework. It is primarily used in social work, but there have been studies using RCT in academic settings (Schwartz & Holloway, 2012; Liang et al, 2010). RCT is a highly critical and reflexive framework designed to focus on identity through cultural competence as categorized through attitudes and beliefs, cultural knowledge, and using culturally appropriate intervention strategies (Sue, 2006). It is important to note that the intention is not to transform teachers into therapists, rather the desire is to explore if teachers, unintentionally, embody some of the core foundational concepts of RCT, therefore potentially increasing healing and improving mental health outcomes for their students.

**A Critique of Resiliency: Critical School Mental Health Praxis Framework (CrSMHP)**

When youth of color succeed despite racial trauma caused by a mismatch in their racial, cultural, and social identities, the scholarship refers to their experience as ‘resilience.’ One definition suggests resiliency is “the capability of individuals to cope successfully in the face of significant change, adversity, or risk and enhanced by protective factors in the individual and environment” (Greene & Conrad, 2002). The tone of resiliency models suggest that victims of adversity are responsible for overcoming their hardships. From a critical perspective, “resilience” does not adequately allow for identification and interrogation of the systemic oppression created in schools. CRT and RCT challenge the resiliency model as they actively resist putting the responsibility on the oppressed individual to overcome their situation and instead give focused attention on the actual problem, a system built on racism.

One consideration often neglected in resiliency discussions is that trauma is historical and/or generational. Trauma may be passed from one generation that shares the same racial,
cultural, and/or social identity to the next generation. (Mohatt et al, 2014). Another concern is the potential meritocratic nature of resiliency research that attempts to weigh and quantify levels of racial stress and discrimination may essentialize racial identification and trauma. Additionally, most resiliency models do not take into account racial battle fatigue which occurs from being a person of color in predominantly white environments (McGee & Stovall, 2015). These effects suggest an alternative to solely focusing on resiliency and grit as a solution to trauma and race-related stress.

I propose a Critical School Mental Health Praxis Framework (CrSMHP) which combines the critical lens of CRT and RCT towards dismantling oppressive systems as suggested by CRT with the systemic reflection protocol put forward by RCT as a method of increasing socio-cultural reflection to build healing relationships between teachers and students. CrSMHP recognizes that both frameworks are necessary to build a comprehensive approach to allow students of color to thrive in schools. As CRT stresses it is not enough to simply connect and build relationships when youth of color still have to face micro-aggressions from a racist society, discriminatory policies and practices, and power and privilege from the white dominant culture. It makes it impossible for a person to heal from racial wounds when the traumatic system continues to perpetuate racial/cultural/social stratification. RCT emphasizes that in order for young people to heal they also need to make new healthy relationships that allow for growth and empowerment. This requires intensive socio-cultural self-reflection from the professional to challenge their stereotypes and biases that influences how identity contributes to their ability to build relationships with students.

This research seeks to explore the praxis teachers nominated by students for being culturally competent. It aims to identify the work they do in dismantling the system of privilege
and to better understand how in this work their identities and contribute to their culturally competent relationship building. I will also propose that as CRT has evolved into other subgroups including Latino-critical LatCrit, Queer-crit, and Asian-crit, that there also be consideration given to the development of a Critical School Mental Health Praxis (CrSMHP) framework to further explore improving school mental health for marginalized identities.

Summary

This dissertation is intended to address gaps in research on how culturally competent teachers make sense of their identity and the identities of their students therefore impacting student mental health. Schools mirror the racial, cultural, and social stratifications, and power dynamics, of society. These inequities result in compromised student mental health for students of marginalized identities.

While equity has always been a priority for school mental health, critical theory challenges how equity should be approached. Critical theory argues that there are two consequences of identity inequities in school that cannot be rectified without social justice and praxis focused on dismantling an oppressive system. Both CRT and RCT seek to transform race, racism, and power relationships to improve mental health outcomes for students of color schools. CRT asserts that ongoing hegemonic systems need to be disturbed and deconstructed while RCT provides a framework of how that work can take place with reflective practice to build crucial healing relationships. CrSMHP provides a missing framework to disrupt the cycle of oppression using intentional critical reflection practices for professionals as a method for improving the mental health of marginalized populations.
In the portraits of the teachers I profile in this study, I illustrate how their identities contribute to their ability to build culturally competent relationships. Their identities are reflective of the essential components of CrSMHP.

In Figure 2.1 below, I compare critical components of Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory and provide the components that synthesize to create the Critical School Mental Health Praxis Framework.
## Critical Race Theory (CRT) vs. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Race Theory (CRT)</th>
<th>Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical framework with feminist influences</td>
<td>Critical framework with feminist influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeks to balance power dynamics</td>
<td>Seeks to balance power dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase cultural awareness by hearing stories, beliefs, and worldviews from youth through counter-storytelling</td>
<td>Increase cultural awareness by hearing stories, beliefs, and worldviews from youth and offering an empathic response while exploring different life experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase social justice education and praxis to make professionals agents of change</td>
<td>Increase social justice education and praxis to make professionals agents of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argues that racial inequities contributes to mental health demise</td>
<td>Argues relational disconnection contribute to mental health demise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not provide direction for building culturally competent relationships</td>
<td>Gives direction on building culturally competent relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centers on dismantling oppressive systems creating ongoing racial traumas for marginalized population</td>
<td>Focuses on healthy and authentic relationships that genuinely seek to understand the identity experiences of students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Critical School Mental Health Praxis Framework (CrSMHP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenet 1: A critical lens is needed to address the root cause of ongoing systemic oppression reproduced through the policies of institutions and the practices of individuals working within them.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenet 2: Intensive professional and personal self-reflection is needed to challenge stereotypes, biases, and expectations that influence the ability to build connected relationships with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenet 3: Connected relationships between students and teachers create a culturally-conscious school climate that can prepare young people to be agents of institutional and individual change in their society.</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 2.1 Critical School Mental Health Praxis Framework (CrSMHP) as a synthesis of CRT
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY: PORTRAITS OF IDENTITY

There is a wealth of research that stresses teachers are poorly prepared to work with “diverse” students. In my opinion, the word diversity is overused and often in poor context, specifically referring to racial identities versus the robust variety of identities found in a classroom. These could include abilities, genders, sexual orientations, background experiences, socioeconomic statuses, religions, politics, ad infinitum. A challenge of this dissertation is the attempt to isolate three identity classifications without fully understanding the intersectionality and complexity of the multitude of factors at play, especially for teachers and students co-existing in a shared space. Even more challenging is understanding how the identity stratifications intersect with mental health.

While I focused on three identity classifications -- racial, cultural, and social – I understand that even within each identity dimension there are countless manifestations and intersections. I chose portraiture to represent my findings because there is power in giving voice to the story of each participant while acknowledging the intricacy of the various details that contributing to their story. To better understand how teachers make sense of their identities and the identities of their students through a critical lens requires a unique methodology that allows for depth beyond empiricism. It requires a reach toward emotional trustworthiness as an indicator of validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This can be attained in the qualitative methodology of portraiture. My study pursues the truth within the complexity of identity and how that impacts teacher-student relationships, and ultimately student mental health.

Qualitative research prioritizes interpretations of data based on interviews and engagement with the study participants (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research does not attempt
to generalize interpretations as the contextual uniqueness of most studies makes them challenging to reproduce (Creswell, 2003). Researchers attend to participant meaning-making and bring their personal values into the study (Creswell, 2003). Often time, on of the personal values of the qualitative researcher is to use findings as a platform for social change (Creswell, 2003). This advocacy research which seeks to implement change on behalf of a marginalized population becomes the voice of change, but it cannot be adequately accomplished with post-positivist views alone (Creswell, 2003). It requires a more in-depth understanding of how actors (participants) understand their own experiences in a rich authentic context (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

**Portraiture**

Portraiture is a unique approach in qualitative inquiry. It is a phenomenological method that delicately balances art and science to share data by painting a comprehensive “picture” of individual identities (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Portraiture is “the first social science methodology to blend art and science, bridging empiricism and aestheticism” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). One of the challenges in research on equity and school mental health is that often times the empiricism does not provide an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. It provides strength in numbers, but is not able to convey emotional truth and offer space for critical reflection with participants.

Unlike many methodologies, portraiture intentionally seeks to discover “goodness” rather than “objectivity.” It is not like typical research that orients in a linear way to a problem and its solution. While knowing that teacher preparation programs are not producing culturally competent teachers poses a significant social problem, my intention in this dissertation is not to
“solve” that problem; rather, it is to capture the essence of culturally competent teachers by painting their portraits through storytelling with specific focus on their strengths (goodness). My reasoning is that if we understand the goodness or strengths provided by a culturally competent praxis, we can better identify patterns of success to use in teacher preparation programs and policy implementation.

Goodness as defined by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016) seeks to focus on what is strong and worthy versus seeking a problem and trying to remedy it (p. 20). Portraiture purposefully pursues strength with a desire to understand and recreate that “goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). As opposed to case studies that would propose to understand a problem of the “case” and focus on potential solutions, portraiture sets out to focus on the strength of the phenomenon followed by painting a “picture” of the story in attempts to recreate the “goodness.” These portraits can serve as counter-stories to give power back to marginalized identities and to challenge ahistorical narratives of school success and failure perpetuated as truth. The search for truth and empowerment is an example of “goodness” as process in portraiture (Chapman, 2005).

Just as teacher-student relationships in classrooms are important to positive identity building, portraiture provided an opportunity for me as the researcher to also build positive relationships and identities with my research participants. In order to nurture trust and explore the deepest and most in-depth stories, I needed to be part of the experience rather than a voyeur on the sidelines (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016).

Portraiture has grounding in Feminist Theory. Similarly to RCT, Feminist Theory includes feeling and empathy as part of the inquiry process; truth is understood as a social construction in which the researcher and participant both have active roles (Steinberg &
Cannella, 2012). Feminist researchers value the importance of humanness in having a rich and robust understanding of the phenomenon. Portraiture is a continuous fit with feminist scholars’ goal that the researcher be part of the experience to afford greater access to inquiry and insight (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). This is counterintuitive to a more rigid positivist approach that only sees “what was there” (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012) in a directly observable and “countable” way.

In portraiture’s encouragement of a trusting relationship between researcher and participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) it also expects the researcher to acknowledge their own experience, background, and perspective. This increased transparency impacts the final portraiture. Portraiture intentionally gives attention to the different stakeholders: audience, participants, and researchers (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Nikundiwe, 2017).

**Audience**

The first stakeholder in portraiture is the audience. The reader of portraiture comes to the table with identities independent and unique of the participants’ and researcher. As the audience engages with the portrait, their own understanding of identity influences how the portraiture is viewed and received. The goal of the author is that the reader “can feel resonance and identification” (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1997; Nikundiwe, 2017). Portraiture is comfortable identifying paradoxes. The art of painting the most intimate of details of a phenomenon forces the audience to refrain from the generalization so common in many social sciences. Instead the hope is that the reader discovers how universal themes may coexist with disparate multiple realities (Lawrence Lightfoot, 2005).
The second stakeholder in portraiture is the researcher. As the person that is interpreting the words, actions, and artifacts of participants, the researcher in portraiture has to also be an interpreter of their own experience. In talking with the teachers in this study, I had to be aware of how my own identities contributed to my understanding and interpretation of our conversations. As a white woman, I think my childhood was one of the most important identity dimensions that shapes my understanding of race, culture, and social identity experiences. I grew up in a suburb of Chicago that was predominantly middle-upper class and white, yet my neighborhood was racially and culturally diverse. I vividly remember that our neighborhood was reflective of the diversity in Chicago. Since neighbors become some of a child’s first best friends, my childhood neighbors and friends were Indian, Jewish, Chinese, Pakistani, Venezuelan, Greek, Hindu, and Muslim, with several white families down the block. We were one of two Catholic families in the neighborhood. As children, we all played kick the can, baseball, and a wide variety of tag games, but as we got older our relationships also dissipated. I lived in a neighborhood rich in diversity, but I never remember my family having family friends of color or dinners at each other’s homes. My first boyfriend was Black, and I remember an uncle at a family party trying to discourage me from dating him. I had other family members that actively perpetuated racist narratives. I remember my stepfather would actively make comments about too many people of color on television or make fun of vernacular English. He was an abusive alcoholic, so as a child his racism confused me, but as I got older it only increased my disdain for him. While I lived amidst a variety of racial, cultural, and social intersections in my neighborhood, my childhood was still very white and Eurocentric.
In school, I remember curricula filled with white men, especially presidents, some inventors, writers, and leaders. Most of them made it into my textbooks each year with a slightly different context. Being near Chicago, I have vague memories learning and celebrating Casimir Pulaski Day, a day that recognizes a Polish Commander that helped George Washington in the Revolutionary War. There was a distinct absence of women and persons of color in our curricula. I have no recollection of learning about Latinos, Asian-Americans, Pacific Islanders, and our content around indigenous populations was skewed to celebrate tyrants such as Christopher Columbus. I distinctly remember Martin Luther King Jr. being one of the only African-American people I ever “learned” about. Often this learning was in the context of superficial classroom activities that repeated every year such as listening to his “I Have a Dream” speech and writing our own “I Have a Dream” speech. Incidentally, over thirty years later, I still see this activity happening as Black history education. It wasn’t until I was much older that I even began to understand that the only persons of color I learned about were in the context of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. Even then everything was white washed. As a white child, I had very little understanding of the lives of persons of color. Even with my neighbors, I never remember talking about adversity. Until I was an adult, I thought Christopher Columbus was a heroic explorer. I remember when I first heard an accurate narrative that he was a horrific, inhumane person that cut off hands and raped at will. I was confused and angered that for most of my life I had been told pure fiction. That was one of my starting points to start think critically about everything I was being taught in school.

In college, my only class aptly entitled something about diversity was a giant lecture hall with a hundred other preservice teachers listening to speakers and creating lesson plans on how to be “diverse” teachers. Absent were conversations on systemic discrimination and how to
dismantle an oppressive system. At the time I knew so little, yet I thought I knew so much. I feel like I have a lifetime of inaccurate information that I am constantly trying to relearn and understand. Everything I learned was so whitewashed for the benefit of dominant culture. Now the more I learn the more I realize I have no clue what it truly can mean to walk in the shoes (identity) of another.

I am unsure that anything genuinely changed until decades later. I never heard the word “privilege,” regarding identity, until I was 30 years old. I was perplexed, and while I cannot note the specific date, time, and moment I learned it, I am sure that I did what most white people do -- deny it or deny that I was “guilty” of it. I was a young teacher plagued by a white savior complex. I assumed that because I wanted the best for my students that meant I could not be described by such a negative label. My white saviorism made me feel immune to being racist or perpetuating oppression, yet every day I willingly taught similar white washed curriculum from when I was a child, and adhered to the same oppressive policies that have marginalized youth of color for countless years.

As a teacher that primarily worked with students in special education classrooms designed for children with behavior and emotional disorders, I quickly learned that in predominantly white schools I had more students of color than were proportionate in the school. Being in a classroom with fewer numbers of students, I was able to get to know more of my students and learn so much about their lives. I learned what they loved, and who they wanted to be. Again, the more I learned, the more I realized I was not equipped to be an effective teacher for students of color. I was not a bad teacher, at all, but I knew that I did not have the same experiences of identity as many of my students. Since many of the children I worked with also struggled with mental health issues, my ability to understand how identity and mental health
intersected was complex. I knew there was a disconnect, and I also saw it with many of my colleagues working with young students of different racial, cultural, and social backgrounds. As I reflect, I remember working with maybe two people in K-12 schools that were not white. Professional development opportunities as a veteran teacher were just as abysmal as my preservice training, so I decided I needed to know more. I left K-12 and decided to pursue a PhD in education, social justice & mental health. In the portraiture I provide, I bring my identity and experiences into how I interpret and tell the story of each of the culturally competent teachers.

**Participants**

The third part of the stakeholders in portraiture are the participants. For this study, my participants were teachers. I recruited my teacher participants in a two-part process. First, I chose a diverse high school class in a district with over 60% students identified as non-white, and asked them to nominate teachers they had studied from in their district they felt were culturally competent. After receiving permission from the institutional review board (IRB), Appendix A, district and the teachers of the class, I visited the class and talked about my study. My first visit was to introduce myself to the students, and explain my research and why it was important. Prior to asking them to fill out a nomination form, we had a brief discussion on what they felt made culturally competent teachers. The students were robust and eager to share that they appreciate teachers that take the time to connect. One student confided that her teachers handwrite all of their high school students Christmas cards and how much that meant to her. Another student indicated that relatability was important, especially when a teacher looks like them and/or identifies like they do. A female student expressed gratitude when “a teacher stands with us by our sides.” One commented that they like seeing their teachers in public and at places that other teachers won’t go such as protests or concerts.
Twelve students returned informed consents resulting in thirty-one nominations. Nominating students self-identified as African-American, Mexican, Lao, Black, Asian-American, Asian, white, and bi-racial. I was hoping for more participants in the nomination process, but I acknowledge that entering a space as a white female researcher with no prior relationship with the students may have contributed to the lack of response in participation.

Students nominated teachers from across five high schools in this large Midwestern urban school district. I initially chose to work with the four teachers with the most nominations. I then had to make adjustments. For example, I learned that one was no longer a teacher in the district. In considering a replacement, I noted that there were many that had the same number of nominations, so I intentionally chose persons from different schools to increase perspective. This led me to eventually contact seven teachers. In the end, three accepted and participated, with unsuccessful recruitment attempts with the other four. Incidentally, one of the participants was a former student that I had taught in a special education graduate class. The other two I had never met, although I was familiar with their names from a common circle of friends.

**Imagery of CRT, RCT & Portraiture**

As a Ph.D. student, I have not had a lot of time for television in many years, but occasionally, when I travel, I am privileged to watch cable. My favorite indulgence is Home and Garden Television (HGTV) for the abundance of house renovation shows. Each premise is slightly different, but the overarching theme is a home needs some renovation and gets it. This is a nearly perfect visualization of how CRT, RCT, and Portraiture align and complement each other.
First, think of the home in disrepair as a broken and oppressive system. It is not functioning in a way in which everyone in it can benefit. Perhaps there is no running water or the kitchen appliances do not work. Most of the HGTV shows have a design team and a construction team; all have the final presentation. When considering this metaphor, CRT represents the design team. They are able to look at the space and recognize the injustice. They can see that it should look far better than it does and have suggestions on what would benefit from improvement. One of the ongoing criticisms of CRT is the lack of specific direction to make that change (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This is where RCT comes in as the construction team. They benefit from having the guidance of the CRT design team to identify the problem areas, but the RCT construction team has the tools to implement the change.

Finally, no HGTV show is complete without a dynamic and exciting presentation of the final result. This aligns beautifully with portraiture. The presentation seeks to find the goodness of the process and helps shine light on the best parts of the new home. It becomes a snapshot of the intimate details that went into the process and the result. Similar to portraiture, it is important to recognize that everyone has a role, but everyone is also coming to the experience with a different bias. For instance, the persons in the home could be the participants who do their best to inform the design and construction teams (RCT & CRT). These teams could also be considered the researchers who have their own ideas about how best to solve the home’s repair challenges; they too have their own preferences and biases. Finally, everyone watching HGTV, the audience, comes to the table with their own lens and expectations of what they consider beautiful and successful. Together, for the residents, design and construction teams, and the audience, an exceptional story is told, yet one that is different dependent on these varying roles and responsibilities.
**Data Collection**

**Who The Culturally Competent Teachers Are**

The three participants in this study, Keahi, Alex, & Louise, are high school teachers in a large, urban, Midwestern school district with over 30,000 students. All participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. They were nominated by their students as being culturally competent. This is significant given that, in their district, the teacher workforce is predominantly white with over 60% of the students served representing a variety of races and cultures of color. The diversity of the district includes both domestic and international students. The district website indicates, over 20% of students were born in over 80 different countries prior to finding home in this community.

Keahi is biracial and was born and raised until early adolescence in a community of color before moving to a predominantly white community. Alex and Louise were born in different rural and white cities in Midwestern states.

I interviewed the culturally competent teachers for approximately four and a half hours each. I probed into their childhood experiences and their identity development. I asked them how their identities contributed to their cultural competence. I inquired about who their students were, and how they thought the intersectionality of their identity contributed to the mental health of their students. Each teacher confided deeply personal and private experiences, mistakes, and their journeys of learning to be better people. They were all immensely committed to their students in similar, but uniquely different, ways. I documented thoughts, connections, and questions as they spoke, created inquisitive memos and revisited those notes and memos while reviewing the transcripts.
I observed the educators interacting with their students for at least three hours each. Much of the time was spent in their classrooms, but I also attended a slam poetry event watching two of the participants as program facilitators. The observations provided me an opportunity to witness the cultural competent “goodness” in action. It heightened my understanding of the interview descriptions they shared with me. Watching their interactions with the students were powerful illustrations of how they navigate the multitude of intersectionality within each classroom.

**Interviews**

For about three months, I spent a lot of time with my participants conducting interviews and observations. Altogether, I interviewed participants for over 13 hours and spent 9 hours observing in total. I chose Seidman’s three step interview protocol (Seidman, 2006). This protocol consists of doing three separate 90 minute interviews per each participant. I thought Seidman’s protocol was a good match for this study since I wanted participants to have time to reflect and make meaning of how their own identity development has contributed to their identities as culturally competent teachers.

I conducted three 90 minute interview sessions with each participant. Following the protocol, the first interview focused on the participant’s life history. The interviews started with a question similar to “How would you describe your experience in school and your relationship with your teachers?” and “Why do you think you were nominated as a culturally competent teacher?” before probing more challenging questions such as “How did your childhood relationships contribute to your identity?” The interviews were filled with follow-up questions that were not on the protocol but were in response to what participants were sharing.
The second interview focused on contemporary experience. Interviews began with “Describe your identity as a teacher” and led to “Tell me about your students’ identities,” “tell me what it looks/means/feels like to be a culturally competent teacher,” “how do you see yourself contributing to your students’ mental wellness?”, and “what experiences have you seen with students’ identity and mental health?”

The final third interview was a reflection on meaning. This interview had the greatest number of follow-up questions based on their previous individual responses and experiences I wanted to understand more in-depth. The interviews began with a general question about what does it mean to be a teacher working with diverse populations and increased in reflection with questions such as “How have you come to make sense of your identity in relationship to your students?” and “how does your identity contribute to your mental health?” Every participant indicated during this final interview that either the questions were challenging or it really made them think in ways that they do not normally. One participant confided that the entire interview process has made him start to think a lot about his identity as a culturally competent teacher, especially analyzing how that looks as a white man working with students of color.

Most interviews were very close to 90 minutes; some ran slightly over and some were slightly shorter. Depending on the participant and context of the interview, I tried to be mindful of emotional exhaustion. For some it was already after a full day of teaching, so after getting copious amounts of rich data we ended when it felt appropriate. All but one of the interviews was conducted in the teachers’ classrooms. The final interview for the third participant was done in a coffee shop, because it was a day she didn’t have school, and she wanted to be in a different place. After data transcription, participants provided a member check to make sure that their words and thoughts were accurately recorded.
Observations

I did three classroom observations for each participant at times of their choosing. I observed their classrooms, a poetry workshop, and a spoken word performance. I wanted to be able to see each participant in their element to be able to more intimately understand how they relate to their students and how their students relate to them.

Artifacts

I also analyzed examples of artifacts of their choosing to help me better understand the relationships and connectedness within the classroom. I received as artifacts project lesson plans, pictures, final student art and poetry products, and a picture of a graffitied wall. I looked at these for evidence of each teacher’s cultural competence. This allowed me to get a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the teacher’s identity and relationships with students.

Data Analysis

I wanted to honor the intimacy of my wealth of data as I crafted it into the story of my participants. I chose narrative analysis, because it uses interviews, artifacts, observations, field notes, and life experience to better understand how people make sense of their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I chose Jerome Bruner’s method of narrative analysis, because it is a functional approach that makes sense of random and chaotic events (Bruner, 1991). It pays attention to how participants make sense of their reality as well as how their interpretations are shaped and created (Bruner, 1991). This is important in my research as I seek to understand how teachers are making sense of their identities and the identities of their students.
I wanted to be able to collect the data and search for the meaning within the existing data rather than trying to fit the data into pre-determined categories. With work so rich in relationship and identity, I wanted to be able to allow the data to guide the meaning. Creating predetermined categories would have misconstrued my understanding of the data if I was trying to use my advanced interpretation as a guide. As I interpreted and analyzed their data, I did so as a storyteller to tell an in-depth and rich portraiture of their experiences and identity as culturally competent teachers. To do this I had to pay careful attention to emerging themes that developed across the data.

One of the biggest challenges for me as an interpreter and storyteller is constantly having to reflect on my own experiences and being mindful of how my experiences are impacting my understanding. For instance, one participant was discussing his struggle with a white savior complex especially when he first started teaching. Immediately, my mind connected to my struggle and experience navigating a white savior complex. While I want to acknowledge that connection, I did not want my own experience and feelings of being a young white woman wanting to “save” all of my students to cloud the rich details and experiences he was sharing. This is specifically why portraiture wants the researcher to be engaged versus a voyeur on the side. It was a dance to focus on his experience from his lens yet still recognize my own lens as an inevitable part of my interpretive process.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is an example of qualitative validity that “requires researchers to make decisions about what quality is and how they will ensure high quality research happens” (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). Validity refers to “whether methods in research are conducted with
integrity and produce credible findings” (Kridel, 2010). My work was also grounded in catalytic validity “A category of validity researchers use to evaluate whether qualitative research designed to spur social change accomplishes its objectives” (Kridel, 2010). Catalytic validity is intended to move participants to action and do “the results of study act as a catalyst for action” (Wolcott, 1994). This study was designed using a critical lens for the intention of creating action to improve teacher cultural competence and antiquated policies that marginalize students of color.

A central question important to validity in research is: “How might I be wrong?” (Maxwell, 2005). There are multiple methods for validity checks, including: long term involvement; rich data; respondent validation; searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases; and triangulation (Maxwell, 2005). Similar to Seidman’s interviewing protocol, portraiture believes that with high amount of time spent together the participant and researcher begin to develop a relationship, and rather than viewing the researcher’s interpretation as flawed, the researcher is seen as an instrument that is responsive, “marvelously smart, adaptable, flexible instrument who can respond to situations with skill, tact, and understanding” (Seidman, 2006).

As an interpreter and storyteller engaged in portraiture, I attempted to adhere to Lawrence-Lightfoot’s assertion that I be vigorously seeking multiple ways to challenge my perspective, coupling rigorous procedural and methodological approaches with critical self-reflection to account for personal bias (Lawrence Lightfoot, 2005). Prior to engaging in my work, I began the reflexivity process by reflecting on my views and biases throughout the study. While interviewing and observing, I used my field notes to indicate bias and my perspectives to use when I went back for data analysis. For instance, one participant was telling the story of childhood traumas and abuse. I wrote in my notes that I momentarily found myself lost in the story, and that I had acknowledged that I was sorry the participant had gone through trauma and
thanked the person for sharing. I also noted that I was fighting back tears for the participant as it reminded me of similar traumas I had as a child. Rather than viewing my feelings at the moment as an intrusion to the data, I acknowledge my experience as part of how I interpreted the meaning of the story.

One of the largest reflexive critiques of my work is that talking to young people to confirm their experiences in the classroom would enhance and deepen my work. I have numerous field notes that indicate my desire to do future research to learn the stories of students and their experiences working with competent teachers to compare and contrast with the results of this study. I triangulated the data I collected in interviews, my own observations, with the student nominations I received, and the artifacts each teacher gave me. I used all of the data to find patterns, refrains until the “convergent themes” began to emerge (Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). My work was a collaboration of the stories I learned, the actions I witnessed, the emerging themes I found, and the conclusions I made.

**Now the Stories Begin…**

With each interview, observation, and artifact analysis, I, often times, found myself lost in the moment. More than one time my field notes indicated that I had periods without notes, because I was captivated by the story, the passion, and, at times, the despair. There was a certain anxiety that built when considering the generosity and bravery it took for someone to let a researcher into their world. To respect their contribution to my work, it was important to me to pay honor to their stories by writing a portrait that illuminates the smallest of details of their experience as a culturally competent teacher. The next section attempts to do the participants justice by painting three portraits of culturally competent teachers and their stories of how they
became who they are, how they make sense of their students, and how that helps us understand mental health as part of CrSMHP framework. Each of the portraits that follow has been crafted from interview and observation data to facilitate the reader’s own feeling about the participant’s experience with respect to the research questions. While the details of each experience differs, all portraits reveal answers about what culturally competent teachers’ understandings are of their identities, how do these teachers understand their identities as contributing to their ability to build culturally competent relationships with students, and how do these teachers understand student identities as contributing to students’ mental health and health.
CHAPTER 4 THREE TEACHER PORTRAITURES: SOCIAL ACTIVIST HEALERS

As I walked into the first interview of my first participant, my heart was racing and my thoughts alternated between absolute excitement and fear. The perfectionist in me started my research journey preoccupied with anxiety over whether I would be able to paint accurate portraits of the three participants. I worried that I would not be able to adequately represent the depth of the meaning of each of the participant’s experience in the way demanded by portraiture. Early on, this worry gave way to intense professional respect and deep creative release.

Quickly, I became enamored with the stories of each teacher and had immense gratitude for their willingness to let me into their worlds. I also found comfort in the beauty of portraiture for intentionally giving me space as part of the story rather than an outsider trying to look inside. The stories they told me about their teaching lives were rich with honesty, emotion, and complexity. I did not want to simply re-share their words or water down the ideas that emerged. I wanted to embody the curiosity, reflection, feelings, and passion shared in all of our moments together.

As the researcher, on this journey, I also share my thoughts with you, the audience, to help give understanding to how I made meaning of what I saw, heard, and understood. Portraiture acknowledges three entities in this work: researcher, participant, and audience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Nikundiwe, 2017). Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) argue that no part of research is untouched by the researcher’s voice (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 85; Chapman, 2005). The researcher and the participant(s) “are engaged in portraiture to co-construct the narrative” (Harding, 2005). My hope is that as you read you become a part of this
journey along with the participants and researcher adding another layer of meaning. As you read my research findings, I hope you are able to find the same splendor I did in each story.

**Snaps: Alex**

*Alex is one the best people I have ever met. He is understanding and honest that I know I can trust him to advocate for my best interest as a student. He lets us know he is there for us at any capacity within his ability. I like that he encourages us to try new ways/forms of expression. He is my favorite teacher and can never be replaced.* – 12th grade African American student nomination

Alex is an advisor for a spoken word program that started as an experiment to integrate the arts and engage kids otherwise not easily engaged in his building. It is based on a social justice imperative. It has grown into a program across his district for students in elementary through high school. The program was born from Alex’s love for hip hop and appreciation for how the arts gave him a voice. In his program, students are immersed in the craft of writing poetry. Each building has their own group meetings and the high school groups meet weekly together for workshops led by Alex and other leaders.

As I walked into the building where they house the weekly workshops, I noticed hundreds of feet outside decorated in graffiti. Colors twenty feet high without an uncovered inch. An ocean mural dominated most of one wall meticulously crafted with dozens of blue and green shades to tell the story of the sea filled with sharks, fish, sea plants, and a sunken ship. Opposite that wall was another wall tagged with letters and symbols in pink, yellow, blue and green pastels. It reminded me of one of the artifacts Alex gave me. A picture of a graffitied wall with a white man in a large black stone chair holding his hand to his ear while the sky swirled a brilliant red and purple overlooking the city skyline. The caption emblazoned across the top right corner read “All of my students possess great power within them…” The stories behind
these pieces are powerful and engaging. I would later learn that some of these images were the work of Alex’s students. They had the schools’ permission to use their creativity to brighten up the otherwise drab space. Loud thumping music guided me down a long cement hallway past classrooms lining both sides to the room that was the source of the hip hop beats. I entered, momentarily in awe of the room’s contemporary urban design. It had two full walls fitted with windows from floor to ceiling. I could see out the windows that it overlooked a courtyard and major downtown thoroughfare. The music was coming from videos playing on two big flat screen televisions at the front of the room. Chairs lined the perimeter leaving the center of the room bare.

As each high school student entered the room, they were greeted by Alex or another program leader. Some students started dancing towards the front of the room and were encouraged to do so by the facilitators’ own dancing. The room was filled with diverse youth. Whether the student was a Latina wearing a crop top or an African American male sporting dress slacks and a bow tie, the faces of the youth and Alex lit up when they saw each other. As a child, the constant taunting from classmates and his family for being a sensitive and fashion-savvy “fag” left Alex with a perpetual desire to help students feel secure in their own identities. When students greeted Alex, it was often with high fives or hugs.

As every workshop begins, so did this one with announcement and chants as a warm-up. These messages were delivered in a sharp and distinct, prideful, tone. Today, a young African American female with bold beautiful curls cascading down her back started the meeting. The room was humming with energy. Their voices oscillated between calm storytelling into passionate preaching that echoed throughout the entire building. The louder and bolder the performance, the louder and bolder the audience became. The young people were encouraged by
Alex and his co-leaders to be loud and to move as they felt compelled. In our previous conversation, Alex had made it clear to me that he sees himself as a facilitator, because he believes he learns alongside the students. He uses the lens of his students to guide his instruction so at a slam meeting like this one, students have voice and share aspects of their story. “We are always focusing on social justice, we're focusing on histories of people of color, we're focusing on the marginalized and the oppressed, and we're also using, you know, creative art forms that traditionally have been taboo in schools,” he had told me.

As each performer shared their poem stories, the crowd erupted with snaps, cheering, and yelling. From across the room, Alex’s fingers were snapping as he shouted “Yeah and whoa!” to the beat. I was overcome with thoughts, questions, and energy. I did not want the moment to end. I wanted every student I knew to experience this. I wanted every adult to create this space for students.

Several weeks later, I had the opportunity to attend their performance and celebration. I arrived early. The wafting smell of pizza greeted me as I walked down the stairs to the performance space. The event was held in the same building as the workshop except we were now in a windowless basement. Eighteen small round tables, countless chairs, and cement columns covered with event flyers gave it the feeling of an underground nightclub. When I turned the corner, I was greeted by Alex and another leader. Their faces shone with enormous smiles, speaking a welcoming hello. They both, kindly, offered me pizza as they ran around the space finishing last minute touches. Soon, Alex went on stage to his makeshift DJ area. He was wearing his usual long-sleeve shirt, buttoned to the top, with jeans. The music started pumping from his computer. Within minutes, students started to wander into the room.
Some hugged each other before sitting down while others shouted their hellos across the room. Some were wearing hoodies while others were sporting beanies. I saw everything from skimpy halter tops to loose sweatpants. Five or six people crowded around tables designed for two or three. The students represented countless intersections of identities. The variety in shades of melanin spoke to the range of racial backgrounds. At one count, there were at least 70 people, primarily students, filling the room. There was little room to walk and as the afternoon progressed and chairs filled, the event became standing room only. A student arrived to cheers and hugs from Alex and his partner -- “Yay, I didn’t know you were coming!” The energy was high and contagious. I had never been to a live slam poetry event, so I was equally as excited.

I had found an old wooden chair towards the back corner of the room, near the door and the 15 pizzas, hoping to be as invisible as possible. I ended up being positioned near the performers’ sign-up table, so I ended up fielding several questions by entering students. Multiple students anxiously asked me, “Excuse me, do you know where we sign up to perform?” after the sign-up sheets had been taken to the stage. I pointed them to the DJ’s booth to add themselves to the list. One of these was a former student I had worked with in another youth program for students of color that wanted to be teachers. I was happy to hear that he was now a college student. Alex had mentioned to me in an interview that they have many students that graduate and still attend their events. He and his partners are very intentional in building strong, familial relationships with students that transcend time. This mirrors the relationships he had with some of his favorite teachers. As Alex told me, “Mrs. Short…She was very familial. She came to cross-country meets, graduations…it wasn’t just seeing you in these walls within a classroom space, but she really took the time outside of those classroom times, too.” His relationship with
Mrs. Short was meaningful and contributed to making him the teacher he wanted to be with his students. He said:

I think that I have really strong and genuine and authentic relationships. I think that they're very much so based in a familialness or a love or a desire to be a part of their life in some capacity. I think that there's just so many young people that I still remain in touch with, and I think that…you know, that's my goal. They may not think that that's possible, but that's definitely the goal.

The stage was illuminated with blue, red, and green lights to make each performer glow like the star they were in Alex’s eyes. Alex rapidly paced between the entrance and the DJ table looking intent in thought. His brown eyes were fixed towards the floor as he strode back and forth. After spending a significant amount of time with him in our interviews, I knew he was a deep thinker. I wondered what he was contemplating. Was he worried about cultural appropriation? As he paced the floor tonight, amidst his greetings with students, was he returning to his reflections about the role of himself as a white man doing work with young people of color?

Between the volume of the music and conversations, it was almost impossible to hear what was being said. Eventually, back at his DJ station, Alex announced into the mic that it was time to get that last slice of pizza because we were getting started. I could see his excitement building. He was in his element. He looked at his computer and as a new song started he began snapping. Between snaps, his fingers alternated from his mouth, as if in contemplation, to his chin. He shifted his weight from leg to leg, seemingly unable to keep still. When Alex introduced an African-American female student as the emcee for the afternoon, the crowd cheered. She started to rile up the crowd -- “Scream and show your love for the performers!” Students erupted in cheers, yelling, and snapping throughout the chants. “Lions hit ‘em up!”
The first poem was about racism and police brutality. “The only identification the police needed was his skin color.” With each word, the performer’s voice became louder, stronger, and more intense as did the snaps and yells from the crowd. Performer after performer took center stage to spit (perform) their uncensored work. Obscenities were common, driving home raw emotion. The youth poets confided everything to the crowd, from being a lesbian in love to a victim of police brutality. Their stories told of white privilege, abuse, eating disorders, and rape. “They tell me to man up. You do not have to put the man up that you are like a showcase. You are whoever you wish to be.” The performer’s words commanded snaps as each idea came out with fury. With each performance, the crowd became louder, lifting up each poet. As a student named Vanessa bore her heart to the crowd, they were unrestricted in the words of support they shared with her and with resounding snaps and cheers. Alex put both hands to his mouth and belted out “We love you Vanessa” to which the crowd chanted back “We have nothing but love for you Vanessa!”

Alex cheered each artist on, like he did Vanessa, with a proud smile that stretched across his face or a hug that bridged their spirits and eased their pain. As I watched him, I was reminded of one of our interviews together when he spoke of feeling isolated and ridiculed by his family. He didn’t want that sense of constant “measuring up” for his students:

But during the [poetry] process, she [a student performer] takes three days to like etch out this idea and get it down before she hammers it out, and then she starts looking around the room at what everybody else has done and immediately starts comparing her work to others and feels less than and feels that she's not good enough or feels like she's an imposter or that she's not really an artist. And so I noticed it almost immediately because I know myself, and I go there, too.

The next performer got on stage and announced “I just wrote this on my way over.” Alex laughed and snapped in approval as he nodded his head in rhythm to the background music.
Alex’s laughter and snaps in approval sent a very strong message to the student, saying “thanks for ‘doing you’ and being here to share it with us.” Some of his relationships and methods have met pushback from his colleagues, but he asserts that it is essential for the well-being of his students:

I think [it’s important] for young people of color to be able to come into a space where they are celebrated for their accomplishments and looked at as the brilliant young people they are while simultaneously having a teacher that isn't afraid to talk about those really problematic ways in which identity has kind of been hijacked and developed within…I think, the United States specifically.

As I left the makeshift club, inspired by the young people who are developing their critical voice under Alex’s care, I was struck by how unapologetic and unafraid he is to challenge the status quo in schools. “I’m trying to use my privilege to blow up a system that has existed for so long and has allowed white supremacy to continue.”

**Power to the People: Louise**

*Mama Louise makes me feel welcomed in her class. I have never once walked in and not been greeted with a “good morning.” She makes it a point to get to know us as students, and she is very good at noticing when the vibe is off. I love having her as a teacher.* -12th grade African American student nomination

“Hey, Love!” Louise chirped with a smile from ear to ear as students entered the classroom. They passed white walls, which would normally feel sterile, but these were lined with an abundance of social justice post cards, signs, and artwork. Not only were the posters filled with color, but the racial and cultural representation was vast. I recognized one of the larger posters, dominating the west wall, from the Women’s March. It was of a Latina with a red rose in her hair and red lipstick. It bore the message across the bottom: “We the People: Defend
Dignity”. It stood out on one wall surrounded by at least 50 other pictures and postcards boasting equity and social justice messages:

- Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes
- Gay power, black power, women power, student power, ALL POWER to the PEOPLE
- Let equality bloom
- Encourage girls to be radical and love their bodies

Below the white dry erase board dominating the front wall, there were large black and white photographs of students matching similar sized pictures of various influential social activists. They looked like something I would see in Time magazine. In a later interview, Louise revealed that the she does this project so that students see themselves represented in the classroom as amazing and important icons too. Her giant blue eyes wilted as she confided that some of the students don’t like how they look in the pictures, so they choose not to take the giant pictures home. But some students do. I recalled how one of Louise’s colleagues chuckled as he told me that when they visit homes, they see the giant pictures monopolizing the family’s living room: “We always wonder what the siblings think with this giant picture of Jose’s head on the wall!”

Student artwork, with clear social justice messages, adorned the classroom and spilled into the hallway. One of my favorites was an antiquated light-skinned mannequin that had been cut open, and filled with butterflies. It honored immigrants. Louise emphasized that one of her philosophies in her class was making sure that students had choice with different mediums of expression. My field notes sang as I wrote, “This space is love” in the margins. As I saw more student work in the classroom, I knew three things: I had endless questions, I wanted to know so much more about the person who created this space, and I wanted to join the class as a student.
As the real students wandered in, some alone and some talking to others, they chose their seats. Louise directed them to help themselves to a bouquet of fruit that had been anonymously delivered the day before from an admirer. It was thanking her and her colleagues for their work with youth. Louise’s voice with her students was sweet like honey; it matched the smile that dominated her face. A white boy with long locks and an African-American young man with glasses and bright white tennis shoes gladly helped themselves to some fruit before taking a seat at one of twelve tables placed in a U-shape around the perimeter of the classroom. Louise casually talked, on the side, with two African-American girls about how she got a great deal when she bought her jump suit and blazer at the thrift shop.

When Louise gently greeted the class, she did so with a smile and her beautiful, big, crystal blue eyes: “Okay as you can tell today we are missing a chunk of our class. All of the sophomores are gone for an event, so we won’t start with our team builder just for today.” Some of the students were nibbling on their pineapple and melon, while others were propped up against the wall in their chairs with their heads against the window. The sunlight pierced through, dancing past the heads of students, over desks, finally illuminating Louise at the front of the classroom. A girl in a hijab seated near me, but away from peers, raised her hand to whisper a question to Louise that I couldn’t hear. Louise affirmed, “Yes totally. You can definitely do that.” This already felt like a college class rather than high school. It was empowered instead of constrained. Louise announced:

Put your phones to the side. I want to tell you about an upcoming event with an organization that empowers women. I have bought a table and want to take three identifying females from each class. If you need transportation let me know. It’s not a barrier, I just need to know.

Several girls in the class took notes and threw each other glances as if to ask, “Should we go?”
Referring to a power point on the front white board, Louise excitedly introduced today’s class topic as intersectional feminism including TERFs (Trans-exclusionary radical feminism) and SWERFs (Sex worker exclusionary feminism). “Trigger warnings today, so if you need to get up and step out to take care of yourself, please do that, and I will come check on you in case you need to process.” Every student appeared fixated on the first video clip. It was a You-tube video, entitled White Feminism. The white woman in the video stressed, “As white ladies, sometimes we have to just shut the fuck up.” I expected students to flinch at the bold statement, but no one moved. When the video was over, Louise asked each student to process what they saw by writing their own examples in their notebooks. Every student quickly and silently started writing. “I see a lot of good stuff. Everyone is writing,” Louise beamed. She was a self-proclaimed “Feminist for as long as I can remember.” But Louise also acknowledged how the white feminist lens always had made her cringe:

Just the white feminist lens that I've always had…without recognizing…just seeing my own evolution of how little I knew or how much my awakening had not even begun until we started this class and I started to become more active in the community and forcing myself to address the ways in which I've been oppressive to others.

As a young person who felt insecure in her own skin, she knew as a teacher that she wanted her students to have a space that allowed them to thrive exactly as they were. Louise boldly approached situations with “an open heart and open mind” from her experiences as a youth: “I try and always think about why people do the things that they do. And I think had someone written me off because of the mistakes that I had made, I wouldn't be in this position now.”

She shared a story with me about the year a female student confided to her that she was pregnant. Since it was the middle of the school year, the young soon-to-be mom was trying to be
responsible and diligent in making sure that she had done as much work ahead of time for all of her classes. As soon as her baby daughter was born, she emailed all of her teachers to find out what she had missed. Louise’s response was to remind her to just focus on her baby, and she would help the new mom figure out the rest. She recalled another colleague’s response was to demand that the young woman should be immediately dropped from her classes. Louise, annoyed and frustrated, fought back: “Well no, she isn’t going to be dropped, because she had a baby.” One of her biggest frustrations is educators who aren’t flexible and willing to meet the needs of students. Even worse are those that stand neutral rather than advocating for students:

Because I remember when I first started teaching and people would say or you’d hear in your classes or just everywhere, teachers have to be this neutral impartial person. But the longer that I’ve been teaching, the more I realize how damaging that can be for kids. You hear it all the time now. It’s like, well, you don’t want to isolate kids on this side or kids on this side.

“How has an example they want to share?” As Louise paced, she fielded student responses about the video. These included everything from the wage gap to transgender women. She disclosed to her class, “I identify as a white middle class woman, and my experience as a woman is different than others. So if the “average” woman asserts her experience as the only experience, then she is asserting power over others.” To this, a Latina student sitting in the back corner with her chair propped against the wall raised her hand. She offered an example about Lena Dunham recently accusing a woman of lying about being raped. Louise strongly responded “Yes!” as she nodded her head in certain agreement with the student. “That is a great example of Lena Dunham perpetuating rape culture.” It was as if each student interaction breathed more life into Louise. She leaned into the students as she spoke and her tattooed wrist became more animated as the discussion intensified. Most high school classes are notorious for losing student engagement after the first ten minutes. In comparison, there was not a phone in sight and all
student eyes were on each other and Louise. Students were anxiously raising their hands. Louise called on multiple names to allow them to rest their weary arms: “First, we’ll hear from Jasmine, then Carlos, and Bre, and then Nadia.”

“What do you think about Nicki Minaj being in a twerking position versus the white woman on the cover of Sports Illustrated in the same position?” This was the next inquiry she posed to the class. This question seemed to strike a nerve with students. At least half of the class threw their hands in the air. An African-American female, propped up against the back wall in a t-shirt and maroon pants, used a voice filled with conviction, “Nicki gets called a slut, whore, thot, and tramp, while the white Sports Illustrated model is called sexy.” One African-American male sitting in the middle of the classroom responded to his classmate’s answer with strong snaps. Another female shouted “uh huh!” The excitement from the students and Louise was alive. Louise affirmed the student’s response with a powerful—“Yes! Our society calls white sexy but women of color doing the exact same thing is unacceptable.” I wondered how many other teachers were having these same discussions and pointing out injustices to their high school students.

A male in jeans and a t-shirt sitting at the tables on the opposite side of the classroom kicked up his boots on the table as Louise introduced and defined the next power point slide entitled “TERF.” Louise seemed unfazed by his boots on the table. While the TERF video clip played, all students intently watched and some took notes. After the video was over, Louise asked the class, “What examples of inequity in feminism did you see?” A female student with big beautiful curls and black framed glasses shot her hand in the air and eagerly piped up, “Healthcare!” Another female student at the table near the front of the room immediately and
seriously asked a follow-up question from the video: “What is intersex anatomy and the surgery like?” Not a single student giggled or laughed. Louise didn’t miss a beat in starting her response:

When some babies are born they are born with ambiguous sex organs. In the past, and still sometimes now, families have to make medical decisions to give their child a clitoris or a penis which can have issues in the future for a child that doesn’t identify with their sex organs.

This sparked another student’s hand to fly up in the air: “So what’s the difference between a hermaphrodite and someone that’s trans, then?” “That’s a great question. Hermaphrodite is an outdated term,” Louise piped back. A dozen sets of blue, brown, hazel, and black eyes were fixated on Louise. Several students around the room were periodically taking notes throughout the conversation. Under her perfectly straight bangs, Louise bared a straight and engaged face with each question. No question was visibly judged nor laughed at. The hands kept flying into the air for a chance to ask another question. With each answer, each student’s lightbulb shone brighter. It was as if secret doors were being unlocked, filled with forbidden sweet knowledge, and they were able to indulge on the endless fruits.

As Louise started to forward the power point to SW ERF, a young man got up to get some pineapple and melon from the middle table and tiptoed back to his seat against the back wall. A cell phone started to beep periodically at the same time more students ambled over to the fruit. Louise kindly asked, “Whoever’s phone that is, can you get it so it’s not beeping aloud?” She whispered to those picking fruit from the arrangement, “Go quick so everyone can see the slide.” She turned to the rest of the class, “While we watch this clip on SWERF, write down more examples and connections.” Students sat engrossed in the video. When the video was almost over most students started to frantically write in their notes. One male student in the middle of the classroom quickly texted on his phone and put it back down. Another student checked her
phone, but as soon as she heard Louise speak, she slipped her phone back in the side pocket of her blue backpack under the table.

For the next few minutes, the class discussed the power of men to keep the sex industry going. When a student asked Louise if women make money off of porn, she honestly responded, “I don’t know.” The students seemed satisfied with that answer and at least two appeared to immediately search it on their phones. As the conversation evolved, multiple student hands stayed patiently up, waiting to ask questions. A student questioned, “What if a person wants to be used (sexually)?” A few students mumbled to each other. Louise cautioned, “Just because it may be hard to wrap our brain around it, we have to be careful not to impose our values in how we look at it.”

Louise stood tall in her tie-up black ankle boots as she handed out the next article. She read aloud as students followed along. Some highlighted key thoughts and passages as they read. One male student put the wooden fruit skewers in his hair while others took notes. Louise appeared to notice but ignored him. “You have eight to nine minutes to answer the questions: What is the difference between white and intersectional feminism and why is it important? Phones should be put away until after we answer those questions.” Louise floated around the room looking over each student’s shoulder to get a glimpse of their work. Students appeared to be feverishly moving their pencils across their papers.

Louise gave her final announcement: “Before we leave, remember to put your papers in your binders and put them back on the shelf. I want to give you a heads-up that we will have guests in our space on Friday just wanting to see how we do things in here.” Students started to slowly get up and meander towards the fruit on their way out. Contrary to many classrooms, the students lingered in her room. One female anxiously started to talk to Louise about her
upcoming birthday and melted into Louise’s arms for a hug on the way out. Another girl eagerly told Louise, “I saw Black Panther yesterday again.” Louise asked, “You’ve been twice now. Who’d you go with? You went with Giselle, your home girl?” The girl smiled and nodded as she waved goodbye and made her way out the door. A group of girls yelled goodbye, in choir, to Louise as they exited the room and she yelled and waved back, “Bye!”

Louise is a magnet for her students. Her classroom is built on using stories and the history of the marginalized, and she, unapologetically advocates for the rights of all of her students. As a culturally competent teacher, she creates a space to empower students to have voice to build relationship and create a critical climate:

It means I have an even greater responsibility to decenter my perspective and to seek out knowledge and resources and experiences that will benefit my young people, will allow them to see themselves within academia in way that they haven't, will light a fire in them because they've gained knowledge that maybe they wouldn't have gained had they not entered a space like this that was, yeah, created by us but has been moved forward because of the young people that have been in this space. I think it's an added layer of responsibility that I feel to the young people to support them in the individual ways that they need and deserve to be supported, I would say.

The Fight for Their Lives: Keahi

Mrs. X helped us form a group at our school as a place where we talk about racial issues in our school and our surrounding and what we can do to change things for the better. We had a panel for teachers to ask us questions, mainly about the “N” word and what to do when students use it. I was giving a voice and be able to voice my opinion without being timid or uncertain if I was going to say the wrong thing. -12th grade biracial student nomination

A pin could have dropped, and it would have been well heard in Keahi’s exceptionally silent classroom hidden at the end of the hallway. The eleven students were absorbed in their laptops, some listening to music with earbuds. Keahi navigated from student to student, sitting
in the chair next to each one, answering questions, having conversations and offering feedback. The cement classroom was cool and the students surprisingly calm for a beautiful spring day. The room was dark, only illuminated by the LED Christmas lights, the three big globe-like Chinese lanterns with soft yellow light hanging from the ceiling, and the glow of each student’s computer.

I noticed one student in particular across the room. He was Alex, an African-American male, with ear buds deeply embedded in his ears. His eyes were actively glancing at his table, his computer, and at me. I was nestled into the teacher’s chair at her desk in the back corner, overlooking the haloed silhouettes from students’ heads caused by their glowing laptops. Keahi’s tiny desk, with worn lines across the top and sides, seemed like it was an original from the 1950’s. A large bag of nacho cheese Doritos laid open facing the students, and mini-stacks of papers were scattered across the desk. Behind me was another colorful little lamp radiating a soft yellow light below a bulletin board with pictures of each student and a collage of Keahi’s family. Pictures of her daughter wallpapered the side of a gray filing cabinet squeezed in between her desk and the windows.

After I smiled at Alex, I tried to avoid eye contact to prevent being a further distraction. Keahi made her rounds through the dimly lit room, and every time she circled by Alex she gently gave him a calm reminder to keep working. He begrudgingly agreed and went back to looking at his screen with a glazed over expression. Later, Keahi shared that Alex had a chaotic home life and really struggled in school. He did not do well with authority nor with staying focused. She felt that his still being in class with her was a feat. She intentionally gave him a lot of her attention and tried to build a strong rapport with him, which she admitted was challenging. Today, her brown straight hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and it bounced as she rotated
from student to student. She was sporting a colorful dragon t-shirt, jeans, and gray slip on tennis shoes. I found the dragon fitting; it was a great symbol of her strength. Keahi worked with some of the most challenging students: “I don’t think Alex would still be in school if he wasn’t with me. He is hard, but we are making progress.” She was resilient in her work.

Within seconds, Alex was back to wandering his eyes across the room. This time he focused on Butterfinger, the lizard, in its 30 gallon luminous tank in the back of the classroom. The green lizard would occasionally walk across the tank and perch itself on a wooden log and regally look out over the class, as if to supervise the students.

There were two worn Lazy Boy recliners on either side of Butterfinger, filled with two Latino boys slouching in them. One boy was dozing on and off, and the other was playing on his phone. Keahi quietly encouraged one of the boys, “Carlos, why don’t you go back to your seat instead of sitting back here on your phone?” Carlos picked up his crutches and hobbled back to his seat at the table, stretching his immobilized leg out under the table. Keahi whispered to tell me that some students were finishing required annual standardized tests on the computer while others were desperately trying to finish research papers. I could hear the stress and strain in her voice: “It’s been a long day… about twenty teachers called in sick today, so it’s been busy. They have started to count these tests as grades, so getting through them are harder now.” I knew this frustrated Keahi. Over a cup of coffee, she had told me, “(It concerns me) that we're setting a lot of our kids up for failure. And that it makes me wonder, who was a part of that decision-making process? What voices were at the table? And why is it that we always do this shit in hindsight?”

As a special educator of students of color, Keahi had shared some of her other frustrations with me, including striving for equity in a system that has been built on whiteness. Recently, she
challenged the purpose of doing Romeo and Juliet with an administrator. This resulted in her being allowed to change the unit to better meet the needs of her students:

It puts you in such a box where it's like, is that really real-world learning? Is that something that is relevant and pertinent to what we're learning? So for example, in our curriculum right now, Romeo and Juliet has been for our Unit Two for like the last five years. I hate teaching that stupid play. I hate it. It teaches bad morals. It's hard as hell to read because kids don't get Shakespeare. I mean, for crying out loud, I didn't take a Shakespeare class until college. Why would we expect kids…I get that you want to expose them to that, but then whose culture are we exposing them to? More white European culture?

As a woman of color, Keahi recognizes that she has similar experiences as her students and gets exhausted being expected to constantly teach the white teaching force around her about equity:

And I'm like, if that's what your culture is, then you don't see it. You don't see how upsetting it can be to have your name mispronounced 20 times or to be told it sounds like a Dr. Seuss poem. And I was like, but a lot of these kids do. And then you have to learn how to educate yourself and get there. Like, I really hate the concept of, well, nobody told me or I didn't know that. That's not an excuse that you didn't know. We live in a world where the world is at your fingertips. You don't live under a rock. Figure it out.

Keahi quickly returned to her computer at the same table as Alex. As she sat down, Alex broke the class silence, like a brick through glass: “What am I supposed to do with…” She stopped him mid-question as she simultaneously pulled out his left earbud: “Why are you talking so loud? Turn your music down.” Alex again loudly retorted, “It’s not loud. You’re making me do too much.” Several students who had been quietly working abruptly turned their heads, glaring at Alex. Keahi calmly whispered something to him. He focused his deep brown eyes back on his computer as his shoulders slouched down.

Then Keahi noticed, with concerned eyes, that Juan was slouched far down in the Lazy Boy, dozing, with his legs stretched straight out ahead of him. He was inches from falling onto
the ground. She crept down by him and suggested that he go to splash his face with some cold water. Without hesitation, he agreed. He quickly hopped up and made his way out the door at the front of the classroom. As he closed the door, the American flag that hung above the corner of the door waved in the breeze. The years of abuse Keahi endured at the hands of her mother, make her empathetic to situations students may be bringing to her classroom:

I have some kids who when they feel like they can't do any work at all or I'm so upset today, and it's like, okay, that's fine. I get it. How about you take a break for 10 to 15 minutes, lay your head down, listen to your music, but even though you feel this way, we've got to learn ways to work around that or we have to make up that time or do something for that. Because you just sitting here and wigging out isn't going to help you. So what can we do to calm down? And once you are calmed down, then can we get back to business. And oftentimes, it works out for them to be able to do that.

White lace was hung by hooks on the bottom half of all of windows, which filtered the light coming into the classroom. Large 3D faded paper stars hung in front of the blinds on the top of the windows above the heating register that lined most of the wall. It reminded me of my elementary school that was probably of a similar age. Keahi was already sitting at the table of another student answering questions while eagerly pointing to the screen, when Juan returned. He was eating a granola bar before sitting back in the chair and working again. She gave a boy, Chris, a high five as he stood up, making more noticeable her half sleeve tattoo of black and white flowers burrowed in vines. She offered him a break. “Way to go! You worked hard!” He sprinted to occupy the vacated Lazy Boy. Juan gave him a head nod as he sat down. Chris stretched his feet across the colorful area rug covering the cement floor in the back fourth of the room and looked to see what Butterfinger was doing before starting to talk to Juan. He reached into his pocket and slid out his phone. The boys’ volume noticeably increased, so Keahi gave them a “Shhh!” as she continued rotating to other students with their hands up in the air.
The students sit at eleven tables staggered across the room, leaving Keahi to maneuver a maze to get from student to student. The students patiently waited for her with hands growing fatigued. When she arrived to a young man with one hand up, she directed him to put away the phone before she would answer his questions. As she made her way back to her seat next to Alex, he broke the silence by asking her a question in his bellowing voice. The rest of the class had grown tired of the interruptions and stayed focused on their work. Again, Keahi quickly removed one of his ear buds and reminded him he was being loud. He tried to respond, but before the words could leave his mouth, she answered his question. Within a minute, he loudly told her that he was done. Unfazed, she reminded him to indent and use periods and affirmed him: “Keep it up. Good going!”

An African-American student raised her hand at the front of the room, so Keahi wove her way through the table maze, passing the green, lush plants that lined her window. Juan and Chris started talking again, eliciting a quick response from a smiling Keahi: “What did I say about talking?” They ceased immediately with smirks as they both looked back down. As she reprimanded the boys in the Lazy Boys, a new student entered the classroom with a teacher associate. Both tall white males, they quietly took seats at a table in the middle of the room, while Keahi quietly greeted them. At the same time, as if he was on a microphone, Alex announced that he was done, and Keahi whispered for him to submit his work.

She headed back to her seat, looking at each student’s bright screen as she walked. As she got closer to her seat, her eyes narrowed in on Juan and Chris hovering over a cell phone. “Man I wouldn’t have let that happen. No way would he have kicked my ass.” “Yeah right dude,” they boasted. Keahi joked, “I was going to give you food but now that you’re talking I’ll have you watch me eat it instead.” Chris piped up to Keahi, “You owe me pizza rolls!” But before Chris
could say anything else, Keahi cut him off, “I’m not your hustler. You earned pizza rolls for working hard. You get them at the end of the month.” Chris smiled and sat back in his recliner with satisfaction, “Yeah I earned them.”

“You guys worked really hard this period. You can have the rest of the time for free time,” Keahi happily announced to the class, as she started to get out cleaning supplies below Butterfinger’s tank. With each bottle and supply she pulled out, she scanned the room before eagerly asking Chris and Juan if they wanted to help her by taking Butterfinger out of the tank. Chris jumped back as Juan gently lifted Butterfinger. “You don’t like Butterfinger?” Juan asked Chris. “No, man you can get him out.” Chris slowly backed away to a safe distance from Juan and Butterfinger. While Keahi coached Juan on how to make Butterfinger feel safe and secure, Juan, sneakily, thrust Butterfinger towards Chris. Chris started swearing profusely as he jumped back almost falling over the carpet. Keahi jumped in, “Hey! We have a guest in the room!” as she gestured towards me. “And you’re going to leave a bad impression for her.” Chris, slightly embarrassed, looked at me and apologized for swearing. “You’re alright,” I responded. Everyone smiled and laughed.

Alex slowly meandered towards the group as we were laughing. He towered over everyone, including Keahi. “I want a turtle,” he told Keahi. “Oh yeah, they take a lot of effort, because you have to clean out their water a lot,” she informed him. “I just won’t give mine water,” he countered as everyone started to giggle. Keahi stopped and looked at him inquisitively, “Alex, turtles need water to survive.” “Oh,” he mumbled very disappointed, but tried to recover his ignorance by redirecting the conversation back to Butterfinger, “Oh look at his spikes!” The three boys took turns asking Keahi various questions about Butterfinger, “What
do you do with him on weekends?” “Oh, he’s okay on the weekends,” she replied. “Where’s your other one?” Chris asked. “She’s upstairs, because they don’t get along,” Keahi groaned.

The student, Eric, who came in late with his associate approached the group. He avoided eye contact, but stood in very close proximity to the others. He was so close to where his peers were standing, I waited to see how the other boys would respond. He was tall, but not as tall as Alex, whose thick locks added a few more inches to his lanky frame. Alex looked at Eric for a second but said nothing. After a few more seconds, Eric asked, “What are you guys doing?” while blankly staring at the floor. Keahi gently explained they were cleaning Butterfinger’s cage. Juan moved closer to Eric with Butterfinger. Eric stood still as Juan approached, but a smile slowly start to creep across his face until it had no room left to grow. Eric analyzed Juan and contemplated whether he wanted to touch Butterfinger or not. He slowly reached his finger to the lizard’s scales and giddily laughed once he touched him. Growing more confident, he stroked his finger down to the tail two more times until Juan started to head back to the tank. Chris and Eric started joking around with elbows to each other’s sides. They kept repeating a word as an inside joke. Later, Keahi mentioned that Eric has several social skills goals and she has never seen him joke around with a peer before today.

“Time to put computers away! Make sure you plug them in and put them in the right spot, better than Anthony did,” Keahi quipped. Anthony laughed on his way to the laptop cart, running his hand through his dark brown hair. The students straggled out of the classroom, some heading to lunch faster than others. Keahi walked out with one of the boys. After class, Keahi shared that some of her students are challenging because of their lives outside of school. Several have gone through abuse and neglect. Others have parents struggling with substance abuse, some have seen violence, and all of them have lost classmates this year to illness and a car accident.
She confirmed that she is fueled by her own past traumas and wants her students to have an adult who they can trust and who will fight for their well-being. As a culturally competent teacher, she sees the value in building relationships within a critical climate, and she unapologetically advocates for the equity of her students.
CHAPTER 5. INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS, CRITICAL CLIMATES, AND ACTIVIST IDENTITIES IN THE MAKING OF A CULTURAL COMPETENT TEACHER

They [Culturally competent teachers] recognize students as humans, full of potential and deserving of respect. They are woke, they are badass, they are educated. They care and it shows. They really want us to learn and grow, which motivates me to make them proud. – Student nomination

This dissertation seeks to identify how culturally competent teachers understand their own identities, how they build culturally competent relationships with students, and how they think about student identity as contributing to student mental health. Alex, Louise & Keahi represent unique stories that provide opportunities for learning in how and where they converge around culturally competent practice.

My first chapter presents the issue of power and hegemony in the United States that is reflected in schools. Students of color do not have the same opportunities for success. Racial, cultural, and social identities have been socially constructed to benefit white dominant culture in policy and pedagogy. In the second chapter, I establish that there is an absence of research that focuses on the intersection of cultural competence and the mental health of students. I use a critical lens to challenge models of cultural competence that focus solely on resiliency and put the onus on the victim to overcome the trauma. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), I suggest a framework, Critical Race School Mental Health Praxis (CrSMHP), which encourages an approach to improving the mental health of marginalized populations in schools through dismantling oppressive systems and using the intensive self-reflection of educators to address stereotypes and biases. Chapter three discusses how I apply portraiture to answer my research questions with rich and in-depth data for which culturally competent practices could emerge. In chapter four, are the portraits I crafted from my
data of Alex, Louise, & Keahi. In their stories, I find common threads woven together for a complex quilt of cultural competence: intentional relationship, critical climate & activist identity. This fifth and final chapter provides a discussion of the common threads across portraits and why those are important to addressing racism in schools and improving student mental health.

With each interview, observation, and analysis of artifacts and field notes, the story takes shape. I compare the process of portrait writing to the value of the crisp details one gets looking through a telescope, details that became even more valuable when stepping back to appreciate how the details fit into the larger landscape. In Appendix D, there is a table demonstrating my thematic analysis. After each interview, observation, and artifact collection, I coded the data for larger ideas that appeared important to the story. I analyzed each participant individually by listing all codes on a spreadsheet before copying and pasting the codes with other similar codes and labeled them as categories. After analyzing the categories for common meanings, I identified larger relevant themes. Once I completed individual thematic analysis, I reviewed the themes for all participants. The themes were very similar and using NVivo I created a larger web diagram to plot the categories and themes, found in Appendix C. The analysis resulted in three emerging themes for culturally competent teachers: creating intentional relationships, developing relationships & culturally conscious climate, and the necessity of praxis.

I am intentionally reflexive of how my own identity contributes to my interpretation of the data. I try to question what the reality is of the story using the data versus what I want the reality of the story to be. As a white woman, I also want to be careful to not to blur my ability to relate to my participants, with my struggles of understanding my own whiteness and privilege; I do not want to glamorize their journey or make them sound like they have arrived at a destination of cultural proficiency. Louise articulates it well when she says, “I guess ‘competent’
is a good word as opposed to ‘proficient’…this idea of being ‘culturally proficient.’ Like, who can ever be ‘culturally proficient’ in all these different cultures?” In each portrait, I attempt to tell their stories as well as include my own transparencies. In this final chapter, I explore what I have learned from the stories of these three culturally competent teachers about the importance of intentional relationship, critical climate, and activism. As I explore intentional relationship, I discuss empathy, authenticity, and connectedness. Then I review critical climate through shared power, student centered, and pedagogy. I end my analysis with a discussion on activism including critical reflection and praxis.

**Love Them Through It: Intentional Relationship**

It is important to note that I am specifically identifying this theme as “intentional” relationship. The culturally competent teachers from this study did not simply stumble upon having strong relationships with their students. While they definitely possess powerful social and relational skills, they are very intentional in the value of relationship by having empathy, being authentic, and understanding what is necessary to build strong connections to empower students.

**Empathy**

Each participant confided that they experienced adversity as a youth. They cited this as contributing to their ability to empathize with the struggles their students face. After the divorce of her parents, Louise began to lose her self-worth: “When my parents were getting a divorce, I was always taking on the role of trying to fix everything for other people. I think at that point I really started to develop a pretty strong sense of no self-worth.” This created a tailspin for Louise into substance abuse and an eating disorder. But due to the support she had, especially from her
mother, she emphasized how important unconditional support was for her transformation. She saw the importance of committing to be that person for her students:

I think had someone written me off because of the mistakes that I had made, I wouldn't be in this position now. So I think absolutely my past experience has influenced the way I work with kids and talk to kids and try and pay attention to the signs and also building relationships with their families. Because that's what I would have wanted, and did experience in certain tokens, people to do for me when I was growing up.

Alex was a self-proclaimed “sensitive kid” meticulously interested into fashion. He cried a lot which was not welcome in his rural Midwestern home that expected him to be “hyper masculine, rugged, and tough:”

But like as a kid, those things were kind of like turned against me by my own parents, by my own family. You know, I got called gay a lot. I got called a fag a lot. I got…you know, in…in addition to the things that…that my peers said regarding this idea of wanting to be black, well, at home it was, you're gay or you're…you're a fag. And this was coming from like my own parents. And so like there was always this like, I'm not good enough for you or you don't really accept me for who I am and you just can't like let me rock with the things that I'm interested in.

The adversity he went through as a child, never quite fitting in, being “othered,” set the stage for how he felt about himself and his ability to have empathy for “others” not able to fit in. “I think that that has had a profound impact on my ability to build relationships throughout my life,” he said.

Keahi explicitly acknowledged her past traumas as driving forces behind her relationships and empathy with her students. Growing up in a home with abuse, created intensive challenges and barriers in her development and self-worth. Her “horrific” experiences allowed her to relate to her students also going through traumatic experiences. She recognized the importance of accepting and validating a young person for exactly who they were. She was
unaflaft to share her vulnerability with her class which helped her to relate and empower her students:

And I think part of the reason I'm also so invested in education is I realize that it can be a life or death situation, literally, and I think about my personal circumstances growing up. My mother was very emotionally and physically abusive. I think it allows me to empathize with kids and differentiate for them in a way that maybe other people can't. Like get to some of those deeper rapport relationships. Because it's one thing to tell a kid, yeah, I understand. Like, oh yeah, I know you're having a hard day. But it's different than letting them know that not only do you understand but you're validating them and then also showing them that like, you're going to be okay. Like, you can do this. I promise you, you can. I know you feel like shit today, but I know you can do it.

While each participant in this study experienced adversity as a youth, it is arguable that one does not need to have gone through adversity to be empathetic and not everyone that experiences adversity becomes empathetic. Yet the participants in this study have connected meaning from their past experiences into their ability and desire to be empathetic teachers. Those from the dominant group that are able to consider experiences in subordination help them in making meaning of “another targeted groups experience” (Tatum, 1997). More exploration is warranted to further understand why adversity results in empathy for some, but not others. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) also caution that empathy is in short supply with race and needs persons to be exposed to a variety of racial and cultural narratives outside of the ones they have grown up with (p. 32-34). One explanation may be from the empathetic relationships youth experiencing adversity find as models. Louise found solace in her mom, Alex’s elementary school teacher remained connected with him through high school, and Keahi found protection from her grandfather. Culturally competent teachers see importance in being empathetic to the circumstances of their students.
Authenticity

The three teacher stories demonstrate that being authentic includes dependability, honesty, transparency, and empowering students to take pride and advocate for exactly who they are. Hill-Collins (2013) advocates that educators have an obligation to create an authentic space that encourages students to feel “perfectly acceptable” even when the dominant culture dictates otherwise (p. 129). Part of how I witnessed dependability in these educators was through their common non-judgmental approach. Louise said, “They’ll come to me and share things with me maybe about trauma or mental health issues. I think that I'm often the bridge to helping them find the services that they might need.” Students called her Mama Louise for her nurturing and caring demeanor. Her dependability contributed to her authenticity. In every class and event I observed, multiple students were always seeking her out for a hug or to talk. She acknowledged building authentic relationships for her is very familial and unconditional:

And so I try and create an environment where they feel like they can always come to me and that regardless of what we've been through, regardless of whether or not they've come in and told me to fuck off one day, that they know I'm going to love them through that and I'm going to hold them to high expectations. And I will tell them how I feel, but I want to teach them to work back from those things because they're kids. So I hope that that's the relationship that I have with students is making them feel special and valued.

Being non-judgmental was critical for Louise to develop strong relationships with young people. In order to be non-judgmental and without expectation of who she expected the young people she worked with to be, she relied on her own transparency of her past struggles:

This young woman on Tuesday… She was just like…kids always think like…they see…they have this image of you, and they just think, your life is so perfect and…you're like married and you have a kid and all of this. And I'm like, well, I used to be a huge fuck-up. Like, it's okay to…eventually, this…you could have a life… She was so worried. She's like, no one's ever going to love me again. No one's ever going to want me again. Not if I have an STD. And it's like, you can go through all of those things and
still have a healthy relationship. You can still have a healthy sexual relationship. But I think it's like we can...it can be really easy to get so far removed from being a kid and those experiences that that just sucked me right back. But I always try and remember that.

Often times, teachers are taught how to manage students, such as in classroom discipline courses in their preparation program, rather than how to build relationships to understand and navigate circumstances. The concept of management implies that the adults need to control students and create expectations of who the students should be. A myth is perpetuated that a marker of success as a teacher is having well-controlled students versus empowering students to be themselves and meeting student needs. Teachers are untrained in developing authentic relationships with students, especially racially and culturally diverse students, and they are often trained by undertrained mentors (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Louise was honest and transparent in her non-judgmental pedagogy with her students. She used empowerment as her way to relate with her students.

Keahi was very honest and transparent with her students to increase her ability to relate with them: “I pay attention to that stuff. I will be like, are you okay? I'm very, very open with my students I'm like, here's the deal. I have these anxieties. These are my coping skills. These are the things I do.” She didn’t share the intimate details of her past with her students, but she was “brutally honest” with her students. When she was young, she found value in the adults that did not sugar coat things for her, so she sought to be the same predictable source for her students. She prided herself on modeling how to be imperfect with students: “So I've made it a real effort for me to be very transparent about when I do screw up or if I don't understand something. Like, I never pretend to act like I know the answer to stuff.” She was predictable and consistent in how she related to students, in hopes that students will see her as more approachable and trustworthy.
Her authenticity was demonstrated in her classroom with her high level of honest transparency. I witnessed students being reprimanded by her yet still gravitating towards her. This is evidence of her ability to develop relationships with her students.

Alex’s authenticity was demonstrated through the transparency, honesty, and empowerment he modeled to his students. Alex acknowledged his whiteness with students and reminded them that he did not have all of the answers. He encouraged young people to “teach” the class with him while not being afraid to take a risk and possibly even make a mistake. He taught them the value of being young and happy exactly as they are. He went out of his way to make sure that students felt that he had high expectations of success for them, but he never expected them to be someone they were not. He worried relentlessly about his students, and saw himself in many of them as young people trying to find their place to be loved and accepted in a merciless world. He argued that most of what he learned about teaching was not from his classes but rather from his experiences. He was driven to help students have pride in who they are and find acceptance.

Culturally competent teachers embrace individual student identities. They encourage young people to take pride in who they are and be unafraid to share their stories. Louise affirmed with students that she did not have any expectations of who she thought young people should be:

Like this young woman who I was working with on Tuesday. She was like, well, I don't want to be a teacher. And I was like, that's okay. You don't have to be any specific thing to be in my life. You don't have to be an amazing poet. You don't have to come to our programs. But I think that there's...with communities that are created, if you are not...if you don't explicitly say that, and especially in those balances of power where I'm in a position of power.
For these teachers, being authentic means being exactly who they are with students, flaws included, and accepting and empowering students to be who they are.

**Connectedness**

Connectedness may be the most important piece of relationship, because it reflects the intentionality. Educators can have “relationship” with students as they robotically pass each other every day in class or rely on reactive and disciplinary responses to manage students versus empowering them. Darling Hammond (2010) emphasizes the importance of building relationships versus “relying on rules to govern behavior.” (p. 238). Keahi, Louise, and Alex, however, intentionally plan so that every student is connected to the classroom, even in the most creative ways.

All three classrooms used the physical space of their classroom as one way to connect with students. I am unsure that a majority of teachers are intentional with using space beyond functionality. I have memories of many of my own teachers and colleagues with positive posters on walls saying something to the effect of “Never give up” or “Be kind to others.” I think of this as low risk engagement. When I think of Louise’s room, I remember how she wallpapered her classroom with words that do not represent a typical classroom to connect with students the second they walk through the door:

- Girls just wanna have fundamental human rights
- Be the change
- Beauty has no skin tone

Her physical space challenged the status quo of most classrooms. Most classrooms tend to have low risk and neutral decor versus Louise’s classroom that screams “I am not your typical classroom” as you cross through the door. The posters and signs sent a message, both direct and
subtle, that intersectional identities are valued in this space. The actual physical space defied the white culture permeating most American schools.

At the start and end of every class, Alex positioned himself near the classroom door to greet or say goodbye to his students. I have never witnessed an educator more intentional in the way he connected and got excited for and with his students. Culturally competent teachers “envision their students as being filled with possibilities” (Ladson-Billings, 2008). He engaged many students with high fives or fist bumps. More than one student greeted him with a hug. The conversations with students were not necessarily formal and many were follow-up conversations on things happening in students’ lives: “See y’all Friday. Have a good walkout tomorrow.”

It is reasonable to assume that students and teachers will always have differences in their identities, even when they identify with the same labels such as African-American, Latina, or Brazilian. Intersectionality and experiences increase the complexity of identity. Educators and schools would benefit from training on intersectionality and how to create meaningful connections with students.

**What the Hell?: Critical Climate**

When referencing the work teachers do to develop climate in their classrooms, we often hear creating “positive” climate. But using the title “positive climate” raises the question of who decides what is positive. A teacher dependent on control may feel the classroom is adequate while a child victimized by a power laden teacher would not agree the classroom has a positive climate.

Culturally competent teachers recognize that there are identity inequities in classrooms and systems. Using a critical lens, they create a classroom space that allows all students to have
equal access at an opportunity to thrive. A critical climate focuses on power sharing between students and teachers, using a student centered lens, and crafting culturally competent pedagogy with the goal of creating a safe and welcoming classroom.

**Shared power**

Louise recognized the danger in using an authoritarian model in a classroom. Power is evident in classrooms with stereotypes and biases that are evident in pedagogy, policies, and expectations for students of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Louise argued that a power dynamic is inevitable between teachers and students, but that teachers have an obligation to recognize implied power and deconstruct it to prevent from oppressing students and perpetuating oppressive systems that leave marginalized students feeling disconnected from school:

> Because I think the power dynamic, even though the power is always there…it's inherently there because we're adults, we're teachers…I think the power dynamic is different because we work so hard to decentralize our power and to spread it out and to decentralize our perspective and our experiences as the dominant or the right way or the most important. So I mean, yeah, there are kids that I struggle connecting with, but it's never I think to the point where…or it hasn't for a while been to the point where they can't find some success or feel some success in the class.

As a teacher, she shared power with her students by intentionally acknowledging her whiteness and that she did not have all of the answers. She provided students with opportunities and experiences to learn outside of their own identities, such as her unit on radical feminism. This challenged her own identity, and she framed shared power when she told her students they will be learning together as a team.

Alex was very astute and aware of the role power plays in most classrooms. Students shared with him regularly their frustrations with teachers that define their success by being in control: “I think that young people definitely still feel like there's this hierarchy...like there's this
very traditional power balance. And they'll say teacher's power trip on them all the time.” He honed in on the devastation he has witnessed in middle school, especially, since young people are vulnerable as “they go through puberty, are socially and physically developing, and learning themselves.” One of the things that concerned Alex the most was when teachers “lay down some serious hammers, meaning they are fierce with expectations and discipline, in space, not realizing how damaging those things can be without giving young people space to really process.” Tatum (1997) affirms that when students are subordinates in classrooms they go into survival mode to protect themselves from those in power (p. 27).

Even worse than the traditional power hierarchy in schools is the power hierarchy for students of color within a predominantly white teaching force. “Maybe because they don't understand where the student of color is coming from, they're very quick to lay their hammer down and have some severe consequences, whereas white students from a white teacher, they may get more passes.” Alex noted the dangers of students not seeing themselves reflected in the room in the teacher, the curriculum, and/or values:

Whereas a student of color with a very different view is now going to feel shut completely out of that and not see themselves reflected back. And so now, as a result of maybe my perspective or my voice, not being given power from the supposed expert in the room as the teacher, what that can do now is have a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. It's like, well, I'm not smart. I'm not good enough. The things that I do aren't right. I've been going about things the wrong way.

Alex’s was careful to use a power sensitive lens when working with students. He was constantly reflecting on his own whiteness that has contributed to how he had formed his own values and expectations to make sure that he was not imposing that on the students that he worked with in the shared space.
As a culturally competent teacher, Keahi recognized that as the teacher she traditionally was given authority and power in the classroom but instead she chose to center her attention on the student:

I mean, yes, I'm their teacher, and to a certain extent, but I'm not…I don't want them to look at me as some authority figure and I'm the boss in the room. It's like, no, we're in this together. I've got to get you to learn. You need to learn. Let's figure out how we can do that together and not butt heads, and have some fun in between.

Keahi recognized the importance of having high expectations of her students. Sharing power with students did not mean minimizing expectations. It meant challenging students to be their best while creating a mutual partnership for success. Having high expectations is crucial to student success (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In this way, culturally competent teachers recognize the differential of power and actively work to deconstruct the one-sided dynamic therefore improving the critical climate.

**Student-centered**

A distinct quality of cultural competent teachers is their understanding that each student’s needs are different. They strive to make the system meet the needs of the student rather than trying to make the students fit the needs of the system. Systems need to be designed to make students believe they will succeed (Darling-Hammond, 2010) and undo any negative societal stigmas that hold students back (Delpit, 2006).

Being student-centered demonstrates knowing students well enough to know what their baseline day looks like. A student-centered teacher can identify a rough day. Culturally competent teachers are well-prepared and “have a deep understanding in how children learn” and are trained to be “culturally and individual responsive” to meet the needs of each child (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Keahi recognized that one of her students, Mikey, seemed off from his usual
self. She knew that his grandma was very sick. She pulled him in her classroom to talk. Within minutes, “he just spills his guts, bawls his eyes out.” Concerned about his mental health, she sent him home. “He's a super smart responsible kid, I don't think he would have gone unless somebody had given him permission to be upset and to grieve. I'm like, you can't focus. You have no business being here.” A student-centered approach puts priority on the well-being of the student.

Student-centered teachers realize that the expectations for a classroom need to be flexible and adapt to meet the needs of the student. When schools are able to provide student-centered environments without a stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), student achievement soars (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Louise recognized that students come in with different norms, values and expectations and strives to individualize her response depending on the situation:

So I think I use that as an example because I think a culturally competent teacher doesn't have hard and fast rules for everyone and recognizing that there are different cultural norms that exist outside maybe our individual cultural norms or the cultural norms that are put forth by the system of public education. So I think that a culturally competent teacher is able to set aside their own ideals and morals and conditioning to look at a situation with students, or a student's case, objectively on a case-by-case basis and to help support them through whatever barriers or obstacles may be in the way of having them being successful in the classroom.

Culturally competent teachers embrace the uniqueness of student identity with open-mindedness and commitment to creating a student-centered critical climate.

**Pedagogy**

The pedagogy of culturally competent teachers recognizes that school curriculum and expectations were built on a system of whiteness. They understand that curriculum is white washed. They know that expectations of how to look, sound, and behave reflect the expectations
of white dominant culture. Culturally competent teachers use a marginalized lens as the curriculum guide and unveil historical truth to their students and teach students how to think rather than what to think (Hill-Collins, 2013). Darling Hammond (2010) calls for authentic pedagogy “instruction, curriculum, and assessment that requires students to apply knowledge in real world contexts including being shared with audiences beyond the teacher (p. 239). This pedagogy allows for students to increase likelihood of having exposure to narratives outside of the dominant culture.

Most of the courses that Alex taught were rooted in social justice. His courses have been consistently popular so they have always filled up fast and required special approval for admittance. His students are of Asian descent, Black, Latinx, bi or multi-racial, and some are white. The topics reflected the identities of students instead of conforming to the very typical white washed curriculum used in most schools:

We always look at the lens of the marginalized and the oppressed because most classes, especially if they study a textbook, well, that thing's going to be written by the victors and it's going to be written by those that want to have a certain narrative and perception pushed forward.

Students that learn critical consciousness are more likely to challenge social injustices (Hill-Collins, 2013). Culturally competent teachers expose students to what oppresses them (Ladson-Billings, 2008). Alex was purposeful in wanting students to be able to learn about themselves and the power of intersectionality through his critical pedagogy.

I would say that any young person that ends up taking this class is not only going to have a much stronger understanding of themselves and the various intersections of their own personal identity and why those things have led them to be who they are, but what it also does is it creates a tremendous amount of empathy for others and it allows you to understand why other people are the way they are or why, you know, they have the characters that they have or have gone through the experiences and have the perspectives that they have.
Hill-Collins (2013) compares it to a jazz combo in which each instrument has its own voice, but they all come together to create a masterpiece (p. 135).

Keahi took a similar social justice lens in her pedagogy. She was passionate in how she taught students historical truths and provided them with counter-narratives that oppose traditional colonialist curriculum. Students were often shocked when she exposed the accurate history that challenges what they have always learned. One of her goals was to teach them to think critically:

And having the conversation with our students of color where it's like, how many times do you see yourself reflected positively in the stuff we read and in the things we look at? And just having frank conversations about that so that they are aware of those things and they realize that just because you read it doesn't always mean it's true. Just because you see it in a book. I think for some of them, at first it's a little like shocking because they're just like, what the hell? Oh my gosh, I didn't know. And then for many of them, it's very much an empowering, like, dude, they get pissed and they get ready to do some stuff. That's exactly what we want to happen for kids to make change and understand these things. It's never fun to have to tell them that stuff. But I think it's good for them.

Teaching students to think critically is necessary to help them be able to recognize false or misleading narratives and to help them advocate for themselves. Keahi’s advocacy, specifically for her students of color, helped address Ladson-Billings’ concept of educational debt—“compounded inequalities of resources, reinforced over generations (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 28), including less challenging curriculum with less qualified teachers and lower support (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 37). Creating a critical pedagogy is essential for all students, but especially necessary for marginalized students that have generationally been unoffered the same opportunities as their white counterparts.

When Louise started teaching at the middle school, she was discouraged by the deficit stroke used to paint the abilities of her students. She grew frustrated with the narrow connection being asserted that, to be literate, students had to score in the proficient range on assessments.
She challenged how proficiency and literacy were being defined as she recognized the strengths and literacies her students were using in her classrooms: “These were kids that were coming in like memorizing full rap songs, writing their own raps, doing rhymes…just like, everything that you would imagine from a beautiful black child who grew up around hip hop.” Rather than trying to force “white supremacist language standards on them,” she developed her pedagogy around the strengths of the students and adapted her pedagogy for a critical climate.

With over 80% of the US teaching force identified as white (Department of Education, 2016), it would be beneficial to increase cultural competence training that actively works to replace inaccurate, colonialists narratives of history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Using Eurocentric curriculum perpetuates white supremacist narratives. It prevents all children from being able to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of racially and culturally diverse people. The expectations of school climate also reflect whiteness. Culturally competent teachers challenge the status quo that being successful means looking, sounding, and behaving white. They question whom the expectations benefit and create environments that recognize injustice and allow students to share power with adults and have access to culturally relevant pedagogy in a student centered space. A critical climate provides safety and security. Teachers are not mental health professionals, but sometimes they, unintentionally or intentionally, create therapeutic spaces that allow for healing.

Would I Have Been Brave?: Activist

One defining characteristic of a culturally competent teacher is the commitment to activism through critical reflection and dismantling oppressive systems. Many preservice preparation programs require a “diversity” class that provides historical information about the
oppression of many marginalized groups. Even equipped with this information, teachers and schools maintain racist practices and policies that traumatize persons of color. Without critical reflection and targeted praxis, taking theory into action, the same cycle of oppression will continue in schools contributing to the mental demise of students (and teachers) of color.

**Critical Reflection**

Louise saw herself on a journey towards cultural competence. One of the most important parts of her journey was being able to be honest and reflexive of herself. As a white woman, she saw herself starting her career trapped in white saviorism, “oozing with privilege:”

> So I think I quickly fell into that trap that…not realizing how harmful and damaging that really is. But it's like, when you find out you're teaching…at least on the street of life…this is like the toughest high school. And then I was just like, well, I'm going to come in, and I'm just going to save all these kids. And that was my mentality. Because I had no idea how harmful that was and how negative that was.

For Louise, engaging in critical reflection was ongoing and challenging at times, but a necessary component of cultural competence. Oppression cannot be dismantled without being acknowledged first. In order to have empathy, one has to critically reflect on their own power and privilege (Hill-Collins, 2013). How can anyone change without recognizing a problem as a problem? In order to continue to grow and improve as an educator, teachers need to be able to critically analyze their own weaknesses and be able to use them to grow.

Alex was not disillusioned into thinking that he was at a destination of cultural competence. In fact, he was constantly critiquing everything he said, thought, and did, to evaluate if he was perpetuating an oppressive system. This constant critique and concern for if what he did was perpetuating racism was evidence of critical reflection. Tatum (1997) asserts that being able to recognize racism, stereotypes and bias in one’s self and others is key to critical
consciousness (p. 47-50). When he went into teaching, he recognized a white savior complex, and it was not until the last handful of years that he really started to understand white privilege and how it impacted his students. He was very astute and transparent that he did not have all of the answers, and he was committed to the journey of being better at understanding and adjusting as he went.

Keahi saw cultural competence as being open and vulnerable to challenging one’s self and willingness to be challenged by others at the risk of being “wrong.” She articulated that being a person of color does not guarantee cultural competence given the complexity of intersectionality:

And I think about the people who I know who are making efforts and gains towards being culturally competent that are…that they're the ones asking and being reflective of scenarios. Like they're checking back in with people or they're more…that they're comfortable with explaining how they realize that those things are wrong or like they're more open to sharing those things. Because I think so many people are so afraid to be wrong for fear that they'll be called racist or this or that, and it's like, dude, I mean, I know even I have said things, and I'm a person of color, where it's like, just because I'm a person of color doesn't mean I'm like 100 percent all the time.

Keahi’s vulnerability and desire to challenge herself demonstrated her ability to engage in critical reflection.

These culturally competent teachers are dedicated to always being better at their craft. In order to do that, they are committed to frequent reflexivity, challenging themselves, and welcoming challenge from others. Teachers would benefit systemic training on how to critically reflect as well as how to receive feedback both from colleagues and students.
Praxis

When Alex was a child immersed in the Civil Rights lessons through MTV, he remembered watching Civil Rights’ leaders critical questioning if he would be brave enough to stand up to injustice:

And then like, I got to a place where I kept thinking, man, if...if I was alive, would I have been brave? You know, it's like, kind of like, you know, being...thinking about like a question that may be asked in an elementary or middle school...like, would you have been brave enough to, you know, stand up for your rights and sit at a lunch counter and have people spit on you and call you names and...I remember really grappling with that as...as a young person and thinking like, well, hell, yeah. Like, I...yes. Like, how is this fair? How is this right?

I remember having similar thoughts as a child. I always assumed everyone did, but as an adult I see that not everyone has the same desire to stand up to injustice. And thinking about standing up to injustice and actually standing up to injustice are very different things. It seems that schools teach children to think critically, stand up for each other, and do the right thing, but Alex’s story was more evidence that the “do the right thing mentality” had limits and lived in a socially constructed box of acceptability. As a child he witnessed racism and the hypocrisy of a religion that preached loving thy neighbor yet was built on stereotypes and bias. As he learned more and more about racism, marginalization, and the oppressive system perpetuating it, his passion to do something about it continued to grow. He said, “I think that I’m very passionate, and I think that that passion really showed itself, as far as standing my ground, not being afraid to show challenge and push back.” Continuing, he stated:

That’s where the term “woke” comes from, because it does feel like you have now been awakened into a life that you didn’t know existed before. It’s like in the Matrix, where you’ve got the red pill and the blue pill. It’s like you just took the blue pill and now you can’t go back.
For Alex, once he knew about injustice, he felt an obligation to challenge the oppression. Park (2013) acknowledged that empathy alone is not enough without action (p. 45). One way to push back is using historically accurate content typically hidden from mainstream classrooms. Students of color rarely get access to learning about persons that look like them in conventional curriculum. Culturally competent teachers need to continue to educate themselves about the socio-political issues facing their students (Ladson-Billings, 2008). Alex’s demonstration of praxis was evident in his commitment to provide students with historically accurate content.

When Keahi was a new teacher, she was fearful to have a voice and advocate for injustice, especially as a teacher of color. She was nervous she would get in trouble or get fired, so she “kept her head in the sand.” With time she has grown in her confidence that she will not be fired and has started to “pull her head out of the sand a little more.” She attributed her voice as a contributing factor to why students nominated her as culturally competent teacher. She was not afraid to share her confusion and concern with her class. She was honest and empowering with her students: “They also have the power and the potential to do and change those things.”

Being one of the few adults of color in her building, Keahi got frustrated and worn out by being tokenized as an expert in equity. Administrators have relied on her to conduct professional developments without additional time nor pay and have communicated an expectation for her or the students of color to speak up:

I was like, no, no, no, no. It is your job to figure this shit out. Because you know it's wrong and you know it's broken and you know you have the power and the privilege. So you need to get to stepping. It's a lot easier for you to pull us up than it is for us to haul our asses up that ladder.

In a professional development experience, she identified an example of a micro-aggression and was questioned if it actually happened. In this way, one micro-aggression turned
into another: “Like, why are you even asking us that question? Like, we're not making this shit up. Nobody wants to make up that question.” At her equity-oriented professional development experiences, she questioned how white people trying to do this work with other white people can be culturally competent when they “are all telling each other the same things they want to hear.” During data analysis in their professional learning communities, Keahi noticed that some of the data was “atrocious” for the students of color and raised the concern to the rest of her white team: “As soon as we started having the conversations about why, it turned very much into a, well, aren't they just...they're just a really rough grade.” Their absence of critical self-reflection and desire to make excuses rather than problem-solve solutions was frustrating for her. She recognized the need for her continued advocacy, but she is “maxed out to the extreme.” Being a consistent voice challenging the system demonstrated Keahi’s praxis, but it also felt isolating for her:

Like, even being able to do this equity work, I realize, god, if I have an issue, who do I go to? All of my white administrators, all of my white high school directors, all of my white school superintendents...I don't have anybody who's going to understand my perspective or what I'm saying.

The isolation and exhaustion wore on Keahi’s mental health: “Mental health-wise, I'm always in a constant state of tension and fear, being more visually seen and heard at PDs by other staff makes me very anxious about how I'm being perceived there.” One way she coped was by white washing part of her identity “because I feel like that's what I have to go with.” She struggled making her self-care a priority, with so many afterschool commitments, but she found solace in her therapist and started medication to help with depression and anxiety.
As a white woman, Louise, acknowledged that as an activist there is challenge that is exhausting, but it builds the momentum to continue the work for people of color that are always facing resistance:

But saying like, you are feeling this way and you're feeling the heat of this resistance, but this is what people who are marginalized feel all the time. Their existence is being resisted. So that was also like a real…like, you're right. She's like, you can't quit. You can't stop doing this work because someone challenged you. That needs to fuel your fire even more.

Louise was intentional in surrounding herself with people that were supportive yet understood the importance of advocacy and continuing the fight:

So I think being willing to surround myself with people who are willing to pat my back and be really supportive but also having friends in the same token being like, I fucking love you, get back in the game, put your chin up, you have to do this because it's not about you

These three culturally competent teachers share in common the importance of being teacher activists. In order to continue to “move things forward” there needs to be focus to challenge racist systems (Tatum, 1997). They recognized that through their activism they are able to help disrupt an oppressive system and build trust with their students. Creating a critical climate has healing benefits for students, though not without consequence. Constantly resisting oppression is exhausting, especially as a teacher of color, already mistreated by the system too. Self-care is critical in being able to maintain strength and mental health for students and their culturally competent educators.

Questions Answered

In this dissertation, I set out to understand what are culturally competent teachers’ understandings of their identities, how do these teachers understand their identities as contributing to their ability to build culturally competent relationships with students, and how do
these teachers understand student identities as contributing to students’ mental health and wellness? As answers emerged from my interviews and observations with teachers nominated by students for being culturally competent, I crafted portraits that would convey the look, the feel, the essence of cultural competence in action. Each portraiture could stand on its own, but together they weave a rich and robust tale of three themes: Relationship, Climate, and Praxis.

Culturally competent teachers understand their identities as complex, fluid rather than permanent, changing with knowledge and experiences. They are rooted in childhood experiences and continue to evolve through adulthood. Keahi discussed her challenges as a biracial child enduring abuse and the long-term impact her traumas have had on her identity development. Alex identified his feelings of inadequacy as a child being taunted by classmates and his family as contributing to identity as an adult. Louise recalled her experiences not feeling good enough in her own skin resulting in an eating disorder and substance abuse as catalysts for her identity evolution.

These three exceptional teachers recognize their identities as impetus for their ability to build culturally competent relationships with their students. All of the teachers had faced significant adversity as a child ranging from emotional to physical abuse, mental illness, and substance abuse. Their struggles allowed them to develop strong, empathetic, and authentic relationships with their students. Each teacher attributed their desire to empower their students from feelings of inadequacy as a youth, wanting students to have what they felt they needed as a youth, and from inspiration they each found in adults that helped them navigate their challenges. While only one study participant was a teacher of color, Keahi, Alex & Louise acknowledged the complexity with intersectionality and each actively participated in critical reflection and praxis to
continue to learn about themselves and their students to develop a strong critical classroom climate.

Using their background experiences and ability to connect with students, the three culturally competent teachers understand adversity for youth as directly related to student mental health. Alex identified one of the symptoms of a feeling inadequate, because he can relate to it himself. Keahi’s struggles with being biracial and being accepted into a racial community have impacted her mental health, so when she can empathize with her students trying to make sense of their own identities. As a white woman, Louise knows that she cannot relate to the racial traumas her students face, but she tries to challenge herself to constantly be engaging in critical reflection and learning to advocate for her students and develop a strong, healthy classroom for her students.

Educators and school communities may not be mental health professionals, but they do have the power and the ability to create healthy and safe spaces of healing for students. Students of marginalized groups benefit from culturally competent teachers that engage in creating intentional relationships with students, in developing strong critical climates, and in committing to praxis to dismantle oppressive systems.

**CrSMHP Implications**

The stories of these three teachers are powerful in illuminating how culturally competent teachers intentionally build relationships, create critical climates, and undertake activism. These are the facets of cultural competence which positively impact student mental health. Historically, there has been exceptional work in fields of education and mental health to address the toxicity of racism in the lives of the youth we serve. There is much evidence throughout the research and
federal mental health initiatives indicating that equity is a priority in schools. There appear to be 
gaps of research, however, in how we understand the intersection of racially marginalized 
students and mental health and the role schools and teachers play.

Historically, there has been attention to improving mental health, but there has been 
limited to no legislation that critically focuses on dismantling oppressive systems to improve 
mental health outcomes for students. In the 1950’s there was awareness that all students needed 
access to school mental health support (Courtney, 1951), though laws did not extend to providing 
those supports across all racial and cultural identities. In the 1960’s, researcher George Albee 
took a fierce stance on the importance of preventing mental illness through the elimination of 
provided evidence of attention towards increasing culturally competent services (Stroul & 
Friedman, 1986). Adelman and Taylor (1998) recognized the importance of addressing social- 
environmental challenges for students such as language, income, and mobility barriers, gangs, 
and violence (p. 135). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s there was increased attention towards 
making sure all students had access to resources (Barrett et al, 2013), including having a diverse 
group of stakeholders on action teams (Tashman et al, 2000). We have to consider how systemic 
racism prevents all students from being able to have equity in education. Even with mandated 
legislation, we need research to better understand how to dismantle racism in schools as well as 
how to prevent schools from perpetuating the traumas of racism. Resiliency models focus on 
how to make the victim able to overcome the situation rather than addressing the racism causing 
the trauma.

“What we do is not enough. It’s never enough, but we’ll keep on” (Stovall, 2016).

While this work is only in its infancy, using a critical school mental health lens has implications
in educational practice and policy that would benefit from further exploration. My new framework, CrSMHP, is inspired by CRT and RCT but expands their scope to include a specific focus on providing school mental health insight to educational communities. This work has manifested three areas needing more attention: 1. The use of a critical lens to address the root cause of ongoing systemic oppression causing youth mental illness through social justice education and praxis; 2. The need for intensive socio-cultural self-reflection from the teaching professional to challenge their own stereotypes and biases influencing relationship building with students; and 3. A focus on building culturally competent relationships by developing a student-centered, culturally conscious climates with shared power between students and teachers.

**Social Justice Education**

Teachers have an obligation to dismantle racism in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2018). One of the larger findings of this dissertation, supporting CrSMHP, is that what students recognize as cultural competence is a teacher who engages in social justice education. So it is not enough in preservice preparation programs to help students know that injustice occurs; they need to know how to actively work to disrupt it. Many models for responding to trauma focus on resiliency to improve the outcomes for youth. While CrSMHP supports the power of resiliency, it also challenges professionals to be focusing efforts on dismantling the system that created the ongoing traumas for youth to begin with.

While CRT emphasizes the importance of teachers as agents of change through activism (Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009), CrSMHP challenges us to develop a systemic way to prepare teachers and encourage school systems to be advocates for marginalized students. Teachers need to be able to work in systems that support advocacy without being fearful of
getting in trouble for challenging dominant systems. If systems teachers are truly willing to do what is in the best interest of students, they need to also be vulnerable and willing to be challenged by other students and staff. Without the willingness for change, teachers will perpetuate a system that continues to protect white dominant culture while traumatizing students and staff in the process.

All students benefit from learning with a robust and diverse curriculum. Privileged children need access to accurate history and critical conversations towards the dismantling of racist systems (Swalwell, 2013). Social justice education gives attention to oppressive policies, including discipline, that create racial traumas for students of color. School systems need to access experts in cultural competence to evaluate system policies and make swift changes. Timeliness is valuable when considering the short and long-term impacts of students of color at the hands of oppressive systems. Action plans that are intended to last for three to five years mean that for three to five years students of color are still being subjected to racial traumas that will have consequences for a lifetime. As educators, we have to make this a priority in a timely fashion.

**Critical Reflection**

Absent in most teacher education programs are classes that teach future teachers to think critically about race, including how to reflect and engage in discussions about race. These courses generally teach a low-risk version of cultural competence that does not engage teachers in any challenging reflection on their own stereotypes and biases. This leaves teachers unprepared to address race in classrooms and dismantle racism within their school. Teachers need time to learn how their understanding of race impacts their pedagogy and student mental health. This cannot be done adequately in a professional development in-service led by
untrained staff (Taylor, 2017). Inservice and preservice teachers need to be facilitated in these understandings by college faculty or school staff that are models of critical reflection.

**Relationships & Culturally Conscious Climate**

Many times classroom climate development and relationship-building are folded into preservice teacher program courses focused on classroom management. The course title, classroom management, sends the message that power is important and children need to be managed. Additionally, most teacher preparation programs have one course, rarely more, addressing “diversity” as a component of creating a healthy climate. While preservice programs may offer attention to the importance of relationship-building or creating a student-centered climate, they often neglect a critical lens that helps teachers better understand and address the injustices being perpetuated in most American classrooms.

The Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) teaching standards have a specific standard regarding “diversity:” “The teacher uses understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). This standard has potential to improve culture, but there is a major limitation: The audience is by and large white teachers being held accountable by white administrators and white preservice students being held accountable by white higher education faculty. Without a critical understanding on race and whiteness, these teachers’ understanding of diversity and culture will be shallow. CrSMHP challenges what an “inclusive learning environment” even means. It proposes teaching educators how to create a critical climate based on shared power through intensive relationship building. It is, arguably, impossible to meet the needs of racially and
culturally diverse students without first acknowledging that schools are oppressive for students of color. All students are not afforded the same experiences in schools. This needs to be a focus for teachers to be able to develop authentic and empathetic relationships with their students. The next step is to be able to decenter power away from the teacher to create a space that gives students opportunities to have voice and to be heard. As an educator, I am unable to adapt my classroom to the needs of my students if I am unwilling to listen and change. There is ample research supporting efforts to move to culturally rich curriculums as a means of creating critical climates. (Ladson-Billings, 2018, 1998, 1995). In Figure 5.1, I return to the CrSMHP synthesis of CRT and RCT and present additional specific recommendations to build CrSMHP, informed by what I learned about cultural competence from Alex, Louise, and Keahi. In the section that follows, I further explain these recommendations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Race Theory (CRT)</th>
<th>Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical framework with feminist influences</td>
<td>Critical framework with feminist influences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeks to balance power dynamics</td>
<td>Seeks to balance power dynamics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase cultural awareness by hearing stories, beliefs, and worldviews from youth through counter-storytelling</td>
<td>Increase cultural awareness by hearing stories, beliefs, and worldviews from youth and offering an empathic response while exploring different life experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase social justice education and praxis to make professionals agents of change</td>
<td>Increase social justice education and praxis to make professionals agents of change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argues that racial inequities contributes to mental health demise</td>
<td>Argues relational disconnection contribute to mental health demise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not provide direction for building culturally competent relationships</td>
<td>Gives direction on building culturally competent relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centers on dismantling oppressive systems creating ongoing racial traumas for marginalized population</td>
<td>Focuses on healthy and authentic relationships that genuinely seek to understand the identity experiences of students</td>
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**Critical School Mental Health Praxis Framework (CrSMHP)**

Tenet 1: A critical lens is needed to address the root cause of ongoing systemic oppression reproduced through the policies of institutions and the practices of individuals working within them.

Tenet 2: Intensive professional and personal self-reflection is needed to challenge stereotypes, biases, and expectations that influence the ability to build connected relationships with students.

Figure 5.1 Recommendations of CrSMHP
Tenet 3: Connected relationships between students and teachers create a culturally-conscious school climate that can prepare young people to be agents of institutional and individual change in their society.

<table>
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<th>CrSMHP Recommendations</th>
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<td><strong>Recommendation 1:</strong> Renovate teacher preparation programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Recruit &amp; maintain high quality teachers representing diverse populations</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Require intensive training by highly qualified culturally competent faculty emphasizing on critical reflection praxis on top of basic required diversity course</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Provide with highly effective culturally competent mentors and models</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Redesign classroom management classes to building relationships and developing culturally conscious classroom climates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Offer mandatory coursework in school mental health including topics in traumas for marginalized populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendation 2:</strong> Overhaul school systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Stakeholders and leadership need to reevaluate policies, procedures, curriculum, and assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Engage in innovate models for teaching that allow students to engage in applicable hands-on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Gather ongoing input from students, families, and community members</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Ongoing intensive critical training</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Abolish expectation for teachers to remain neutral in the face of injustice</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendation 3:</strong> Legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Mandate greater time educators in training regarding race, culture, intersectionality and the impact on mental health</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Develop system of accountability to support and require culturally competence educational reform</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendation 4:</strong> Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Increase research specifically focusing on how schools impact racial and cultural diverse student mental health using a critical lens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Invite persons with racially and culturally diverse backgrounds to research conversations and studies regarding school mental health</td>
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</table>

Figure 5.1 (continued) Recommendations of CrSMHP
CrSMHP Recommendations

CrSMHP maximizes on the efforts of CRT and RCT with the intention of expanding efforts to improve equity within school mental health by dismantling the cause of the trauma for marginalized youth. While CRT emphasizes the importance of teachers as agents of change through activism (Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009), CrSMHP challenges us to develop a systemic way to prepare teachers and encourage school systems to be advocates for marginalized students. In order to further the work of CrSMHP there are four primary recommendations as part of next steps: 1) Renovate teacher preparation programs; 2) overhaul school systems; 3) enact equity legislation; and 4) expand research.

Recommendation 1: Renovate teacher preparation programs

Recruit & maintain high quality teachers representing diverse populations

Evidence supports that students perform better when they have racially similar teachers to themselves (Egalite & Kisida, 2017), yet 82% of teachers are white.

Require intensive training by highly qualified culturally competent faculty emphasizing on critical reflection praxis on top of basic required diversity course

Teachers have an obligation to dismantle racism in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2018). It is not enough in preservice preparation programs to help students know that injustice occurs; they need to know how to actively work to disrupt it. Absent in most teacher education programs are classes that teach future teachers to think critically about race, including how to reflect and engage in discussions about race. These courses generally teach a low-risk version of cultural competence that do not engage teachers in challenging reflection on their own stereotypes and biases. This leaves teachers unprepared to address race in classrooms and dismantle racism within their school.
Provide with highly effective culturally competent mentors and models

The Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) teaching standards have a specific standard regarding “diversity:” “The teacher uses understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011). This standard has potential to improve culture, but there is a major limitation: The audience is by and large white teachers being held accountable by unprepared white administrators and white preservice students being held accountable by untrained white higher education faculty. Without a critical understanding on race and whiteness, these teachers’ understanding of diversity and culture will be shallow.

Redesign classroom management classes to building relationships and developing culturally conscious classroom climates

Many times classroom climate development and relationship-building are folded into preservice teacher program courses focused on classroom management. The course title, classroom management, sends the message that maintaining power and control is important to success and children need to be managed. Additionally, most teacher preparation programs have one course, rarely more, addressing “diversity” as a component of creating a healthy climate. While preservice programs may offer attention to the importance of relationship-building or creating a student-centered climate, they often neglect a critical lens that helps teachers better understand and address the injustices being perpetuated in most American classrooms. CrSMHP proposes teaching educators how to create a critical climate based on shared power through intensive relationship building. Within the redesign, classroom management classes need to be
shaped into a course(s) focusing on culturally competent relationship building and developing culturally conscious classroom climates rather than how to control and have power over youth.

**Offer mandatory coursework in school mental health including topics in traumas for marginalized populations**

According to the 2015-2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey, 74% of teachers indicated they had preservice instruction on classroom management techniques, 70% had instruction on students with special needs, while 64% had coursework on working with students from diverse economic backgrounds, while 38% were prepared to work with limited-English proficient or English-language learners (Taie & Goldring, 2017). As of this publication there is no national requirement for school mental health training, though according to the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (AFSP) (2017), eleven states require suicide prevention training annually, two of those eleven included trauma training, and zero specified training on trauma for marginalized populations (State Laws, 2017). The Center for Disease Control (2018) indicates that 20% of all children live with a mental health disorder that can interfere with a child’s progress at school. Educators would benefit from school mental health training that informs them of these dynamics and outlines their roles and responsibilities.

**Recommendation 2: Overhaul school systems**

**Stakeholders and leadership need to reevaluate policies, procedures, curriculum, and assessments**

All students benefit from learning with a robust and diverse curriculum. There is ample research supporting efforts to move to culturally rich curriculums as a means of creating critical climates (Ladson-Billings, 2018, 1998, 1995). Privileged children need access to accurate history and critical conversations towards the dismantling of racist systems (Swalwell, 2013). Social justice education gives attention to oppressive policies, including discipline, that create racial traumas for students of color.
School systems need to access experts in cultural competence to evaluate system policies and make swift changes. Timeliness is valuable when considering the short and long-term impacts of students of color at the hands of oppressive systems. Action plans that are intended to last for three to five years mean that for three to five years students of color are still being subjected to racial traumas that will have consequences for a lifetime.

Engage in innovate models for teaching that allow students to engage in applicable hands-on learning

Linda Darling-Hammond’s book, The Flat World and Education, helped inspire this recommendation. She asserts that marginalized students find greatest success engaging in innovative models for education that allow students to interact with applicable, hands-on learning opportunities. She argues that many schools need a massive redesign to take them from the early twentieth century framework they continue to operate within to make them highly effective for today (Darling-Hammond, 2015) Approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, such as Ambitious Science Teaching (Windschitl, Thompson, & Bratten, 2018), provide a clear outline for such redesign. Principles and practices oriented to authentic problem-posing, drawing on students’ ideas, scaffolding for cognitive growth, and establishing discursive communities oriented to “thinking about thinking” can be applied in multidisciplinary ways to engage youth who are otherwise attributed with low expectations for their school performance. In general, the shift Darling-Hammond calls for, one that turns away from propositional toward performative modes of knowledge, aligns with broader assertions that the primary goal of education in democratic societies should be, for all students, humanizing and soul-enhancing (Richardson Bruna, 2016).
Gather ongoing input from students, families, and community members

CRT and RCT both assert that voice through storytelling is critical to increasing understanding of marginalized groups (Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009; Jordan, 2000). CrSMHP that increased voice also contributes to shared power between schools, youth, families and the community. Hart’s ladder, Figure 2, is one model that promotes student engagement using eight tiers that range from full adult control and manipulation through youth and adults share decision-making (Hart, 1992).

![Hart's Ladder of Participation](image)

There is evidence that creating meaningful two-way partnerships with families and communities improves academic outcomes, attendance, and student behavior (Gonzalez & Jackson, 2013). To minimize barriers for families that may feel marginalized, Cook et al (2017) recommend schools facilitate community dialogues, intergroup conversations where individuals from different racial, ethnic and cultural groups meet to talk openly in a safe and structured environment about personal experiences with race and discuss ways to address race relations in the community (Cook et al, 2017, pg. 10-11). These opportunities strengthen and develop relationships between schools, families, and communities.

Ongoing intensive critical training

It is arguably impossible to meet the needs of racially and culturally diverse students without first acknowledging that schools are oppressive for students of color. Understanding that not all students are afforded the same experiences in schools is a first step in teachers being able to develop authentic and empathetic relationships with their students. The next step is to be able
to decenter power away from the teacher to create a space that gives students opportunities to have voice and to be heard. Teachers need to be able to work in systems that support advocacy without being fearful of getting in trouble for challenging dominant systems. Many educators join the field to make a difference for a child. The challenge to teachers is learning to be vulnerable and willing to be challenged by other students and staff. Without the willingness for change, teachers will perpetuate a system that continues to protect white dominant culture while traumatizing students and staff in the process.

Abolish expectation for teachers to remain neutral in the face of injustice

Education is built on an expectation that teachers need to remain neutral in their professional capacities. CrSMHP challenges that neutrality is dangerous and damaging to marginalized students in an unjust system. School systems need to actively engage in dialogue and encourage a climate that not only teaches, but expects, educators to challenge systems and each other in the best interest of the students.

Recommendation 3: Legislation

Mandate greater time educators in training regarding race, culture, intersectionality and the impact on mental health

As mentioned above, 20% of students have a mental illness (CDC, 2018), but students of color also suffer from racial battle fatigue as they attempt to navigate oppressive systems that result in the erosion of their mental health.

Develop system of accountability to support and require culturally competence educational reform

One of the most challenging issues in education is getting quality, and funded, legislation enacted. Education mirrors the oppressive policies and laws of the government. Schools, educators, and students would benefit from mandated legislation requiring and funding educators
having greater amounts of time spent in training regarding race, culture, intersectionality, and the impact on mental health. To help maintain rigorous expectations for cultural competence which will improve the mental health of students, legislators need to develop a system of accountability to support and require culturally competence educational reform. Considering the short and long term impact of trauma on a child, this issue needs to be addressed with immediate attention.

**Recommendation 4: Research**

*Increase research specifically focusing on how schools impact racial and cultural diverse student mental health using a critical lens*

Using a critical lens can be challenging, because it pushes the field into uncomfortable territory. Education and mental health are driven with “happiness” in mind, but in fields that are predominantly white, we have to continue to ask ourselves “whose happiness?” Using a critical lens in research is an opportunity to create more authentic work towards meeting the needs of marginalized populations.

*Invite persons with racially and culturally diverse backgrounds to research conversations and studies regarding school mental health*

As a scholarly field, there is a need for intentional planning to include a wide-variety of representation at places of decision-making to increase voice to deepen, challenge, and enhance the much needed work to improve school mental health for all students.

**Final Thoughts**

Through the work of crafting intimate portraits of Keahi, Louise, & Alex, I developed insight about how culturally competent teachers make sense of who they are, who their students are, and why that is important to the mental health of their students. Developing relationships with each teacher allowed me to have access to their classrooms, to hear their stories, and to
witness interactions with students that, taken together, helped me paint a portrait of how they impact their students. For the two white teachers, once learning the “secret” that white supremacy is embedded into education, they committed to their own journeys of becoming culturally competent. For Keahi, through her own identity, she recognized her role as life or death for some students. All three teachers recognized the work as messy, complex, and often imperfect, but necessary. Their stories showed us their goodness through their ability to develop empathetic, authentic, and connected relationships that empowered students. A critical climate develops when teachers share power with students, prioritize students at the center, and use a culturally relevant pedagogy with a marginalized lens. While teachers are not mental health professionals, they can create a climate of healing for students. One of the most challenging, but necessary, lessons that emerged from crafting the three portraits was that cultural competence requires a teacher who is also enabled as an activist through critical reflection and praxis. It is simply not enough to know about injustice without taking action for change.

Using Critical Race Theory and Relational Cultural Theory, I have developed a new framework, Critical School Mental Health Praxis (CrSMHP). This framework challenges traditional models that focus on increasing a youth’s resiliency by providing instead a critical lens addressing the root of the oppression. Using this lens, I argue, teachers should be trained in the in critical reflection and other practices that they can use in their classrooms and schools to dismantle the oppressive system. To develop my model further, I would like to do a similar portrait-based exploration with students to explore what cultural competence looks like as an aspect of lived youth identity.

When teachers are unaware and uneducated about their identities in relation to their students’ identities, there are missed opportunities to improve student mental health. The need
for cultural competence in education is urgent for the mental health of young people. Our nation
was built on racism and continues to be perpetuated by leaders, such as President Trump, as I
explained at the outset, who use their power to condemn those not conforming to an oppressive
system. Schools reflect the same model of dominance that marginalizes those who do look, act,
and sound the way those in power expect. As the diversity in our country and its schools
continues to increase, we need a new approach to teacher preparation and development that
places the onus on our own professional responsibility, not students’ personal resilience, to
ensure equitable access to the opportunities we have, historically, proclaimed as open to all, but
protected, in fact, for the few.
REFERENCES


Fearon, J. D. (1999). What is identity (as we now use the word)? Unpublished manuscript, Stanford, CA: Stanford University.


Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2005). Reflections on portraiture: A dialogue between art and


APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 6/27/2017

To: Jennifer Uile-Wells
508 25th St.
West Des Moines, IA 50265

CC: Dr. Katherine Bruna
N164 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Racism and Relationships: A portrait of teacher intersectional experiential knowledge

IRB ID: 17-250

Approval Date: 6/27/2017

Date for Continuing Review: 6/26/2019

Submission Type: New

Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 50), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.

- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.

- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others, and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.

- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 202 Kingland, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4666 or IRB@iastate.edu.
**APPENDIX B: NOMINATION FORM**

**Nomination Form**

Hello! Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study for my dissertation at Iowa State University. I am seeking your expertise for nominations of teachers that are committed and exceptional at working with diverse groups of students. You will be provided with a different nomination form for each teacher. You may nominate up to five teachers, but they have to be teachers in the Des Moines Public Schools. Please include their names, if you know what school they are at, and why you are nominating them. Please include as much information as you feel comfortable sharing about why that teacher is committed and exceptional at working with diverse groups of students. Thank you for your help! (Use the back if you need more space)

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<th>What grade are you in?</th>
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<td>How do you racially identify?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Name:</td>
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<td>Teacher School:</td>
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Why are you nominating this teacher as committed and exceptional for working with diverse groups of students?
APPENDIX C: DISSERTATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I used Seidman’s three step interview protocol (Seidman, 2006), and conducting three 90 minute interview sessions with each participant. Following the protocol, the first interview is in regards to the participant’s life history.

Potential questions may be:

1. How would you describe your experience in school and your relationship with teachers?
2. How would you compare your experience in school to that of your friends?
3. Tell me about what you felt were the expectations of you from those around you as a child?
4. Describe some of the strongest relationships you had as a child/adolescent? What made them strong?
5. Describe some of the more challenging relationships you had as a child/adolescent? What made them challenging?
6. How did those relationships contribute to your capacity to make healthy and empathic future relationships?
7. How did these experiences contribute to your identity?
8. Tell me about your journey to becoming a teacher
9. What relationships contributed to your journey?
10. When did you start to make sense of your racial/cultural/social identities?
11. How did you start to think about yours and others’ mental health experiences?

The second interview is regarding the contemporary experience. Potential questions may be:

1. Tell me about your identity now as a teacher
2. How would you describe your relationship with your students?
3. Students nominated you as an exceptional teacher. What contributes to your success?
4. Tell me about your student’s identities (Who are they? What are their strengths? Challenges?)
5. What parts of your own authentic experiences do you leave out of your relationships with your students?
6. How do you use your past experiences and relationships in your personal and professional relationships?
7. What are some of your socio-cultural influences that have contributed your ability to make mutuality in your relationships?
7. Tell me a story that shows me what it means/feels/looks like to be cross culturally competent teacher?
8. How do you understand the intersection of cultural competency and mental health?
9. How do you see yourself contributing to the mental wellness of your students?
10. Tell me about experiences you have seen in your classroom with students identity and their mental health

The final interview is a reflection on meaning. Potential questions may include

1. What does it mean to you to be a teacher working with diverse populations?
2. How would you compare your experience in school to your students experience in school? Why is it the same or different?
3. How have you come to make sense of your identity in relation to your students and vice versa?
4. How has your relationship with your students contributed to how they make sense of their identities?
5. How does your identity contribute to your mental health?
6. How do the relational and controlling images (will provide background for interviewees) impact how you view your students and your relationships with them?
APPENDIX D: THEMATIC WEB FROM NVIVO
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