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Teachers' Perceptions of Language Learners and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Niyoka S. Johnson

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Walden University
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Abstract

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EdS, Argosy University, 2006

MA, Central Michigan University, 2002

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education in Leadership, Policy, & Change

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Abstract

English language learner (ELL) students come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and educators need specific training in second language acquisition and content instruction to provide culturally responsive instruction leading to academic success. This phenomenological interpretative analysis was designed to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. The theoretical foundation of this study was grounded in both social constructivism and diversity pedagogy theory, as both theories support the construct of sociocultural interactions experienced by educators in this setting. The research question inquired about the perceptions of general education middle school teachers regarding ELL students and the culturally relevant pedagogy needed to support ELL students' academic needs. The qualitative phenomenological design employing interpretative analysis was chosen to explore the attitudes and perceptions of educators towards practices of cultural pedagogy in classrooms. Data were collected through in-depth semistructured interviews with 12 participants. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the collected data. As a result, three major themes were the need for increased and targeted CRP training for the teachers, awareness that each child in the classroom is represented, and a belief in the success of CRP through the empowerment of students. Implications of the study findings support the need to integrate culturally diverse pedagogy in classroom environments to promote positive social change and academic achievement among ELL students.

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Dedication

I want to thank God first! With Him, ALL things are possible. I dedicate this work to my husband, Albertus, and our children. Without your support, encouragement, and patience, completing this work would not have been possible. You took on most of everything, so I can find time to work on my research. Our children, Omari and Sidney, have patiently learned the meaning of sacrifice through this journey as they had to endure the challenges of balancing a family, work, and college alongside me. Omari and Sidney, you had encouraged and given me the motivation that I needed to keep going when I wanted to stop. I love you! There is no doubt that my three guardian angels were alongside me through this journey, providing the push that I have needed to finish and overcome life's challenges. I dedicate this work in memory of my dad and mom, Napoleon and Beverly McKibbens. They always believed in my potential to accomplish great things as a person and educator. Finally, I dedicate this work in memory of my brother Wesley, who believed that I could overcome any challenges and hardships that I might face.

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I want to thank my doctoral committee members, Dr. John Harrison, and Dr. Katherine Emmons, for looking at my study from many different angles and opening my perspective. I am grateful for how committed you were to see me complete this dissertation and make it continually better. To all my friends and other family members, thank you for your support and waiting on me. I did it! I am forever grateful to those who have supported me through this journey!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Meeting the needs of all learners is a challenging task for educators. The number of diverse learners has increased, and English language learners (ELL) are among the most rapidly growing student populations in public schools across the United States (Cheatham et al., 2014; Clark-Goff & Eslami, 2016; Ziegler et al., 2013). ELL students learn English as a second language (ESL) while learning grade-level content. The increased immigrant population has changed the composition of public schools across the United States (Yochai, 2019), contributing to changes in educational programs and teaching practices that accommodate social and cultural diversities in the classroom setting (Copple et al., 2014; Kiss & Weninger, 2017).

According to the U.S. Department of Education ([DOE], 2017), 5.5 million out of the 50.7 million students in today's public schools are considered ELL students. Statistics from 2017 showed that the enrollment of ELL students increased by 51%, while non-ELL student enrollment increased by only 7%. As of 2017, ELL students made up 10% of the student population in U.S. public schools. Across the country, particularly in New York City, school districts serve students from diverse cultural backgrounds with various learning needs (U.S. DOE, 2018). Educators who work with ELL students require extensive training in second language acquisition and core subjects to effectively support ELL students' academic and linguistic needs, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary (Gándara & Santibañez, 2016; Li & Peters, 2020). ELL students rely on the skills of classroom teachers to support their language and content acquisition. The present study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of general education

middle school teachers of ELL students and teachers' practices of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in diverse classroom environments.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. The next section provides background information, followed by a description of the problem and the stated purpose of the study. Based on the literature reviewed in the background section, research questions are posed, followed by the theoretical foundation and the nature of the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with the key definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study, followed by a summary.

Background

As the racial and ethnic diversity of the overall U.S. population increases, the racial and ethnic diversity of the public-school population also continues to shift (U.S. DOE, 2017). The U.S. Census Bureau (2015) estimated that 11.8 million students between the ages of 5 and 17 speak a language other than English, 2 million more than was reported in the 2000 U.S. Census statistics. Within the New York metro area, data indicated that at least 192 different languages are spoken in home environments, with 38% of all individuals aged five years and older speaking a language other than English in their homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In the 2017-2018 school year, the state of New York had 216,378 ELL students enrolled in public schools (U.S. DOE, 2018). Consistent with the data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) 2008 policy brief described ELL students as a highly heterogeneous and complex group of students with diverse abilities, educational needs, backgrounds, and goals.

Several scholars (Téllez & Manthey, 2015; Yochai, 2019) have indicated that ELL students placed in regular education settings perform poorly on standardized assessments because general education teachers often lack knowledge of appropriate instructional strategies to support the linguistic and academic needs of ELL students. General education teachers often disregard linguistic and academic skills that are needed to succeed on standardized tests assessing speaking, listening, writing, reading comprehension skills, and vocabulary due to the teachers' lack of training to address ELL students' unique learning needs (Karatas & Oral, 2019; Téllez & Manthey, 2015). ELL students' limited English skills can, therefore, increase stress and test anxiety since the students have difficulty comprehending what is being taught. Additionally, teachers often provide learning activities at academic or English proficiency levels that are not appropriate for ELL students, which might further contribute to poor outcomes on standardized testing and lead to: (a) lack of motivation to participate in class, (b) decreased attendance, and (c) reduced willingness to learn the English language or core subjects (Yochai, 2019).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, researchers examined classroom instruction for Hispanic students with a particular focus on classroom pedagogies. Chamberlain (2005) suggested that educating ELL students challenges classroom instruction because it requires teachers to understand students' social and cultural contexts. Similarly, Vogt (2012) observed that a one-size-fits-all instruction model was ineffective for ELL students with diverse backgrounds, needs, and levels of proficiencies. More recent researchers have observed the need to reduce the academic gap between ethnic groups,

accounting for the influence of teachers (Shaffer, 2017; Sharma et al., 2016). Shaffer (2017) studied the dynamics of mainstream teachers' interactions with ELL students and their effects on increased student academic performance. Shaffer suggested three criteria for teachers when interacting with students: (a) ideology through inferred messages, (b) representation of all people, and (c) promotion of critical pedagogy (Shaffer, 2017).

Cultural competence has been used to explain the positive influence of culture on student educational development (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016). Culturally responsive teaching is evident when teachers: "(a) have knowledge and sensitivity to cultural influences, (b) can provide a supportive learning context, (c) offer appropriate instruction and assessment, and (d) facilitate parental involvement" (Larson et al., 2018, p.155). Culturally responsive teachers encourage social interactions by maintaining transferable teacher-student relationships, establishing connectedness with all students, fostering a community of learners, and encouraging student collaboration (Tran et al., 2016). Karatas and Oral (2019) recommended that classroom teachers display cultural sensitivity in their daily interactions with minority students and parents. Understanding the teachers' self-efficacy to implement culturally relevant instruction offers valuable insights and informs efforts to improve ELL students' academic success.

Cultural competence presents the opportunity for individuals to avoid ethnocentrism and understand other cultures and people (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016). Estrella (2016) identified factors that shape teachers' culturally relevant pedagogy. Yoon and Sharif (2015) recommended that teachers implement culturally responsive and culturally relevant instruction to non-English proficient students, adding that culturally

competent teachers consider students' cultures and languages in their instructional practices, support students' cultural identity, and respect the students' culture during teaching. However, previous researchers (Estrella, 2016; Yoon & Sharif, 2015) have not examined the lived experiences of teachers' perceptions in employing culturally relevant pedagogy when there is a cultural gap between teachers and students.

Communicating with ELL students, their parents, and families requires culturally sensitive efforts by teachers across multiple grade levels. Many ELL students enter the U.S. education system at different points in their academic careers following the immigration of their families to the United States, noting that the rapid growth of ELL students entering U.S. schools is projected to continue (Ardasheva et al., 2017; Latunde, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Scholars have observed that limited parental involvement in the ELL community may be due to family structure, background, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement (Daniel et al., 2016). Researchers further suggested that some parents believe they should not interfere with school processes and thus consider direct communication with teachers culturally disrespectful (Walker & Legg, 2018). Therefore, general education middle school teachers must ensure that their communications are culturally sensitive to meet the needs of the students and the parents and ensure the academic progress of these students.

Often, students from different cultural backgrounds experience challenges when transitioning from the cultural environment of their home to that of the classroom (Sharma et al., 2016). Moreover, teachers may lack the training to use culturally responsive strategies to address cultural differences that help students make a smooth

transition, reflect on cultural concepts, and critically analyze subject matter within a culturally diverse classroom (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016). Gay (2021) argued that culturally responsive teaching "teaches to and through the strengths" of students and is "culturally validating and affirming" for them (p. 29). Therefore, it is critical to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and the teachers' practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments.

Both ELL students and their teachers continue to face challenges in the academic environment; therefore, more research is needed. Prior researchers have identified factors contributing to the lack of English proficiency and the effects of limited English proficiency on ELL students (Ardasheva et al., 2017; Flory & Wylie, 2019; Yochai, 2019). Previous researchers highlighted the need to develop equitable and culturally sensitive instructional practices and aimed to contextualize the concept of teacher efficacy with diversity and multicultural education (Banks & McGee Banks; Gay, 2021; Raisinghani, 2018). Other researchers, including Lucas et al. (2015) and Yough (2019), explored teachers' perceptions of their efficacy to instruct ELL students efficiently, concluding that many teachers were not confident in their abilities to modify the curriculum for ELL students. While some of the published literature has suggested that teacher efficacy and cultural competence were at the core of culturally responsive teaching practices, the research literature has not explored teacher perceptions of their culturally relevant pedagogy in meeting the diverse needs of ELL students (Coppersmith et al., 2019; Manning et al., 2017; Yough, 2019).

Additional research is needed to evaluate teachers' perspectives on cultural backgrounds, attitudes, and experiences when working with diverse students. Such research might enable the restructuring of classroom instruction to prepare ELL students for challenging learning tasks. The aims of the present study included expanding the existing body of literature by exploring general education middle school teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of the cultural differences of their students. In this study, teachers' personal beliefs, constructive attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of cultural issues related to their use of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Problem Statement

As culturally diverse ELL student populations continue to grow in U.S. schools, culturally relevant pedagogy can aid learners by addressing the cultural diversity within the classroom (Gay, 2021; Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016). Decades of research (Bennett, 2001; Gay, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2015) have provided insight into the relationship between culturally responsive instruction and students' success. Nevertheless, classroom teachers' use of culturally responsive teaching strategies has not been clarified (Compton, n.d.; Tran et al., 2016). Preservice teachers' exposure through college courses and in-service teachers' participation in professional career development programs promote culturally responsive teaching strategies (Compton, n.d.; Walker & Legg, 2018). While it is common for teachers to experience multicultural pedagogical practices, such as culturally responsive teaching (Compton, n.d.; Walker & Legg, 2018), teachers cannot be assumed to routinely apply multicultural pedagogy in the classroom setting (Compton, n.d.; Tran et al., 2016). This study addressed the specific problem,

which is the lack of knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom setting by teachers of ELL students (Compton, n.d.; Coppersmith et al., 2019).

The target population included ELL students in general education classrooms in an urban school district in New York and middle school education teachers in the identified school district. According to the New York State Education Department, the district serves more than 160,624 English learners instructed by over 250 English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers (New York State Education Department, 2019). The identified school district's ELL population is growing rapidly (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2016; Sharma et al., 2016). The current study explored the lived experiences of the target population of teachers and their perspectives of ELL students.

Few researchers have explored teachers' perceptions of ELL students and the teachers' use of culturally responsive teaching practices. The previous studies have demonstrated that ethnic minorities, particularly students of African Diaspora and Latino descent, do not achieve as highly as their Euro-American counterparts (Borrero et al., 2018; Quintana & Mahgoub, 2016). Ladson-Billings (1995) originated culturally relevant pedagogy to address the gap between teachers and students in ethnic, racial, and cultural characteristics. Schools need to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies (Borrero et al., 2018) that encourage teachers to creatively use or develop culturally relevant pedagogy to improve student achievement (Szucs et al., 2020). To support the academic achievement of students of color, culturally relevant practitioners encourage collaboration to support and foster cultural competency and develop students' academic potential (Durden et al., 2015). The current research explored general education middle

school teachers' perceptions of ELL students and the teachers' practices of culturally relevant teaching in general education classrooms. A qualitative approach was employed using individual teacher interviews to collect the data on the pedagogical choices of teachers regarding strategies used when creating lesson activities and to further explore factors that influence teachers' decisions to implement culturally relevant instruction.

Purpose

This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. Many studies have explored ELL student experiences in school, aspects of community engagement, and sociocultural experiences of individuals within schools (Farah, 2015; Walick & Sullivan, 2015). However, previous researchers have not explored teachers' perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogical practices in general education classrooms while considering cultural differences between teachers and ELL students. By investigating teachers' perceptions of the use of culturally relevant pedagogy and exploring diverse culturally relevant ideas, strategies, processes, and influences, individual interviews provided insights into teachers' lived experiences in New York Public Charter schools.

Research Questions

The primary research question that guided the interpretative analysis was:

RQ1: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address perceived cultural diversity of ELL students and influence the students' academic success?

Two sub-questions were formulated to guide the interview protocol and helped answer the primary RQ included:

RQ1.1: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the cultural diversity of ELL students?

RQ1.2: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?

Theoretical Framework

Sheets' (n.d.) social constructivist perspective and diversity pedagogy theory (DPT) guided the study. Vygotsky et al. (1979) provided the framework for social constructivist thinking, postulating that learning cannot be separated from its social context. Vygotsky's cultural development theory applies to actual relationships between individuals. Cultural relevant pedagogy is founded in sociocultural theory. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests that social, cultural, and historical factors shape cognition and ponders that effective teachers must practice culturally relevant pedagogy. Vygotsky stated that social interaction is fundamental for developing cognitive processes. All functions in the child's cultural development evolve first at the social level and subsequently at the individual level (Vygotsky et al., 1979). The ability to sustain culture or a shared understanding is transmitted through the medium of speech. Vygotsky emphasized the role of language and culture in a child's learning process. According to

this theorist, both language and culture play essential roles in human intellectual development and in humans' perceptions of their environment and eventually understanding of themselves.

General education classroom teachers who want to develop an effective culturally diverse pedagogy must become involved in the lives of their students (Szucs et al., 2020). The term diversity pedagogy emerged from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Decades later, Sheets (n.d.) introduced the diversity pedagogy theory (DPT). According to Sheets (n.d.), diversity pedagogy emerged due to ethnic minority and poor children being viewed differently in education because of their cultural, language, economic, and ethnic differences. The Sheets' framework interconnects culture, cognition, and schooling in a single unit (Sheets, n.d.). In this theory, culturally competent teachers observe students' cultural-behavioral patterns to identify groups and individual cultural competencies and skills. Sheets (n.d.) noted, "To be effective as a teacher; you must understand and acknowledge the critical role culture plays in the teaching-learning process" (p. 11). When teachers gain culturally competent skills, they can change and adapt instruction to improve the instruction of all students.

This study explored general education middle school teachers' perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy and the methods they use to include effective strategies in their instructional methods for ELL students. The social constructivist perspective was used to frame the role of social and cultural factors and their interaction in middle school general education instruction. DPT was used to frame teachers' instructional approaches and strategies in response to students' cultural, linguistic, economic, and ethnic

differences, particularly in middle school settings. A more detailed explanation of the theoretical framework and its application to this study is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The school selected for this qualitative research is located in an urban area with a high ELL student population. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), "Qualitative researchers conducting a qualitative study would be interested in (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 23). The current study explored how teachers' cultural perceptions and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy affect their ability to teach ELL students. The present study sample consisted of 10-12 general education middle school teachers with a minimum of 3 years of experience teaching ELL students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the study participants. An invitation letter was placed in school mailboxes of all core content teachers to recruit participants. Teachers participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews that focused on their experiences of teaching ELL students. Data sources included in-depth analysis of recorded interviews.

Since this research did not attempt to answer, "how many" or "how much" and does not call for a hypothesis that addresses, explains, or predicts the participants' behavior, statistical analysis, and numeric description, quantitative research would not be appropriate (Creswell, & Poth, 2016, p. 153). Accordingly, this study did not aim to predict teachers' behavior, determine teachers' attitudes, or seek experimental data but to explore teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and descriptions of implementation of

culturally relevant pedagogy. This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions and lived experiences in mainstream classroom settings to gain insights that may lead to a better understanding of the essences and meanings attributed to the challenges of teaching culturally diverse ELL students. A quantitative paradigm to capture the cultural lens of participants' everyday lived experiences was rejected. To accomplish the goal of this study, a systematic explanation of participants' experiences, feelings, and ideas had to be captured.

Out of the five main qualitative study designs, specifically narrative, grounded theory, ethnographic, case study, and phenomenological, the phenomenological approach was most appropriate for the current study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Smith et al. (n.d.), a phenomenological approach involves examining the actual experiences of the study sample to establish meaning from the overlapping connections. The phenomenological approach was well-suited for this study on the lived experiences of the participants as opposed to collecting facts, developing theory, examining the circumstances or evolution of a population or group over time, or studying a culture or group (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A qualitative phenomenological design contributed to exploring culturally responsive teaching strategies through the lens of teachers' lived experiences of culturally diverse ELL students.

Definitions of Terms

Academic language: Academic language refers to the oral, written, auditory, and visual language proficiency required to learn effectively in schools and academic

programs. It is used in classroom lessons, books, tests, and assignments, and students are expected to learn it and achieve fluency in it (Phillips Galloway et al., 2020).

Cultural awareness: Cultural awareness is the ability to understand the personal values, beliefs, and perceptions of people from one's own culture, as well as from other cultures (Kiss & Weninger, 2017)

Cultural competence: Cultural competence refers to the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than the teacher's own (Brown et al., 2016).

Culturally and linguistically diverse: The U.S. Department of Education uses the term cultural and linguistic diversity to define non-English proficient (NEP) or limited-English proficient (LEP) students enrolled in education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Culturally relevant pedagogy: Culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes the importance of referencing a student's culture in all aspects of their learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Diversity: Borrero et al., (2018) defined diversity as the various dimensions along which individuals differ from or resemble each other, including gender, race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, sexual orientation, class, mental and physical ability, and immigration status, among others.

Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT): DPT is a set of eight principles that point out the natural and inseparable connection between cognition and culture (Sheets, n.d.).

English as a Second Language (ESL): ESL is the study of English by speakers with different native languages (Bauer-Ramazani et al., 2016).

English Language Learners (ELL): ELL students are active learners of English who have limited English proficiency and speak a language other than English. These students have difficulty performing grade-level work in English (Sharma et al., 2016).

General education: General education services are provided to students who are proficient English speakers without additional support (Gottlieb, 2016).

Heterogeneous classrooms: Heterogeneous classroom is a term used in education to identify a classroom containing students with various linguistic and academic levels (Kinsey, 2017).

Intellectual development: Influenced by the interaction of hereditary and environmental factors, intellectual development controls every other development aspect, including emotional, social, and moral (Schunk., 2014).

Multicultural education: Multicultural education is a broad term that encompasses all philosophies, policies, and practices that seek the highest quality of learning experience for all in a culturally diverse educational environment. Multicultural education recognizes that numerous factors shape cultural diversity among different student populations (Tran et al., 2016).

Assumptions

One assumption of this study was that the selected teachers would be motivated to participate due to the increased enrollment of ELL students in their classrooms and realize that culturally relevant pedagogy is important in improving student achievement.

The second assumption was that participants would be thoughtful and honest in their responses. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study if they were uncomfortable and that their answers would remain anonymous to encourage honesty. Similarly, the third assumption was that all participants interpreted the questions as intended and expressed their opinions to their knowledge. The fourth assumption was that the teachers across the schools shared similar instructional challenges, as they work within the same context of school policies and protocols. The fifth assumption was that each participant brought a unique perspective based on personal experiences, such as background, training, cultural interactions, self-reflection, and years of teaching.

Scope and Delimitations

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) mentioned that the scope of a study encompasses the area of primary focus. The scope of the current study included general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the cultural diversity of ELL students in the classroom and the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy. All participants were selected from a single school located in an urban area with a large population of ELL students.

Delimitations include characteristics of the study within the researcher's control (Creswell, 2015). Participants were selected based on the research criteria determined by the researcher. Specific participation criteria were: (a) general education middle school teachers; (b) with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience; (c) who teach ELL students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Despite some logistical challenges, such as meeting with teachers to schedule a focus group or having adequate time to complete the

focus group, the study was delimited by data collection methods, including a focus group design. The study is also delimited by including teachers only, meaning no principals or other school administration were included in the study sample, as this research required data from educators who are directly responsible for classroom instruction.

Limitations of the Study

One responsibility of qualitative researchers is to suggest possible limitations of their study, noting that limitations are influences or circumstances outside the researcher's control (Creswell, 2015). The primary limitation of this study was that participants' experiences and culturally relevant pedagogy might not represent the entire school district or other districts. Data were collected from one public charter middle school, which may not generalize to students in other middle schools or in other grade levels beyond those represented in the study. Thus, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. The study was also limited by the sample that included teachers with differing years of experience teaching ELL students. Accordingly, some participants may have more relevant and diverse experiences to share compared to others. Lastly, the self-reported nature of the data may be limiting. Data collection focused on participants' lived experiences educating ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. Some participants may feel inclined to downplay instructional challenges or struggles or misrepresent the extent to which they implement culturally relevant pedagogy with diverse students. Participants were reminded that their participation would not affect their employment and that their data would be anonymous in the published study.

Significance

A study of the perceptions of general education middle school teachers teaching ELL students side by side with native English-speaking peers can be an essential addition to the existing research on cross-cultural teaching. EL learners need effective teaching methods and teachers who care and are sensitive to their cultural differences and needs (Villegas, 2018). An understanding of the diverse cultures in the community can affect the social and economic success of a society. This study aims to provide information on culturally relevant pedagogy through the lens of teachers' perceptions and experiences. The findings may assist administrators, school personnel, and teachers in making changes to meet the needs of their students. Based on the findings, the administrators and teachers at the selected school can begin or continue the conservation of culture and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. The U.S. public school system is currently failing its culturally diverse students (Ford, 2014). Today's growing diversity makes it increasingly necessary for the U.S. public school system to require culturally relevant pedagogy within the curriculum (Szucs et al., 2020). Education for culturally diverse students has become a subtractive process (Delpit, 2015); as a result, modern school systems have not met the challenge of educating the increasingly diverse student population (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Teachers will continue to fail these diverse student populations until

they provide equitable educational opportunities for all students; however, this is impossible without a common vision for teachers (Ford, 2014).

The first chapter of the present study introduced the problem, the problem statement, the nature and purpose of the study, the conceptual framework, a set of operational definitions, assumptions, and limitations, the study's scope and delimitations, the significance of the study, and a transition statement. The second chapter presents the literature review, including discussions of studies that define aspects of the theory and relate to the selected methods. The chapter also includes discussions of the conceptual foundation of sociocultural constructivism, followed by the theoretical framework's main constructs of culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural competence.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of English language learner (ELL) students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. This study intents to advance knowledge and awareness of how general education middle school teachers' pedagogy practices meet the academic needs of ELL students by investigating influences that shape these practices and exploring teachers' experiences and perceptions of working with different cultures. The present study's findings may contribute to the existing literature on teacher pedagogy, multicultural education, and cultural competence.

The remainder of Chapter 2 includes a review of the chosen theoretical foundations and the relevant literature organized by themed sections and subsections that include cultural attitudes of teachers and their role in educating ELL students, the school as an organization, culture in the classroom, cultural competence, growing diversity in America, understanding culture, cultural tolerance, and multiculturalism. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature and a transition to Chapter 3.

Search Strategy

The literature used in this review was obtained from Walden University Library databases and public databases that included ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE, Research Gate, Science Direct, Google, Google Books, Google Scholar, national and state department of education websites, informational websites, and government-supported information sites. Search strategies and limitations included the use of available options per site, such as peer-reviewed journals,

dates of publications focusing on information published in the last five years, author name

searchers when needed, access to related articles and studies, and the use of full-text or PDF

availability of published literature. The literature discussed in the review included articles

published in peer-reviewed journals, books, dissertations, and websites. Search terms involved

the use of entries in single terms or Boolean search terms, which included: *cultural, culturally

responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant instruction, multicultural, multiculturalism,

multicultural education, cultural competence, impact of culture, teacher cultural attitudes,

cultural awareness, cultural diversity, culturally diverse, cultural competence, culturally

responsive, culturally responsive teaching, intellectual development, English language learners,

ELL students, diversity, heterogeneous classrooms, general education, diversity pedagogy

theory, linguistically diverse, social constructivist theory, Vygotsky, English as a second

language, ESL, social diversity, sociocultural diversity, second language acquisition, culturally

relevant pedagogy, CRP, pedagogy, middle school,* and *charter school.* Much of the research

literature used was published from 2016 to 2022. Overall, 69 of the total 211 works cited, or

32.7%, were published during the target period, while 142 (67.3%) of the total 211 works cited

were published in 2015 or earlier. Of the total 210 works cited in the literature reviews,

approximately 47% included works from peer-reviewed sources.

Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical frameworks chosen to guide the present study included Vygotsky et

al.'s (1979) sociocultural theory, as CRP is founded in sociocultural theory and the diversity

pedagogy theory of Sheets (n.d.). Vygotsky et al. (1979) developed a sociocultural theory based

on the perspective that social, cultural, and historical factors shape cognition. Accordingly, the

theory supports the belief that teachers must practice CRP to be effective. Vygotsky et al. (1979) sociocultural development theory and Sheets (n.d.) diversity pedagogy theory guided the design and implementation of this study.

Sociocultural Development Theory

Vygotsky et al. (1979) cultural development theory explains that perception plays an essential role in intellectual development and the process of learning. Vygotsky's theory sets the foundation for the importance of culture in developing relationships, noting that social interactions facilitate the evolving understanding and knowledge of the student. Noted as one of the first sociocultural constructivists, Vygotsky claimed that the educator as a learner takes on an active role in constructing cultural and social knowledge through meaning-making (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000). Vygotsky et al. observed that social interaction precedes development and is fundamental in developing the cognitive process. A student develops higher cognitive functions and capacities when favorable conditions support learning within the social interactions involved in an academic setting. The culture created in a school is based on how the individuals within the school view culture. Individual cultural dispositions brought to the school by the school personnel create school culture.

According to Au (1998), Vygotsky considered that the development of higher mental functions includes transferring aspects of cognition from an intra-psychological to inter-psychological perspective, meaning that higher cognitive function occurred as an individual progressed from socially supported actions to individually controlled behaviors. Vygotsky's theory integrated aspects of human development rooted in social, historical, and cultural factors with shaping cognition and other human functions (Daniels, 2016). The sociocultural theory

explains how historical, cultural, and institutional actions influence human actions (Au, 1998; Daniels, 2016; Vygotsky et al., 1979).

Cole and Wertsch (1996) argued that sociocultural term appropriately describes the heritage of Vygotsky (Daniels, 2016). Furthermore, Cole and Wertsch described the goal of the sociocultural theory as the intent to develop and integrate the associations between human behaviors and actions with the environmental influences founded in the situations that supported those actions, including cultural, institutional, and historical aspects. According to Cole and Wertsch (1996), the sociocultural theory effectively examines cognitive discourse and skills in formal educational environments.

Daniels (2016) suggested that cognitive values referred to in Vygotsky et al. (1979) theory involved questioning the publicly available and openly taught nature of some material and knowledge, while other forms of knowledge and information were not readily available, leading to further questions of the value placed on some types of solutions. Moreover, the idea of cognitive values and politicizing of pedagogy was derived from Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective. Vygotsky noted that pedagogy is not politically neutral, as the influence of pedagogy on the psyche leads to the adoption of social trends or political positions, either willingly or not, as a dominant social perspective often influences the nature and origin of the pedagogy.

Vygotsky's (1979) sociocultural development theory provides a theoretical basis for CRP (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Research that explored the value placed on cultural variations and the processes associated with development observed that researchers interested in examining

contextual strategies used in studies of both learning and teaching apply theories influenced by different cultural factors and historical constructs (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

Diverse Pedagogy Theory

Due to the nature of job responsibilities, general education teachers become involved in the lives of their students. The diversity pedagogy theory incorporates culture, cognition, and schooling into a single unit (Sheets, n.d.). Sheets noted that culturally competent teachers observed the cultural and behavioral patterns displayed by students, used their observations to identify individual and group patterns, and then applied the knowledge gained through student observations to guide culturally relevant teaching decisions. Diversity pedagogy theory unites classroom practices with deep understandings of the role of culture in the social and cognitive development of students (Cocking & Greenfield, 1994; Cole & Wertsch, 1996; Learn, 2000; Rogoff, 2007; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). This study aimed to explore general education middle school teachers' CRP and investigate the ways in which teachers include effective strategies for ELL students in their instructional methods. Diversity pedagogy theory provided a foundation to guide and challenge the present study's assumptions, interpretations, and expectations.

Review of the Literature

The literature presented in this review provides evidence of the challenges teachers face in creating meaningful learning experiences for all students in the classroom. Cultural diversity needs to be integrated into the teaching strategies that meet the needs of all students, including ELL students, as the U.S. public school systems are evolving across cultural, racial, and socioeconomic domains (U.S. DOE, 2018). The literature included is presented in sections and

subsections according to five primary themes: teachers' cultural attitudes, cultural integration in the classroom, the growing diversity across America, an overview of culture, and a discussion of multiculturalism. The five overarching themes are further divided into in-depth and useful information about the growing need for cultural relevance integrated into classroom pedagogy. Teachers across the country face challenges in understanding and meeting the needs of their ever-growing culturally diverse student populations. The presented literature supports the problem and purpose of the current study exploring the challenges teachers face in meeting the culturally diverse needs of all students.

Teachers' Cultural Attitudes

Teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions play a role in student behavioral and academic achievement. When teachers display positive attitudes towards ELL students in their classrooms, students' self-efficacy increases, and they feel more integrated into the school community (Villegas, 2018). Teachers' attitudes and beliefs correlate with ELL students' behavioral and academic performance (Lucas et al., 2015; Villegas, 2018). Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs affect ELL students' learning and performance. Villegas (2018) pointed out that the school faculty members' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions can affect the school's climate. Teacher effectiveness increases ELL students' academic achievement and positive behaviors (Lucas et al., 2015). This section discusses the teachers' roles in educating ELL students, organizational culture from a school perspective, and the relevance of culture in learning.

Teachers' Roles in Educating English Language Learners

U.S. school system introduced programs that support students in speaking another language other than English. The most common ELL programs designed to provide instruction and language acquisition for ELL students are sheltered English instruction and bilingual instruction. Truong (2017) observed that sheltered English instruction, or English-only instruction, includes teaching interventions in stand-alone methods, program-developed strategies, and one-to-one teaching. English-only programs involve pull-out or collaborative tactics that give students little to no time to use their native language, while structured immersion strategies provide non-formal instruction in a student's native language (Truong, 2017).

In contrast, bilingual instruction programs provide teaching interventions in both English and the student's native language (Truong, 2017). Three general bilingual programs offered include the early exit or transitional program, developmental bilingual education, and dual-language or two-way immersion programs. Early exit or transitional programs provide ELL students with supportive instruction in their native language for up to three years. Developmental bilingual education provides supplemental instruction in the primary language during the elementary education years, even if the ELL becomes English-proficient. The dual-language or two-way immersion options allow ELL students to continue instruction in English and their primary language through their academic years (Truong, 2017). General education teachers are expected to instruct ELL students in language, reading, and other subject matter content, as well as to serve as a liaison between students and parents.

According to Gallagher and Haan (2018), ELL teachers play a role in constructing social opportunities for learning, although teachers' beliefs and assumptions often interfere with the

social and academic integration in the regular classroom. Previously, Penfield (1987) conducted a study on teachers' perceptions of ELL students and ESL teachers to suggest improvements in preparing regular teachers. The researcher administered open-ended questionnaires to 162 teachers who taught subjects entirely in English to ESL students. The participating teachers did not have training on dealing with ELL students. Penfield's study showed that ESL teachers needed to improve academic learning for ELL students and learn more about integrating the content. Penfield (1987) also stated that teachers needed to adapt content curriculum material to meet the needs of ELL students. This author claimed that Hispanic students require more attention, as they are difficult to discipline. These ELL students tend to be isolated in schools from other classmates, not being accepted socially. In 2007, The National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2016) noted that educators must provide instruction in both languages to help ELL students develop strong literacy, and they must respond to Hispanic students culturally and linguistically.

Organizational Culture: A School Perspective

All schools have an organizational culture. DiPaola and Wagner (2018) defined school culture as the traditions, beliefs, and values that distinguish a school from others and infuse it with a distinctive identity. School culture is reflects teaching practices that promote student learning (DiPaola & Wagner, 2018); however, the definition of school culture remains ambiguous, making it difficult to study or predict patterns. Research on school culture has focused on school effectiveness and school improvement (Carlson & Patterson, 2015; Deal & Peterson, 2016; Westrup et al., 2018). School culture is often shaped by the personal experiences of teachers, school staff, and administrators. The term culture refers to the ongoing experiences

based on perceived norms, individual values and beliefs, and practiced traditions and rituals that evolve over time based on the influences of people or groups working in a united manner to address and solve shared challenges and problems (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Culture shapes how people think and feel and cultivates commitment among the students, faculty, and parents. It also influences the actions and shapes the school's motivation, focus, and commitment. The school leadership regularly evaluates and addresses the school's core values to shape the school's culture (DiPaola & Wagner, 2018). Popkewitz (2018) noted the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the academic environment, relevant policies, and the rhetoric and voices of the teachers.

Relevance of Culture to Learning

Culture and language play an integral role in the learning of ELL students who are enrolled concurrently in language educational programming alongside general education classes. Bennett et al. (2018) observed that cultural incongruence in schooling involves a disparity between common approaches to teaching strategies that address the learning needs and interests of students with culturally diverse backgrounds. In addition, Au (2013) noted two ways in which schools fail students from diverse cultures. First, the U.S. school system curriculum tends to be Eurocentric and focuses on mainstream students' perspectives while ignoring the historical perspectives of other cultures. Second, schools cater only to the social processes of general education students. Social processes that fail diverse cultural groups include teacher-initiated interaction patterns and whole-group approaches instead of small-group instruction. Bennett et al. (2018) found that interaction patterns prevent ELL students from participating in classroom discussions because they are individualized and competitive. The values of the mainstream

culture may be antithetical to those taught to culturally diverse students (Bennett et al., 2018), and culturally responsive instruction is the only solution to this disparity.

Integrating Culture in the Classroom

By integrating the students' cultural background in the classroom into their teaching strategies, classroom teachers are positioned to establish a learning environment that supports the cultural integrity of the students and advances their cultural awareness and competence. Student-centric pedagogy that embraces cultural heritages empowers students from culturally diverse backgrounds and meets those students' social and academic needs (Alim et al., 2020; Alismail, 2016). While overlap exists in the terminology employed to describe the integration of culture into classroom teaching, the construct of classroom pedagogy that integrates the cultural diversity of the students contributes to their academic experiences and successes (Gay, 2021). This section presents information on culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural competence, cultural competence in education, and cultural competence and teacher efficacy.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy consists of teaching strategies that use culture to help students understand themselves and their native cultures and the culture of others, develop confidence in social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge, as opposed to trying to adapt the school culture to the student's needs (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Siwatu et al. (2016) defined culturally responsive teaching as: (a) valuing and accepting differences, (b) building instruction based on students' cultural background, and (c) being attentive to different cultural learning styles. Culturally responsive, culturally relevant, and culturally sustaining pedagogies have been

suggested by various researchers as successful approaches for meeting culturally diverse students' social and instructional needs (Alim et al., 2020). Alismail (2016) emphasized the importance of teachers to understand and implement students' cultural heritage into the curriculum, assessments, and instruction. To fully recognize culturally responsive teaching, changes must not occur only in the curricula but also in human relationships, instructional approaches, and the overall school setting (Alim et al., 2020).

The local education system controls teachers' pedagogical choices (Santos et al., 2013). State-mandated standards have limited how teachers implement culturally responsive pedagogy. Nieto (2015) suggested that teacher professional development focuses more on standards and assessments than on culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers receive limited training on implementing cultural pedagogy into the classroom (Nieto, 2015).

In general, culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to: (a) be a facilitator, (b) communicate high expectations, (c) provide student-centered instruction, (d) have a positive perspective on student families, (e) redesign the curriculum, and (f) learn students' cultural backgrounds. Teachers must begin to know the whole student to help culturally diverse students feel that they fit in and are accepted in the school environment. Ford (2014) noted the following characteristics of culturally responsive teachers and classrooms: (a) strong student-teacher relationships, (b) consideration for the students' native language, (c) diversified teaching staff, (d) culturally related pedagogy, (e) culturally sensitive assessments, (f) integrated teaching philosophy, (g) tough-love philosophy, (h) common and collective philosophy, and (i) culturally sensitive instructional practices.

Au (2013) characterized culturally responsive instruction as one of two theoretical approaches, direct and indirect, to address and improve the literacy achievement of students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The direct or assimilationist approach stems from the perspective that children from diverse backgrounds should be immersed in mainstream instruction and curriculum. The proponents of culturally responsive instruction advocate for Au's (2013) second approach, the pluralistic or indirect approach.

In the indirect approach, public schools first reinforce and affirm the cultural identity of students from diverse backgrounds (Au, 2013). Schools that establish a basis of cultural identity support a learning process that involves interaction and mainstream content. Au's (2013) view on culturally responsive teaching involves interfering with the mainstream content through students' cultural lenses.

In reviewing research on culturally responsive teaching, Gay (2021) described that culturally responsive teaching involves establishing a conduit for learning using the cultural traits, experiences, and perspectives of culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse students as tools to accomplish greater efficacy in teacher and learning. Gay pointed out that overlapping terms, such as culturally relevant, centered, sensitive, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, and synchronized, describe culturally responsive teaching. The author further emphasized the importance of the construct that supports the different terms to provide classroom instruction more aligned and consistent with the cultural orientations of the diverse student populations. Gay argued that culturally responsive teaching is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the students' lived experiences,

they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy has been associated with various other names and has developed over time. Common other names include culturally responsive pedagogy, CRP, and culturally congruent instruction (Au, 2013). Each of the terms focuses on the role of teachers and their classroom pedagogical practices. Jupp and Sleeter (2016) suggested that each term is aligned with common theoretical assumptions. This study used CRP as the primary term to emphasize teaching practices.

CRP incorporates cultural concerns, such as community and family issues, into the student learning experiences, textbooks, and curricula. This student-centered approach improves self-confidence and transfers information taught in the classroom to real-life situations (Au, 2013). Jupp and Sleeter (2016) described the pedagogy as a student-centered resource that allows students' cultural heritage to be embedded within the instruction. CRP allows teachers to value and understand the culture of their students and build on teachers' current cultural competencies. Banks (2015) suggested that empowering students from culturally diverse backgrounds requires examining school-level variables, including the school climate, grouping and labeling practices of teachers and school administration, and academic staff expectations for student achievement.

According to Jensen (2014), three criteria are integral in practicing CRP. The three criteria include: (a) teaching staff's understanding of the diverse cultures and backgrounds of students in the classroom, (b) integration of teaching materials into the curriculum that are associated with specific cultures and language relevant to the student population, and (c)

awareness of culturally-based learning styles and the development and use of teaching strategies appropriate for students from culturally diverse backgrounds that would help them improve their achievement.

Classroom teachers play an essential role in providing a learning experience that ensures academic success and cultural integrity. Public schools are in a critical position to create a learning environment that maintains cultural integrity for all students. Banks (2015) noted that the academic achievement of diverse students improves when teachers use cooperative rather than competitive teaching activities and strategies. Banks suggested that culturally relevant instruction requires teachers to modify their instruction to facilitate the academic achievement of diverse groups of students.

Theorists such as Vygotsky (1997) have embraced culturally relevant teaching and encouraged educators to use pedagogy to empower students (Au, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lee, 2015). Pedagogy is aligned with the interests and values of the dominant social class, even when educators are informed of the political nature of pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2014) described culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy that empowers students in various dimensions, such as intellectual, emotional, social, and political, by introducing references of a cultural nature to impart knowledge and bolster skills and attitudes toward learning. According to Ladson-Billings, it is possible to use students' culture as a tool that counters and surpasses the negative effects of the dominant culture. Instead of functioning as a tool to bridge or explain aspects of the dominant culture, cultural relevance should be included in the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence includes the awareness of both self-identity and cultural differences. One's perception of one's cultural identity greatly affects views of other cultural groups. A strong identification of one or more groups can decrease judgment of individuals who are different from one's own cultural identity. Kim and Pettit (2019) noted that group associations strengthen the cultural differences between the outsider and insider.

Teachers with cultural competence embrace inclusiveness, which facilitates intercultural engagement. Kim and Pettit (2019) stated that intercultural exchanges increase when individuals are secure with their own identity and accept the cultural differences of others instead of perceiving them as a threat. An individual with well-developed cultural competence is secure in his or her own identity.

To gain a deeper understanding of how to develop cultural competence, it is necessary to study other cultures, particularly intercultural communication (Deardorff, 2015). The increasing growth of international and culturally diverse student populations indicates that students and teachers are engaged in cross-cultural communication; therefore, educators need to be aware of cultural competence. Varied interpersonal interactions, including conflict resolution and collaborative problem-solving, characterize the day-to-day classroom. These common relational situations may invite actions or behaviors that could be misinterpreted due to different cultural understandings; thus, all educators need cultural competence skills in today's globally oriented workplace.

Fox et al. (2010) conducted a study that involved helping practicing teachers develop cultural competence. These authors discovered that many practicing teachers resist recognizing

culture and believe that assimilation helps students succeed in the classroom and society

(Gordon, 2016). Additionally, they reported that some of the teachers of diverse students

believed that racism was a non-issue. Fox et al. found that many teachers' knowledge and

awareness of instructional strategies and student learning in the classroom setting were enhanced

when teachers were provided with an opportunity to explore a broader perspective of culture and

then apply what they had learned to their professional contexts. Educators understand cultural

competence when they can apply their learning to their teaching domain.

Previous researchers have explored students' and faculty's perspectives of cultural

competence. Pickett (2013) performed a case study, identifying five themes that describe how

faculty develop cultural competence: (a) increasing the depth of experience, (b) creating dialog

and collaboration, (c) breaking down barriers, (d) cultivating a unique learning community, and

(e) having a global philosophy. Barriers that have been identified in previous research included

teachers teaching only for professional recognition as well as teachers' entrenched ways of

thinking about teaching and learning (Kober, 2015).

In another qualitative study, Helms (2003) identified four contributing characteristics to

cultural competency development: (a) preparation in graduate school, (b) ongoing professional

development, (c) participation in campus events, and (d) faculty mentoring. According to LeGros

and Faez (2012), professional development and formal training in cross-cultural instruction are

crucial, and ongoing efforts to expand cultural experiences play a major part in developing

cultural competence (Heely, 2005).

Focusing on cultural competence, Taylor (2008) explored factors that motivated Christian

postsecondary faculty members to adapt their teaching practices and behavior to become more

culturally competent. The study focused specifically on White faculty members' instruction to non-White students. The participants expressed that building relationships with diverse students was more impactful than changing their teaching practices (Brown, 2015). Taylor (2008) concluded that creating personalized development plans for each teacher that would encompass his/her reflection, reading, and relationship building could enhance cultural competence. Other studies have also confirmed that deep reflection contributes to developing cultural competence (Pesce, 2015). Previous researchers exploring college faculty cultural competence have commonly focused on teacher preparation, particularly in nursing and health-related fields.

Cultural Competence in Education

Research on cultural competence has inspired a movement to improve the academic development of minorities (Sanchez, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2013). According to Chu (2014), educators are becoming aware of linguistic and cultural barriers to teaching and learning. Practitioners have designed various programs focused on cultural sensitivity, multicultural education, transcultural relations, and cross-cultural relations (Chu, 2014). These efforts have addressed the primary focus of refugees or immigrants who lack sufficient knowledge of Western culture and English proficiency. These programs were introduced to expose students to different cultural contexts and perspectives (Chu, 2014). Such programs were created to promote learning of minorities' cultural norms and history to reduce conflict and foster a greater understanding between immigrant students and educators (Sanchez, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2013).

Advocates of cultural competence recognize that other factors are needed to address incorporated theories on cultural competence (Sanchez, 2014). Cultural competence was

developed to focus on topics of importance to racial and ethnic disparities in education.

Proponents of cultural competence have cited the need for cross-cultural education to address

educational disparities. Others have purported that cultural competence would allow for adequate

personal and institutional racism (García & Ramirez, 2015). Cultural competence offers a

framework for addressing racial disparities in education (García & Ramirez, 2015). The cultural

competency framework results in positive outcomes, such as increased civic engagement and

understanding, attitudes (Lott, 2013), self-confidence and persistence (Butler-Barnes et al., 2013;

Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014), academic engagement (Harris et al., 2014), corporate social

responsibility and job-functioning (González-Rodríguez, et al., 2013), motivation and learning

(Edwards, 2015), leadership skills (Lakshman, 2013), retention (Gwyer & Hack, 2014), and

satisfaction and college experience (Dunagan et al., 2014).

Cultural competence pioneers have broadened the issue of education to include any

learner outside or within the educational system (Dahlman, 2013). Culturally competent

education requires teachers to understand the effects of their cultural orientation on classroom

climate and educational functioning: appreciate students' cultural context, heritage, perspective;

and become aware of different cultural approaches to teaching and learning (Guo & Sun, 2013).

Behaviors, skills, and knowledge are the core of cultural competence in education. As a result,

cultural competence has equalized and rationalized the educational system to better serve the

needs of all individuals (Truong et al., 2014).

Cultural Competence and Teacher Efficacy

Cultural competence and teacher efficacy influence student educational outcomes (Jupp

& Sleeter, 2016). Teachers' training in cross-cultural relations, cultural sensitivity, multicultural

education, and transcultural relations enables them to expose their students to other cultural contexts and provide alternate perspectives on various cultures (Alim et al., 2020; Chu, 014). Brown et al. (2016) defined cultural competence as the ability to successfully teach students from cultures other than that of the teacher. Cultural competence involves developing personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivity, advancing personal understanding regarding cultural knowledge, and mastering skills that underpin effective cross-cultural and culturally responsive teaching (Brown et al., 2016; Garneau & Pepin, 2015). Cultural competence encompasses behaviors, attitudes, and values of individuals, organizations, groups, and nations (Cui, 2013). School leaders should consider teachers' attitudes and beliefs during the teacher hiring process to ensure that they can work in culturally diverse environments.

Dahlman (2013) noted that cultural competency is a process by which individuals, agencies, organizations, or systems integrate the knowledge of their own cultures and transform their awareness of assumptions, values, and biases of other cultures to respond respectfully and effectively across cultural boundaries. Research on cultural competence has tried to improve the academic development of minorities (Sanchez, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2013), and cultural competence became the framework to address racial disparities in education (García & Ramirez, 2015). This framework initially included topics that were relevant to racial inequality in education, such as student motivation and learning (Edwards, 2015), student-oriented academic engagement (Harris et al., 2014), intergroup self-confidence (Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014), leadership skills (Lakshman, 2013), student retention (Gwyer & Hack, 2014), attitudes, and understanding (Lott, 2013). The concept of cultural competence has broadened to include student interactions in the educational system (Dahlman, 2013; Matteliano & Stone, 2014). Currently,

the education system uses the framework to rationalize and balance all students' needs (Truong et al., 2014).

According to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008), educators become culturally competent when equipped with the knowledge and praxis (Villegas, 2018). Yang and Montgomery (2013) noted that in this context, knowledge describes an understanding of cultures, stereotypes, biases, and cultural differences, while praxis is the application of strategies, pedagogical practices, and skills that help teachers work with students from different backgrounds. Culturally competent teachers know how to integrate a student's culture into a lesson, reinforce a student's cultural identity, and respect a student's culture (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Nassar-McMillan (2014) stated that cultural competence requires that individuals work deliberately at being aware of various stereotypes and their cultural baggage before engaging with cultural differences. In light of cultural ideologies, cultural competence allows individuals to experience and explore transformation (Deprow, 2014), have an informed conversation when interacting with others, be open to divergent thoughts, and cultivate a critical mind (Deprow, 2014). Kickett et al. (2014) stated that the development of cultural competence is an ongoing, longitudinal process.

Growing Diversity in America

In the last 50 years, the United States has seen a significant increase in immigrants with diverse cultural practices and native languages other than English, including Latino, Hispanic, and Asian individuals. Today's educators teach a more culturally diverse student population than in previous years (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015). According to Robles-Goodwin (2018), the

number of ELL students in schools has grown at five times the total enrollment each year. Over the last several decades, schools have seen an increasing number of cultural identities and languages (Ryan, 2013). Researchers and policymakers must recognize that today's educational practices are distinct from those in America's past (Lee, 2015). Multiple researchers and theorists have contributed to the increased awareness of academic achievement gaps between minority or low-income groups compared to White students (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Researchers have shown ample evidence that public schools in America have created advantages for some cultural groups more than others (Giroux, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Several court cases throughout history were related to segregation, racism, and cultural diversity. One of the landmark cases was *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which resulted in the Supreme Court ruling that it was unlawful to have different educational facilities for Whites and Blacks. Cultural diversity court cases such as *Diana v. California Board of Education* (1970) and *Jose P. v. Ambach* (1979) determined that standardized testing for ELL students was biased because the testing was conducted in English.

As a result of the growing diversity in America's public schools over the last 50 years, further discussions on multiculturalism, inclusion, and diversity are needed. School systems have not adopted or established a unified vision of how to operate in a multicultural society (Banks, 2015; Giroux, 2018). Theorists who focused their research models on multicultural education showed that cultural diversity influences teaching and learning (Gay, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2014). The literature indicates that common areas of focus incorporated into the theories include beliefs that: (a) social injustices imposed upon cultural groups are not excluded in our public-school systems (Howard, 2019), (b) education is a critical component of democracy (Darling-

Hammond, 2016), and (c) schools are obligated to advance or ameliorate social injustices (English et al., 2016).

When a student is enrolled in the U.S. education system, his or her parents or legal guardians are required to fill out a questionnaire, referred to as a home language survey, to indicate the language most spoken at home (U.S. DOE, 2017). Students who speak a language other than English are screened to determine their English language proficiency level in writing, listening, speaking, and reading. Depending on the English proficiency level score, a student may qualify to receive English as a Second Language (ESL) services. ESL services are provided to increase English proficiency. U.S. DOE (2017) noted that after students have attended the U.S. school system for one year, they must take a state test, and any student receiving ESL services is subsequently identified as ELL.

Current Data Trends

The U.S. public school system is experiencing a significant shift in student demographics, including cultural, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics. During the 2017-2018 school year, the state of New York had 268,279 ELL students who attended public schools (U.S. DOE, 2018). From 2014 to 2023, the Department of Education has projected that the White student population enrolled in public schools will decrease from 25.3 million to 23.5 million, and Black students will fluctuate from 7.6 million to 7.8 million (U.S. DOE, 2018). While educators will see a decline in White students, the enrollment of Hispanics and Asians/Pacific Islanders will increase. By 2023, Hispanic students will represent 30% of the nation's student population, and Asians/Pacific Islanders will represent 5%. As the nation's

schools continue to shift, educators will see a growing diverse student population in their classrooms.

The multicultural and multiracial student population is not the only shift in our public education. Changes in family income and socioeconomic status have occurred in the past decade. In 2012, the poverty threshold for a family of four was $23,283. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), poverty is defined as a family's total income (which includes money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits, such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps) that is less than the family's threshold (based upon the size of the family and the ages of its members). From 2016 to 2017, the percentage of students living in poverty decreased from 18% to 17.5%. The poverty rates for Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students were higher than the national poverty rates. Researchers have shown that 39% of Black students, 34% of Hispanic students, 30% of Native Hawaiian-Pacific Islander students, and 36% of American Indian-Native American students lived in poverty (U.S. DOE, 2018). Meanwhile, poverty rates for White students (37%) and Asian students (33%) were lower than the national poverty rates.

Today's students are facing increased levels of homelessness and poverty. The National data records indicate that approximately 1.4 million students enrolled in public schools are considered homeless (County et al., 2018). The number of homeless students enrolled in America's public school system has doubled in the past 10 years. The U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) has estimated that nearly 180,000 people in families with children were experiencing homelessness in 2018 in the Point-in-Time count (U.S. HUD, 2018).

Schools must ensure that students who are classified as homeless perform and meet the same state standards as their housed peers (Lindsey et al., 2020).

As the demographics of public-school students change, the diversity of the teachers seems to remain the same. In 2015-2016, the composition of public-school teachers was 8% White, 7% Black, 9% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native and Pacific Islander (County et al., 2018). Data trends show that the number of White and Black public-school teachers has decreased from 1999 to 2000; however, the percentage of Hispanic public-school teachers in the 2015-2016 school year increased.

According to statistics from the U.S. DOE for the 2015-2016 school year, approximately 77% of the teachers in U.S. public schools were female, while 23% were male (U.S. DOE, 2018). Data indicate a growing gap between racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds between the teachers providing daily instruction to students in public schools and the students they teach. Biases or deficit thinking can affect a teachers' perception of students in their classroom. Llamas (2012) found that student demographics, especially the demographics that teachers respect, influence teachers' perceptions. The researchers also found that students might adopt anger as a defense mechanism against the racially or negative biased teacher perceptions. Previous findings have indicated that student misbehavior could result from negative teacher perceptions; however, that may not always be the case. Myers and Pianta (2008) found that student behavior directly reflected the teacher-student relationship (Hamari et al., 2016). Some teachers disagree, placing the accountability for students' success on students and their families (Woodward, 2018). A question of concern is whether students from diverse backgrounds receive equal and appropriate learning opportunities in public schools. Teachers' ability to distribute

academic opportunities equitably plays an important role in understanding the diverse student population and cultures in today's classroom.

Historical Context: Culturally Responsive Teaching

In recent decades, cultural competence research has fallen under the broader paradigm of multicultural education and has been largely centered on teacher education and K-12 classrooms. Research findings published in the 1990s and early 2000s have shown that students benefit from culturally responsive teaching practices (Bennett, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive teaching practices have resulted from increased accountability for student learning outcomes, focusing on racial subgroups' disparity. The majority of all U.S. educational governing organizations and accrediting educational settings have published standards that address diversity, and teachers are evaluated on their ability to meet these standards. However, due to the increased accountability for student learning, teachers' cross-cultural attitudes and skills have been questioned.

Current researchers interested in culturally responsive teaching have focused on the inability of teacher preparation programs to provide adequate preparation. Previous authors have evidenced that teacher preparation programs have not provided sufficient cultural competence instruction to the middle-class White students that teach and have inadequately prepared these students to meet the needs of the diverse students they will teach in their classroom (Gay, 2021; Hayes & Fasching-Varner, 2015). Some scholars have concluded that culturally responsive teaching, as a part of the multicultural education movement, has been hindered due to unclear directions and lack of a cohesive agenda, thus impeding the effects on student outcomes, teacher preparation, or true educational reform (Cushner, n.d.). Evidence suggests that the application

and development of cultural competence is a far more complex process than researchers have previously envisioned.

The proponents of culturally responsive teaching have expounded on the concept that culturally responsive teaching informs individual teaching practice and clears up the misconceptions that only a certain set of strategies is required to engage culturally different students. For example, Hammond (2014) described that cultural responsiveness in the classroom could enhance neural connections in students' brains by linking culturally responsive teaching to neuroscience. This author concluded that cultural responsiveness improves cognitive performance and increases academic confidence. Hammond also found that strong neural connections can prevent undesirable behaviors in students, such as shutting down and becoming disengaged in learning.

Culture Overview

The concept of culture is grounded in anthropology and sociology but is applied across many social science fields. Anthropology builds on the existing knowledge of humanities to fully understand the complex concepts surrounding human life. This section includes information on cultural awareness, cultural identity, cultural diversity, and tolerance for diversity.

According to the American Anthropological Association (2018), the field of anthropology encompasses the study of humans' past and present. Anthropologists have debated the meaning of the concept of culture since Edward B. Tylor first used it in 1871. The term culture is hard to define because it is a social phenomenon that must first be placed into context before it can be understood. In the beginning, Tylor defined culture as the capabilities (i.e., beliefs, customs, etc.) and habits that make a member of a particular society. Barrett (1984)

described culture as a combination of variables shared among individuals within a human society that included learned beliefs, practiced traditions, and behavioral guides. Culture is also defined as the normative or social glue that holds an organization together (Frick, 1991).

Anthropologists have different views of cultural and sociocultural anthropology. Cultural anthropologists view culture as an understanding of human actions surrounding the dimensions of customs, patterns, practices, and behaviors, including understanding human actions. Hence, cultural anthropology seeks to answer questions about humans and human action: (a) Why do humans behave the way they do? and (b) What makes some people different from others whose customs represent another view of the world? (Goodenough & Keesing, 1959). Sociocultural anthropologists examine the social patterns and practices across various cultures, emphasizing factors such as race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and class (American Anthropological Association, 2018).

Since the mid-20th century, theorists have worked to define culture. Kluckhohn (1939) and Parsons and Kroeber (1958) had a significant effect on the concept of culture. As a behavioral phenomenon, culture deals with the social behaviors of individuals who interact with each other (Bohannan, 1963). Culture is shared and learned by people who live within the same social environment (Mora, 2013). It is a dynamic process that implies the unwritten rules of a social environment over time (Zion & Kozleski, 2016). These unwritten rules include the behaviors and symbols that provide outsider clues about the beliefs, values, and attitudes (Geertz, 2022). Clues offer theorists a holistic reason for humans to exist and convey ideas and cultural images (Guggenheim, 1968). The core of culture is value, which is the fixed unconscious response to the unanswered question of why people do what they do (Schein, 2016). Cultural

values assist people in forming judgments about their own culture, other cultures, and themselves.

Cultural characteristics act as a cultural print for a community, and what is learned in one culture may not be acceptable in another (Kim, & Pettit, 2019). Culture, experiences, and genetics are major predispositions of behavior influenced by community, religion, language, and genetics (Baker, 2014). Culture is looked at as a societal system where individuals share beliefs, values, traditions, behaviors, and history and transmit them across generations through learning (Baker, 2014; Thomas et al., 2016). Deardorff (2015) framed culture into two visible factors of awareness, such as language, food, dress, and works of art, and invisible factors, which included conceptual areas within the subconscious, such as values and attitudes.

Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness implies a person's conscious effort to determine the effects of the individual. According to Rivera and Lee (2016), self-awareness serves the individual by providing a means to monitor and adjust behaviors, attitudes, assumptions, and ideas of prejudices and stereotypes when dealing with individuals and groups from differing cultural backgrounds. Cultural awareness involves an examination of cultural values and beliefs that mold a person's understanding of self, the world, and reality; it is the ability to also understand the beliefs, personal values, and perceptions of other people's cultures. A cultural awareness assessment identifies one's prejudices, attitudes, beliefs, biases, ethnocentricities, and convictions (Constantin et al., 2015).

A culture-aware individual can appreciate the differences and similarities of various cultures (Constantin et al., 2015), recognize a myriad of diverse perspectives, and understand

that values accepted and celebrated in a particular culture might not be accepted in another culture. Hence, cultural awareness is important in developing relationships and maintaining interactions with individuals from other cultures. The similarities that connect diverse groups increase cultural awareness (Welzer et al., 2017).

Cultural awareness has four levels. Welzer et al. (2017) described the parochial, ethnocentric, synergistic, and participatory levels. These researchers defined the parochial level as an awareness of only the cultural norms within a specific group or population. The ethnocentric level encompasses groups or populations' perceptions of their cultural norms without acknowledging the cultures of other diverse populations. Both synergistic and participatory levels recognize the significance of their own cultures while accepting the cultural aspects and norms of diverse populations and working with other cultures to resolve problems. Moreover, the participatory level involves a shared vision to address problems and conflicts between cultures. Being culturally aware includes understanding how people greet each other, how they express themselves, and what they talk about (Vogel, 2015).

Cultural Identity

Mora (2013) suggested that culture is learned from an individual's societal environment rather than based on innate characteristics. Individuals may be defined by their ethnic group, language, physical features, gender, or other features (Stets & Serpe, 2013). However, an individual is not born aware of a particular culture but is taught about the common beliefs and values within the cultural group. Cultural identity theory differs from the personal identity model, which connects the person to group identity or context (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Cultural identity refers to an individual's understanding of his or her belonging to a particular group or

culture. According to Gay (2021), cultural identity involves recognizing common factors or characteristics shared with another person, population, group, or ideal.

Cultural identity theory is generally applied in educational research (Banks, 2015). According to Mora (2013), the construct of cultural identity is rooted within an individual, yet it continually evolves due to the effects of interactions with other people and societies. Cultural identity reorganized the teaching and learning process to be more unified; thus, it is a critical factor in education (Fryberg et al., 2013). Gay (2021) noted that teachers must understand their own cultural identity and its ramifications on students in their classroom. Educators need to be willing to transform their perceptions of schooling to meet their students' diverse needs (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In addition, culture helps students develop a strong sense of self; therefore, it plays an important role in all education. The National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2016) noted that teachers who encouraged, recognized, and praised their students created a more effective and positive classroom environment and boosted students' self-confidence. Richards-Tutor et al. (2013) found that Spanish-speaking students responded positively when interacting with adults who considered their culture. Student-to-teacher interaction must promote a positive cultural environment; however, peer interaction is equally important.

Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity has several definitions, with some including religious, linguistic, or gender differences, and others referring to the cultural diversity that includes differences in beliefs or customs (Banks, 2015). To truly understand cultural diversity, one must understand the

meaning of culture and diversity individually. The word *cultural* has different connotations and meanings. The most complex definition of culture refers to distinct societal groups or populations (Cummins, 2017). Previous researchers have used the word culture to describe the language, non-verbal and verbal communication, belief and value system, race, gender, learning style, identification of one's own culture and ethnicity (Banks, 2015; Cummins, 2017). Similarly, Sevier et al. (2016) defined diversity as perceived or actual differences rooted in various human traits and characteristics among groups of human beings. Cultural diversity, therefore, refers to the differences between people in their specific ways of life.

Tolerance for Diversity

Tolerance refers to respect for diversity among people. Dawidziuk et al. (2012) observed that individuals with a high tolerance for ambiguity make decisions and handle challenging circumstances openly, avoiding the need for additional information. In contrast, individuals with a low tolerance for ambiguity rely on first impressions as a basis for judging other people or cultures. Individuals with a higher tolerance for ambiguity respond more comfortably to unfamiliar situations (Dawidziuk et al., 2012). Similarly, Potgieter et al. (2014) suggested that tolerance should be acknowledged as an individual act of interest that indicates concern for ideas, attitudes, opinions, and actions that might be unfamiliar or different from those of the individual. This implies that individuals are establishing a working knowledge of other cultures and that diverse groups of people are coexisting. In other words, individuals develop respect for cultural differences rather than ignoring, diminishing, or stereotyping cultural differences. Therefore, tolerance for diversity implies that individuals must be open to cultural differences and accept various perspectives and worldviews (Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015).

Modern society continues to battle with issues associated with colonial heritage, race, and sensitivity to different cultures outside of its own (Wilson, 2014). The pluralistic and multicultural modern world has emphasized the importance of tolerance to help remove oppression, discrimination, and indignities. Tolerance is essential in the promotion and development of civil and democratic society, whereas the absence of tolerance produces actions that manifest in religious or political persecution, crimes of hate, and terrorist activities (Potgieter et al., 2014). A demonstration of tolerance addresses the issues of inequality, injustice, unfairness, bigotry, and prejudice (Mujtaba, 2013).

The authors of many critical evaluations are against the concept of tolerance and lessening the reliance on tolerance as a remedy to confront human problems (Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015). Alexander (2013) and Neal and Neal (2014) argued that tolerance hinders social change and a sense of community by denying and undermining the reality of structured and social factors. Tate (2014) contended that contemporary problems have less to do with intolerance but are more related to the issues of inequality, exploitation, and injustice. Phillips (2016) implied that consideration should be given to the political struggle and emancipation. In distinguishing the terms of negative tolerance and positive tolerance, Aigner (2014) argued that negative tolerance connotes the notion of begrudging traditions or unnecessary, unacceptable, and insufficient opinions.

Classical and Neoclassical Tolerance

Levina et al. (2016) distinguished *classical* and *neoclassical* tolerance. Neoclassical tolerance demands an acceptance of differences, whereas classical tolerance signifies an appreciation of differences (Meskell, 2013). Classical tolerance has an underlying assumption

that each perspective must be respected but not necessarily agreed upon, sympathized with, or shared (Levina et al., 2016). According to Levina et al. classic tolerance is understood as putting up with an individual you may find incompatible or disagreeable. Moreover, classical tolerance implies an individual's coexistence with other individuals whose opinions and culture are different from one's own. All individuals are entitled to their own opinion, and classical tolerance allows others to hold on to their beliefs without expecting others to accept their views.

Through neoclassicism, Levina et al. (2016) broadened the meaning of tolerance to include embracing the differences of others without personally living or accepting those differences. Some critics have recommended shifting from the classical approach to fully accepting those with different opinions and practices (Killion, 2013). Through neoclassicism, tolerance calls for individuals to have an open mind to others who are different while uniting around common issues (Levina et al., 2016). A neoclassical aspect of tolerance celebrates and honors differences (Meskell, 2013). A neoclassical view of tolerance notes that differences are accorded the same respect and grace and that no ideas should be deemed objectionable (Levina et al., 2016). When tolerance is viewed through a neoclassical lens, every perspective is valued. All individuals are entitled to their values, lifestyles, and beliefs (Levina et al., 2016). A neoclassical tolerance implies the ability to be sensitive to different opinions and practices.

The United Nations indicated that tolerance requires accepting, appreciating and respecting a diverse world while avoiding dogmas (Meskell, 2013). Tolerance goes beyond accepting and appreciating differences and requires treating people with respect, dignity, and civility (Levina et al., 2016). Classical tolerance conveys forbearing the differences of others, whereas neoclassical tolerance points to accepting differences. All people have a moral

obligation to show a healthy respect for others, even in the middle of a disagreement (Levina et al., 2016). Tolerance for diversity challenges individuals to learn from and listen to others even if they disagree with them (Aigner, 2014). Tolerance for diversity does not require a person to endorse another person's perspective but to respect his or her perspective (das Neves & Melé, 2013). Thus, tolerance for diversity is about embracing people and not necessarily assimilating their beliefs or practices (Lauring & Klitmøller, 2017). All persons must have the right to express their opinions despite differences (Levina et al., 2016).

Authentic Tolerance

On the contrary, authentic tolerance sheds a different light on diversity in education. Authentic tolerance is the practice of dignity and respect for differences and implies that no belief or practice should be deemed offensive. Educational programs designed to eliminate and confront discrimination, prejudice, and injustice should move away from promoting appreciation, acceptance, and understanding of differences to indorsing authentic tolerance (Neal & Neal, 2014; Weissenstein et al., 2014). Authentic tolerance teaches respect for all persons, which is different from classical and neoclassical tolerance views. Levina et al. (2016) noted that authentic tolerance encourages listening to individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds. However, some individuals are unwilling to practice authentic tolerance due to their strong objections and beliefs. Authentic tolerance makes it possible for an individual to have an open exchange, which provides an opportunity for all persons to articulate their convictions and also learn about their differences. Weissenstein et al. (2014) suggested that authentic tolerance forces the individuals being questioned to examine their views and explore new insight. Authentic tolerance makes it possible for individuals to be open and have their opinions compared and

questioned (Weissenstein et al., 2014). The openness or dialogue in authentic tolerance can be an encouraging, enriching, and challenging experience that results in helping an individual better understand and question his or her perspective (Levina et al., 2016).

Authentic tolerance allows for authentic reflection, which helps individuals examine the aspects of their beliefs that may need amending (Levina et al. et al., 2016). An individual can become aware of certain new aspects of his or her cultural perspective (Bangwayo-Skeete, & Zikhali, 2013). das Neves and Melé (2013) noted that being authentically tolerant does not mean that one has to accept the beliefs of a person but respect individual differences. The coexistence of different perspectives characterizes authentic tolerance (Levina et al., 2016). Authentic tolerance involves treating different individuals with courtesy and allowing others who are different to freely hold their beliefs (das Neves & Melé, 2013). In modern society, authentic tolerance is becoming a necessary human quality (Lauring & Klitmøller, 2017).

When properly understood, tolerance is the treatment and respect given to others without dishonoring one's convictions and beliefs (Taylor, 2014). However, tolerance for diversity does not mean that a person should ignore or deny another person's differences. Tolerance for diversity is authentic and celebrates individuals' worth and dignity by respecting their beliefs. It is a critical and necessary factor for developing an individual's cultural competency (Taylor, 2014). Respect is foundational to having a productive relationship with others who are different, especially those who share practices and beliefs different from our own. Taylor (2014) noted that co-existence and tolerance of cultures might exist in international schools, the potential for cultural exchange and understanding is not fully developed. In sum, tolerance for authentic diversity can be valuable in enhancing culturally diverse educational programs.

Multiculturalism

It is important to examine the historical origins and conceptual perspectives of

multiculturalism to better understand multicultural education. Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) stated

that multiculturalism developed in the 1970s from exposure to and acceptance of ethnic and

racially cultural diversities experienced through the sharing of cultural traditions, languages,

attitudes, and activities, contributing to the acceptance of phrases and slogans that led to the use

of the term multiculturalism. Similarly, Banks (2015) observed that multiculturalism is rooted in

broader societal concepts, such as human equality, human rights, social justice, and the

democratic process. Banks cited that the term *race* has been replaced with the concepts of culture

and multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism can be divided into three eras of the Civil Rights movement: (a) before

the 1950s Civil Rights movement, (b) the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and (c)

Post Civil Rights (Kim, 2016). The Civil Rights movement was an organized effort by African

Americans to end racial discrimination and gain equal rights, but emerging issues extended the

focus to multicultural issues. The Civil Rights Act affected ethnic issues and immigration.

Before the Civil Rights movement, ethnically and racially diverse populations coexisted under

racially discriminatory policies. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case served as legal protection

for treating ethnicities and races differently without violating liberal democratic values (Kim,

2016). *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) established the concept of "separate but equal" treatment.

The Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s approached the restoration of

equality among minorities (Kim, 2016). During this time, Dr. Martin Luther King began

breaking down racial barriers to legally create policies, equality, and programs that would

expand opportunities for minorities. The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case initiated the end of legal racial segregation in public school accommodations (Kim, 2016). As a result of *Brown v. Board of Education*, African American students obtained admission to private and public schools (Banks, 2015). This was a legal victory for African Americans; however, it would take decades for the law to become a reality.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a major success for the Civil Right movement. Kim (2016) explained that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided several provisions that institutionalized the comprehensive antidiscrimination principle, including the prohibition of discrimination in public facilities, schools, government agencies, voting procedures, and requirements. This Act also contributed to the growth of multiculturalism in the U.S. by affecting citizenship and immigration. During the mid-1960s, immigration reform occurred due to the increasing numbers of non-Europeans, including immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

The early 1960s also brought new terms, such as ethnic studies, multiethnic, multicultural education, and multiculturalism. The term *ethnic studies* was introduced to enhance the self-esteem of selected minority groups. In the late 1960s, researchers proposed that all students, not just a selected minority group, learn about diverse cultures, introducing the term multiethnic to reflect the new perspective (Dura & Volk, 2006). The late 1970s marked the first appearance of the term multicultural education, and by the 1980s, the term referred to differences in age, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and exceptionality. Today, the term multiethnic is used when speaking specifically of multiple ethnic backgrounds.

Multiculturalism emerged as a melting pot term that included different people based on their culture, ethnicity, and race. Despite the changes in American society, debate on the merits and definition of multiculturalism continues. Multiculturalists and scholars have questioned the concept of a melting pot, which they believe forces diverse people to assimilate to the dominant or hegemonic White culture (Banks, 2015). The melting pot concept encouraged values such as acculturation and assimilation but was later rejected by multiculturalists who disputed the concept derived from a misunderstanding of history.

In response to the melting pot concept, the late 1990s introduced other terms, such as cultural pluralism (Bruckner, n.d.) and critical multiculturalism (Banks, 2015). Huber-Warring and Warring (2008) suggested that the term multiculturalism implied the existence of different populations or groups within a community. The author further indicated that the term *pluriculturalism* referred to an individual's integration or acceptance of aspects put forth by other cultures. Cultural pluralism means diverse cultures living side-by-side on equal terms (Bruckner, n.d.). Banks (2015) noted that critical multiculturalism as a movement asserts that America is multiracial and has never been only White. Critical multiculturalism emphasizes the different cultural groups that settled, arrived, became citizens, or migrated in the United States, such as Native Americans, Spanish, Africans, Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese. Banks explained that critical multiculturalism represents an effort to preserve aspects specific to different ethnic populations, racial groups, or cultural communities without melting them together to form a combined culture.

Although cultural pluralism and diversity have become commonly used terms in American society, multiculturalism's attention to differences might best be associated with the

recognition of the need to move structural problems, such as acts of discrimination and socio-economic inequalities, to the foreground to either reduce or resolve issues (Banks, 2015). Multiculturalism should go beyond superficiality. Multiculturalism celebrates the diversity of cultural groups. Some have argued that multiculturalism has negative effects, such as unequal distribution of power in society (Banks, 2015). Ideological debates on whether multiculturalism is a product of the state-sponsored policy or whether it reduces immigrants to essentially different ethnic groups fostering cultural separatism continue (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). Casebeer (2016) explained that multiculturalism generally refers to the diverse state of society that can be described as comparative and coexisting dimensions of multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multireligious factors. The term multiculturalism should focus on political, societal, structural inequalities, and economic circumstances faced by minority groups and immigrants (Banks, 2015).

Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) observed that the focus placed on multiculturalism had lacked the critical inclusion of aspects regarding hegemony, social class barriers, racial instabilities in societies, and the exploitation of immigrants as a source of cheap labor. Therefore, instruction on multiculturalism needs to target the inclusion of relationships between dominant and subordinate groups at local, national, and global levels (Banks, 2015). Banks (2015) explained that this type of multiculturalism asserts that cultural diversity should be taught by investigating the constructs related to social inequalities outside the education arena. According to Casebeer (2016), multicultural teaching strategies advance students' knowledge of other cultures to enhance tolerance and potentially acceptance of the other cultures.

Multicultural Education

Multicultural education practices encourage teachers to value and learn from their students' diverse cultural heritage. According to Zepeda (2016), multicultural teaching can be a progressive approach to transforming educational strategies. Models of multicultural education guide teachers to create a collaborative learning environment by bringing their own biases and assumptions to the learning environment. Gay (2021) described multicultural education as a human relations approach. Banks (2015), Gay (2021), and Nieto (2015) contributed to multicultural education research and documented highly effective teaching methods for minority students. Since 1970 (Banks, 2015; Jupp & Sleeter, 2016), various models of multicultural education have increasingly been accepted in American public schools.

Although public schools have adopted various models of multicultural education, no single universal model was accepted by the 1990s (Zepeda, 2016). Theorists have classified four multicultural education approaches: (a) the reconstructionist approach, (b) the contributions approach, (c) the additive approach, and (d) the transformation approach. The reconstructionist approach suggests a larger social system affects how teachers prepare students to bring change through social justice (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). This approach is used in a classroom setting to respond to inequality and develop a complicated role for the teacher. Students engaged in this model understand and question social issues and find ways to do something about them (i.e., write letters, participate in social change, etc.)

The contributions approach engages students in concepts of multiculturalism through activities and books that celebrate holidays and special events from various cultures. These activities are typically not a part of the curriculum (Banks & McGee Banks, 2019). Alenuma-

Nimoh (2016) referred to this model as Eating the Other Multiculturalism (ETOM). ETOM

introduces the lifestyles of various cultures and engages students in simple concepts of

multicultural education, such as eating, cultural songs, and dances. The ETOM approach is not

supported in research since it infers that cultural awareness and respect for a specific culture are

gained only when an individual is interested in the culture (Alenuma-Nimoh, 2016; Nieto, 2015).

In the additive approach model, classroom teachers incorporate themes and concepts

from diverse cultures into the curriculum without changing the structure of the curriculum. This

approach does not transform thinking but merely exposes students to other perspectives and

concepts (Banks & McGee Banks, 2019). However, the transformation approach changes the

curriculum structure and encourages students to view concepts, themes, issues, and problems

from various ethnic perspectives. In this model, classroom instruction involves critical thinking

and consideration of diversity (Banks & McGee Banks, 2019). Both models increase a positive

relationship, respect, and appreciation. Implementing multicultural education in the classroom

decreases prejudice and stereotyping and broadens the worldview. Before learning about

students' cultures, teachers must confront their own biases and racism to be effective

multicultural educators (Banks, 2015).

Criticism of Multicultural Education

While some educators support multicultural education and aspire to incorporate

multicultural content into the curriculum, a few misconceptions exist about what multicultural

education is and how it should be implemented (Crookes, 2013). Ford (2014) cited four

multicultural misconceptions about education, including: (a) multicultural education lacks

rigorous instruction, (b) multicultural education needs to be taught as an isolated subject, (c)

instruction that is taught about one cultural group is pertinent to another cultural group, and (d) literature and books about other cultural groups are generally authentic.

Teachers must overcome generalizing minority groups to fully implement multicultural education (Gay, 2021; Ladegaard, 2015). Jupp and Sleeter (2016) cited that although culturally responsive pedagogy's resources are readily available, they are not being implemented in the classrooms. Some teachers struggle to implement multicultural education in conjunction with state standards (Howard, 2019). Additional researchers (Howard, 2019; Jupp & Sleeter, 2016) referred to the shift of the American education system towards state and national standards, explaining that this has made it difficult for teachers to adapt their culturally responsive pedagogy to acknowledge the cultural identity of their students. Multicultural education is less likely to be adopted in classrooms until the field of education can effectively assist teachers in practicing culturally responsive teaching pedagogy aligned to standards (Howard, 2019).

Summary

The findings in the existing body of literature have illustrated a rapid growth in the diverse student population. This chapter provided insight into theories, focusing on culture, multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching pedagogy, CRP, and culture competence, and considered their effects on the diverse student population in today's schools. These topics provided a framework for analyzing data that the researcher collected from this interpretative analysis study.

Today's teachers face the challenge of implementing CRP because of the pressures to teach mandated standards and assessments. The current study aimed to address the gap in the literature on the general education middle school teachers' perceptions of ELL students and

culturally relevant instruction. The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on CRP by highlighting general education middle school teachers' perceptions and experiences in diverse classrooms. The findings may also assist teachers, school personnel, administrators, and preservice training developers improve their multicultural educational practice. Chapter 3 discusses the study methodology and design based on the study problem, purpose, and aims identified in Chapter 1 and supported by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. Chapter 3 reviews the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, methodology, study participants, study procedures, and issues of trustworthiness. The section on study participants describes the parameters of the target population and sample and the sample selection process. Study procedures provide a detailed description of the methods used to conduct the research. The chapter concludes with a summary and a transition to Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

The primary research question that guided the study was:

RQ1: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address perceived cultural diversity of ELL students and influence the students' academic success?

Two sub-questions that guided the interview protocol and helped answer the primary RQ included:

1. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the cultural diversity of ELL students?

2. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?

A qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. While previous scholars have explored the student experience in school, community engagement, and the sociocultural experiences of individuals within schools (Farah, 2015; Walick & Sullivan, 2015), studies on general education teachers' perspectives are limited. Previous researchers have not examined teachers' perceptions, particularly when a cultural variance exists between teachers and students.

The current study of the perceptions of middle school general education teachers teaching ELL students side-by-side with native English-speaking peers is an essential addition to the existing research on cross-cultural teaching. ELL students require effective teaching methods and teachers who care about and are sensitive to their cultural differences and needs (Villegas, 2018). Phenomenology is a philosophical movement founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). This type of research describes and interprets the phenomenon of a lived experience through an in-depth, first-person point of view (van Manen, 2016). The objective of phenomenology research is to uncover, pre-reflectively describe, understand, and reflectively interpret the meanings behind the lived experience (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016). The goal is to provide information on culturally relevant pedagogy through the lens of teacher perceptions. The findings can assist administrators, school personnel, and teachers in making changes to meet all students' needs. Using the findings, the administrators and teachers at the selected school can begin or continue the conservation of culture and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in ELL students' classrooms.

The phenomenological perspective is frequently used in education, psychology, health sciences, and sociology (Creswell, 2015). To answer the research question proposed in this study, the researcher determined that the qualitative phenomenological approach was the best method because phenomenology is less interested in facts and more interested in the essence of the lived moment (Patocka, 2018). According to Smith et al. (n.d.), phenomenological research is essential in education due to its emphasis on the human experience and perspective.

Through phenomenology, researchers describe lived experiences through the lens of those living them. Smith et al. (n.d.) stated that an underlying phenomenological principle is that individuals should consciously examine their experiences to know more about them. The meaning is formed by interrelated or overlapping connections to a particular experience. To understand an individual point of view, it is important to understand how a person derives meaning behind the manifestation of his or her experiences (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016). In phenomenology, life is seen as happening first, and theory is derived from the result of reflective interpretation of the lived experience. The pre-reflective description of natural experiences enhances perceptiveness and provides various understanding (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenology research does not view theory as something that comes before practice (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Another key component of IPA is hermeneutics, which involves the reflective interpretation of one's lived experience.

Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation used in explaining literary, biblical, and historical texts (Smith et al., n.d.). Interpretation describes the context of the experience and the individual involved. Smith et al. (n.d.) explained that the interpretative process focuses on the person's language rather than the meaning. The *hermeneutic cycle* involves a circulative

movement of part-to-whole or whole-to-part through a dialogue about the lived experience rather than a description of the essence of the experience (Vagle, 2018). IPA research, therefore, involves a back-and-forth movement of interpretative analysis throughout the hermeneutic cycle, as perception and subjectivity are derived at various levels of the experience (Smith et al., n.d.). As a result, interpretative phenomenological analysis is designed to explore lived experiences through reflective interpretations and pre-reflective descriptions.

Other qualitative traditional methods considered include a case study design. A case study analyzes one or more cases and provides a detailed account of a phenomenon within a real-world context (Creswell, 2015); however, it does not investigate or interpret participants' experiences. The case study design has a place and time restrictions and, as such, is not well-suited for the parameters of the current study. An in-depth analysis of a single or group case could not assist the researcher in developing an understanding of the phenomenon.

For this qualitative study, it was not necessary to investigate or completely immerse in the lives of teachers over some time; therefore, the ethnography research was not selected. Ethnographic researchers describe or interpret a social group or culture by completely immersing themselves in the day-to-day lives of the group under study (Creswell, 2015). Creswell explained that ethnography involves observing a cultural group in their natural setting for a prolonged period. The current study focused on teachers' reflections of their experiences and culturally relevant pedagogy; therefore, it was unnecessary to observe the participants for a prolonged period.

A phenomenological approach is the best method to capture the essence of an experience through the lens of those living it. Reflective interpretations and pre-reflective descriptions of

lived experiences summarize the influential factors of culture, self, and society to better understand how and why people do what they do (Smith et al., n.d.). In this study, phenomenology enabled an in-depth discovery of general education middle school teachers' perceptions of ELL students and culturally relevant pedagogy beyond single observation. The researcher explored the central phenomenon within multiple, varied, or partial contexts through the hermeneutic cycle (Vagle, 2018). The researcher gathered data using semi-structured interviews, which the researcher audio-recorded and transcribed. The researcher analyzed these transcripts to gain insight and understanding into the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms.

Through in-depth interviews, the researcher investigated the teachers' predispositions toward ELL students and their historical background. Phenomenology allowed the primary investigator to discover lived experience through empirical prereflective description and reflective interpretation and answer the research questions. Although it overlaps with other quantitative traditions, interpretative phenomenological analysis is the only research method that provides an in-depth analysis to understand any differences and similarities of a shared phenomenon. In this study, the researcher explored the attitudes of general education middle school teachers of ELL students to discover the essential meanings of their shared experiences and expressions. The interpretative phenomenological analysis allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and the practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is to remain attentive and natural during interactions with study participants designed to collect the data. The researcher must remain in an ethical frame of mind throughout all stages of the research process (Creswell, 2015). The researcher must also respect participants as human beings who have consented to share their knowledge and experiences. The current researcher's role as a novice phenomenological researcher was to evaluate the lived experiences and their credibility, with less concern on the accuracy of participant information shared (van Manen, 2016). The researcher ensured confidentiality via verbal and written consent to develop security and trust. After the interviews were completed and the data were transcribed, the participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and plausibility (Vagle, 2018).

Methodology

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) explored the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. Since the study intended to explore the lived experiences of teachers of ELL students, a small number of participants was needed to find shared themes among the teachers' experiences. In IPA research, the aim is to gather data from a small number of participants "to whom the research will be meaningful" (Smith et al., n.d.).

Study Participants

The study's target population includes general education middle school teachers of ELL students in one public charter school in New York State. The researcher selected a public charter school employing an adequate number of teachers of ELL students to support the study. The

researcher selected study participants using a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to recruit individuals suited for the study who are knowledgeable, available, and willing to participate in the research (Etikan, 2016). Purposive sampling provides strength to the data collected since the participants share the characteristics or group of characteristics that support the phenomenon of interest and the aims and purpose of the study (Etikan, 2016). A delimiting factor is that participants in this study had to be middle school general education teachers with at least three years of experience teaching ELL students.

Participants were selected based on responses to a 10-item screening and demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). The questionnaire collected general demographic and screening information about the participants and asked the participants to report the number of years of teaching experience, whether they were certified middle-grade educators, number of years teaching ELL students, and whether they would participate in a research study on lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and the teacher's practices of culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers that met the study's criteria included certified teachers with three or more years of teaching experience, current and previous experience teaching ELL students, and a desire to participate. If all general education middle school teachers met the criteria, the researcher selected participants based on the advanced degrees earned and the number of years of experience.

The target number of participants for the study was 10 to12 teachers who meet the criteria for inclusion. To conduct the IPA, a minimum of 10 participants was needed (Smith et al., n.d.). The researcher planned to recruit 15 to 20 participants to account for participant attrition. Patton (2015) noted that there "are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry"

(p.245). In IPA research, the aim is to gather data from a small number of participants "to whom the research will be meaningful" (Smith et al., n.d.). The researcher expected that 10 to 12 participants were adequate to represent and reflect a reasonable sample of general education middle school teachers' perceptions of ELL students and the teachers' practices of culturally relevant pedagogy. While no guidelines have been established regarding the number of participants for a phenomenological study (Käufer & Chemero, 2021), Vasileiou et al. (2018) and Guetterman (2015) suggested 10 participants as sufficient for reaching data saturation when using an IPA approach.

Participant Selection Procedures

The first step in the participant selection procedure was to gain approval for the study from Walden University Institutional Review Board #03-26-21-0384772. Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher contacted the superintendent of the public charter school selected for this study. The researcher gave the school superintendent the letter of the proposal that described the study and requested permission to contact teachers employed by the school (Appendix A), a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix B), a copy of the participant recruitment email letter to be sent to employed teachers of the selected school (Appendix C), a copy of the 10-item teacher screening and demographic questionnaire (Appendix D), and the researcher's contact information.

Upon written approval by the school superintendent to conduct the study, the researcher distributed the participant recruitment email (Appendix C) and the 10-item screening and demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) to the teachers. The researcher considered all general education middle school teachers as potential study participants; therefore, the researcher sent

the email to all general education middle school teachers employed by the school. The teachers

were instructed to return the questionnaire to the researcher by email. The researcher waited ten

days from the initial contact email and then sent a reminder email to teachers reminding them to

complete the questionnaire. There was a 10-day deadline for completing and submitting the

questionnaire following the email reminder.

The researcher reviewed the returned questionnaires and selected participants based on

their responses to the 10-item screening and demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) and their

willingness to participate in the study. The questionnaire asked the respondents to provide their

email addresses and telephone numbers. The researcher constructed a sampling frame, and each

teacher was assigned a unique number. The researcher contacted the selected teachers via email

or telephone. Selected participants were sent an email that officially accepted their participation

in the study and included the study's informed consent document (Appendix B). The informed

consent document (Appendix B) indicated that participants could withdraw from the study at any

time.

Instrumentation

Data collection instruments included researcher-developed instruments. Semi-structured

in-depth face-to-face interviews with the researcher were planned and were guided by a

researcher-developed interview protocol. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by

the researcher. Additional instruments for data collection included a personal notes journal, the

audio recorder, and member-checking of transcriptions to aid in credibility and accuracy. The

quality standards consisted of member checks, researcher reflective journal, triangulation,

detailed description, and epoche/bracketing.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Validation of Instrument

The researcher conducted a phenomenological validation of instrument test to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms environments. Such a test is done before the actual data collection procedures to confirm the appropriateness of proposed data collection procedures and instruments. The focus of the validation of the instrument is to determine whether the data collection procedures would sufficiently address the study's research questions.

Additionally, the researcher modified the original interview questions after serval bilingual educators reviewed them. After asking the interview questions and listening to the responses given by the expert reviewers, the researcher identified a need to revise several of the questions. Some of the original questions provided opportunities for open-ended discussion and discovery of teacher attitudes but did not provide an opportunity for the teachers to discuss their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy. The researcher noticed that additional interview protocol questions were needed to better understand their experiences. The validation of the instrument indicated that the interview questions were appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms environments. Modifications were needed to demonstrate that the research design and data collection methods would address the research questions sufficiently.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered from 10 to 12 participants using audiotaping that included epoche/bracketing and in-depth semi-structured interviews, researcher's reflective journal, participant member checks, follow-up interview summary, and summary reviews. The semi-structured interviews aim to gain insight into the lived experience through a reflective interpretation and meaningful conversation (Vagle, 2018). The semi-structured and open-ended interview questions (Appendix E) were guided by existential phenomenology procedures (Vagle, 2018). Depending on the participants' responses, the semi-structured interview questions allowed the researcher to probe and ask clarifying questions (Creswell, 2015; Smith et al., n.d.). Interviews are essential for IPA because it allows the researcher to begin an iterative hermeneutic analysis. The IPA examines how participants make sense of their experiences.

At the time of the interview, the researcher re-introduced the study's purpose and reviewed the consent form with each participant (Appendix B). Participants were advised to answer the questions truthfully and without reservations. Every attempt was made to ensure participants were comfortable before and during the interview process. The researcher used a digital recorder and notes to gain first-person accounts of the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The researcher's goal was to listen for the unfolding of the essence of the lived moment as described by each participant. To capture the essence of the lived experience, participants had the time and freedom to voice their individual stories (Smith et al., n.d.).

After each interview, the researcher uploaded the digital recordings to a password-protected computer and a password-protected USB flash drive. The USB flash drive and audiotapes were stored in a lock box at the researcher's home. All audio recordings were shared with a professional transcriptionist who has experience working with confidential data. In addition, the transcriptionist signed a confidentiality agreement form found in Appendix H. After all interviews were transcribed, a copy of the interview was electronically sent to each participant to member check to ensure validity and plausibility. Creswell (2015) noted that member checking is a process that requires the researcher to ask one or more of the participants to check for data accuracy or plausibility. Although most qualitative interviews use language such as member checking, it does not validate the phenomenological study (van Manen, 2016).

Qualitative data must be validated and verified based on analytic and detailed accounts of the participants' lived experiences free from the researcher's emotions, reactions, preconceptions, and predispositions. To ensure the study's reliability, all participants interviewed were provided a copy of their interview transcript asking them to member-check their responses, make necessary corrections, and add any clarifying information. If the participant made corrections or additions to their interview, the information was coded and easily attached to the original transcript interview. To further enhance data credibility and reliability, the researcher used thick descriptions of the data. Epoche/bracketing notes helped the researcher separate her impressions and descriptions from those of the participant.

The researcher triangulated the collected data through various methods to address validity issues. Triangulation is important because it challenges discrepant data and facilitates the examination of explanations (Creswell, 2015). The researcher employed triangulation through

semi-structured interviews, audiotaping, reflective journaling, and an enlisted colleague for peer

debriefing. The first data source came from the semi-structured interviews with teachers who met

all aspects of the qualifying criteria. The second data source was the audiotaped and transcribed

notes, which provided information regarding the researcher's impressions and incidental

observations. The researcher utilized a reflective journal to record her notes regarding the

research procedures, experiences, personal reflections, and biases as the third data source.

Additionally, the researcher enlisted a colleague to review the interview transcripts and develop

themes to further validate the research data. The researcher compared the themes identified by

herself and the enlisted colleague.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Plan

To gain insights into the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of

ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms, the

researcher analyzed multiple sources of data to aid in the interpretation of the participants'

experiences. The data collected for this doctoral study were recorded, organized, transcribed,

analyzed, and coded for themes. Some data were analyzed concurrently with data collection.

Lotto et al. (1986) stated that the initial data analysis is not problematic when data collection is

still in process. The researcher selected in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews to

explore the primary research question:

RQ1: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally

relevant pedagogy to address perceived cultural diversity of ELL students and influence

the students' academic success?

To capture the essence of the lived experience, the researcher also developed two sub-questions:

1. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the cultural diversity of ELL students?

2. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?

The interview protocol questions reflected the research purpose, exploring the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. Appendix F illustrates the interview protocol addressing the sub-questions.

The researcher transcribed the recordings within one week after the initial interview. The researcher read and listened to transcripts and audio recordings to understand the participants' lived experiences. Smith et al. (n.d.) noted an important element in IPA is the hermeneutic (interpretative) cycle representing the movement between part and whole. The interview transcription was shared with each participant to member-check for accuracy. The participants' transcriptions guided the data analysis and served as a data source during the coding process.

Phenomenological research requires a systematic method to analyze and manage large amounts of data. The researcher identified common phrases, excerpts, and terms in the first coding round. The researcher highlighted terms and ideas to connect them. After initial coding, the researcher conducted a second round of coding to develop categories and subcategories. In the deductive phase, the researcher compared the categories and identified major themes and subthemes.

Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method was used for phenomenological data analysis to analyze and interpret the interview data. The modification of

the van Kaam method for phenomenological data analysis required data clustering, thematizing, data reduction, individual and composite development, and synthesis and structural meanings of the lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). According to Smith et al. (n.d.), thematizing or coding involves reducing data into themes to make sense of the text.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Four aspects of trustworthiness in a qualitative study include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Anney, 2014). Credibility refers to the accuracy and truthfulness of the study findings. The researcher used triangulation, member checks, thick description, a reflective journal, and epoche/bracketing to ensure adherence to quality standards. Credibility, as discussed by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), must be safeguarded by ensuring that the study accurately applies research methods of: (a) member checking, (b) triangulation, (c) identification of bias, (d) thick descriptions, (e) documentation of discrepancies, and (f) prolonged time in the field. Transferability encompasses the applicability of the study findings to other contexts (Anney, 2014). Details and thick descriptions of the study procedures aid other researchers interested in applying the study to other contexts. The study's dependability is enhanced through the verification procedures and member checking (Anney, 2014). Confirmability can be enhanced with a clear description of study procedures and steps taken to minimize biases that could potentially affect the study findings (Anney, 2014). All of these steps are necessary throughout the process to eliminate potential methodological errors. Verification procedures, data analysis procedures, and procedures adopted to increase the quality of the study helped ensure that the study findings were accurate, credible, dependable, reliable, confirmable,

and transferable (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher understands the importance of involving all participants for validation and verification purposes.

Thanh and Thanh (2015) noted that credibility depends on accurately representing participants' thoughts, feelings, and actions during data collection. A research study is only valid when the data accurately reflect and represent participants (Yin, 2018, p. 78). To establish credibility, the researcher analyzed all data collected as accurately as possible to capture all participants' thoughts, ideas, and feelings. To obtain accurate and credible data, the researcher collected data using multiple methods, such as in-depth semi-structured interviews and epoche/bracketing. In this doctoral study, the researcher triangulated the collected data to ensure that data findings represent participants' thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Triangulation was applied because multiple sources of evidence are essential in providing multiple measures of the same phenomenon (Yin, 2018, p. 92).

To avoid biases, the researcher utilized protocols in Appendices F & H to minimize the possibility of bias.

Ethical Considerations

Once the Institutional Review Board at Walden University granted permission, the researcher recruited participants through email (see Appendices C & D). The researcher designed the study to minimize any risk to the participants. All participants' personal information remained confidential. Researchers ensured participants' identities, including participants' names or school information. Patton (2015) noted that researchers should ensure that they do not gather irrelevant data. If participants expressed privacy concerns, the researcher assured them that all collected information remained confidential. The initial communication was conducted through

participants' school email. Teachers in the school were unaware of who participated in this research study. All participants signed a consent form which included the purpose, procedures, confidentiality, contact information, and withdrawal opportunity (Appendix B). Hard copies of personal documents and interview recordings were stored in a lock box. After checking all review transcriptions and personal digital documents for plausibility, the researcher stored all information on a password-protected computer. All collected data would be stored for five years after study completion, as Walden University requires.

Summary

The qualitative choice of IPA was the best choice for this study. Only a phenomenological study would provide the depth of inquiry needed to discover the essences of the lived experiences of 10 to 12 general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments (Patton, 2015). The researcher performed an IPA study to capture the pre-reflective descriptions of the individual participants' lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and craft a reflective interpretation of the lived experience regarding their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The researcher used Moustakas's (1994) modified Van Kaam analysis of phenomenological data to analyze and interpret the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy. The researcher conducted in-depth, semistructured phenomenological interviews to obtain detailed first-person accounts of what it is like to teach ELL students. Data collection procedures

included open-ended interview questions, the researcher's reflective journal, field notes, epoche/bracketing, and member checks.

In this chapter, the researcher provided a full description and justification for the selected methodology, a discussion of how the target population was identified, and details related to the sampling process. This chapter also included a description of the data collection procedures, the stages of data analysis, and the instrumentation of the study. Chapter 4 provides a detailed discussion of the research study results and the significant themes.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The fourth chapter of this study summarizes the results of the interpretative

phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the interviews with 12 study participants. This qualitative

study aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL

students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments.

In line with this purpose, one research question and two sub-research questions were established

to fully present and describe the experiences of the general education middle school teachers on

their employment of CRP and its effectiveness inside a culturally diverse classroom. The primary

research question for the study was: What is general education middle school teachers'

perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address perceived cultural diversity of

ELL students and influence the students' academic success? The two sub-questions asked were:

RQ1.1. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the cultural

diversity of ELL students?

RQ1.2. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the

effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?

In the analysis of the 12 interviews, the researcher used NVivo12 by QSR to systematically code

participants' responses. This chapter describes participants' backgrounds and demographics. It

reviews the data analysis process used to uncover the study themes. Next, the researcher

presents the complete results of the study along with the tables and participants' responses.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Demographics

All 12 participants were general education middle school teachers of ELL students in one public charter school in New York State. Of the 12 participants, 11 were female, and one was male. Most participants (9) were Black or African American, two were White or Caucasian, and one was Hispanic or Latino. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 61 years old. Meanwhile, participants had different levels of educational attainment (education specialist, B.S., B.A, M.S, and M.A). Their years in service as teachers ranged from 1 to 16+ years. Their years of experience teaching EL learners ranged from 1 to 16+ years. All 12 participants currently have EL learners in their respective classrooms. Table 4.1 summarizes the participants' backgrounds.

Table 1

Demographics of the Participants

PA #	Gender	Ethnic Background	Age Group	Highest Degree Attained	Certification	Years as Teacher/ Teaching ELLs	Current ELLs in Classroom	Current Role
PA1	Female	Black/African American	31-40	Education Specialist	Yes	5-9; 1-4	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA2	Female	Black/African American	31-40	Education Specialist	Yes	10-15; 10-15	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA3	Female	Black/African American	51-60	M.S/ M.A	Yes	16+; 1-4	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA4	Female	Black/African American	41-50	MBA	Yes	10-15; 10-15	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA5	Female	Black/African American	31-40	B.S/ B.A	Yes	10-15; 1-4	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA6	Female	White/Caucasian	20-30	M.S/ M.A	Yes	1-4; 1-4	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA7	Female	Hispanic/Latino	51-60	M.S/ M.A	Yes	16+; 10-15	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA8	Female	Black/African American	41-50	M.S/ M.A	Yes	16+; 16+	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA9	Female	Black/African American	51-60	M.S/ M.A	Yes	16+; 5-9	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA10	Male	White/Caucasian	31-40	M.S/ M.A	Yes	10-15; 10-15	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA11	Female	Black/African American	41-50	M.S/ M.A	Yes	16+; 16+	Yes	General Ed Teacher
PA12	Female	Black/African American	61+	M.S/ M.A	Yes	16+; 5-9	Yes	General Ed Teacher

Data Analysis

To determine the most significant experiences of the 12 interviewed participants, the researcher followed and applied the modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994). This process integrated data clustering, thematizing, data reduction, individual and composite development, and synthesis of structural meanings of the lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As Smith et al. (n.d.) noted, the main aim is to thematize or code the interviews by reducing data into themes to make sense of the responses shared by the study participants. The next section discusses the most significant relevant experiences of the interviewed teachers.

Data Results

I have been an Education Specialist for 18 years and has witnessed the evolution of diversity in classrooms over the said period. I wanted to explore educators' experiences connecting with their EL learners inside their respective classrooms. As the current National Director of Teacher Development and Instructional Support of 3DE Schools or institutions that encourage young students to succeed in the worldwide economy, the researcher found the need to perform a research study that would bridge the gap on the current challenges and issues faced by EL learners and educators inside a diverse classroom. This is a critical aspect that must be given attention to ensure that all students are well represented and given equal opportunities inside and outside the classrooms.

With the integration of the study framework or the diversity pedagogy theory (DPT), the researcher sought to address the issues and struggles experienced by the minorities inside the classroom due to the cultural, language, and ethnic differences faced by the learners. General education middle school teachers of ELL students were interviewed because they have firsthand knowledge and experience of the strategies and practices employed to assist and help EL learners achieve academic success inside the classrooms. From the researcher's experience, three themes underlie the phenomenon: the lack of training of teachers in managing diverse students, leading to inadequate background and skills to address the needs of their ELLs; the desire to have an equal representation of all students inside the classroom; and the need for students to be empowered as learners and individuals.

As the current study was an IPA, the researcher aimed to create a descriptive or narrative account of the proposed issue, the participants' experiences as general education middle school

teachers of ELL students, and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. The IPA involved an exploration of the most common but meaningful themes emerging from the interviews with the participants. The researcher ensured that the data provided adequate evidence to demonstrate that themes were indeed established or generated directly from the perceptions and experiences of the participants and not the researcher's preconceptions and biases. Participants' responses were matched and grouped under each theme to support the findings. Below is a breakdown of the 12 participants' expressed values.

Participant 1

Participant 1 expressed that the cultural diversity of EL learners inside the classroom is indeed a challenge for teachers. She shared that teachers might feel "a little intimidated" by the EL learners and the challenges associated with teaching their lessons successfully, and language barriers continue to hinder the teachers' goals. Further, Participant 1 pointed out that such barriers may limit teachers, especially when they do not have adequate skills and training in managing EL learners. Despite the barriers and challenges identified, this participant valued the right of the EL learners to learn effectively. She then shared that she continuously helped students understand differences in cultural norms and practices using different learning strategies. Aside from learning strategies, Participant 1 constantly ensures that each ELL student is valued and represented inside her classroom.

Participant 2

Participant 2 expressed that most general education teachers feel they must be provided with more "training and resources" to teach their ELL students. For Participant 2, both teachers and ELL students face struggles and difficulties inside the classroom. As a teacher, Participant 2

works hard to integrate different strategies to assist students and make them feel that they are heard and represented. Participant 2 shared that this goal is achieved once there is an active engagement, effort, and participation from the ELL students and that ELL students become more empowered and confident over time.

Participant 3

Participant 3 commented during the interview that the presence of cultural diversity among ELL students inside the classroom is "challenging." For her, teachers must be willing to take the time to get to know their ELL students and make an effort to build effective relationships to facilitate the communication between them. Participant 3 also highlighted the value of collaboration between the students and instructors to ensure the successful delivery of instructions and lessons to the EL learners. Lastly, Participant 3 advocated for providing a "safe space" for the ELL students to be more active and open, which could also translate to the empowerment of the EL learners.

Participant 4

Participant 4 shared that general education teachers have the responsibility to help eliminate the struggles and barriers experienced by ELL students inside a diverse classroom. However, to do this, Participant 4- indicated that general education teachers must also be given attention and be equipped with the proper resources to help and assist their ELL students. As they attempt to address the barriers and issues inside the classroom, teachers must also find ways to relay their lessons and make their ELL students feel welcomed and respected. Once students perceive such changes, Participant 4 expressed that the CRP would also empower ELL students to succeed.

Participant 5

Participant 5 noted the effectiveness of employing culturally relevant materials and incorporating them into lessons and activities. This participant wanted to connect and relate to the background and identities of her students to get their interest and attention. Participant 5 found that such incorporation would reduce the gaps and barriers between the students and the lessons, leading to successful ERP and positive changes among the ELL students.

Participant 6

Participant 6 expressed the need to find effective and resourceful strategies that could connect them with their ELL students. For Participant 6, general education teachers inside a culturally diverse classroom must be aware of and sensitive to the needs and conditions of their ELL students. In this regard, Participant 6 shared that the teachers need more training and awareness programs. With their incorporation of culturally relevant materials and practices, teachers must continue to eliminate barriers and work to empower and uplift their ELL students.

Participant 7

Participant 7 shared her experiences with EL learners from 1993 up to today. Although she noted changes and positive transformations in incorporating strategies to accommodate ELL students, she mentioned that more must be done to make their program more effective. This participant highlighted the need for increased support in managing ELL middle school students. While waiting for the support, she created her strategy to build relationships with the ELL students to gain their trust. She also highlighted the ways to make them feel valued and respected, leading to their empowerment both inside and outside the classroom. Participant 7 disclosed that she needed to be creative in finding ways to engage and teach her ELL students.

Participant 8

Participant 8 noted the importance of being patient and creative when managing the ELL students inside the classroom. This participant highlighted from experience the importance of resourcefulness and innovation inside the classroom to ensure that the needs of the ELLs are met and addressed. Further, Participant 8 has also found success in giving voice and power to ELL students, allowing them to build the confidence needed both inside and outside of the classroom. Lastly, Participant 8 called for more training and resources for teachers like herself to manage the difficulties that general education middle school teachers face inside a diverse classroom.

Participant 9

Participant 9 expressed the value of accommodating the culture and understanding each student's background inside the classroom. This participant admitted that teaching ELLs is "more challenging" than expected; however, she realized over time the importance of flexibility and the ability to adjust as she engages and communicates actively with the ELL students. Like the previous participants, this participant also needed to be resourceful and creative in finding the right strategies to convey and deliver the lessons to the EL learners successfully.

Participant 10

Participant 10 expressed that CRP inside the classroom could still be enhanced and improved. This participant called for an increased focus on professional training and development to equip general education middle school teachers with the knowledge and skills to manage the ELL student population. Participant 10 taught this population for almost two decades and identified many areas that require attention. For him, teachers must make each student feel

represented and empowered. They must determine the right methods and strategies to achieve their goal inside a culturally diverse classroom.

Participant 11

Participant 11 noted the need to exert more effort in teaching inside a culturally diverse classroom. She noticed that the ELL students are "extremely excited to learn." This has motivated her to be resourceful in connecting with them. This participant also discussed how she collaborates and works with other instructors to ensure their students get the best possible education, indicating that the lessons are well integrated. In the end, a common goal is to increase the confidence of the ELL students and empower them both as students and members of society once they step outside the walls of their school.

Participant 12

Participant 12 expressed that teachers of the ELL students are responsible for making sure that each of the students inside the classroom is heard and represented. As teachers, they must be open to adjusting to the needs of their ELL students and finding ways and resources to connect with them. For her, the CRP is one strategy that could empower and change how culturally diverse students learn.

With the phenomenological analysis of the data, the researcher uncovered the teachers'

meaningful perceptions and experiences with regard to their use of culturally relevant pedagogy

to address the perceived cultural diversity of EL learners and influence the students' academic

success. This was achieved by carefully reviewing participants' transcripts and generating the

themes based on their shared experiences. After forming the themes per participant, the

researcher created a master list of themes prioritized based on the richness and meaningfulness of

the data (Smith et al., n.d.). As seen in Table 4.2, 12 major and minor themes and 13 subthemes

were uncovered. It must be noted that the major themes are the most referenced experiences by

the study participants. Meanwhile, minor themes were mentioned less frequently than major

themes. Finally, subthemes were incorporated to present detailed examples of the parent themes

or the major and minor themes.

Table 2

Breakdown of the Study Themes

Category	Themes	Subthemes	Total Participants	Total References
The perceived cultural diversity of EL learners and its influence on the students' academic success	Need for increased and targeted CRP training for the teachers	Effective in increasing their competence and boosting their confidence; Facing the fear of being able to connect to students despite the language barrier; Needing constant professional development programs to improve and innovate	10	25
	Accommodate ELLs' differences by applying various teaching strategies and resources.		5	8
	Gather feedback from students to ensure that each one's thoughts and voices are heard	Experiencing the effectiveness of using photos or visual representations to teach students; Using reading materials that discuss different cultures; Allowing the students to be the teachers of their culture to their peers; Using media tools and resources to assist students; Embedding vocabularies in lessons and activities; Connecting with other teachers to integrate vocabularies in their subjects	2	2
Teachers' perceptions of cultural diversity?	Ensure that each child in the classroom is represented	Taking the time to get to know the EL learners and their background; Building trust between teacher and student; Providing a safe space for EL learners	10	30
	Help students understand the differences in their cultural norms and practices.		5	7
	Acknowledge that EL learners feel intimidated and hesitant inside the classroom.	Assisting EL learners closely to help them communicate their thoughts and feelings	4	6
	Acknowledge that cultural diversity is a challenging issue inside the classroom.		2	2
	Acknowledge personal biases and preconceptions of others.		2	3
The effectiveness of the use of culturally relevant pedagogy	Understand that the success of CRP depends on the empowerment of students	Seeing the EL learners try to answer questions and actively participate in activities; Making the EL learners feel respected and accepted; Having the opportunity to acknowledge the needs of the EL learners	12	32

Develop targeted CRP training for the teachers

For the 10 out of the 12 interviewed teachers, participants admitted that teachers need more focused training in applying the CRP inside their classrooms. The interviewed teachers explained that professional development training programs, especially those that discuss and readily provide information on the CRP, will improve their knowledge, competence, and skills in teaching EL students. Participant 1 was aware of the negative effect of the lack of a CRP course in college. According to Participant 1, it is common to believe that they are not as effective in implementing CRP in their respective classrooms, given their lack of formal training. Further, she admitted that her current institution does not provide enough support. Participant 1 stated:

> I feel most teachers will say they are not effective when implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in their classroom. I know that CRP was not a course offered in college. There has not been a lot of training in my school to help teachers in my building feel they are effective.

Similarly, from Participant 2's experience, increased training and the provision of valuable sources might help develop teachers' CRP competence, supporting the claim by saying, "I think most general education teachers feel they need more training or resources to teach ELL students." In line with this perception, Participant 10 also found it important for teachers to be proactive students and learners. Given the continuous changes and innovation in education today, Participant 10 articulated that teachers must also be open and willing to improve themselves. In this case, teachers must adjust themselves to accommodate the changes in instruction and classroom settings. In this way, they are also setting themselves and their students for success. Participant 10 expressed during the interview:

A teacher is a student first, right? Any teacher has to be a student first. You have to

constantly adapt and evolve and take on new ways of doing things; the way I was trained

in the late 1990s and 2000 to teach is not how we do instruction. Now [in] order for me to

succeed, I had to adapt.

Effective in Increasing Their Competence and Boosting Their Confidence

Four out of the 10 participants shared a subtheme that attending training programs could

indeed help improve their skills and confidence as instructors. Participant 2, from experience,

emphasized that schools must empower their teachers in performing their responsibilities inside

ELL classrooms. The participant expressed during the interview: "I think I would start with

going back to what I was saying a little bit earlier about starting with the teachers… thinking of

how we can empower the teachers who spend more time with them [the students]." Meanwhile,

Participant 9 shared a similar perception of training programs, pointing out that training

programs on various CRP methods and techniques would help increase teachers' abilities in

teaching and engaging their EL learners. This participant also provided examples of the areas

that could be targeted and integrated, saying:

It is [important] to have proper training that will give you the strategies and skills to meet

the needs of those ELL students, training that consists of techniques, ideas, and training

at work. Give us training that shows you how to implement those strategies.

Facing the Fear of Inability to Connect to Students Despite the Language Barrier

Participants also shared the need for training to reduce or eliminate the fear of not being

able to build a connection with their students due to language barriers. Participants 2 and 9 both

expressed that teachers are often hesitant to successfully connect with their students given the

lack of training and their lack of knowledge of their students' respective languages. Participant 2 noted that it has been difficult for her to associate with the thoughts and feelings of her students due to the language barrier between them:

> … So, I think it was more of like a fear thing for me, like how I am going to be able to reach these children if I don't have the same first language is obviously. I think I was dying, I think, when I just got silent, I was like I need to say anything else, but is it okay?

Needing Constant Professional Development Programs to Improve and Innovate

Another specific theme was that training programs need to offer growth and development opportunities for the teachers, as with the current state of education and technology, educators must be able to keep up with the technological and societal changes to properly implement their teaching instructions and plans inside the classroom. Participant 10 explained the drastic changes in their field. Having been an educator for more than 10 years, Participant 10 admitted that he is still having a difficult time adjusting to the current technological advances:

> I came into a field, and then suddenly, everybody is 20 years old, and they're doing all these cool things with technology. And I'm looking for an overhead projector. So, I think it's the same in that realm, it depends on your mindset. Some teachers are looking at this as an opportunity to learn about the students, to evolve, to learn from mistakes that might have been made ten years ago, maybe ten years ago.

Accommodating EL learners' differences by applying various teaching strategies and resources. The first minor theme that emerged from the phenomenological analysis of the interviews was the need to accommodate the differences between the ELLs by applying various teaching strategies. By doing so, the teachers are expected to effectively reach and influence their

EL learners. Participant 6 firmly believed in exploring creative techniques inside the classroom, noting, "I'll never just do flashcards and simple repetition. I want to be more creative." Further, Participant 11 shared the different resources and strategies she applies as an ELL instructor. Some of the tools that Participant 11 applies inside the classroom are vocabulary mapping, videos, and critical analysis practices. She stated that these resources are crucial in effectively developing the skills of the EL learners:

> So, I would say vocabulary mapping video integration. All the general skills for ELA, like critical analysis, all of those particular skills for ELA kind of transfer over to the ELL student, especially when we're having a dialogue and conversation. My class is a heavy discussion class, and students are writing. So, when they need those particular skills, and when they're developing those particular skills, we make sure that students are understanding and comprehending.

Experiencing the effectiveness of using photos or visual representations to teach students. The first subtheme or specific example referred to images and other visual representations to teach the EL learners. According to the interviewed participants, such creative resources have permitted them to reach and connect with their students. Participant 1 discussed her amazement with the effectiveness of pictures in helping learners understand the subject or topic, describing it as "mind-blowing." Based on her experience, pictures and scaffolding have proven successful:

> One of the biggest things, one of the most mind-blowing things, was when I was first getting trained for ESOL or ELL using pictures or building background knowledge to help them understand whatever you're trying to teach. I know that sounds super simple, but it was mind-blowing for me because I'm thinking is something super complex, and it's

not; it's almost like, again, helping a student who lacks the background knowledge for

whatever reason, kind of scaffold up to what you need them to know.

Using reading materials that discuss different cultures. The second subtheme that

followed mentioned reading materials and resources to learn more about the cultures around the

world. For the teachers, this is another effective strategy that could help convey the lessons and

promote cultural diversity inside the classroom. Participant 1 shared that her ELLs have

improved through the different reading materials she incorporated during their lessons.

Specifically, she mentioned the book titled *Seedfolks* as an effective resource for teaching

students about various cultures and their interrelationship:

> I use the book called *Seedfolks,* and *Seedfolks* covers different cultures. Cultures that are
>
> all in this neighborhood, they all come in. The book really is good for one, showing
>
> different cultures and how they interact with each other, it's really good in showing us
>
> migration… And I felt like it gave students an idea of multiple cultures and multiple
>
> norms. They could see themselves because the setting, I think, was in Chicago, an
>
> American city in American culture.
>
> The premise of the book is how all of these different cultures, they rally behind
>
> this urban garden, and that's really how they get to know each other and really become a
>
> close-knit neighborhood. And so, they're able to see how different cultures react in those
>
> situations as well.

Participant 5 echoed the same experience as Participant 1. She then discussed how the stories and

narratives that the ELLs read allowed them to learn and acknowledge the presence of cultural

diversity around them. The examples also led to personal reflections and critical thinking:

Engaging in the English [language] if they are comfortable with that in terms of content, where the text mirrors aspects of their own culture. We read a text about the Chilean rodeo and how it compares to America. They were able to know the aspect, the culture, and colorful clothing that are usually associated with the behaviors of the audience members at the rodeo.

Allowing the students to be the teachers of their culture to their peers. The third subtheme or example that followed was the teachers' strategy of encouraging the students to become "teachers" or "educators" to their peers as they share the same culture with the rest of the learners. According to Participant 11, she has successfully implemented activities that permit EL learners to find the right confidence and balance within a culturally diverse classroom. Participant 11 shared during the interview:

Well, culturally relevant pedagogy activities… I allow students [and give them] opportunities to share and discuss their actual backgrounds through projects. We've had projects where students talked about themselves, which goes for every student. I think in that particular aspect, that's one activity. I think all of the activities recently that we have been embarking upon are geared toward being culturally relevant because those particular activities are geared towards again, this society being a whole world society.

Using media tools and resources to assist students. The integration of interactive and newer media tools to assist in the learning and development of EL learners emerged as another subtheme. In relation to this subtheme, Participant 8 discussed that she has also tried to work with their school's media specialist to assist her in finding the best resources to develop activities

for EL learners. The participant provided a personal experience wherein such collaboration led to more learning opportunities for the EL learners:

… As soon as I get this nonspeaking English student, I always contact our media specialist, and she instantly gives me assignments to help their websites to help them because, you know, let's make sure they're doing something in class.

Embedding vocabularies in lessons and activities. The fifth subtheme or example that emerged was the strategy of inserting and incorporating simple but important vocabulary in their lessons and activities. At the same time, participants explained that such practice also involves collaboration with teachers of other subjects. For Participant 1, it was crucial to provide the context for teaching different words and terms to ELLs:

Before starting the training, I found that teaching the vocabulary in isolation did not work for them. It needed to be embedded within a context that helps them. So, I would say isolating vocabulary, just like definitions, would not help them. Just [to make sure], providing context [is helpful].

Similarly, Participant 1 described her efforts of connecting with other teachers and instructors to ensure that students learn important vocabulary in other subjects as well, "So, the experience informed me tremendously… I've tried to maintain relationships with those particular teachers, whenever I could sneak in, I put my kids on a Zoom call with them."

Ensuring that each child inside the classroom is represented

The second major theme generated from the analysis was the link between cultural diversity and working hard to ensure that each child or student in the classroom is well-represented, allowing teachers to promote cultural diversity and set good examples for all their

students. According to Participant 1, cultural diversity is closely related to the representation of the largest population and smaller groups. She expressed that it is crucial to include and give attention to all students and ensure that all students could see themselves involved in the content and classroom setting:

> Yeah, my definition of cultural diversity is making sure that representation is there, whether that is, you know, a larger culture from students from another country or a subset of a culture where it comes from, like geographic geography, where you live, whether that's rural versus urban subgroups of culture, like the south versus the north or the west. That's why it's really important to get to know the kids so that you'll make sure that they do feel that they're represented, and they can see themselves in the content.

Meanwhile, Participant 11 had the same perception and experience as Participant 1, noting the need to acknowledge each student's presence and role inside the classroom. Participant 11 expressed that students must find a way to make their presence felt and be able to contribute:

> Everybody has to play a role. I don't even really just necessarily denote that student is separate from your group or they're special in a way that they can contribute. They have to understand that everyone has something to contribute.

Taking the Time to Get to Know the ELLs and Their Background

To guarantee that each student is well-represented, all participants agreed that taking the time to get to know the EL learners and learn about their background or history makes the students feel valued. Participant 2 noted that this goal is achieved when students realize: "My teacher is thinking about me enough to ask me questions about what I know or thinking about me

enough to." Similarly, Participant 3 also disclosed a personal experience when she needed to adjust and learn to communicate not only with the students but their families as well:

> And so, there were cultural challenges, changes, and environments that I had to learn about those families, so I ended up learning more than just how to communicate with those particular students; I ended up having to have more of a relationship with their entire family.

Finally, Participant 6 explained that she built a positive and effective relationship with her students by spending the time to get to know the students and making them feel as comfortable and acceptable as possible:

> Oh, my relationship with my students is good; I stop to get to know them. I want them to stop and tell me about their culture. And through that day, they start to feel more comfortable and just like they are helping me out because they are. But it also helps them know that if someone is interested in where they come from and that, you know, we are going to be now knowledgeable through their experience of what's happening in their culture.

Building Trust Between Teacher and Student

The second subtheme demonstrated the importance of building trust between the instructors and EL learners. Participant 2 commented on the value of trust: "… That they understand that there's an understanding that we are making the connection, that trust is being built." Participant 7 also shared how she invested her time and effort to gain the trust of her students by listening to their thoughts and feelings:

Yes, I feel like part of my success as a teacher has been to be emotionally available to my

students and find appropriate times in which to share my own story with them so that

they can see themselves reflected. So, in fact, I rely on that heavily as a way to relate to

my students. I had one of my schools, I started a club called Images for Young Girls, and

it was to help them be more comfortable in their own skin, basically that kind of thing.

Providing a Safe Space for EL Learners

The third subtheme addressed cultural diversity by providing a safe space or environment

for EL learners. The participants needed to ensure that the EL learners felt safe and protected in

an unfamiliar setting. Participant 1, as an instructor, started to feel more confident and

empowered in positively changing the overall classroom experiences of EL learners. She

highlighted the value of making EL learners feel "welcomed, safe, and present:"

Culturally relevant pedagogy empowered my practice in the classroom and my students,

which is what I believe. It makes them feel more comfortable with struggling by

providing a safe opportunity where everyone is welcomed, feel safe, and present. It

allows them to feel more comfortable getting something wrong or asking questions or

being more open to learning by using nonlinguistic pictures or something relatable to

them or using a word web.

Further, Participant 3 added her personal experience: "I think the most challenging aspect is

creating a safe space and making it welcome for everybody without offending, it's if you're going

through." Lastly, Participant 8 echoed the importance of securing a safe setting for the EL

learners:

… Make everyone feel safe. I mean, that's what I believe so they can learn and just make

sure that your classroom is safe and secure and that everyone understands that we're not

the same. We're not all the same. Everyone is different. And you have to respect

everyone's religious, cultural, and ethnic beliefs because everybody's not the same.

Believing in the Success of CRP Through the Empowerment of Students

The study's third and final major theme referred to acknowledging CRP's success

through observing changes and improvements in their EL learners. According to all 12

participants, the positive changes and improvement became apparent and evident over time.

Participant 1 noted that the CRP activities had permitted students to become more open and

involved, empowering them not only as students but also as leaders:

I think it allows them to be more open. And I think I forgot to mention in your last

question, as far as helping their social skills, I think it empowers them to be more of a

leader in that sense.

Similarly, Participant 10 discussed the empowerment of learners with their newfound voice and

identities inside the classroom. With the awareness of their own culture and increased

knowledge, EL learners become more confident and competent over time:

I think that it empowers the LS. It allows them to know that they have a voice, that

somebody is interested, one and other things that's going on. It's also somebody who

seems to be aware of your culture. If you have somebody in the room who feels that they

know you and takes an interest in you, it's a big deal, right? Part of cultural diversity is

understanding other cultures other accustoms. If you're an ELL student in the room just

coming to this country, you may feel lost in this country.

Lastly, Participant 11 shared her success as she slowly noticed the change in the EL learners'

willingness and openness to learning:

> One particular thing is that those ELL students are extremely excited to learn. I mean,
> that's what I've noticed. And to be honest, I don't know if I could see this, but they end up
> being some of my favorite students because they're really eager to learn. And I see a
> difference in attitude about education once you get over that initial shy point. And
> somehow, I've been able to touch the ELL students in that way. So, I have a relationship
> somehow with both ELL students and get them to open up and learn those concepts.

Seeing the EL Learners try to Answer Questions and Actively Participate in Activities

Again, Participant 11 noted that success could be measured using students' reactions to

their activities, lessons, and discussions. Another example Participant 11 shared was: "Well, I

think based upon their reactions and again, the level of collaboration, I expect that everyone has

something to contribute and not just, you know, students who are students who are more

[accustomed to the] English [language]."

Making the EL Learners Feel respected and Accepted

Under the second subtheme, participants explained that success is also attained and

measured with students' positive feelings when attending the course or program. According to

Participant 3, a culturally diverse classroom can be effective and successful, stating: "Actually,

there was one student, in particular, she determined that the activity was successful because she

sent me a note, she wrote me a note and said she really appreciates it." The same participant

further added: "Even though she went to a predominantly black school, [she appreciated] that I

acknowledged her, and that I made her feel safe in her classroom and I respected her culture."

Having the Opportunity to Acknowledge the Needs of the EL Learners

Lastly, Participant 9 discussed the instructors' ability to understand and readily address the needs of their EL learners. According to Participant 9: "I think it has informed me because it allows me to identify with the needs of my students that sit before me and allow me to help them and use diversity to meet their needs."

Answering the Research Questions

RQ1. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address perceived cultural diversity of ELL students and influence the students' academic success?

The researchers interviewed 12 teachers to answer the study's main research question, What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address the perceived cultural diversity of ELL students and influence their academic success? Ten out of the 12 interviewed teachers believed that teachers need to be provided with proper and increased CRP training to address more effectively the presence of cultural diversity inside the classroom and positively influence students' academic success. These participants believed that currently, teachers lack formal guidance and assistance as they perform their tasks and duties inside the classroom. Furthermore, the participants expressed the need to apply various teaching strategies to accommodate ELLs'' differences. Five participants believed that as teachers of culturally diverse students and classrooms, they must be able to identify and apply different strategies to accommodate the needs and conditions of the EL learners. Two other minor themes emerged that the teachers mentioned less frequently. In this

regard, additional research is needed to solidify these themes' trustworthiness. Table 4.3 contains

the complete breakdown of themes addressing the main research question.

Table 3

Breakdown of the Study Themes Addressing the First Research Question

Research Question	Themes	Subthemes	Number of Participants	Total Number of References
RQ1. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address perceived cultural diversity of EL learners and influence the students' academic success?	Need for increased and targeted CRP training for the teachers	Effective in increasing their competence and boosting their confidence; Facing the fear of being able to connect to students despite the language barrier; Needing constant professional development programs to improve and innovate	10	25
	Need to accommodate EL learners' differences by applying various teaching strategies and resources	Experiencing the effectiveness of using photos or visual representations to teach students; Using reading materials that discuss different cultures; Allowing the students to be the teachers of their culture to their peers; Using media tools and resources to assist students; Embedding vocabularies in lessons and activities; Connecting with other teachers to integrate vocabularies in their subjects	5	8
	Need to gather feedback from students to ensure that each one's thoughts and voices are heard		2	2

RQ1A. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of cultural diversity?

The first sub-research question explored the teachers' perceptions of cultural diversity.

Under this query, the researcher analyzed perceptions and experiences of cultural diversity, as

witnessed by teachers inside their ELL classrooms. The phenomenological analysis found that 10

out of the 12 participants believed that they applied cultural diversity in their respective

classrooms by ensuring that each child was represented inside the classroom. According to these participants, it was crucial for each student to feel that they belong with the rest of the students in the classroom — that they are valued, relevant, and important. Meanwhile, another minor theme pertained to helping students understand the differences in their cultural norms and practices. As seen in Table 4.4, the analysis revealed four other minor themes that the participants mentioned less frequently; thus, further research is recommended.

Table 4

Breakdown of the Study Themes Addressing the First Sub-Research Question

Research Question	Themes	Subthemes	Number of Participants	Total Number of References
RQ1A. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of cultural diversity?	Ensuring that each child is represented inside the classroom	Taking the time to get to know the EL learners and their background; Building trust between teacher and student; Providing a safe space for EL learners	10	30
	Helping students understand the differences in their cultural norms and practices		5	7
	Believing that EL learners feel intimidated and hesitant inside the classroom	Assisting EL learners closely to help them communicate their thoughts and feelings	4	6
	Believing that cultural diversity is a challenging issue inside the classroom		2	2
	Acknowledging personal biases and preconceptions of others		2	3

RQ1B. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?

The second and last sub-research question asked: *What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?* All 12 of the interviewed teachers believed their CRP implementation was successful and effective in empowering their students, as indicated by students becoming more active during their classes, feeling respected and accepted, and believing that their needs are acknowledged and addressed. Table 4.5 contains the breakdown of the themes and subthemes.

Table 4.5

Breakdown of the Study Themes Addressing the Second Research Question

Research Question	Themes	Subthemes	Number of Participants	Total Number of References
RQ1B. What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?	Believing in the success of CRP through the empowerment of students	Seeing the EL learners try to answer questions and actively participate in activities; Making the EL learners feel respected and accepted; Having the opportunity to acknowledge the needs of the EL learners	12	32

Summary

This qualitative IPA aimed to explore the lived experiences of general education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. Using NVivo12 by QSR to organize the data, the researcher uncovered relevant experiences to describe the phenomenon explored. The themes uncovered from the analysis of the 12 participant interviews were presented in Chapter 4. The three major themes, 11 minor themes, and 13 subthemes supported the study's purpose and the main and sub-research questions. The final chapter discusses the themes, highlighting the implications of the findings, offering recommendations, and drawing conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This research study aimed to explore general education middle school teachers' perceptions of ELL students and teachers' practices of culturally relevant teaching in general education classrooms. To address the lack of knowledge regarding the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom setting by teachers of ELL students, the researcher formulated one primary research question and two sub-research questions. The study's primary research question was: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address the perceived cultural diversity of ELL students and influence their academic success?

The two sub-questions that guided the interview protocol in answering the primary research question were:

RQ1.1: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the cultural diversity of ELL students?

RQ1.2: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy?

For this purpose, I conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis of interviews with 12 general education middle school teachers of ELL students in a public charter school in New York State. A systematic analysis of these 12 interviews using NVivo12 by QSR uncovered teachers' meaningful perceptions and experiences with using culturally relevant pedagogy to address the perceived cultural diversity of ELLs and influence the students' academic success. Generally, the results confirmed the findings in the literature highlighting the positive relationships between teachers' perceptions, culturally relevant pedagogy, and cultural diversity

of students (e.g., Lucas et al., 2015; Truong, 2017; Villegas, 2018). The analysis identified three major themes, 11 minor themes, and 13 sub-themes. Some of the key themes emphasized the need for increased and targeted CRP training for the teachers, the need to accommodate EL learners' differences by applying various teaching strategies and resources, the need to gather feedback from students to ensure that each one's thoughts and voices are heard, and the need to celebrate different cultural observances. The subsequent sections detail these findings and the implications, recommendations, and conclusions.

Interpretation of the Findings

As discussed, a systematic analysis of interviews with 12 participants yielded three major themes representing the teachers' perceptions of ELL students and their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address the perceived cultural diversity of EL learners and influence the students' academic success. The three major themes were the most referenced experiences by the study participants throughout the dataset. Specifically, the participants repeatedly underscored the need for increased and targeted CRP training for the teachers, the importance of ensuring that each child is represented inside the classroom, and the importance of believing in the success of CRP through the empowerment of students. Meanwhile, minor themes reflect other significant experiences of the participants that received fewer references than the major themes. Moreover, the subthemes exemplify the major and minor themes.

Research Question 1

The primary research question guiding the study was: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy to address ELL students' perceived cultural diversity and influence their academic success?

Major Theme 1: Need for Increased and Targeted CRP Training for the Teachers

Ten out of the 12 interviewed teachers indicated the need for teachers to be provided with proper and increased CRP training. This finding aligns with the literature that examined teachers' perceptions of ELL students and ESL teachers who suggested improvements were needed to train teachers in CRP. For example, by administering open-ended questionnaires to 162 teachers who taught subjects to ESL students entirely in English, Penfield (1987) reported that teachers needed to improve academic learning for ELL students and learn more about how to integrate content. The current study extends their findings and suggests that the ELL teachers perceive a need for increased training to meet the culturally diverse demands of ELL students.

The participants in the current study reported that teachers lack formal guidance and assistance as they perform their tasks and duties inside the classroom and that professional development training programs, especially those that discuss and readily provide information on the CRP, would improve their knowledge, competence, and skills in teaching EL learners. This finding extended the studies conducted by Lucas et al. (2015) and Villegas (2018), who found that increased effectiveness of teachers (Lucas et al., 2015) and attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the school faculty (Villegas, 2018) positively affected academic achievement and behaviors of ELL students.

The literature also suggests that teachers still resist recognizing culture, believing that assimilation helps students succeed in the classroom and society (Gordon, 2016). Fox et al. (2010) reported that providing teachers with an opportunity to explore a broader perspective of culture and then apply what they had learned to their professional contexts enhances teachers' knowledge and awareness of teaching instructional strategies and student learning in the classroom setting. It can be concluded that CRP training for teachers can improve culturally responsive teaching, leading to increased success of ELL students.

Subtheme 1: Effective in Increasing their Competence and Boosting their Confidence. Four out of the 10 participants shared a subtheme that referred to the belief that attending training programs could improve teachers' skills and confidence as instructors. This increased confidence, in turn, would positively affect the teachers' attitudes and beliefs and, subsequently, students' behavioral and academic performance (Lucas et al., 2015; Villegas, 2018). Furthermore, cultural competence has been related to teacher efficacy in the literature (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Subtheme 2: Facing the Fear of Being Able to Connect to Students Despite the Language Barrier. The second subtheme that followed was the need for training to reduce or eliminate the fear of connecting with their students due to a language barrier between them. The current study's findings suggest that the lack of knowledge of their students' respective languages has made some teachers hesitant to successfully connect with their students. This is a unique finding of the study. Although a few researchers have examined the CRP training needs of teachers, the current study is the first to recognize that this training would help teachers face their fear of connecting with their students.

Subtheme 3: The Need for Constant Professional Development Programs to Improve and Innovate. Another subtheme was the need for additional programs. With the current state of education and technology, teachers must be able to keep up with the changes to implement their teaching instructions and plans inside the classroom properly. Some of these changes can include learning the native language of ELL students to provide instruction on both languages, which has been reported as an important aspect of developing strong literacy among ELL students (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2016).

Minor Theme 1: The Need to Accommodate EL learners' Differences by Applying Various Teaching Strategies and Resources

The first minor theme was the need to accommodate the differences between the EL learners by applying various teaching strategies. The theme suggests that teachers can effectively reach and influence their EL learners by accommodating ELLs' differences. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Au (2013), which noted that U.S. schools fail culturally diverse students because of a myopic focus on the perspectives of mainstream students while ignoring the historical perspectives of other cultures and due to catering only to the social processes of general education students. Therefore, schools can better serve their students by widening their focus and accommodating EL learners' differences.

The current study identified some tools for vocabulary mapping, videos, and critical analysis practices. To provide culturally responsive instruction to address diversity, small-group instruction could substitute teacher-initiated interaction and whole-group approaches that seem to fail diverse cultural groups (Au, 2013; Bennett et al., 2018).

Subtheme 1: The Effectiveness of Using Photos or Visual Representations to Teach Students. The first subtheme was using images and other visual representations to teach the EL learners. The current study's findings confirmed that such creative resources allow them to reach and connect with their students, as language can be a barrier between the teachers and EL learners (Chu, 2014).

Subtheme 2: Using Reading Materials that Discuss Different Cultures. The second subtheme indicated that teachers believed it was important to use reading materials and resources to learn more about the cultures around the world for culturally responsive instruction. This finding confirms the results of the studies conducted by Alismail (2016) and Alim et al. (2020), who observed that student-centric pedagogy that embraces cultural heritages empowers students from culturally diverse backgrounds and meets the social and academic needs of those students. Meanwhile, Gay (2021) also observed that classroom pedagogy that integrates the cultural diversity of the students contributes to their academic experiences and successes. Therefore, the current study's findings reiterate the importance of using reading materials that discuss different cultures.

Subtheme 3: Allowing the Students to be the Teachers of their Culture to their Peers. The third subtheme highlighted the teachers' strategy of encouraging the students to become "teachers" to their peers as they share the beauty of their own culture with the rest of the learners. This extends the results reported by Ladson-Billings (2014), who posited that students' culture could be used as a tool that counters and surpasses the negative effects of the dominant culture. They further suggested that cultural relevance should have a place in the curriculum instead of functioning as a tool to bridge or explain aspects of the dominant culture. Therefore,

studying diverse cultures can be a part of the curriculum, and ELL students can be teachers of their cultures.

Subtheme 4: Using Media Tools and Resources to Assist Students. Another subtheme suggested integrating interactive and newer media tools to assist in the learning and development of EL learners. The subtheme recommended employing such tools and resources to accommodate students' different learning needs and preferences. Participants also found that these newer platforms can effectively engage the students.

Subtheme 5: Embedding Vocabularies in Lessons and Activities. The fifth subtheme that emerged was the strategy of inserting and incorporating simple but important vocabulary in their lessons and activities. At the same time, participants explained that such practice involves collaboration with teachers of other subjects. It should further be noted that the findings of subthemes 4 and 5 are novel to the current study, as no previous research that would report such findings was identified.

RQ1A. What are General Education Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of Cultural Diversity?

The first sub-research question explored teachers' perceptions of cultural diversity. A systematic analysis of the interviews suggested that 10 out of the 12 participants believed that they applied cultural diversity in their classrooms. According to these participants, it is crucial for students to feel that they belong with the rest of the class — that they are valued, relevant, and important. However, this finding contradicts the direct or assimilationist approach that Au (2013) presented as one of the paths to address and improve the literacy achievement of students of culturally diverse backgrounds. This path stems from the perspective that children from

diverse backgrounds should be immersed in mainstream instruction and curriculum. Meanwhile, this finding confirms the second path or the indirect approach presented by Au (2013), where public schools are expected to first reinforce and affirm the cultural identity of students from diverse backgrounds. It should be noted that the proponents of culturally responsive instruction advocate for Au's second path, reiterating the importance of making ELL students feel valued and important by affirming their cultural identity using various strategies.

Major Theme 2: Ensuring that Each Child in the Classroom is Represented.
The second major theme generated from the analysis was the link between cultural diversity and working hard to ensure that each child or student in the classroom is well-represented. The current study's findings suggest that cultural diversity is closely related to the representation of not only the largest population but also smaller groups, consistent with Banks (2015), who referred to the representation of differences in beliefs or customs.

Subtheme 1: Taking the Time to Know the ELLs and their Background. Teachers perceived that ELL students felt represented and valued when teachers took time to get to know the ELL students and learn about their background or history. This finding aligns with the literature suggesting that teachers' positive attitudes towards ELL students increase their self-efficacy, making them feel more integrated into the community (Villegas, 2018). Therefore, a positive attitude towards ELL students by taking an interest in their history not only makes the students feel more connected to the school and its community but also positively affects their academic performance (Lucas et al., 2015), improving the relationships between immigrant students and educators (Sanchez, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2013). Further, the literature has also

reported that programs created to promote learning of minorities' cultural norms and history allow teachers to gain an alternate perspective on other cultures (Chu, 2014).

Subtheme 2: Building Trust Between Teacher and Student. Teachers expressed the importance of building trust with ELLs. This finding extends the observation by Alim et al. (2020), who argued that to fully recognize culturally responsive teaching, changes must occur not only in the curricula but also in human relationships, instructional approaches, and the overall school setting. Therefore, building human relationships by garnering trust between teacher and student is important for culturally responsive teaching.

Subtheme 3: Providing a Safe Space for EL learners. The third subtheme that emerged was the goal of addressing cultural diversity by providing a safe space or environment for ELLs. The participants agreed that the ELLs must feel safe and protected in an unfamiliar setting. This can happen when teachers with cultural competence embrace inclusiveness to facilitate intercultural engagement. Intercultural exchanges increase when individuals are secure with their own identity and view the cultural differences of others in a positive light rather than as a threat (Kim & Pettit, 2019). Therefore, ELLs should feel safe and secure in their cultural identity.

Four other minor themes were formed that the participants mentioned less frequently. One of the findings underlying these themes was that teachers perceived a need to help ELLs closely communicate their thoughts and feelings. This finding confirms the results of the study by Truong (2017), which revealed that bilingual education or dual-language two-way immersion options that allow ELL students to continue instruction in both English and their primary language through their academic years improve student achievements. Further, like the current study's findings, National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2016) noted

that educators must provide instruction in both languages to develop a strong literacy among ELL students and respond to Hispanic students culturally and linguistically.

Teachers in the current study believed that cultural diversity is a challenging issue inside the classroom. This finding extends the results of the study by Gallagher and Haan (2018), who observed that teachers' beliefs and assumptions often interfered with the social and academic integration in the regular classroom. Another challenge is that students of certain ethnicities, like Hispanic students (Penfield, 1987), may require increased attention, and they might be difficult to discipline compared to non-ELL students.

RQ1B. What are General Education Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of their Use of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

The second and last sub-research question asked: What are general education middle school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their use of culturally relevant pedagogy? All 12 of the interviewed teachers indicated that their CRP implementation was successful. CRP has been associated with improved self-confidence of ELL students (Au, 2013). Further, Jupp and Sleeter (2016) observed that CRP allows teachers to value and understand their students' culture and build on their current cultural competence.

Consistent with the literature, the current study's findings revealed that teachers considered their integration of CRP to be effective, as they were able to empower their students. They observed such empowerment when students became more active during their classes, felt respected and accepted, and believed their needs were met. This finding expands upon the study conducted by Banks (2015), who reported that empowering students from culturally diverse backgrounds requires examining variables at the school level that include the school climate,

grouping and labeling practices of teachers and school administration, and academic staff expectations for student achievement.

Major Theme 3: Believing in the Success of CRP Through the Empowerment of Students. The study's third and final major theme related to teachers' acknowledgment of CRP's success through improved performance of ELLs. According to all 12 participants, the changes become apparent and evident over time. Consistent with this theme, Vygotsky (1997), Au (2013), Ladson-Billings (2014), and Lee (2015), among other researchers, have reported a theoretically positive relationship between culturally relevant teaching and empowerment of students.

Subtheme 1: Seeing the EL learners Try to Answer Questions and Actively Participate in Activities. The current study's findings suggested that success could be measured using their students' reactions during activities, lessons, and discussions. It was encouraging for the participants to see how their students evolved. Their active engagement and participation are good signs that students learn and feel empowered through their class.

Subtheme 2: Making the EL learners Feel Respected and Accepted. Under the second subtheme, participants explained that the students' positive feelings when attending the course or program also indicate success. The teachers explained that they try hard to make their students feel welcomed and accepted. For the teachers, it is important to respect the needs and feelings of each ELL.

Subtheme 3: Having the Opportunity to Acknowledge the Needs of the EL learners. Lastly, the study suggests that the success of CRP can be measured by the ability of the instructors to know and readily address the needs of their EL learners. These three findings

provide a novel view of the measurement of CRP's success through the empowerment of ELL students. Because of the lack of research on the effectiveness of CRP, the findings presented in this paper can be used as the foundation for research efforts in this direction.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study has important implications, it has certain methical limitations that need to be acknowledged. One limitation of the study is that the results are based on interviews with a limited number of participants from one geographical area. Teachers in other parts of the world may have different experiences, which could not be addressed in the current study. This reduces the generalizability of the results. Second, the study sample contained a 90% female population, which does not accurately represent the general teaching population. This further reduces the generalizability of the results. Lastly, the findings and conclusions of the current study are based on the assumption of the Diversity Pedagogy Theory (Sheets, n.d.) that teachers observe the cultural and behavioral patterns of the students and use this knowledge to guide students. However, this may not hold for all teachers. The experiences of teachers who do not actively engage in such practice are not a part of the current research.

Recommendations

The current study's findings can be a stepping stone towards several research directions. The third major theme identified described teachers' beliefs in the success of CRP through the empowerment of ELL students, which can be used to explore a new direction in CRP training research. Prior research has not addressed the relationship between the effectiveness of CRP training and students' empowerment. However, the current findings point towards a theoretical relationship between the two constructs. Future efforts can test this proposition empirically in a

quantitative research study. The research design of the current study was exploratory and therefore resulted in several theoretical propositions highlighting the need for teachers' training in CRP, effective practices and strategies to ensure its success, and its effect on empowering the EL learners in the long run. Future researchers should empirically test the relationships found in the current study to improve the generalizability of the findings and bridge the research gap present.

Additionally, the future could address the methodical limitations of the current study and use a larger sample representative of geographical locations other than that used in the current study, is recommended.

Implications

The study was undertaken to address the lack of knowledge about culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom setting by teachers of ELL students. The results of the study have several implications.

This is the first study to explore the lived experiences of teachers' perceptions of employing culturally relevant pedagogy when there is a cultural gap between teachers and students. The exploration led to the unfolding of several previously unknown theoretical relationships between CRP training, ELL students' empowerment, and the inclusion of vocabulary embedded in the regular curriculum as a strategy to improve ELL students' understanding, among others.

The current study's results reiterated several existing theories, increasing their understanding. Most findings confirmed previous literature. The findings were further consistent with the Diversity Pedagogy Theory (Sheets, n.d.) and Vygotsky et al. (1979) social

constructivism. The study highlighted that it is crucial to address the diversity of students inside the classroom and maximize such factors to improve and develop the capabilities of all students to their advantage.

Practicing teachers can use the results of this study to impart culturally responsive teaching to ELL students, which would improve their academic achievement. Schools and institutions can also use the study's findings to improve their training programs to enhance their sensitivity towards cultural diversity students. As reported, the participants called for increased competency programs to improve their abilities to engage with their EL learners. Training programs for teachers benefit them as professionals and address the ever-present diversity issues in the classrooms.

Conclusion

ELLs' educators are faced not only with the onus of improving the academic success of students but also with developing creative ways to support cultural diversity. Cultural diversity has been studied for several years. However, no previous research has examined the lived experiences of ELL teachers to explore their perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. With the increase in the immigrant population, leading to an increase in students who learn English as a second language, there was a growing need to evaluate teachers' influence to reduce the academic gap between ethnic groups. The current study catered to this need in the literature.

An extensive literature review explored several overarching constructs related to the purpose, including teacher cultural attitudes, teachers' roles in educating EL learners, organizational culture, the relevance of culture to learning, and other constructs. This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis aimed to explore the lived experiences of general

education middle school teachers of ELL students and their practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classroom environments. A systematic analysis of interviews with 12 participants resulted in three major themes, i.e., a) the need for increased and targeted CRP training for teachers, b) the need to ensure that each child is represented inside the classroom, and c) beliefs in the success of CRP through the empowerment of students, 11 minor themes, and 13 subthemes. These themes yielded findings that have implications for academics and practitioners alike. The fifth chapter detailed each theme and the discussed researcher's implications, recommendations, and conclusions.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Questions

1. How is teaching ELL similar to or different from what you thought it would be?

2. Discuss the most challenging aspect of teaching ELL students.

3. What is your definition of cultural diversity?

4. What is the ethnic makeup in your class?

5. What are the cultural differences between yourself and your ELL students?

6. What are the cultural differences between your ELL students and peer students?

7. Describe your relationship with your ELL students.

8. Discuss your feelings regarding the emphasis today's curriculum places on multiculturalism and diversity.

9. Describe your preparation to teach ELL students.

10. How do you engage and motivate students of diverse cultural backgrounds in your daily lessons?

11. Please share an example(s) of CRP instructional practices that you have learned from professional development or training.

    a. Probe: If an example is shared, then ask what were the resources?

    b. Probe: If no example is shared, then ask what resources have supported you in implementing CPR in the classroom?

12. How have you applied other CRP skills in your classroom?

    a. Probe: What activities did you implement?

    b. Probe: What skills/activities, if any, have you tried that did not work for your students and why?

13. Please share a time when you used a successful CRP activity in your classroom.

    a. Probe: Describe the classroom cultural diversity at the time, if you recall.

    b. Probe: Describe how you determined the activity to be a success.

14. Given an example of how CRP impacted your ELL students' social interactions?

15. How has your practice of CRP impacted your ELL students' academic learning?

16. How has your practice of CRP empowered your ELL students?

17. If you could change how ELL students are taught in your school, what would it be?