Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: The Views of Latinx Students Inform Teacher Professional Development on Critical Consciousness

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CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY:
THE VIEWS OF LATINX STUDENTS INFORM TEACHER PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT ON CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY:

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The number of Latinx K-12 students has grown dramatically over recent years. There are approximately 12.5 million Latinx students in U.S. public schools. Despite these large population gains, inner city Latinx students continue to struggle academically. Their dropout rate is almost two times higher than that of white students, making it the highest of all ethnic and racial groups. In the past several decades, there has been a focus on accountability, school choice, and various other educational reforms that have been implemented with an aim to improve student performance. However, these reform efforts have not yielded the desired change and outcomes. Given the limited success of these measures, this research explores how student voice can inform pedagogy and teacher development of critical consciousness as part of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Using an action research approach, a group of 11 eighth grade students was convened, the Principal’s Advisory Group. The goal was to understand the lived experience of Latinx students in the school where the author is principal. The topic focused on how their experiences could inform professional development in the area of CRP and the critical consciousness component within it, with particular attention for any occasions when the students moved toward a critical read of their worlds. However, the conversations confirmed that the students at this school have not been prepared to think critically at that level and that as educators at this school, movement should be made toward cultivating critical consciousness,
encouraging student analysis and agency. Their responses substantiated that there are many obstacles that can get in the way of effectively teaching students and cultivating them as citizens who can make change and influence their environment. Possible openings toward realizing such aims were noticed. These observations made it evident that relational teaching should be considered a foundation to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Implications for school leaders and teacher professional development were discussed, as well as future research to consider.

Keywords: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Relational Teaching, Student Voice, Critical Consciousness
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DEDICATION

To my sister. This is in memory of you.

Dr. Florita Cotto
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Throughout my career as a teacher and administrator in urban areas, I have maintained an interest in finding the keys to the academic success of inner-city students. This interest was partly driven by my own experience as a Latinx who dropped out of high school in the 11th grade. I grew up in a city seven miles away from the school in this study. That city, as well as its schools, maintains very similar demographics to the city in which this study took place. During that time and place, it appeared that dropping out was as normal as graduating. This lived experience helped me obtain first-hand knowledge about the challenges faced by some of our historically underachieving populations, including Latinx students. Later, my experience as a teacher and administrator allowed me to witness a different perspective. During my time as an educator, I have observed the best and worst teacher qualities and practices being implemented, which solidified the desire within me, like many others, to find the pedagogy and learning environment most beneficial to inner city Latinx students.

Largely for these reasons, I decided to explore how student voice can inform the practice and development of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and critical consciousness within it. My interest in critical consciousness stemmed from seeing many students who did not have a voice or the support to address the structural obstacles they faced. It was my hope that integrating critical consciousness would help prepare the students to challenge these systemic disadvantages.

“School 42” is a pre-K to eighth grade school with a focus on academics and performing arts. It is a high poverty, urban school with a predominantly Latinx
population. Latinx students can inform teacher practice at School 42 by sharing their experiences at the school in order to understand how they are impacted by current school policies and teaching practices.

During this study, the assumption was made that each student is an expert on their individual learning experience and may have helpful suggestions that could inform CRP and critical consciousness as well as our preparation and development of teachers. It is the premise that in order for teachers to learn how students are impacted by poverty and racism, they should hear from the students themselves. Also, teachers might see the need to include critical consciousness in their work. With this knowledge students can learn not to bear the full burden of blame and responsibility for their social and academic challenges, but also learn to hold systems accountable for providing equal resources, education and opportunity. Because of the persistent opportunity gap and low academic performance of Latinx students, scholars like Villegas and Lucas (2007) have asserted that educating this population of students requires a particular approach to teaching that is based on understanding how cultural and socioeconomic factors impact learning.

As the principal of the school, I engaged in an action research that involved soliciting student voices directly. I planned to use my understanding from the students towards staff professional development (PD) at my site. PD can help educators make the connections to see how socioeconomic status, poverty, and race impact learning. In addition, staff can explore how practices of CRP and critical consciousness might lessen the negative effects on learning for these students and how critical consciousness can empower students to use their voices to effect change and be counted as principal members of the school community. The goal was that staff will be receptive to
professional development on CRP and critical consciousness will also commit to reevaluating their current pedagogical practices. However, this dissertation is only documenting the gathering of students’ voices, which is the first step in that process.

Statement of the Problem

The number of Latinx students in U.S. public schools has grown dramatically over recent years. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), the number of Latinx students increased by 50.4% between 2000 and 2012; this was the largest population increase of any group. There are approximately 12.5 million Latinx students in U.S. public schools. Despite these large population gains, inner city Latinx students continue to struggle academically. Inarguably, there are many factors that contribute to the academic challenges of Latinx students (Gandara, 2017; Irvine, 2010). Our school educators are just one component of a system and society that is failing this population (Gandara, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). Although Latinx students comprise approximately 25% of the public school population, their academic performance and high school and college graduation rates continue to be lower than that of white, African-American, and Asian students (Pew Research Center, 2016). Their dropout rate is almost two times higher than that of white students, making it the highest of all ethnic and racial groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Despite an increase in scores from 2005 to 2015, only 21% of Latinx fourth graders read at proficient levels in 2015; this is in comparison to 46% of white students and 35% of fourth graders overall (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2016).

Government efforts have been made to improve the quality of education and performance of all students. Students in New Jersey, the site for this study, are evaluated
mainly according to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS). These standards were created in order to establish a clear set of universal goals and expectations for each grade level. In addition to establishing the basic learning targets and skills for English Language Arts and Mathematics, they are used to ensure students are on track for college and career readiness. While these standards are rigorous, and have the potential to raise student performance as measured on the test given by Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), they do not address the specific needs of low-income, disadvantaged students because they do not recognize or address the disproportionate resources across communities or causes of educational disadvantages (Gandara, 2017; Gillborn, 2015). While all teachers and students are held to the same standards, the resources available to all are not equal. In addition, these standards and measures fail to empower students to socially and intellectually challenge the system that perpetuates the inequality.

In the past several decades, there has been a focus on accountability, choice, and various other educational reforms that have been implemented with an aim to improve student performance (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Payne, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). These include government support of school choice and charter schools, high-stakes testing, and reform efforts such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the Goals 2000 Educate America Act of 1994 and 2015, the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 and 2011, and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Comer, 2004; Darling–Hammond, 2007; Ravitch, 2010). However, these reform efforts have not yielded the desired change and outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gillborn, 2015; Payne, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). It is evident that raising student expectations and
teacher accountability is not enough. We will be complicit in perpetuating the structural inequities that continue to hinder students of color if educators do not recognize and address systemic injustice. Teachers must see how race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors impact the lives and learning of their students, (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006; Milner, 2010, 2011, 2017).

Given the limited success of the aforementioned measures, I was interested in exploring how student voices can inform pedagogy and teacher development of critical consciousness as part of CRP. By and large, many of the reforms in education have focused on teachers and changes to the teacher evaluation tools, which now include modifications for diverse learners, value-added measures, and recent updates to the student learning standards. While these changes aim to improve instruction and raise learning expectations, their execution rests squarely on the teachers. Despite this remarkable responsibility, teachers are asked to spend much of their professional development time making assumptions about students or guessing how a student might approach a topic or task; these assumptions and guesses are then used to inform their pedagogical practices (Blanchet, 2018). The PD that the teachers receive often is linked directly to meeting assessment goals, and the socio-cultural contexts of students' learning are disregarded. Understanding this, it appears that it would be more instructionally sound to include students in the process by soliciting their input; we might thereby reduce the need for guesswork and base teacher planning and preparation on accurate assumptions from student feedback. Blanchet (2018) argues that it would be most beneficial if we encouraged and prepared our students to be part of the educational process, as well as recognized student voices as viable sources for teacher education and
In the same vein, it is essential for teachers to have the practice of CRP as part of their mission, which focuses on the development of critical consciousness within their students. It is also crucial for teachers to embrace the notion that CRP can help students find their voice. Failing to inculcate critical consciousness means students of color may continue to receive the full blame for low outcomes, which are the result of the existing structural inequalities in education. If students of color fail to learn to read the world, they may not understand the inequitable structures in place that have created the disparities seen in American education, nor would they know to hold these structures accountable for providing them equal educational opportunities (Freire, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2003, & 2006).

The literature on CRP has highlighted an existing need for the cultivation of student voice in inner-city youth. Ladson-Billings proposes (1994) CRP as teaching that empowers students politically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Current instructional models of teaching aim to meet performance goals and standardized assessment targets. In contrast, CRP’s main component is more individualistic because it is based on the use of culturally specific references and terms to more effectively convey information and skills to minority learners. A strength of CRP is that it is specifically meant to counter a curriculum that is based mainly on white middle class norms and values. It requires teachers to consider the students’ family, immigration history, and specific strengths and challenges within their communities in order to create a more effective curriculum. Delpit (2006) asserts that teachers should know their students’ race and cultural groups and account for any prior knowledge and experience to better
anticipate how students will make meaning out of the content being presented.

CRP is a holistic approach, the implementation of which helps to prepare students to fight social inequalities and affect change, with specific attention given to the socio-political and critical consciousness component conceptualized by Freire (1972) and later introduced by Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995, 2003, & 2006). The work of Ladson-Billings (1992) highlights the importance of developing culturally relevant curricula and instruction for all students in order to empower students to become critical thinkers capable not only of examining educational content, but also what is needed to create a democratic and multicultural society. CRP uses the students’ culture to help them create meaning and understand the world. It helps students develop the ability to critically examine their place in the world and see it not as a “static reality but as a reality in process of transformation” (Freire, 1972, p. 12). This pedagogy ultimately focuses on the need for students to develop a critical consciousness in order to challenge the status quo.

Paulo Freire (1972) insisted on situating educational activity in the lived experience of his students. This philosophy has opened up a series of possibilities for the way that educators can approach their teaching practice. In a similar manner, proponents of CRP seek to make that connection for the students as well (Ladson-Billings, 1992). They maintain that content and curriculum refinement alone will not yield the desired outcomes for students of color. Culture is viewed as the basic curriculum by which child rearing, learning, development, and socialization has taken place (Gay, 2010). Therefore, pedagogy should tap into those pre-established resources. Doing so would facilitate learning, affirm and validate the student, and advance their learning without compromising cultural integrity (Erickson, 2012; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017;
Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Ladson-Billings’s (1994) concept of CRP differs from other multicultural educational concepts because it goes beyond addressing teacher dispositions to describing the type of learning that is believed to be most beneficial for diverse learners. CRP’s methodology includes critical consciousness or critical thinking advocacy. Although critical consciousness is part of the CRP model, far too often it gets omitted in practice. This is detrimental to the practice of CRP because it is this component, which paves the way for teachers to prepare students to question sociopolitical inequalities and ultimately affect transformational change.

For this reason, this study will be used for ongoing staff PD at School 42. It is not only beneficial to the field of education, but for School 42 to learn how student experiences can inform the practice of critical consciousness and teacher development of CRP. CRP was selected largely due to its focus on pedagogical practices that have yielded positive outcomes for African American students and those of culturally diverse backgrounds, as well as its critical consciousness component. Academic scholars like Ladson-Billings have not only sought to identify current flaws in the educational system that prevent effective learning for the marginalized, poor, and ethnic minority students, but have also identified the best practices for teaching minority students. Although this dissertation makes references to minorities and Latinxs, the paper mainly focuses on the latter. The term Latinx is a gender-neutral term used in preference of Latino or Latina. Latinx follows U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of Latinx, which broadly describes all those of “Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (p.2). More specifically, in this context it is used to refer to students who are from Latin America or are of Latin
American ancestry.

This study explores how student voice can inform practice and teacher development of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) and critical consciousness within it. Student voice can inform teacher practice at School 42 by inviting students to share their experiences at the school in order to understand how they are impacted by district policies as well as teaching practices.

As part of a larger action research effort, the data collected from students will be used to inform staff professional development. The students’ individual learning experiences and suggestions are used to inform CRP and our preparation and development of teachers. The premise is that in order for teachers to see the necessity of critical consciousness, teachers should hear from the students themselves, specifically in regard to how they are impacted by poverty, race/ethnicity, and stigma. It is hoped that teachers will genuinely embrace the notion of critical consciousness and see the need to include it in their work. This would be helpful so that students can learn not to solely bear the burden of blame and responsibility for their social and academic challenges but learn how to hold the systems accountable to provide them equal resources, education, and opportunity. Because of the persistent opportunity gap and low academic performance of Latinx students, scholars like Villegas and Lucas (2007) have asserted that educating this population of students requires a way of teaching that is based on understanding how culture and socioeconomic factors impact learning.

The purpose of the PD will be to prepare educators to learn how socioeconomic status, poverty and race impact the lives of their students. In addition, staff will explore how practices of CRP might lessen negative effects on learning for these students; and
how critical consciousness can empower students to proactively engage to change the system and use their voices to effect change and be counted as principal members of the school community. It is the goal that staff will be not only be receptive to professional development on CRP but will also commit to reevaluating their current pedagogical practices, this dissertation is only documenting the first step in that process: the gathering of students’ voices.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Researchers have demonstrated that student academic outcomes are considerably impacted by factors such as race and social class (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013). Although research has demonstrated that external factors and environment contribute more to students’ education than school, teachers are held fully accountable for their academic growth and success of the students. These measures hold the teacher as the main arbiter of knowledge (McCutcheon, 2002; Milner, 2010) and do not empower students to develop intellectually or socially in order to make meaningful and lasting contributions to society (Milner, 2010). Gay (2010) examined how Latinx, Black, and Native-American students are taught in U.S. schools. Based on the performance history of each group and the variability within them, it is imperative for the school system to change the way these students are taught (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) identified CRP as a paradigm that uses cultural referents in all aspects of learning. She supported this paradigm because it is used to filter curriculum and teaching through a frame to make it more meaningful and attainable for students of color (Gay, 2010; Milner, 2017). The enormity of the problem makes it necessary to include all stakeholders, including students, to collectively work toward change. For this reason, social justice and student voice were also noted to be integral to CRP. Student voice has been linked to an increase in academic achievement in marginalized student populations, more classroom participation, and an increase in positive behaviors (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Being consulted implies that students are
members of the school community, which, in turn, encourages them to feel an increased sense of belonging and a greater positivity about learning (Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016). As such, student-centered approach to learning is conducive to student academic achievement (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). The literature substantiates the importance of relationships to the learning of marginalized students (Nelson, 2016). Student-teacher relationships enable educators to ensure that their teaching is grounded on the knowledge that the students bring (Belle, 2019). The element of critical consciousness is a very important aspect of CRP, and its emphasis is grounded in the belief that students should move beyond consuming knowledge to critically examining it (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006; Milner, 2011). It also encompasses all the positive pedagogical practices such as student voice, relational, teaching, and social justice that have been demonstrated to be effective for improving the learning outcomes for disadvantaged students.

The literature review will discuss:

- Current efforts to improve education for all students
- The impact of social class on Latinx students
- Developing student voice, student voice and school leadership
- Teaching Latinx students: Relational teaching and Socially conscious teachers
- CRP and critical consciousness
- Limitations and implications for further study.
Context of Teaching and Learning

Gandara and Contreras (2009) illustrated how race and ethnicity intersect with social class, poverty, and under-resourced schools. Similarly, Cordero, (2014) found that schools in low-income neighborhoods obtained worse results in reading and mathematics than those in high-income areas. In an effort to understand how the cycle of academic and economic challenge is produced and perpetuated, we should consider that more than 40% of Latinx mothers lack a high school diploma, a rate that is almost seven times higher than that of white mothers. This is a significant statistic because while a lack of resources and educational support affects Latinx students, the greatest predictor of a student’s academic achievement is their parents’ educational attainment, in part, because of a lack of education then impacts their socio-economic possibilities (Gandara and Contreras, 2009).

From an educational perspective, the parent’s lack of education and resources are difficult areas to address, therefore, the attention is shifted to what is deemed to be within control—the teacher’s performance. The State of New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) (2017) website describes the government overhaul that was implemented to improve how instruction takes place in the classroom—an overhaul focused primarily on teacher evaluation. Radical changes were made to teacher evaluations, which are now comprised of three measures: teacher practice, Student Growth Objectives (SGO), and Student Growth Percentiles (SGP). These are scored and combined to determine the summative rating. Teacher practice is generally measured through classroom observations, in which teachers are evaluated in the following domains: teacher planning and preparation, classroom management, delivery of instruction, monitoring, assessment,
use of data, intervention and follow-up, family and community outreach, leadership, and professional responsibilities. The second component is SGO, which measures student growth within a predetermined period. The third component is the SGP, which measures the growth of students in comparison to others of similar demographics and academic potential.

By design, it is inevitable that education systems are narrowly focused on outcomes. It is also not surprising that they perpetuate disparity among students by ignoring the inequalities in academic achievement, which are tied to social class (Smith, 2012). The supports put in place to ensure fair and equitable schooling and performance of disenfranchised students is woefully inadequate (Smith, 2010). As noted by the Pew Research Center (2016), none of the previously mentioned reforms have made any significant impact on the lowest performing subgroups, which include Latinx and African-American students. In fact, these efforts overlook all the other community issues that factor into a child's learning such as poverty, racism, etc., yet hold the teacher fully accountable for the academic growth of the students.

While there is a variation in the quality of teachers and the outcomes they produce, we still need to consider the ways in which the students are impacted by their circumstances (Gorad & Beng, 2013). The indicators of the teacher evaluation do not address the need to enable students to identify and challenge structural inequalities. In fact, these measures hold the teacher as the main arbiter of knowledge (McCutcheon, 2002; Milner, 2010) and do not empower students to develop intellectually or socially in order to make meaningful and lasting contributions to society (Milner, 2010).

Moreover, research has demonstrated that outside factors and environments
contribute more to the students’ education than in-school factors (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). It is for this reason that Gandara (2010) argued that schooling benefits poor students more than middle class students. For middle class students, school serves as a supplement for what they are already learning at home and in the community; these resources ease their transition into school. For lower income children, education serves to fill existing gaps due to the fact that poor households have less access to learning experiences, materials and resources (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013). For instance, Latinx students in particular excel academically when they participate in a preschool (Garcia, 2001). Yet the positive effects of schooling and preschool are not maximized because the schools that Latinx children attend cannot sustain the aforementioned benefits and the academic growth. Essentially, Gandara and Contreras (2009) demonstrated that education does not take place in a vacuum. Poverty, access to quality teaching, parents’ low education levels, economic challenges, outside environment, limited English spoken at home, and the under-resourced/under-funded and effectively still segregated schools are all factors that contribute to the educational disparities among Latinx students. This wide range of issues is further evidence that teachers, students, families, and community members need to work collectively for any transformative change to take place.

In addition to the challenges described above, cultural disparity also tends to have a significantly negative impact on Latinx student performance because the white middle class norms, values, and practices reinforced in the school system are inconsistent with those of students with diverse backgrounds (Garcia & Chun, 2016). Allen, Scott, & Lewis (2013) “examine institutionalized systems and structures within K-12 district and
school contexts, coupled with teacher positionalities that perpetuate racial microaggressions” (p.117). Micro-aggressions are defined as the day-to-day experiences of marginalized people that lead to feelings of inferiority. According to Sue (2007), these include “verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). Schools continue to perpetuate societal ideologies. Teachers often interpret differences as deficits, dysfunctions, and disadvantages rather than assets in students and their cultures. Allen (2012) presented results to his study where he found that often times, these micro-aggressions present themselves as assumptions of intelligence and deviance and differential treatment in discipline. Allen et al., (2013) argued that these micro-aggressions have long-term negative consequences for the students. It is their contention that a comprehensive culturally affirming education would positively impact the social-emotional, intellectual, psychological wellbeing of African American and Latinx students in urban schools.

Gay (2010) examined how Latinx, African American, and Native American students are taught in U.S. schools. She believed, based on the performance history of each group and the variability within them, that it is imperative for the school system to change the way these students are taught. It is not enough to continue to point out the poor academic achievement levels of the students of color; this has not yielded results thus far. Gay (2010) identified CRP as a paradigm that does for students of color and low-income students what traditional ideologies and pedagogy have done for middle-class European American students. She supported this paradigm because it is used to filter curricula and teaching through a frame to make it more meaningful and attainable
for students of color (Gay, 2010; Milner, 2017). Gay (2010) observed that the CRP framework “insists that educational institutions accept the legitimacy and viability of ethnic group cultures in improving learning outcomes” (p. 26).

It is this same insistence that educational institutions must accept the legitimacy and viability of students’ cultural backgrounds that led Ladson-Billings (2006) and Irvine (2010) to argue that there was no “achievement gap” but instead an education debt owed to students of color (Milner, 2010; Milner, 2017). Irvine (2010) suggested that the perceived achievement gap might actually be a reflection of other areas in which the educational system has failed its students and we should shift our focus to the gaps that are driving the notion of achievement gaps. Ladson-Billings (2006) concluded that while disparities exist, in the U.S. there is not as much of an achievement gap as there is an “education debt.” She challenged researchers to move beyond the focus on academic performance and to focus on the educational debt owed to the students it has poorly served.

Milner, 2010’s statement echoed that of Irvine (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2006). In urban education we should not talk about gaps without addressing:

the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the healthcare gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap and the quality childcare gap (p. xii).

It appears curricular change is not enough to effectively address the vast areas in which the educational system has failed its students. The enormity of the problem makes it necessary to include all stakeholders, including students, to collectively work toward change.
Developing Social Justice and Student Voice

According to Belle (2019), education is the best place to start to change the world but only if U.S. public schools can live up to their purported role as social equalizers. This can only happen through the work of social justice education. Student voice is an important component of social justice education. It can be as simple as students sharing their opinions with the administration but most effectively, is the inclusion of students in addressing and solving problems. Student voice tends to focus on examining process and outcomes of organizations and programs that are intended to help them. Mitra’s recent study (2012) examined youth participation in U.S. contexts. She found that the U.S. has bottom-up initiatives, which lead to strong student voice outcomes but struggle with the sustainability of the work. According to Mitra (2012), in order for student voice to be maintained, inquiry should be integrated to the curriculum as a way of teaching and learning. Also, schools should include many layers of opportunities for inquiry-based practices. The initiatives created should be structurally embedded and become part of the daily practice of the school if they are to endure. Biddle (2019) believed this may be due to “the latent custodial and sorting functions of schooling—that of teacher and student” (p.1). The U.S. does not have formal systems to encourage youth participation, unlike Europe and other parts of the world, where it is supported by policies and national educational structures (Mitra, Serriere & Kirshner, 2014). However, countries like New Zealand who are implementing policies and initiatives to support youth agency and student voice in schools are finding that underlying beliefs youth agency must change before student centered learning can effectively take place in its schools (Biddle, 2019; Bourke & Loveridge, 2016). One of the most common types of student participation
found in the U.S. is facilitated minority group youth organizations, which are growing in under resourced neighborhoods and urban communities. These youth organizations work towards community impact and aim to solve community problems and increase political engagement.

Han, (2017) described democratically oriented classrooms as another type of student participation in which instruction is student centered and student voice is prioritized. Based on Han’s observations of democratically oriented classrooms, she was able to observe that sharing authority and humility elicited a reciprocal response from students. She also concluded that when given this opportunity, students used talk to lead, extend other’s thinking, and advocate for one another. Mitra and Serriere (2012) of Penn State University expanded on this concept with their claim that the “ABCs” all young people need to succeed in school are the following:

A. **Agency**, the ability to exert influence and power in a given situation, the right to question authority, and the opportunity to be heard and respected.

B. **Belonging**, they should develop meaningful relationships with other adults and feel they have a role within the school. Being consulted implies that the student is a member of the school community, which, in turn, encourages him or her to feel an increased sense of belonging and a greater positivity about learning (Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016).

C. **Competence** is described by Mitra and Serriere (2012) as a critical component for student success because it involves students developing new abilities and being appreciated for their talents.

D. **Discourse** or exchanging ideas and opinions to work towards a common goal
were cited as conducive to favorable student outcomes.

E. **Efficacy** in civics was noted as the belief that one can make a difference and has the responsibility to do so is an integral part of success (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Westheimer (2017), Mitra and Serriere (2012) and Baroutsis, et al., (2016) agreed that in order to effectively teach students to think students should be encouraged to ask questions, not just absorb information. Students should be engaged with controversial issues: “That is, young people have a right to be heard and to have their opinions taken into account on all matters relating to them, including education” (Baroutsis et al., 2016, p.125). Students should think deeply and broadly and go beyond regurgitation—a process of learning that recognizes only one interpretation. Instructors should teach strategies that help students learn to root instruction in local contexts and work within the students’ surroundings and circumstances. Westheimer (2017), Mitra and Serriere (2012) and Baroutsis, et al., (2016) recommended engaging students in community projects that provide the opportunity for real-world challenge of their beliefs.

In contrast, Reeves (2009) had three suggestions for teaching social responsibility. He believed one should teach behavior, not beliefs and allow students to recognize the results of their actions and the importance of their responsibilities. Reeves (2009) emphasized the importance of respecting the corporate sector; he believed that social justice educators should not engage in bashing government agencies, businesses, or organizations. Reeves (2009) advised educators to avoid political agendas and stick to universal principles such as the Golden Rule, the biblical rule of *do unto others as you would like them to do unto you*, and focus on topics such as eradicating poverty and increasing literacy.
According to Westheimer (2017), the curriculum used in schools is reflective of the society we want to create. Schools prepare children to follow rules to prepare them to function in society. Schools are not necessarily teaching children to be good citizens, but they are indirectly teaching citizenship: “Whether teachers explicitly “teach” lessons in citizenship or not, students learn about community organization, the distribution of power and resources, rights, responsibilities, and of course injustice” (Westheimer, 2017, p. 15). Besides content, teachers serve an inevitable influence on molding children’s views on the world; these influences and experiences ultimately will shape society (Rogers & Westheimer, 2017). Schools should work to prepare citizens, teach students to question, and expose students to multiple perspectives.

Developing a young person’s voice with the purpose of helping them engage in democratic practices, and challenge systemic inequalities does not always look the same in each circumstance. Reeves’ (2009) approach to teaching social justice is questionable. While Reeves (2009) engaged in teaching social responsibility, his resistance to calling out certain agencies and the government is problematic, especially since this is the logical place to begin when challenging disenfranchisement. Just as teachers are the gatekeepers of learning and are tasked with mediating government policies and teaching requirements in their practices and philosophies, so is the case for those who teach social justice. As a result, their individual approach and personal philosophies impact their concept of democratic schooling. Schools should also encourage students to consider their specific surroundings and circumstances: “If being a good democratic citizen requires thinking critically about important social, political, and economic assumptions locally, nationally, and globally—recent trends in education policy are at odds with that key aspect of
citizenship” (Westheimer, 2017, p.17). In this case, Reeves (2009) by advising educators to avoid political agendas and stick to universal principles such as the Golden Rule, is asking educators to become gatekeepers and mediate their responsibilities as teachers of social justice by steering students away from challenging systems that perpetuate inequality.

Another reason that our schools are not conducive to the development of thoughtful and critically engaged public citizens is due to standardization. In response to recent education reforms and at times pressure from stakeholders, goals like “career preparation” or preparation for 21st century learning, schools have emphasized these individual goals over the common good (Westheimer, 2017, p.13). In addition, schools have become focused on math and literacy at the expense of citizenship education, which is less tangible. Westheimer (2017) elaborated, “Since we can’t measure what we care about, we start to care about what we can measure” (p. 27). Westheimer’s goal was to focus our attention on the kind of citizens we want to produce, and the educational programs required to develop such citizens. Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) had a different perspective, they launched a project which consisted of a series of articles aimed to renew attention to the importance of engaging each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for college and career readiness. While recognizing that learning is a social activity, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) also shared data to support that student-centered approach to learning is conducive to student academic achievement. In essence, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) advocated for a focus on career and college readiness but recognized that is important to pay particular attention to the importance of customizing education to respond to each student’s needs and interests, emphasizing student voice and
a student-centered approach.

Joel Westheimer (2016) recalled being a first-year teacher and how he learned to help his students learn, not only to use critical thinking, but also to apply critique and moral commitment to other spheres. In his class, he experienced that students recognized racism and bigotry was wrong they were unable to apply that in their own lives. He became aware that his students were able to “identify a contemporary example of prejudice and connect it to a widely agreed moral standard that called prejudice wrong,” but did not see the relation between those examples and their own behavior and language they used towards one another (Westheimer, 2016, p.68). Westheimer (2016) did not offer his stance, instead he allowed his students to reach the desired understanding; he believed teachers should use examples and encourage new interpretations that are contemporary and relevant. Noddings and Brooks (2017) would agree with Westheimer: in most cases, teachers should use “pedagogical neutrality,” meaning that they recommend the instructor refrain from interjecting an opinion and instead assist the students in learning how to listen to opposing views, and think critically. “However, there are issues when teachers should take an official moral stance” (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 33). The problem as Noddings and Brooks (2017) see it, is that once the instructor takes a stand on a controversial issue, there is no room for discussion.

Promoting student voice has been linked to an increase in academic achievement in marginalized student populations, more classroom participation, and an increase in positive behaviors (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). One of the most powerful tools for positively influencing academic achievement is to give students a stake in their learning. Han, (2017) demonstrated that even young elementary students are capable of assuming
leadership roles in various contexts such as the classroom. The third graders who participated in the study demonstrated that student-centered classrooms that capitalize on self-determination and connectedness can yield positive academic and social results (Han, 2017). Mitra (2004) affirmed that the inclusion of student voice could help to create meaningful experiences that also meet the developmental needs “especially for students who otherwise do not find meaning in their school experiences” (p.651). Belle (2019) advised that educators should acknowledge whom the students are by taking the time to learn about their families, cultures, and communities. Educators should also ensure that their teaching is grounded on the knowledge that the students bring. Student voice activities look different from school to school. These activities range from schools gathering information from their students via focus groups, audience facilitated conversation with students, surveys, working with teachers to address school or local issues or follow up actions based on students’ ideas (Han, 2017). In order to effectively plan, Belle (2019) advised social justice educators to create a curriculum map and unit plans for the year so they could start with desired outcomes and plan backwards. This is a useful strategy that aims to ensure the teachers cover the desired curricula and students finish the year with the targeted skills and knowledge.

To help students develop critical thinking skills, social justice educators can support their students’ preparation by making themselves aware of their own implicit biases and encouraging their students to question everything (Belle, 2019). The open conversations that solicit student voice and welcome students to talk about injustices in schools can raise equity issues that tend to get “swept under the rug” by administrators and other adults in the school. These exchanges also make it difficult to shift the blame
back to the student. Mitra (2004) cited a study took place in Canada (The Manitoba School Improvement Program), which documented a correlation between an increase in student voice and in school attachment. In addition, they found that students improved academically when their voices are valued. Increasing student voice in school helped reengage alienated students by providing them with a sense of ownership and belonging in their school. It helped students gain a sense of their talents and abilities and learn that they could affect change within their school. Also, increasing student voice helped make students aware of their own learning process and supported teachers to more effectively meet student needs.

**Student Voice and School Leadership**

Inviting students to participate in the governance of their school enables school leaders to understand the necessary perspectives needed to effect change: “Student voice helps cultivate a school climate, culture, and practices that encourage safe and productive learning environments” (Mansfield, 2011, p.5). The benefits of investing in student voice far outweigh the costs. Brasof (2018) cautioned that at times, influential adults in the school set a negative tone by initiating and leading school improvement efforts and positioning students on the fringe, rather than as central partners of school change. This model justified the exclusion of students by presenting them as unable or too immature to effectively participate in the decision-making process. In this way, school leaders may be perpetuating existing social inequalities in the school. Educational leadership researchers, Dantley & Tillman, (2009) and Mansfield et al., (2018) contend that it is critical for school leaders to come to terms with the way in which their leadership practices may be perpetuating marginalizing conditions for the students.
Mansfield et al., (2018) provided examples of leadership practices that are ethical, socially just, and student-focused. One way to address these issues is for school leaders to reflect on their own position of privilege and oppression and how these matters might influence their personal attitudes and beliefs. Cheung, Flores and Sutton (2019) went further by recommending that school leaders begin to increase student voice and activism by establishing a relationship with students that makes them allies. Mansfield et al., (2018) agreed that “most schools are not structured in ways that encourage student voice” (p. 24). While soliciting student voice is not common or prioritized in most educational research and practice, listening to and considering student voice is crucial to ethical leadership. Mansfield et al., 2018 further explained:

Listening to and considering the voice of the student inherently operationalizes ethical and socially just leadership practices that are student-focused and hold promise to sensitize our research efforts, destabilize oppressive school leadership structures, and create positive and innovative environments for students (p. 11).

Mitra (2008) expressed regret that “age and ability segregation, coupled with unmanageable school and class sizes, increases student alienation” (p. 24). Mansfield, Welto and Halx (2018) cited substantial empirical evidence, which shows that there are many advantages to allowing students to have their own voice. These advantages include curricular development and improvement, stronger relationships between teachers and students, and personal and academic resilience, which are strengthened when students learn to advocate for themselves (p. 14). Mansfield, Welto and Halx (2018) also referenced numerous researchers who have substantiated the notion that ignoring student voice often results in students feeling “alienated, anonymous, powerless, and disengaged.” They emphasized the importance of critical pedagogy and the use of student voice to obtain cultural assets as a means to enhance their school experience “and
challenge the power structures in place that silence the voices of marginalized students” (Mansfield, Welto and Halx, 2018, p. 17). The EL population are among the most marginalized students. It is important for teachers to be aware of how their practices might be perpetuating the disenfranchisement of these students. Teachers can improve the learning context for EL students by having the preparation to work effectively with immigrant populations and finding ways to include their voice.

**Teaching EL Students**

Latinx students face the widest teacher diversity gap of any ethnic group (Villegas, Strom & Lucas, 2012). Villegas, Strom & Lucas (2012) suggested “that teachers of color are particularly suited to teaching students of color because they bring to their work an inherent understanding of the backgrounds and experiences of these learners (p. 285). Currently nine percent of teachers nationwide identify as Latinx, yet Latinx students constitute almost twenty five percent of the total student population (Shapiro & Partelow, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Lewis et al. (2012), affirmed that students’ perceptions about teacher caring had a direct impact on whether they believed they could learn the subject matter, regardless of its difficulty level. This link was observed to be strongest with Hispanic English Learners (ELs), as compared with Hispanic English Speakers. Therefore, the researchers concluded that ELs stand most to gain from teachers who have a caring disposition.

Nonie Lesaux (2013), has asserted that more has to be done to address the needs of Latinx students and particularly its EL population. After years of receiving attention, Latinx students still have made very little academic measurable growth. There is an existing gap between them and more advantaged peers; this gap is evident in opportunity
graduation rates (Lesaux, 2013). Good and Braden (2000) reported that, “Children attending poorly supported schools in impoverished or inner-city schools do not perform as well as those in affluent areas where funds are readily available to provide technology, laboratory and library facilities or other types of equipment and supplies needed for lessons in various subjects” (p. 71). Because most Latinx students attend schools that are economically and racially segregated, the classrooms in these schools provide Latinx students with fewer opportunities to learn than peers from higher income communities (Good & Braden, 2000). Lesaux, (2013) emphasized the importance of teacher training and support, particularly for those teachers that serve this population. According to Lesaux, the teachers should focus on academic growth of the entire population by providing both ELs and English speakers with content and language-rich classrooms. In essence, although ELs require additional instructional support, effective classroom practices will not only benefit ELs but all Latinx students (Goldenberg, 2013).

It is important to consider the needs of EL students, particularly when studying Latinx students. This population is frequently disregarded and subjected to subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). Often times, the classroom practices involving these students lead to them feeling disconnected from learning and their teachers. Black (2005) argued that special attention should be given to the English acquisition of EL students because learning the language well can be the determining factor in the future success of the EL student. Successful acquisition of the English language means that the students are more likely to finish high school and enroll in college. He recommended that ESL precede English immersion because research does not support the English only approach (Black, 2005). Black’s (2005) position is supported by University of California
researcher Kris Gutierrez (2008), who found that ‘subtractive’ programs or programs that do not build on or extend the native language, tend to produce negative results because they call for the use of English, instead of the native language for learning and tests.

Her work builds on Angela Valenzuela’s (1999) on Subtractive Schooling, which looked at how schools subtract resources from students. The first way was what she called ‘De-mexicanization’ or subtracting the students’ culture and language. Valenzuela (1999; Valenzuela, 2016) found this to be especially detrimental to the academic achievement and the assimilation of the students. The second is the perceived lack of caring between the students and teachers. The process of De-Mexicanization involved stripping the students of their and resources. There was nothing for the students to use as a foundation for academic advancement and there was nothing for them to use as a commonality to bond with others born in the U.S. Valenzuela (1999) and Gutierrez (2008) found that students benefit from ‘additive’ programs. Recently, Valenzuela (2016) once again expressed concern that it is not going to get better since “the current subtractive schooling framework finds expression in our state and federally mandated high stakes accountability systems (p. 1). Gutierrez (2008) concurred with Valenzuela, (1999 & 2016), that it is critical for students to maintain their native language while the second language is acquired, and that those who did, mastered English quicker and did better in school. This type of program produced more positive outcomes because students were encouraged to use their native language while they learned English; concluding that native language should be used to promote academic development and English language acquisition in ELs (Black, 2005; Goldenberg, 2013).
Relational Teaching

The literature and this study substantiate the importance of relationships to the learning of marginalized students. To underscore Valenzuela’s (1999) point about the perceived lack of caring between teachers and students, we look at Nelson’s (2016) study, which examined how Relational Teaching improves the learning and engagement of African American boys. Nelson (2016) also explored the importance of positive student-teacher relationships for African American boys and how these relationships help students develop a voice to counter the existing negative narratives and stereotypes about them. Dumas and Nelson (2016) argued that often times negative student-teacher relationships are a result of the devalued position of African American students and their “unimaginable boyhoods.” They believed that the public discourse on African American males has contributed to some having difficulty in seeing the humanity of these students. Yet Raider-Roth (2015) reminded us that relational images also play a part in how teachers interact with students. She described “in relational psychology, the idea of relational images connotes the ways in which we bring dynamics of old relationships into the prism of current ones” (Raider-Roth, 2015, p. 38). Nelson (2016) also established the importance of relational teaching for a population that is in the bottom quartile across all achievement outcomes, all of which are exacerbated by racial marginalization and poverty. These studies highlight the need to identify and address factors that interrupt or interfere with student-teacher relationships, which lead to the realization of the link between relational teaching and Relational Cultural Theory. This theory is based on the notion that people need connections in order to thrive. In essence, human brains are wired for connection with others, individuals thrive through connections and when we
fail to make them—we suffer (Banks, 2016; Comstock et al., 2008; Miller, 1976).

Nelson (2016) was able to identify gestures consistently enacted by relationally effective teachers.

During this study, it was found that relationships were important when enacting CRP, and that attention must be given to the factors that interrupt or interfere with establishing connections and relationships. This significant realization helped make a significant linkage between relational teaching and CRP.

**Socially Conscious Teachers**

Belle (2019) advised that educators acknowledge who the students are by taking the time to learn about their families, cultures, and communities. Educators should also ensure that their teaching is grounded on the knowledge that the students bring. Belle (2019) advised social justice educators to create a curriculum map and unit plans for the year so they could start with desired outcomes and plan backwards. This is a useful strategy that aimed to ensure the teachers cover the desired curricula and students finish the year with the targeted skills and knowledge. Social Justice educators should be aware of their own implicit biases and encourage their students to question everything in order to develop critical thinking skills (Belle, 2019).

Overall, 49% of the nation’s students are of color, and in larger cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles that number rises to over 80% (Borrero, Flores, & De la Cruz, 2016). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014) projected that by 2019-2020, Latinx children will account for 30% of the student population (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017). Given this data, there is a need for teachers who want to bring about change through education, are willing to engage in pedagogy that disrupts the
cycle of oppression and are also willing to tackle inequitable and discriminatory practices in school. These teachers should be able to provide an alternate point of view to the students in order to relate to their backgrounds and work with them to examine social injustice and inequalities (Borrero, 2011).

Socially conscious teachers are needed because too often teachers bring their preconceptions into the classroom. Villegas and Lucas (2007) argued that many teachers have low expectations and a deficit perspective when it comes to students from socially subordinated groups, which leads teachers to treat students differently and results in negative outcomes and self-perceptions. Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) also asserted that some American teachers have higher expectations for European-American students than they do for Latinx and African American children. A study conducted at Johns Hopkins concluded that white teachers, who make up 82% of the teaching force, are less likely to expect academic success from black students, especially boys (Will, 2017). African-American students, along with those students who have been identified as low achievers, tend to receive more negative attention, criticism, and reprimand (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). Essentially, some teachers may display micro-aggressions toward students, singling them out based on race, income, or disability. However, more often than not, the teacher may not be aware of their actions (Sparks, 2015; Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). *It's not the culture of poverty, It’s the poverty of culture:* Gloria Ladson Billings talked about the tendency of novice teachers to use self-esteem and culture of poverty as excuses when they could not be successful with students. She emphasized that this is a reflection of teacher training and not the individual.

Socially conscious teaching entails the acknowledgement of the different ethnic
groups and their impact on students’ attitudes and approach to learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b). Students are taught to value their cultural heritage as well as the heritage of others. These teachers ensure there is a connection made between school and home as well as real-world content. This is not just a strategy applied in the classroom, but a whole approach to teaching. Hence, socially conscious teaching requires true dedication and change in teacher practice and pedagogy (Borrero, 2011; Borrero & De la Cruz, 2016; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017).

Pedagogy that focuses on social and critical consciousness in education is largely based on Freire’s notion of reading the world, which focused on teachers as change agents (Freire & Macedo, 1987). To these teachers, teaching is a craft, a calling that aims to defy the odds and expectations of lower income and marginalized students. They are motivated by the desire to empower students, improve their learning, and change the view students have of themselves so that they too could see themselves as agents of transformation and change (Dixson, 2014; Freire, 1972; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Critical Consciousness**

The element of critical consciousness is a very important aspect of CRP, and its emphasis is grounded in the belief that students should move beyond consuming knowledge to critically examining it (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006; Milner, 2011). Students are not necessarily conscious of how general curricula and the school system fail to effectively address their needs. Similarly, educators are not conscious of how their pedagogical practice fails to tap into a wide array of communicative and cognitive resources (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006). It is for this reason that the critical consciousness component of the CRP framework is considered a vital pedagogical
approach to reform these issues. Critical consciousness calls for both educators and students to be reflective and engaged and to take an active approach in reforming the system. In this framework, students are not passive consumers of information; instead, they actively interact with the content not only to make meaning, but also to be self-aware of their position in the overall structure. Teaching is viewed as a process to empower students to maintain cultural competence and to prepare for academic success through the development of a critical consciousness (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006; Milner, 2011).

Critical consciousness is grounded in the theory, pedagogy, and practice of Paulo Freire (1972). It is composed of three core elements: critical reflection, critical motivation or efficacy, and critical action. Diemer, Rapa, Voight, and McWhirter (2016) have described critical reflection as the process of learning to question inequality and injustice, as well as seeing and understanding how things really work. For instance, critical reflection allows students to question situations such as a teaching vacancy that has gone unfilled for six months, or why a disproportionate number of students from a particular racial group make up the majority of the disciplined and/or suspended population at school. Minority students would not take such common situations for granted but instead learn to question, understand, and critically reflect on them. Moreover, white students could also learn about structural inequality and learn to question the privilege and power structures within it. Freire’s (1972) terms—critical motivation and critical action—point to the commitment to effect change on the level of individual or collective activism. An engagement to take collective action might see students rallying to speak with the principal about an unfilled vacancy or even presenting
a complaint directly to the Board of Education. As Diemer et al. (2016) stated,

Freire believed that developing literacy was intertwined with learning to critically read dehumanizing social conditions, because marginalization and oppression led people to believe that their voices and perspectives were irrelevant, that they were powerless, and that literacy was not necessary for *people like us* (p. 216).

While it is important for educators in such a setting to be involved in collective action that brings more resources to the students and community they serve, the educator is also charged with the task of not only proving that the possibilities of the future are real, but also of shaping a strong education to make that future practically accessible. Students must be made to understand the cause of their disenfranchisement in order for them to reflect critically on how to address it. Freire’s (1972) theory was based on his observation that as oppressed individuals understood their system of oppression, their views about themselves in relation to society changed.

**Professional Development Related to CRP**

Before CRP can take place, teachers need to engage in critical reflection (Howard, 2003). This is recommended as a way for teachers to reflect about equity and social justice issues and also to help them find ways to incorporate social justice and equity into their practice. Howard (2003) suggests that critical reflection is a prelude to creating culturally relevant teaching strategies. He argues conceptual and practical reasons that teacher educators must be aware that critical reflection is needed for effective culturally relevant teaching. Howard’s (2003) stance was that the development of culturally relevant teaching strategies is dependent upon the teacher’s critical reflection about race, culture, and equity as it relates to them and their students.

Once the teachers have done this, they may be better prepared to engage in the work. After critical self-reflection, the teachers’ knowledge should go beyond respect for
or recognition of differences; they should know the characteristics of the culture, the contributions of the ethnic groups as well as an awareness of their own bias (Gay, 2002). It is important for teachers to thoroughly understand what internal or external factors get in the way of enacting culturally responsive pedagogy.

Gay (2002) argued that preservice and practicing teachers should learn how to analyze and revise textbooks and other instructional materials to ensure there are adequate representations of culturally diversity. Gay (2002) advises teachers to be prepared to do away with the misconception that there is no room for CRP in content areas such as math or science due to concerns that its inclusion may lead to “watering down” the curriculum. She elaborated that in fact, culturally responsive teaching focused on multicultural instructional strategies by enhancing or adding multicultural content to existing curriculum (Gay, 2002). Starker and Fitchett (2013) conducted a study in which they concluded that culturally relevant teaching can be successfully taught in preservice education courses. This validated Villegas and Lucas’s (2002) notion that cultural responsiveness can and should be taught throughout a teacher’s education program and not isolated to a single diversity course.

Morrison, Robbins and Rose (2008) sought to compile the established methods by which educators were implementing culturally relevant approaches through examination of 45 classroom-based research studies from 1995 to 2008. Morrison et al. (2008) acknowledged that the noted practices are not a “prescribed set of instructional moves” but snapshots of what was taking place in the various classrooms. Morrison et al. (2008) rightfully believed that this study could assist teacher candidates and professional development for those who were also seeking to enact culturally relevant approaches (p.

For the first tenet, high academic expectations, teachers addressed challenging curriculum by modeling, scaffolding, and when necessary, breaking down rigorous material (Morrison *et al.*, 2008). The teachers in the study used the students’ strengths as the foundation for instructional starting points. They planned lessons and activities that met students at their academic level in order for them to have positive initial encounters with subject matter (Morrison *et al.*, 2008). Banks and Banks (2009) acknowledged that it was not enough to teach math and literacy; teachers would also have to teach students how to question and become reflective and active citizens, and agents of social change. In addition, these teachers are expected to be personally vested in the students and take personal responsibility for their success by creating and nurturing cooperative learning environments that foster motivation and participation on the part of students. Teachers in Morrison’s *et al.*, (2008) study also made classroom behavior rules explicit; they ensured that students understood their expectations for their behavior and provided structured routines.

Culturally competent teachers understand that students do not have to give up their cultural identity in order to achieve academically (Morrison *et al.*, 2008). Teachers should be able to successfully use diversity to improve instruction instead of avoiding it. Teachers can make learning relevant by connecting content to the identity of the students,
this is necessary in order to create a link between what happens at home and school (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Gay, 2013). Yosso (2006) described this work as building on “array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (p. 69). Yosso (2006) also argued the need for teachers to combat racialized assumptions about the students and their families by encouraging teachers to make efforts to build relationships with the community where they teach.

Teacher practice in the third tenet, critical consciousness, would be evidenced by teachers taking on a critical stance toward their content instruction and seeking to help students become critical thinkers. Researchers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Durden, Dooley and Truscott, 2014) explained the importance of teachers becoming adept in intentionally creating opportunities and educational experiences for students to question and combat oppression and injustice. Moreover, teachers engaged students in social justice work, and educated students on the power dynamics of society with the students (Morrison et al., 2008). Lastly, teachers should model equity in the classroom and be mindful of power balance and the importance of structuring democratic classrooms (Banks & Banks, 1995).

**Practical Implementation of CRP**

CRP can be an excellent intervention in our current pedagogical practice; it aims to teach students to read the world and see the current arrangements of society as unjust and disenfranchising. Youth learn not to blame themselves or accept deficit labels. They can begin to demand more opportunities and resources for themselves and their communities. Yet the question of how exactly to ground our teaching in critical
The three tenets of CRP focus on academic achievement, sociopolitical consciousness, and cultural competence. Ladson-Billings (1994) suggested that the way students are taught affects the way the content is perceived. Instead of a standardized curriculum and pedagogical practice that does not take into account the students’ relation to the content being taught, CRP methods in the classroom are always cognizant of the relationship between classroom content and the students’ background. For this reason, in her book *The DreamKeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) focused on the practice of the teachers and not on the curriculum being taught; she draws attention to the how rather than the what. Ladson-Billings (1994) described culturally relevant teaching as “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). The notion of cultural relevance uses the students’ culture to make learning relevant.

In Freire’s (1972) problem posing approach, students were asked thought provoking questions but instead of answering the questions, they were encouraged to reply by asking questions. In other words, students were taught to question answers instead of answer questions. The students were naming the problems in their world and then building curriculum from their existing socio-political inequality. Also, contrary to current instructional practices, in a lesson with critical consciousness, teachers would pause for reflection and debriefing. Since teachers were asking the students to question everything, it was important for students to be given the time to take in the information and have discussions that will push their thinking. The teacher would also point out shifts in thinking, discourse, and text. The purpose of this strategy is to model what
critical thinking looks like. It also helps students and teachers search for answers
together and deviates from the banking approach to education, where the students are
seen as empty vessels into which teachers deposit knowledge (Freire, 1972).

Another strategy for CRP implementation is for students and teachers to work to
identify personal feelings and biases that may unconsciously influence learning and may
affect the course of the discussion (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). For instance, in one
description of culturally relevant teaching, Ms. Lewis, a sixth-grade teacher, explored and
debated the question of whether ancient Egyptians were black (Ladson Billings, 1994, p.
92-94). Students not only understood the relevance and importance of that question for
their own identity, but they also researched many other aspects of the ancient Egyptians,
learning more than they probably would have from a textbook. The students began with
an essential question, which was significant for their own ideas about identity and had a
connection to their culture. They then moved beyond the expectations of the curriculum
to determine their position on this debated question; their interest thus played an active
role in how the content was being taught (Ladson Billings, 1994).

This practical example illustrated what CRP looks like in the classroom. The
lesson was student-centered, with the teacher taking the role of a facilitator. The teacher
was culturally competent and was able to “empower her students intellectually, socially,
emotionally, and politically” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 476). Ms. Lewis helped
students “recognize and honor their cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access
to the wider curriculum” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36). Students not only learned the
content but engaged in socio-political consciousness raising. The students obtained the
information they needed through active engagement in the content being presented, and
were also helped to “recognize, understand and critique current social inequalities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 476). This lesson had the potential to yield life-altering results because it imparted knowledge that had a more permanent place in the student’s overall knowledge of the world. This emphasis on the how over the what is a critical embodiment of socially conscious pedagogy. The ultimate goal of CRP and critical consciousness is that students are not just learning passively by reading about issues, but instead are engaged in practicing critical reflection and hands-on experiences to improve their awareness of their social position.

Emory University professor Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2009) described the following six myths about cultural competence that result in awkward moments, ineffective instructional practices, and counterproductive relationships between teachers and their students and parents. The first myth is that Culturally Competent Pedagogy means including popular culture, ethnic holidays, and colloquial speech in the classroom. CRP goes beyond just celebrating ethnic holidays or putting up posters, etc. These practices could be seen as compliant or superficial. CRP calls for critical thinking and hands on engagement on the part of the student. The second and third myths are that only teachers of color can be culturally relevant that CRP is not appropriate for white students. These are myths because teachers of all colors can bring awareness to their students and all students and teachers could work to help improve their awareness and social responsibility. Another is that culturally relevant curriculum lacks academic rigor. All tasks that the students engage in such as critical thinking, questioning, analyzing and applying concepts are at the top of Bloom’s Taxonomy and Depth of Knowledge wheel. These are considered the highest forms of thinking for students. The fifth is that the
purpose of CRP is to help diverse students improve their self-esteem and feel good about themselves. While this may be an effect of the students being informed and learning to advocate for themselves it is not the purpose. Last, is that culturally relevant teachers should adopt their teaching to accommodate stereotypes. Teachers should see students as individuals and treat them as such. Teachers should be mindful that CRP goes beyond higher test scores and the focus of it is to assist students to change society and not just survive or exist in it (Irvine, 2009).

**Limitations of CRP**

Although there is a commonsense appeal to the CRP framework in education, there have been many challenges in its practical implementation. Some of the challenges of CRP can be attributed to the component of teaching for critical consciousness. Sleeter (2012) described how standardized curricula and pedagogy have superseded most attempts to incorporate CRP. Oftentimes, the ideas of CRP are considered liberal and progressive reforms, without substantial educational validity (Sleeter, 2012). In turn, some educators resist the effort to change their practice and instead choose to maintain the status quo. This resistance is evidence that structural complexities will limit this kind of teaching and that students and teachers should be prepared to expect these roadblocks and find ways to circumvent them.

Biddle (2019) noted, “without effective networks of support, many of these initiatives flounder after 1 or 2 years as individual educators or educational leaders struggle to overcome technical barriers or face resistance to institutionalizing a new positioning of youth within schools (Mager & Nowak, 2012, p.2; Mitra, 2009). Young’s (2010) study is a good illustration of this type of obstacle. Young (2010) conducted
interviews in an urban school to assess CRP as a viable pedagogical tool. She found that there were “deep structural complexities” that involved racism and/or cultural bias on the part of the staff, which made CRP difficult to implement (p. 258). For example, Young, (2010) asked a teacher why every student had to learn about the Mayflower, 1620, and Plymouth Rock, while no mention was made of Cortez, the Spanish conquistadores, or efforts to evangelize Native Americans. The teacher, who was a white middle-class female, responded that there was too much material to try to cover everything, and that she did not want to deviate from the curriculum. In other words, she was choosing not to introduce sociopolitical issues due to the pressures of time constraints and being required to cover the set curriculum (Young, 2010).

When examining the difficulties of implementing CRP, Parhar and Sensoy (2011) contended that teachers struggled with the social aspects of learning because of the individualistic and competitive nature of school and common assessment practices. Young (2010) found that the teachers made poor judgments and seemed to be either unwilling or unprepared to do the work involved in implementing CRP. Even when they did try to implement CRP, teachers tended to emphasize the components of academic success and cultural competence, but many times excluded the element of building a sociopolitical consciousness. Despite leaving out this component, the teachers still complained that lessons were becoming crammed and that time constraints and the obligation to cover the curriculum made covering all concepts very challenging (Young, 2010).

Perhaps the reason for these choices was due to teachers struggling to break away from the standard curriculum and assessment norms. These existing structural constraints
limited the teachers’ possibility to see the benefits in engaging in building sociopolitical consciousness. After all, these critical thinking projects were not assessed through common assessments such as standardized exams. Another drawback to teaching critical thinking and sociopolitical consciousness is that teachers are charged with identifying and assessing systemic inequalities and what are considered to be dominant ideologies in the curriculum. They are then responsible for discovering meaningful and effective approaches that will help students realize and challenge the oppressive nature of the status quo (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). This is especially difficult considering that often times, teachers have limited teaching supplies and are forced to use their own time to plan and compile resources for these lessons, typically with no additional support or incentive to do so (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011).

With regard to time and teacher demands, Royal and Gibson (2017) also questioned whether educators would be able to resist the demands of “hyperstandardization, hyperaccountability and neo-liberal reforms” and continue to embrace CRP (p. 18). It seems that for the implementation of CRP to be successful, a certain amount of pressure needs to be removed from covering set curricula, and more space and available time needs to be built into the curricula to allow teachers the room to explore the benefits of CRP and sociopolitical consciousness with their students. As part of their work, teachers would need to work for change in these larger structural constraints such as teaching autonomy, curricula, and pacing.

Time constraints make up a recurring theme in the discussions concerning the limitations of CRP incorporation. Educators are always struggling to manage time constraints due to the current demands of teaching, making it difficult for them to
incorporate CRP and its critical consciousness component into their lesson planning. It gets treated as optional component and not as the core of the work. According to Howard (2017), there is limited opportunity in everyday school life for CRP to be authentically implemented. However, Howard (2017) further argued that it was nonetheless important to create the space and opportunity for teachers to put the concept into action. Unfortunately, under these circumstances, “culturally relevant teaching is often simplified and relegated to little more than occasional group work or celebrating different cultures in ways that disregard individual interests and stereotype students” (Byrd, 2016, p.2; Sleeter, 2012).

Another challenge to the implementation of CRP is that teachers cannot be taught how to practice it. Although it appears that part of teaching with critical consciousness is a matter of addressing whose story is being told or whose perspective is not included and why, the implementation of CRP and critical consciousness is often not so simple. As previously mentioned, questioning is just a part of what teaching critical consciousness entails but involves socio-political consciousness raising which entails helping students identify and critique current social inequalities. In response to a prospective teacher’s question about how to do multicultural education and essentially CRP, Ladson-Billings (2006) stated, “even if we could tell you how to do it, I would not want us to tell you how to do it” (p. 30). One of the reasons behind this rather enigmatic claim is that Ladson-Billings (2006) worried that no one-size-fits-all approach would address the range of differences, experiences, and needs of the students. Teacher decisions are supposed to be based on various social contexts that shape the students’ learning experiences. In addition, the learning experiences provided to the students are dependent on the teachers’
own background and how they perceive structural and societal injustices. Not all teachers are critical or agents of change which means that a critical consciousness curriculum would be determined by the researcher’s perspective.

Additionally, as previously mentioned, data from the U.S. Department of Education indicated that over 80% of classroom teachers are white and middle-class. Most of these teachers are also monolingual and female. Therefore, it is probable that many of them are unaware of the experiences, dispositions, and cultural knowledge that their students bring to the classroom. For this reason, Milner (2010) argued that any attempt to implement CRP on a large scale would involve helping teachers bridge the cultural knowledge gap that exists between the teaching force and the students they serve.

Lastly, scholars such as Milner (2017) expressed concerns about the latest research concerning CRP. Milner argued that race needed to be re-centered in CRP and the fight to support students of color. Milner (2017) pointed out that although race was originally a critical component of Ladson-Billings’ conceptualization of CRP, there has been a recent turning away from the focus on race, particularly the African-American race, which he believed had caused a loss of integrity in the framework. Milner critiqued the fact that in discussions of CRP, race is often treated superficially or used interchangeably with ethnicity. Moreover, he pointed out that some researchers use the terms CRP (Culturally Relevant Pedagogy) interchangeably with CRT (Culturally Responsive Teaching), without differentiating the small differences in each framework (Milner, 2017). Thus, aside from the issues regarding the feasibility of CRP’s practical implementation, Milner’s theoretical critique also pointed to the definitional looseness of the terms involved and the interpretation and application of these terms.
Implications for Further Study

Having defined some of the limitations and challenges to the incorporation of CRP, Sleeter (2012) detailed three necessary steps to address these challenges and the resistance to implementation. The first was to obtain evidence-based research that documents associations between culturally responsive pedagogy and student outcomes. The second was to educate parents, teachers, and education leaders about what culturally responsive pedagogy means and its purpose in the classroom. The third was to reshape discussions and beliefs about teaching, particularly teaching in inner cities where diverse and historically underserved communities reside.

My own observation is that far too little research thoroughly documents CRP’s impact on student learning. Johnson and Fargo (2014) have revealed that teacher participation in Transformative Professional Development (TPD) with a focus on CRP has had a significant impact on student achievement for an elementary school. The percentage of proficient students or students who met the established academic standards in the school that focused on CRP grew from a 25% baseline to 67% by the end of the program. When compared to the other school, this growth was significant and was attributed to the TPD on CRP. However, studies such as Johnson and Fargo’s (2014) two-year research were difficult to find, and more research is needed.

The existing literature on CRP is extensive but focuses primarily on teachers trying to enact CRP. The research centers on teacher actions believed to improve student engagement and outcomes. An example of such literature is Maye and Day’s (2012) study, which determined that teachers who had an ability to identify and relate their own cultural identity and life experiences to their students had more effective practices of
culturally relevant pedagogy.

Although there is not a lot of research that looks specifically at teachers enacting critical consciousness, Cammarota and Romero’s (2009) study focused on the impact of the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) on student learning. SJEP is based on Cammarota and Romero’s (2009) model of “critical conscious intellectualism” for reinforcing the teaching and learning of Chicano students (p. 6). As opposed to the pre-packaged curriculums that are most common today, this was a social studies curriculum that was grounded in critical pedagogy. The students were taught to create rather than consume knowledge and identify conditions that limited their progress. The research indicated that the students involved in the SJEP not only graduated but also excelled in high-level courses (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Yet despite the promising data, it remains an uncommon practice in the classroom.

Because there is not much research in the area of teacher enactment of critical consciousness, the information gained from the present study will contribute to the body of knowledge pertaining to the incorporation of students’ voices into the professional development of teachers as they reflect on refining their pedagogical practices toward CRP. The study has the potential to educate professionals on the value of including student input in the conversations pertaining to CRP and critical consciousness, student performance, and teacher development. This research is also conceived as gathering information regarding Latinx students’ views on their educational experience, which could help inform district officials who determine student programs and others who will continue to build on this work.
CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

This study examines how student voice can inform professional development in the area of CRP and the critical consciousness component within it. Throughout this effort, there was interest in hearing students share their experiences and exploring how these experiences could inform teaching practices with Latinx students. It is anticipated that the insight gained from the students and the research would make a valuable contribution to the topic of CRP. Most importantly, this is an important work for School 42 because it has been my observation that the district in question is very political. At times, in my position, I have witnessed actions and decisions with an understanding that if the parents truly understood or exercised their rights, outcomes would have been different. The needs of the Latinx community are easily overlooked because they are the least vocal and involved. Favors, access and opportunities in the district and city tend to be granted based on relationships with people in high positions, leaving this community at a disadvantage. Although the Latinx population is the majority in the city and district, they have not been able to leverage this advantage in their favor. They are impeded because most are first generation immigrants who are focused on meeting the immediate needs of their families, and others do not have the education, social or political knowledge to demand what they are entitled to receive. Furthermore, although the main reason for choosing this topic is a personal and professional interest in bettering the school district, this work also stems from a concern that CRP is often equated with teaching a culturally relevant curriculum while the critical consciousness component is seldom referenced. Therefore, it is a goal; in particular, to develop critical consciousness
amongst both the teachers and students of School 42 so that they can learn to get involved and advocate for themselves. This could be a starting point in which they learn the possibilities of navigating the systems in place to improve educational, social and political outcomes for themselves and all under resourced and marginalized groups in the city.

During this experience, students were offered to try on a new role: agents of their own school experience and learning. As I began to gather data, it was realized that by offering these roles, intervention was taking place: it was expected to take their past experiences to improve future teaching and learning. However, it was not expected this study would affect their current circumstances. A stance of inquiry was taken in the continual process of collaboration and questioning with the students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Consequently, in tapping into their voices, inviting them and taking them seriously, the project provided students with an “intervention” into their typical school day by which their learning context was improved. At the same time, students “intervened” in the sense of helping to improve not only personal practice but also, eventually, the pedagogy and programs within the school. Based on observations during this project, it was noticed the importance of working with students on a particular goal: to encourage students to move beyond simply recounting their experiences so that together we could envision what their future experience could be.

In order to move toward the goal of engaging in developing critical consciousness with both the teachers and students of School 42, a practitioner action research study was implemented using qualitative data gathering techniques (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (2007) described action
research as an approach that “takes place in educational settings that reflect a society characterized by conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources and power” (p. 3). School 42 can be described as such an educational setting because there are conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources. As a school and society, we purport to educate and empower, yet it became evident that instead we were oppressing and providing the minimum required learning experiences and resources to our students as compared to more affluent districts.

Action research was selected as a methodology for several reasons: it has been used to study social reality with an eye toward change, within a particular cultural context and this was the proposal. It was a form of collaborative inquiry that helped gain a detailed understanding of student experiences in this initial study (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). Action research allowed me to do collaborative research work while engaging in inquiry with the students. Although unintended, an intervention was offered into school by allowing students to play a role they do not usually get to play. Another action research was selected as the methodology was because it aligned with a personally reflective nature, way of thinking about a question, and narrative style writing. Action research was conducive to inviting and including their collaboration as active participants working to resolve a shared problem. Within action research there was an established protocol for addressing positionality and power relations among participants. It helped me clarify my relationship to the setting and how multiple positions can intersect, making us insiders and outsiders, simultaneously, depending on the dimensions (Herr & Anderson, 2005). For instance, as a Latinx and an insider, I understood the culture, language and knew the students and what generally occurred in the building; however, as
an administrator and outsider, I was not privy to the interactions and experiences of the students amongst themselves and with teachers. Another reason for selecting action research was that it provided quality criteria which enabled insiders of an organization, like me to use the approach to deepen understanding of practice and bring about change (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007). I applied my insider knowledge about my school and took advantage of the tacit knowledge I possessed to bring forth important issues about our practice, student perceptions, and experiences.

A generative theme was necessary, a common problem in which all colleagues were interested and recognized (Herr & Anderson, 2005). I planned on sharing the research findings with my colleagues so that we could engage in collectively developing professional development. It was the reason that the study took place at the school where I am principal. I have worked at the school for six years and am very familiar with the student population. My role as principal has allowed me to have interactions with most of the students at the school. I am well acquainted with the variety of students at the school and thus was able to target a wide range of student voices when selecting students to participate. Knowing many of the students for the past six years has also enabled me to establish a rapport with them. In fact, it is already customary for me to have conversations with the students during their lunch since it is the time in the school day when I have access to them. Another practical advantage of conducting the research at my school is that I could then continue the work with the teachers and engage them in professional development. The meetings were conducted in Spanish and English to accommodate the preference of the students. The data obtained is being used toward building-based professional development.
Context

In order to better understand the students’ perspectives, it is important to know about the city in which they live. According to the 2010 census, the city in which this study took place has a total population of 146,199. Of the total population, 54,323 of its residents are foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The city where this study took place has a 57.6% Latinx population. The median household income of the city’s residents is $36,106. 29.0% of the total population and 27.5% of the Latinx population live below the poverty line. In the Latinx population, 66.2% have attained a high school diploma or higher. 8.1% have attained a 4-year degree or higher.

This is now a post-industrial city, once having had a thriving silk industry. Today, this city is characterized by high poverty, and crime. As of October 2019, there have been 75 shootings in the city, many of these involved teenagers as young as 14. The neighborhoods vary from those that appear to be residential, to others with high gang activity in which it would be too dangerous to walk at night. The school itself, is located in an area with high prostitution, drug and gang activity. The custodians go out every morning to check the school grounds for any paraphernalia in order to make it safe for the students.

It has the second highest density of immigrant populations of any city after New York City, including one of the largest Muslim populations in the U.S. There are large Indian, Middle Eastern, Jamaican, and South Asian populations. There are restaurants, legal services, family businesses from what appears to be almost every part of the world. To walk around the city one can understand why it has continued to be a destination choice for so many immigrants.
The research focused on inner city, Latinx students at School 42. Out of 863 students, approximately 190 were English Learners (EL). These are students who have recently arrived to the country and are in the process of learning the English language. I was interested in working with middle school students at the site of this study and where I am the school’s principal. School 42 has approximately 863 students and a predominantly Latinx population (89.2%). The remaining population is 8.9% African American, 1.2% Asian, and 0.7% white. The home language of 61.8% of the students is Spanish, while 37.2% of the students’ home language is English and 1.0% have grown up speaking another language at home. The school currently has 74 special education students and 144 students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). EL describes any student who does not meet the minimum proficiency in English.

This group included students with varied academic abilities from low to high. They also varied in their English fluency as some were currently EL students while others had exited for some time. The group also included students who were born in the United States. Some students experienced behavior issues and some were honor roll students who frequently appear on the principal’s list for having straight As. While they all attended a high poverty school, their appeared to be varying degrees of poverty within the group. Based on the experiences shared, it became apparent that some students had more access to resources than others.
A brief demographic overview of the school’s faculty reveals that most of the teachers at the school are Caucasian females. There are 10 male staff members out of a staff of 85; this total includes two security guards, meaning there are only 8 male teaching staff. There is a total of 18 Latinx staff members; this includes 4 self-contained bilingual, 3 ESL teachers, 2 physical education instructors, 1 guidance counselor, and 1 administrator. Being that there are approximately 863 students, out of which most are Latinx, it is unlikely that many students will be assigned Latinx teachers. Most students will be assigned teachers of a different race and tasked with learning how to navigate those differences so that they could receive an education, particularly since only two teachers live in the city. In other words, only 2.35% of the teaching staff is part of the community where they teach and where the students live.

**State Involvement in the Oversight & Curricula of School 42**

The district of the city in which this study took place had been under state control for the last 27 years. In 1988 New Jersey became the first state in the country to
authorize the Department of Education to take over its failing school districts. The state deemed it necessary to take over the district due to its mismanagement of funds and the students’ gross underachievement in basic subjects. In 2018, legislation was passed that would grant the district local control in 2020; the district is currently in a two-year transition towards that goal (State of New Jersey Department of Education: Transition Plan for the Return of Local Control to Public Schools, 2018). Essentially, by the end of the transition, the state would have granted the district the authority to govern its own educational system. As it stood under state control, the city’s Board of Education did not have the authority to make any decisions without the consent of the state appointed superintendent.

Between 2012 and 2018, School 42 was labeled a “Focus” school by the state. This label is given to schools that demonstrate a disparity in academic performance between the general education population, the school’s special education students, and ELs. The two latter populations consistently performed lower than the state performance targets for both groups. As a result of several lawsuits and as part of a district effort and focus, some improvements have been made for special education students. Unfortunately, the same improvements have not been made with the schools’ EL populations. While the district is making every effort to be responsive, they cannot keep up with the learning needs of this ever-growing population. In my capacity, I have taken funds from the school’s budget and created after school literacy intervention programs for specific grade levels, I have fought to get them placed in appropriate programs such as Newcomers, I have met with the teachers regularly to analyze data, make modifications to the curriculum, and gather resources etc. The parents of these students are not as well
informed as that of the special education population. The needs of ELs are not as highly prioritized, there are not special organizations nor parent advocates available to inform and support parents in advocating for their children. As a result, there are not many complaints about the limited programs and resources available for their children. Often times, parents of ELs make decisions for their children’s program placement based on convenience and proximately. In the case of special education, students are evaluated, parents are made aware of their child’s academic challenges, goals are developed, and a plan is developed to help address their needs. Parents are given an Individual Education Plan (IEP) which outlines what services the school must legally provide. There are annual special education goals that are reviewed and revised if necessary. In turn, the parents of EL students are not afforded this level of information or support. As a school, we will continue doing whatever is possible to help improve academic outcomes of our EL students but overall, the future prospects for this population do not seem positive. For fiscal reasons, the district has recently cancelled its plan to open a newly arrived Latinx high school that would have served approximately 200 students.

In addition to the issues pertaining to EL students, I am generally concerned with School 42’s Latinx students because they compose the majority of the school’s population and as a school, their academic performance consistently lags behind their peers in other schools across the state and nation. These concerns prompted me to engage in action research as a way to begin to understand what might be helpful in improving school practices and ultimately learning outcomes for our students. Over the course of this study, I have come to think of certain structural aspects of the school in new ways. I have an increased awareness of how they factor into the academic difficulties
experienced by the Latinx population therein. For instance, the EL and English-speaking students have the same school day schedule, which is itself a problem. The EL students only have a 40-minute period with the ESL teacher and then are submerged in English only classes for the rest of the day. These circumstances bring about a host of issues for the ELs—not only lack of academic progress, but also widespread bullying and further marginalization on the part of non-English speakers. EL students are frequently teased because of their extreme poverty, language barrier issues, interrupted schooling, resulting from not having attended school in their native countries. These students are commonly 2 or 3 grade levels behind. Consequently, learning disabilities have been frequently overlooked because it is difficult to determine if the student's performance is a result of the other limiting factors that negatively contribute to their learning. These additional disadvantages tend to make bilingual and EL students targets for mistreatment by their peers as well as some educators. Although School 42 has a Latinx majority population and is located in the inner city, there are varying degrees of poverty and access to resources. These newcomer students are in the bottom of the hierarchy.

In order to support each other, Latinx EL students tend to segregate themselves; they interact with each other almost exclusively. This tends to irritate many teachers, who frequently complain that they are always in groups speaking Spanish. Several teachers have complained to me and other administrators about having so many ELs in their classes and requested for the students to be transferred to a more suitable program. At times teachers have been known to make comments about how little the EL students know or how hard it is for them to learn. Many feel burdened and complain about the amount of work it takes to differentiate lessons in order to effectively teach those
students.

Based on state and local assessments, the EL students at School 42 tend to be between one and three grade levels behind their peers. School 42’s EL students are serviced in four bilingual self-contained classes, and additional support is provided by our five English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who provide instructional services for all identified students in compliance with the bilingual federal legislation. These services assist students with English language acquisition but do nothing to address that most are several years behind and are unlikely to catch up. The students take a yearly test and are exited out of the program once they reach a 3.5 Composite Proficiency Level (CPL) score. This is the process for all students participating in the Bilingual Education Program. Generally, these students are left two or three years below grade level, with minimal English skills, and no additional resources or support at home. The teachers are then faced with the dilemma of retaining students for years or passing them along, so they are not penalized for something that was not their fault. District policy is that it is not fair to retain newly arrived students because it would be socially damaging. These students are promoted unless there are extreme circumstances. There is an understanding that they may never catch up since they are missing several years’ worth of foundational learning and skills. This situation places this population in a position of always being at the bottom of the class and in some cases, may impact the amount of effort teachers invest into educating them.

In addition to these efforts, the district has put a wide range of reforms, strategies, and programs in place to improve the learning and performance of all students, such as the implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) in all
academic areas with a push in Literacy, Math, and Science. Teachers and students are using the Model Curriculum. This curriculum was created by the New Jersey Department of Education to be used as a model for educators when implementing the NJSLS, which are based on the Common Core Curriculum Content Standards. It consists of units of study that contain specific Student Learning Objectives that are aligned to the standards and are assessed using formative assessments until the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA) given at the end of the year. The NJSLA measures student proficiency of the NJSLS. In addition, the NJSLS are further supported via the implementation of various literacy components, including Writers’ Workshop, Guided Reading, Phonics, and the Institute for Learning (IFL). IFL consists of rigorous, meticulously designed units intended to address the essential components of 21st century learning skills. In mathematics, we continue to engage students in the conceptual-based model through various tasks, including those through the IFL, which pushed our students through problem solving, critical thinking, and application and understanding of specific concepts. In science, the staff and students are focusing on implementing the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), as well as the application of 21st century learning skills through IFL units as well as the use of the research based Full Option Science System (FOSS) science kits. Every student has a scheduled intervention period, which is individualized, data-based instruction that remediates or serves as enrichment to the curriculum.

Despite these efforts, the Latinx students at School 42 consistently perform lower than the NJ state performance targets for Latinx students (NJ Performance Report, 2016-2017). Besides the socio-economic factors described above, no one is able to give a
definitive reason for this disparity. I agree with those teachers that feel that one obvious reason is that the district shifts programs and initiatives too frequently, not allowing sufficient time to access their effectiveness. Any teacher who has been in the district a few years can list several program initiatives that have come and gone. This pattern promotes and substantiates the concept that most teachers have in regard to new initiatives that “this too shall pass.” In essence, we do not know what works and what does not work because it is not implemented long enough to find out.

**Teacher Professional Development Opportunities at School 42**

At School 42, teachers are allotted two to three 40-minute periods every six days to meet with a group of 5-7 other educators from the same grade level and school. One meeting date is designated as a Data PLC and the other is Grade Level Meeting. The Professional Learning Community (PLC)s meet to analyze data, which includes standardized tests, unit benchmark tests, their own observations and assessments. They work collaboratively on improving their teaching practice and to focus on ways to improve the academic performance of their students. Some of the practices include using the data to group the students, developing intervention plans which consist of remediation and enrichment, differentiating instruction, gathering resources, rubrics, developing higher order questions, creating incentives, planning engaging lessons and developing individualized smart goals and feedback. Middle school teachers also have Vertical Articulation Meetings, which allows them to meet with other grade level teachers to ensure students are adequately prepared for the next grade level. In addition, the district offers voluntary PD opportunities and several built in PD days when students are dismissed early in order to create time for staff to receive PD. Moreover, staff meets
after school on the first Monday of every month and I as the principal have 5
discretionary days in which to have PD after school for 30 minutes. Because of the brief
allotted time, these are generally used for staff meetings.

During the PD days, the staff does not select the curriculum. The topics are
selected by central office or building based administrators. It would be helpful if they
could have some autonomy in deciding the area in which they might benefit from
additional support. At one point, an environment was being fostered where teachers were
regularly visiting each other’s classrooms but a threatening communication from the
union president ended the practice immediately. The union deemed that observations
were conducive to teachers evaluating each other, which is strictly prohibited. Another
overwhelming is that there are many initiatives and programs taking place in the district
simultaneously. For this reason, it takes teachers at least one year to become acclimated
to all of the various curricula demands of the district. With proper support though, the
investment in developing new teachers results in very effective teachers. However, the
problem is that these very well-prepared teachers then leave the district to work
somewhere that pays far more and is a lot less demanding. As a school and district, we
are perpetually preparing teachers due to high teacher turnover.

Participants: Forming the Principal’s Advisory Group (PAG)

My research was derived from a group I formed: The Principal’s Advisory Group
(PAG). It consisted of 11 eighth-grade students who met with me on an ongoing basis, to
help me understand the lived experience of Latinx students at School 42. Latinx students
were selected because of the predominance of the demographic population at the school.
I was also seeking varying experiences and perceptions; therefore, the participants
selected included both English learners and English speaking Latinx students. This was to highlight similarities and differences within the experiences of Latinx students, particularly when they share the same learning context and to better understand why both groups are struggling academically. Eighth graders were selected for several reasons: for the most part, the eighth graders at the school are the most mature and expressive. I have known most of them for the longest amount of time and have an established rapport with them.

Our students are governed by a point system which deducts points for negative behaviors that we are trying to discourage. Because this system is closely monitored by their assigned vice principal and teachers, I was able to reduce the perception that students would be receiving or losing points based on their participation in my PAG. In addition, the 8th grade students will be moving on from School 42 at the end of the school year and that reduces the possibility that they will be impacted in any way by their participation in the study.

In order to select the students, I visited each homeroom with the school’s testing coordinator and read an in-person invitation to and explanation of the group. At that time, I explained that participation is voluntary and would have no effect on them or their grades. I also explained that the purpose of their participation is to help us create a better learning environment for future students. After reading the invitation, I left the testing coordinator with the students to distribute and collect volunteer forms from the students (See Appendix). Every student received a form and they were asked to indicate whether or not they were interested in participation. At that time, my testing coordinator selected a group consisting of six to eleven students. Students were selected as randomly as
possible amongst the targeted population of students, but the testing coordinator understood that she also had to be mindful to create a group that reflected the overall Latinx population at the school. She gave some consideration to the inclusion of ELs and Special Education students. After all, the focus of my study was to include students’ voices; therefore, this structure ensured that I heard from a variety of Latinx students. The PAG consisted of students who were: Native English speakers, ELs, former ELs, high and low achieving, self-driven, struggled with behavior issues, and racially diverse.

Throughout the students maintained consistent attendance to the PAG meetings. However, it was explained to the students that the process was voluntary. I understood that an established advisory group with entirely consistent participation might not be possible. Therefore, I told the students to inform me if they would not attend the following meeting so that I would be able to allow others to participate. As a result, after the first meeting or so, two students changed their minds about participation and an additional two were selected as replacements.

**Data Collection: Dialoguing with Students in the PAG**

Data was collected through ongoing advisory group meetings. During the PAG discussions, students were invited to see themselves as consultants who offered their perspective and council on issues pertaining to their learning. I created a schedule, which allowed me to meet with the Latinx students during their 40-minute lunch period. The meetings or sessions took place twice per week over the course of eight weeks. Given that our school has a predominantly Latinx population (89.2%), the premise of our meetings was based on the fact that I wanted them to succeed and I wanted to hear their thoughts on how to help them achieve this success. For this reason, our group discussions
were in Spanish and English. All students understood both languages; however, their fluency varied. Furthermore, I explained that we know Latinx students are capable and that any of their perceived failures are actually a reflection of the educational system and school which must do better by them. Therefore, I was trying to understand this struggle and what we as a school can do about it.

I then proceeded to solicit ideas and discussed the topics they brought to the table for discussion. For instance, I told the students that I was interested in understanding what they feel deters them from being successful students. The students began by brainstorming reasons they think some of their peers do not do well in school. The students named factors such as teachers, poor instruction, language barriers, access to resources at home, parental involvement and support, peer conflict, peer pressure etc. I took note of their responses and then proceeded to have them expand and discuss each of these items.

Often times, our conversations organically touched on topics such as: the impact of language on learning (the school’s Bilingual ESL program, the advantages and disadvantages of speaking Spanish in school), participation in class, teacher expectations, as well as parental support, involvement, and communication. As our discussions developed, we also conversed about perceived differences between teachers and students (largely concerning social class and race), interactions with peers and staff, equity in education, and student suggestions for improving the school’s education of its Latinx population. These topics were partly based on students’ concerns as well as my tacit knowledge and interpretation of areas where our Latinx and EL students struggle. Initially, I allowed the student responses to generate the topics. However, I had
additional topics in mind and discussion questions were routinely asked in order to move the conversation forward. For example, I began by asking the students about the advantages and disadvantages of speaking Spanish, then moved the discussion to how that question pertained to school and the ESL program. The questions were crafted carefully so that the students were able to understand them. Prior to using my questions, I went through a vetting process to confirm that they are appropriate for the advisory group. The readers for the questions were the school’s two vice principals, a colleague who is an elementary school principal and a doctoral student in Teacher Education and Teacher Development program, my doctoral advisor, and two students.

I anticipated that the main challenges would be maintaining student focus on the topic throughout the duration of our discussion and having consistent attendance at each session. It is for this reason that I selected a forty-minute period and met with them during the coldest days of the week; days too cold for them to be permitted outside for recess time after lunch. I figured they would not mind meeting on days that playing outside was not an option for them. With consideration to student travel time and the fact that they were eating, the time was ideal to hold their attention. In addition, we created group norms that were aimed to address issues such as side conversations and confidentiality. As a result, the students began to identify as an exclusive group and maintained consistent attendance throughout the study. It was made clear to the students that if they were no longer interested, they would be allowed to discontinue their participation at any time.

I maintained detailed notes on student responses and interactions. I recorded the group discussions, and I kept my talking to a minimum in order to effectively listen.
also maintained a journal which enabled me to reflect on what the discussions made me think, which effectively made my experiences, opinions, and thoughts a part of the research process and analyses (Ortlipp, 2008). I recorded our discussions, analyzed what was said, and framed questions before moving on to the next session.

**Data Analysis**

My data analysis began with transcribing the PAG audio recordings I had made. I recorded each session using a recording application on my iPhone. Later, I transcribed each session verbatim and assigned pseudonyms to each participant. All of the student data was kept in a locked drawer in my office at work. The transcriptions were stored in my computer and also a binder that was stored in a locked drawer in my office at work as well.

Data analysis for this action research began immediately and guided subsequent data and decision making (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Each week, I read and reread each transcript several times, all the while making notes in the margins about what I was hearing. In fact, this is how I understood there to be a problem with the participation of ELs during our initial meetings. Although, we spoke in Spanish and English, their participation was limited during the first few sessions. I made notes about what I was hearing and observing. I made notes of emerging categories and coded my data. My coding consisted of field notes, which were mainly about various interactions throughout the day that may relate to something the students were discussing during the PAG meeting. A few times, I noted teachers’ concerns about ELs or disciplinary referrals about a student in the group so that I could compare it to the students’ point of view. I noted reflections about observations and ideas or thoughts that occurred to me regarding
my data—as well as the development and use of thematic categories (explained further, below). I used a form of inductive and comparative data analysis method; each week I repeated the process and continuously compared the new set of data with previous data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Charmaz, 2014). I continuously listened and read for patterns or themes that were consistent throughout our discussion and then checked my understanding with the students so that I could get further input. As mentioned previously, the PAG consisted of a group of diverse students inclusive of students with varying degrees of English language acquisition, academic achievement, motivation and engagement in school as well as racially diverse. Throughout this process, I continuously aligned the data with my focus question. I also continued to read literature that would inform my interpretation of the data.

Because my research was job embedded, it was challenging to see all around me as possible data. As Herr & Anderson (2005), observed, “Practitioners (insiders) already know what it’s like to be an insider but because they are ‘native’ to the setting, they must work to see the taken-for-granted aspects of their practice from an outsider perspective” (p. 51). As an insider action researcher, I was also aware that data might be available outside of the PAG sessions. I was also guided by the following two questions mentioned by Herr & Anderson (2005),: “What data are already available that have relevance to my study?” and “What data is available to me through my daily work responsibilities and interactions?” (p. 79). By asking myself these questions I was reminded to constantly take account of the data that is within the day-to-day context of my work.

At first, I thought I would be limited because my role as principal in this inner-
city school kept me occupied with meetings and addressing issues. However, these questions helped me understand that this was the best position possible to understand the learning context from all perspectives. When I was thinking about why students were not learning, I was able to refer to data from my meetings with parents who came in frustrated and looking for the school to help them with their children who were falling behind. I was able to go to monthly central office meetings to discuss our building’s data and the district’s response to remediate the academic challenges confronted by of the district’s students. I had to consider that I had data from meetings with teachers regarding concerns about resources, parents, their observations, evaluations, student interactions and the growth of students in their classes. I was invited to classes when teachers were having a difficult time and when they wanted to showcase something exceptional happening in their classrooms. I have always frequented businesses in the city where this study took place, so I began to pay extra attention to conversations at the hair salon and my butcher, where I often hear parents discussing their unfiltered concerns regarding the city’s school system.

I then put everything into thematic categories and compared for frequency. For instance, I began to find consistent issues of perceived discrimination among students, students sharing classroom circumstances where they felt and did not feel academically successful. In addition, students shared other assumptions they thought the teachers had about them and their community etc. The criteria for building a theme was that the data was related to my issue, was interesting and had the potential of contributing new information to my topic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The themes that I recognized in my data will become the main topic contributions to staff
professional development, which will focus on the practice of critical consciousness and the role of student voices within it as it pertains to the education of Latinx students. I then represented the data in the form of student quotes descriptions of the academic lived experience of Latinx students, matching these quotes with the themes I’d developed. My writing included a mix of dialogue, excerpts from data, description, and context. Student voices were used to tell a broader story about how Latinx students are experiencing school and identify questions that will be worthy of exploration in the future.

**Ethics**

As previously stated, the students were purposely selected from a predetermined group of 8th graders. Being that the students were asked to think about, inform, and be critical of practices within the school, ground rules and norms were established. I maintained the role of facilitator and withheld my judgment in the conversations. Also, I was mindful not to create an impression for the students that the school environment is incompetent or uncaring. It was my job to design the study to be a reflective process for the students that served to make teaching better, not to engage the students in tearing down systems that are currently in place to help them. One way I addressed that was to take a few minutes when our session was over to explain the rationale behind any process or practice that is not currently working and then later in our sessions, engage the students in describing the ideal scenario for each. Also, I discouraged students from discussing teacher names during these sessions, although they did on occasion; as part of our ground rules, we discussed the types of critiques that are not acceptable during our sessions. Students were informed that the purpose of the discussions was to improve practice and that was why it was important to maintain our focus on practice, not persons.
Students were reminded that they could, as they always had, speak to a vice principal or me privately with any concern.

As the principal of the school, I found myself faced with the question about how my position could impact the students’ openness and honesty. This was not a major concern; however, since most of the students already had an established rapport with me and have not had qualms about identifying issues or concerns with school administration in the past. In fact, during the preceding school year, some EL students came to me representing concerns of a larger group of EL students pertaining to a teacher who is no longer at the school. Others frequently look for my assistance to help them mediate issues with teachers or their peers. My ability to unconsciously exert influence over the participants would have been minimized because the eighth graders are largely governed by a committee of eighth grade advisors who implement a point system that determines their privileges and consequences—and I have no influence over this committee. They are under the purview of a vice principal of that grade level. These factors help to deter the possibility of coercion or the exertion of influence on my part. All actions concerning eighth graders are discussed and agreed upon by a team. In addition, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). As per the Board of Education policy, I also obtained permission from my district to proceed with this study at my current school.

It is important to note that my conversations with students regarding their learning experiences had implications on teachers. Therefore, it is important to address how the teachers responded to PAG. Overall, it appeared that the teachers trusted me and process; however, there was a student who told a teacher that she was referenced during our PAG discussions. According to the students, on at least two occasions, the teacher confronted
them about what was said. I understood her concerns, after all, I am the principal in charge of her evaluation, and she did not have the opportunity to defend herself. I met with the teacher to address the matter and better explain the information I was trying to obtain. I told her that I understood these narratives were based on student perceptions and assured her that if the matter was serious enough to require a response, I would not hesitate to inform her as I do in my role as principal. There were many instances, when names were not mentioned, yet all of the other students knew who was being referred to during the discussion. I explained to her how I addressed those situations and how I ensured a respectful dialogue during PAG meetings. The teacher felt more at ease and there were no further issues pertaining to teachers articulated to me thereafter. It is human nature to be influenced by some of the stories shared by the students, therefore; I was mindful to ensure it did not affect my role or relationships with the staff at the school.

**Trustworthiness of the Study**

Throughout my study, I addressed trustworthiness considerations. As an action research practitioner, I demonstrated that the study was credible and can be trusted by adhering to the established action research criteria (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007). A combination of methods was used to meet the criteria of establishing validity or trustworthiness, and signal that the research was credible” (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007). Because of my role as principal who was working with students, it was important to ensure credibility. Also, as an insider, I had to particularly attend to my multiple roles of administrator and researcher, as well as internalized beliefs. In order to interrogate these, I put a number of methods in place.
Researchers Journal

I maintained a journal which enabled me to make meaning and reflect, which effectively made my experiences, opinions, and thoughts a part of the research process and analyses (Ortlipp, 2008). This method increased the trustworthiness of the study because it helped me to reflect and acknowledge my biases and subjectivity related to my position. After all, as a qualitative researcher, I was the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of the data; therefore, it was my duty to reflect on my own perspective (Merriam, 2009). As an insider, I am not only using qualitative data gathering methods, but I am also required to make the familiar strange. I have multiple roles that bring me into contact with students – all influencing and potentially enhancing my own understanding, yet it cannot go uninterrogated.

As part of my practice as a principal, I have made it a habit to take notes on important situations, meetings, conversations with students, teachers, parents, concerns, and matters that require follow up etc. I made it part of my practice to go over these notes every day with an eye of a researcher to see how these notes applied to my study. I soon realized that they also had a pattern noted in the categories in the next chapter. I was careful to note how I was responding to these situations and to keep my feelings and thoughts visible (Ortlipp, 2008). For example, in one instance, I realized I was internalizing some of the exchanges and experiences with teachers shared by the students, as they reminded me of my own childhood negative experiences with teachers. In other instances, I made notes of practices, that I deemed would be unacceptable in more affluent areas where the parents were more informed and involved. I became aware that these were particularly frustrating and of concern to me, i.e., class sizes, teachers
removing students from activities or trips, communication with parents, etc. In a
different scenario, my journal helped me become aware that the participants of my study
were students from my school building and my position as a principal may have impacted
some of the student responses. As noted in my journal, I felt that initially, the students
tested me a bit by sharing information that they knew would receive an immediate
response outside of this context. For instance, during discussions, they may have shared
non-emergency situations that took place in the classroom and then reminded me not to
address it because it was part of our ground rules. I took several measures to ensure the
validity of my work and to account for these issues and possible biases (Anderson, Herr
& Nihlen, 2007).

**Member Checking**

One of the methods that I used to ensure validity was member checks—in other
words, checking in with the student-members of the PAG regarding the accuracy of my
data collection. In addition to recording, transcribing, and analyzing the discussions, I
requested feedback from my students on the preliminary findings from my study to make
sure that my interpretation of their words and experiences was accurate. This data was
maintained in a research journal where I kept detailed field notes for evaluation and
reflection. I began each session by reviewing what was discussed during the previous
week, sharing my understanding of what they had said and seeking clarification or
answers to things I was still curious about. The transparency of this process allowed me
to find anything that I may have misinterpreted and change it to accurately reflect the
intention of their words or actions.
Critical Friends

Ongoing conversations with colleagues and scholarly friends helped to establish the trustworthiness of my study. Every week, I solicited feedback on my emerging findings from my vice principals, who frequently acted as sounding boards and felt comfortable challenging me and expressing concerns or disagreement. In addition, I had two meetings with my friend and colleague Pedro Valdes to discuss my findings; he served as an additional critical perspective. Currently, Pedro works in another district but had worked in my district for fifteen years. Over the course of those years, Pedro worked as a teacher, data coach, vice principal and principal. He is also a doctoral student in the Teacher Education Teacher Development program. All of the aforementioned individuals share tacit knowledge of the district and were able to help me identify bias, assumptions and blind spots to ensure that my interpretation of the student experiences was accurate and truthful.

Researcher Positionality

As the principal of a school that is overwhelmingly Latinx (89.2%), I have maintained an interest in finding the keys to the academic success of inner-city students. This interest has been partly driven by my own experience as a Latina and inner-city student. I am uniquely situated for this research because my entire career as a teacher and administrator has taken place in the urban district under discussion. Although I was born in the U.S., when I started school, I was an EL. During my time as a student, I experienced caring teachers as well as neglectful teachers. As an adolescent, I lived in the Dominican Republic for over a year; and most of the Latinx students at the school where I work are Dominican or of Dominican descent. Meanwhile, as an educator, I have also observed the best and worst teacher qualities and practices being implemented. I am
CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

Latina, Spanish speaking, and a mother. I have spent most of my life living in an urban city, which is similar and in close proximity to where this study took place. As a result, I have a genuine and personal interest in contributing to the field of study that will assist teachers in educating Latinx students and improving the learning conditions and outcomes for these students.

While my educational experience and professional background had contributed to my research interest, it had implications. There are also instances where my multiple roles have collided, and roles have influenced each other. For instance, as the school principal during the PAG, I struggled with preconceptions of a student who was deemed to have behavior issues. Initially, I anticipated this particular student would be disruptive and I had to work to consciously put those presumptions aside. While I wanted to hear student voices, for me there was this inner struggle. I learned that the student may have had issues with self-control but had invaluable contributions to our discussion.

The implications of my identity as a person of Dominican descent impacted my perceptions of the data obtained during PAG. It was difficult to listen to the experience and at times the criticism of those students without personalizing it. As a mother of boys who had attended an inner-city school, I always thought of how I had experienced the situations or teacher actions that were taking place. It was and continues to be necessary to remind myself that despite cultural commonalities, we are all different. We are individuals with unique lived experiences who receive and internalize things differently.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings of the Study

Framing the Conversation: Emergent Themes in PAG Conversations

Over the course of eight weeks, I used action research strategies in my work with the students in the Principal’s Advisory Group, asking them to describe their learning experiences in order to examine how student voices in my own school could inform professional development in the area of CRP and the critical consciousness component within it. Given this project’s focus on cultivating critical consciousness amongst students, I was particularly listening for any occasions when the students moved toward a critical read of their worlds. However, our conversations confirmed that the students at this school have not been prepared to think critically at that level and that as educators at this school, we should move toward cultivating critical consciousness, encouraging student agency and analyses.

Based on my analysis of their responses, I established there are many obstacles that can get in the way of effectively teaching students and cultivating them as citizens who can make change and influence their worlds. At the same time, I also noticed possible openings toward realizing such aims at my school. Such obstacles and openings are described in the following pages according to thematic structures developed to highlight significant and resounding strands within the student discussions. The data is organized and presented under the following themes and subthemes, which were developed and used to explain the findings of this study: Powerlessness and Degradation and its sub-themes: Failure to Interrupt Meritocracy; Relational Disruptions Across Differences; and Students as Oppressors. These sub themes are followed by the additional theme, Opportunities for Agency and its sub-theme: Co-construction of the
Learning Experience. In the sections that follow, I provide an explanation of these terms before going on to present specific in-session material demonstrating how students articulated issues related to each theme.

**Powerlessness and Degradation**

A sense of powerlessness and degradation is a theme that stood out in students’ discourse about their education. During the discussion, students not only attempted to understand and make meaning out of their experiences, but they also expressed an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. By powerlessness in this context, I mean that the students feel they do not have control or power to affect their circumstances. Evidently, they struggled to make meaning across differences in culture, race and social class with their teachers. Students expressed frustration and regret about these situations but were not prepared to move beyond that point or empowered to believe they could change their conditions.

Going beyond their relationships with teachers, in this context, powerlessness also applies to the fact that there are very few opportunities for student voices to be heard and considered within the school. The sub themes were categorized as such because they are all part of the overall theme, albeit varying contexts and dynamics. This section describes interactions with staff, and student responses to those exchanges. The following sub themes of powerlessness and degradation are reflected in our failure to interrupt the meritocracy myth, relational disruptions and student to student oppression. In these instances, students are expressing the result of relational inequality within the school and what happens when students internalize dominant ideologies pertaining to progress and treatment of historically disadvantaged groups.
This powerlessness is reflected in the narratives offered by students in the group about their feelings as they move through their school. A student shared an instance in which the teacher felt the students were not cooperating and resulted in the teacher making the comment that she would get paid whether they learned or not. Tomas recalls thinking, “Man, she’s not going to teach us today.” His comment implied regret that no teaching was going to take place on that day and that he was invested in learning. This suggests that powerlessness is in conversation with perceived loss of learning.

Degradation goes hand in hand with powerlessness because it is often used to describe how students feel in situations where they are powerless. Degradation defines the demoralized state that has been created for students at School 42. Based on my data, I concluded that we have contributed to creating a demoralized state for students by depriving students the opportunity to have a voice in their education. In other instances, this theme was derived from narrated student experiences. Students shared exchanges with teachers that left them feeling worthless or questioning their self-worth. This theme not only came across as they shared negative interactions with teachers but also when they described being oppressed by fellow students in a following section. While it is not uncommon for students to use their feelings about a teacher as motivation to “show them” and do better, these examples go beyond the norm. It is far more uncommon and problematic for students to be degraded by personnel to the point of being called names and made to feel “like trash.” Their narratives involving teachers demonstrated that such experiences have had a long-lasting effect on how they view themselves as people and as learners. For instance, Magaly, a former EL student, shared her experiences in a class:

There was this teacher where I wanted to try my hardest, but whenever I failed the test or did something wrong in class, she would always degrade me. And make
me feel like, “You’re not the best in here,” you know. “You’re not anything.” That’s what I felt, personally. She used to call me names. It made me feel bad in a way that I wasn’t enough in that class. Yeah, I keep it in my head; it motivates me to do better, so I won’t have to be that person again.

Juan, also a former EL student, had shared a similar experience to Magaly, and concluded the following:

Well, for me it did impact me a lot. And it impacted me in a good way, to be honest with you, ’cause she made me feel like I was trash. Like I was worthless, like I wouldn’t understand nothing. But over time, I developed, I got way better. I started listening, paying attention, and I’m starting to understand like, more stuff better. You know what I mean? And I kept trying to prove her wrong.

The result of these interactions was negative internalization and self-perceptions and feelings of degradation on the part of the students. In addition, the students reflected that they felt worthless and did not want to be “that person again.” By “that person” they were referring to themselves as a struggling learner in a situation where they felt the teacher does not support them. On the surface, Juan’s experience may appear to end on a positive note, but it is extremely damaging to a child when their motivation is to prove the teacher wrong who makes him or her feel worthless. As educators, we strive to motivate students in ways that allow them to learn and feel affirmed but that does not always happen. Maria shared a similar experience: “She looked down on me in such a way that made me feel so bad about myself. Like I couldn’t do anything— that I couldn’t learn. It’s like… I can — everybody can.”

As evidenced from the students’ statements during our group discussions, their teachers did not know how to tap into the cultural capital that enabled students to navigate the school setting. The students are not performing well academically, and the teachers are struggling to understand and address that problem. At the same time, the students felt teachers did not understand them or value the knowledge and effort they
displayed in the classroom. At times, students appeared to be trying to understand the situations by attempting to see things from the teacher’s perspective. They tended to absorb the blame and almost absolve the teacher of responsibility of these traumatic exchanges. In response to why they thought these interactions took place, Magaly made the following statement, “I guess I would say, you know, it’s kind of weird that they have black and Latino kids with—you know, white people. I’m assuming it would be weird for them.” The students added that they sympathized with the teachers because they imagined it was difficult to deal with students who looked and acted so different than what they were probably used to in their own communities. Earlier in the chapter, the statements by Juan and Ray affirmed that they felt that the students in the teacher’s community were probably nicer and smarter, and therefore, understood the teacher’s challenges in the classroom. Students have internalized and blame themselves for their neighborhood and community, because they have not experienced the process of the analysis of inequality or the inequities that create under-resourced communities, they blame themselves.

The experiences of students in the PAG often struck me as case examples of the lack of critical consciousness or lack of "reading the world" that Freire laments, wherein students internalize the blame and assume responsibility for the instructor’s wrongdoing. This scenario is explained by Monzo (2016) as the concept of internalized oppression. She explains it as a “deeply ingrained acceptance of dominant ideologies” on the part of people of color “that non-whites are not as smart, beautiful, resourceful, good, or deserving of success (Pyke, 2010). For Latinxs and other people of color, “this deficit is often attributed to race, culture, language, and immigration” (Monzo, 2016, p.148).
Failure to Interrupt the Ideology of Meritocracy

As previously mentioned, of the students in this study that come from a high poverty community, 66.2% have attained a high school diploma or higher. Only 8.1% have attained a 4-year degree or higher. School 42 is considered a Title 1 school, which means that the school has a high concentration of low-income students and receives federal funds to assist in addressing academic needs of these students. All of this school’s students receive free lunch, which indicates all are at or close to the federal poverty level. Powerlessness and degradation describe the students’ experience of being subjected to an ideology that attributes success and wealth to individuals and essentially ignores the existence of structural inequality – placing the blame on them for their poverty and academic performance. This facet of powerlessness and degradation is the fact that students are unaware of the unequal distribution of educational funding, resources and experiences that exist in high poverty, and historically disadvantaged communities. Our educational system does not prepare them to understand social inequality and thereby they are not necessarily conscious of how the school system is failing to effectively address their needs. Without these analyses of the external challenges, they are vulnerable to internalizing the blame.

Despite our discussions concerning assessments and the performance of the schools’ students, PAG students seem not to have firmly grasped that they are performing significantly lower than their peers throughout the state and the nation. A reason for this might be that the school has a good reputation because it tends to outperform the district in every grade level and content. However, the district performs well below the state, and the school does as well. School 42 is a relatively high performing school in an
underperforming district; it is also an underperforming school. When asked whether they felt confident competing with students nationwide, most students replied that they do. Magaly made the following remark: “Just cause they’re in a different county or different district, that doesn’t mean they’ll be smarter than you. Everyone, at the end of the day, receives the same education.”

In keeping with the meritocratic beliefs, the PAG students also tended to think that if their peers did not do well academically, the blame would rest solely on the student. Maria added “I think, like all of them said (signaling towards others in the group), every student is capable of doing good work. They are capable of being smart and getting good grades like everybody else.” They believe all students receive an equal and quality education and if they do not perform well, it is because they are focused on the wrong priorities; they do not recognize other factors which might impact the students’ possibilities for success and do not know to hold the school or society accountable. Essentially the students are demonstrating that there has been nothing in their education to disrupt the status quo understanding of equal opportunities, or the ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ notion which is based on individualism and self-motivation as determinants of success. The students appear to have internalized that if they are not doing as well as students in more affluent communities, it is their fault as opposed to it being a matter of under-resourced schools and mismatch between them and teachers. They have not been offered anything to interrupt the U.S. ideology that implies a level playing field versus the reality of privilege and advantage, that hard work will yield progress and social mobility – the meritocracy myth. This lack of counter-narratives leaves students with no alternatives that reflect the realities of inequities in systems.
In a discussion, students were asked to describe a normal school day in regard to their experiences in the classroom. Overall the data suggested that they had varied experiences, depending on the class. They had previously described teachers they liked, others who gave too much work etc. However, when I homed in on questions pertaining to the quality of their education, they shared that it is typical to have days in certain classes when no learning is taking place. In response to this question, they all agreed that this is scenario occurs once to several times per week. Ray stated: “Well it’s mixed cause sometimes my teacher is not in a good mood.” Magaly further explained that: “You have one day where they teach you good, and then you have another day, all of a sudden she goes and doesn’t teach the class how she used to.” When asked to describe a class during the time they are not being taught, they said that during these classes, the teacher would sit at her desk and only speak to them if they individually walked to the desk to ask her a question. The teacher would not address the class as a group. The students spent the rest of the class period doing independent work that they deemed unimportant. During this narrative, only the students’ understanding of the teacher’s actions are being offered, and we cannot assess the intention of the teacher. It has been my experience that this is an approach used by teachers when they fear losing control of the class; they sometimes do this in an effort to scale back negative behaviors. The idea behind this approach is that after class session like this, students are more receptive, cooperative and motivated to maintain the appropriate behavior needed to work collaboratively and engage in class discussions.
As the school principal, I embark on daily classroom visits and I have not witnessed the classroom experience described by the students, or at least, I have had a different perception of what I have witnessed. However, I can also assume that my presence may prompt a teacher to change the approach to one that is aligned to the practices promoted within the school. If the administration in the building became aware that any teacher was neglecting their responsibilities as a teacher, it would be addressed immediately. At this school, the learning and growth of the students are monitored, and interventions are put in place when we see students failing. That said, the problem appears to be that the students understand these classroom experiences as occurrences when teachers did not want to teach them. Whether factual or perceptual, it is most detrimental for the students’ learning and their relationship with the teacher to have this belief. Unsurprisingly, they did not advocate for themselves by addressing it to anyone who might have intervened. In addition, it is an example of how they do not make the connection between their learning experiences and their academic standing and instead only hold themselves accountable for their performance. They disregard all other factors and only accept the notion that if they succeed or fail it is strictly based on how hard they work. In the example above, as a school, have failed to do our part to interrupt this belief and have ignored the power dynamics in the classroom. It is apparent that the students are not empowered to believe they can affect change in their circumstances and do not fully understand that their academic struggles or failure is not entirely their fault. They are struggling to read their micro worlds of the classroom; they just are not sure how to make meaning of their circumstances.

They believe they have had a typical school experience; therefore, when the
students recounted possible reasons for poor performance, they proceeded to self-blame. When asked to explain why some students do not do well academically, all students put the responsibility on the students. They said it was due to students not caring, copying work, lack of effort and attention, not seeing education as a privilege etc. While students felt comfortable criticizing the teachers, they all believed that the teacher was just reacting to student behaviors. The students do not yet have a broader sense of how the system is shortchanging them on their education. Students are not aware that they are required to receive good instruction, which is engaging, differentiated, rigorous and structured. The students have fairly circular reasoning – most of it centering on academic outcomes that are their fault, rather than any larger understanding that they are entitled to a good, consistent education and a system that supports their learning. Their understanding is grounded in meritocracy, with an understanding that their success is solely dependent on hard work, perseverance, talent and grit. Marginalized adolescents who have been indoctrinated with this belief have been shown to have a decline in self-esteem and an increase in risky behaviors beginning in their middle-school years (Godfrey, Santos & Burson, 2017). Essentially these preteens’ emotional and behavioral outcomes have been found to be linked to their belief in meritocracy because we are placing the blame for poverty on them instead of the system that perpetuates it. Yet here at the school, there has been nothing to interrupt this belief. In fact, it has probably been enforced by well-meaning teachers trying to instill hope and motivation in the students. They have not received a narrative that explains systemic inequality beyond their micro interactions. This is an illustration of the need for the development of critical consciousness because the students do not have the tools to apply Freire’s concept of
reading and understanding the world. Consequently, without these larger, alternative understandings these students are ripe for continuing to digest and internalize their own oppression.

**Relational Disruptions Across Differences**

In almost every instance, a sense of powerlessness and degradation came across in the students’ descriptions of negative interactions with teachers. It was apparent that the students struggled to make meaning across differences in culture, race and social class, as did teachers. The end result for many interactions was that the students did not believe teachers understood or cared about them. This can be attributed to the students’ meaning making and not necessarily the teacher. Although several factors play a role in determining a student’s academic success, when carefully analyzing the students’ statements, I began to understand another aspect of why Latinx students at this school are not performing well. The students in this inner city are teacher dependent, because almost all of their academic learning comes from the teacher (Delpit, 2012). Their perception that teachers are engaging in discriminatory practices is damaging to the culture of the school and interrupts the learning for those students. After all, they cannot learn from someone they think looks down on them because of their race. In addition to their struggling to understand why their teachers or parents do not help them, students at School 42 are also trying to understand how race, class, language differences make connection to their teachers more difficult. The students’ narratives not only offered examples of meaning making but also made it apparent that as a school we have failed to offer another view to the message society sends them. Regardless of intention, the negative outcomes of the interactions for students is an area for teacher growth. On the
surface, these interactions appear to capture poor interactions between teachers and students; however, when looking closely, they substantiate that nothing has been offered in their education that would cultivate a more critical analysis. Lacking critical analysis skills and attempting to make meaning out of difficult situations leads students to contribute to disruptions to positive teacher-student working relationships. Students might be prepared to look more analytically at situations and either reject the face value appearance of discrimination for other possibilities or attempt to challenge the perceived discriminatory practices. For example, in one instance, the student responded perceived discrimination by giving up; she has stopped trying. In this study, the students understand the disparities between them and their teachers, to be a result of differences in culture, race and social class, yet are not prepared to move beyond that point. Anabel explains “Some kids feel they are treated the way that they are because of the way that they are, like they don’t have enough money, or they don’t come from parents with education. They feel like they’re treated wrong because of that.”

As mentioned, for these students, educational disparities are based on poverty, parents’ limited schooling, and EL proficiency among other challenges. Students feel that these disparities often lead to negative interactions between them and the teachers and may have a negative impact on the academic performance of Latinx students (Garcia, 1991; Garcia & Hun, 2016). In general, some of the most common negative interactions are a result of students out of uniform or not changing for gym, students not completing homework properly or at all, and chronic absenteeism or tardiness to school. These issues can all be directly related to poverty. The students argue that they do not own washing machines and are waiting for their parents to go to the laundromat, which sometimes
takes a while because of the financial aspect. Their parents cannot get them the materials they need to complete projects nor can they offer them additional homework support or assistance at home. In addition, many of the children are responsible for dropping off siblings or have to stay home to watch them so the parents do not miss work. Once again, these are examples of how students and teachers struggle to make meaning across differences in culture, race and social class.

The students of the PAG acknowledged an existing disparity in the classroom learning experience of the EL students compared to those who spoke fluent English, noting that teachers invested most of their time with the latter group. Although students see it this way, there remains the possibility that the teacher does not feel equipped to teach students who speak another language. Sometimes the teachers require more development in instructional models such as Sheltered Instruction (SI), which is not only a district approved method of teaching ELs but is also aligned with culturally responsive teaching. If the teachers know this approach, they might be able to develop a student’s language proficiency and content knowledge at the same time. To further complicate matters, teachers and students are placed in teaching situations that are unconducive to teaching and learning. The district has capped class sizes at 30 students but often times, the class sizes exceed this capacity. Moreover, they are then paired with one teacher who does not speak the native language of the students. At best, these situations lead to a heavy reliance on the support of the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher but at worst, they result in teachers solely focused on classroom management and safety as a priority while learning is sacrificed. Inarguably, the EL population requires a great deal of support and it is unfortunate that they feel the teachers may not see them as valuable
sources of their time and energy.

Sandra, an EL student, described her experience:

We are treated badly [by the teachers] because those who speak English … I will give you an example, they [teachers] take care of that person and one gets left for last. That’s what I am referring to. For example, the other day I was in a class and raised my hand for help with a question and she [teacher] did not pay me any attention. Another student raised his hand and she paid him attention.

When Sandra was asked why she attributed that to language, she replied “Because it always happens, in almost all my classes.” Sandra went on to share an incident when a teacher told her that she did not want her there:

Teachers are here to teach us. When one needs help, their job is to help us understand things better—that’s why I would ask this teacher for help, but she would tell me “No.” She would tell me that she did not know why I was here if I could not speak English.

EL students spend a large part of class waiting for teacher assistance so that they can participate in the learning. The students said at first, they would spend a large part of the class, if not most of it, waiting for support. This is no longer the case for Elena, an EL student. When asked how long she waits for the teacher, Elena responded that she stopped raising her hand: “I don’t last long because I already know that I am being ignored and I don’t raise my hand again.” When she cannot do something, she simply does not do it. She no longer tries. In fact, Elena is failing most of her classes. It appears that this is not only an example of powerlessness but also conditions that cause students to disengage and disconnect from the learning process because this student has
now given up and no longer attempts to participate or request assistance from the teacher. 
Elena has given up on the learning relationship.

Since the students are aware of this existing dynamic between teachers and EL students, it is obvious why they may assume that the teachers do not care for Spanish speaking individuals. This may also explain why students assume teachers would also not have a favorable view about their Spanish-speaking parents. For instance, during our discussion, Magaly made the following: “I think they assume, oh they don’t speak English, or they’re not capable of speaking correctly or sophisticated. Because for teachers, for example, they speak with good vocabulary and our parents are not well educated… they may assume.” To this, Tomas added: “Just cause you hear somebody with an accent, I think like, other people assume that they’re on a lower level, though that’s not true. Cause other people from different countries can be way smarter.”

Although Tomas offered a different voice, he is still aware of the general assumptions pertaining to his native culture and language.

These examples demonstrate relational disruptions that are a result of differences among staff and students. There is a constant struggle among them to understand and connect with each other in productive ways. Despite this tension, the students do not feel seen in positive ways, which includes their culture and language. As a school, we are missing the opportunity to build learning relationships by failing to make a connection between school and home or culture. Reducing relational disruptions will lead to an improved educational experience by fostering the development of trust and communication between students and teachers. Understanding how the students’ points of view and behavior are shaped by their environment, socio-economic status and cultural
influences would help teachers reduce relational disruptions, which may lead to more positive meaning making on the part of the students. It appears that overall, staff may not know how to make these connections because the students felt that some teachers believed that because of the culture they are from or the language they speak—they are lesser.

As Maria put it:

Some kids probably feel helpless, like nobody cares about what they do, so they decide to do anything they want. And other parents don’t help them at all, or teachers don’t help them, so they feel like, Oh, if I’m not getting any help or nobody cares what I do, then I can just do what I want to do.

It is evident by Maria’s response that these circumstances sometimes cause students to disconnect and begin to draw away from the learning process. Her comment reflects a feeling that students do not feel like they have adult advocates for their learning in school or at home. It is also indicative that some students have experienced relational disruptions that have caused them to feel disconnected from the learning process. When students feel that the teachers are not engaged and do not care, they too disengage from cooperating and learning. She also expressed the frustration of some students over their parents’ unwillingness or more than likely, inability to assist them with schoolwork.

Another issue that became clear during the PAG sessions was that students did not know how to deal with issues that stemmed from disparity of race and social class between them and their teachers. They have not been prepared to understand these issues, which based on this data, can be attributed to misunderstandings, unrealistic perceptions and negative interactions that occur between people with different economic status.

For example, Juan conjures the following:
In my opinion, I think that since they don’t live in [this city], they live in like Fairlawn and stuff like that, it’s more chill and calm right there. Some of them, they behave way better than us, but not to say that we’re not educated or nothing, but they think in their minds that we’re all—every single student, every single place is gonna act just like the students in their living area where they’re from.

Ray followed up with this statement:

Well, I think over there [suburbs] you got some good kids. You know, always doing their work, highly educated, or getting into them good high schools. Over there, whatever happens is always like good stuff. You never hear anything bad happening there, but here [in this city]... You know, like us kids, we live a different life, more hard life than people in suburb areas do.

Such dialogue shows how students think teachers might find them more familiar if they were like the imagined kids in their neighborhoods. It also appears that they feel the teachers wish they were more like suburban students and have unrealistic expectations about who they are. This is all the more disheartening in that the students’ descriptions of their experiences demonstrate that they have had a long-lasting negative effect on how they view themselves and their community, in comparison to others.

In addition to student assumptions that are based on perceived differences in social classes, there are times when teachers might say things that push students to the belief that the teachers have disdain towards the community. Students shared that a comment they hear frequently from staff is that they need to work hard in school so that they can “get out of [this city].” While educators say things like this with the intention of motivating students, it is not always received that way. The resounding underlying message that the students seem to hear is that their community is worthless, while the teachers may be referring to the safety issues or the lack of opportunity within the city. This may be an example of students lacking analysis skills and critical consciousness which contributes to disruptions to positive teacher-student working relationships.
In this section the data demonstrated that there is a need for teachers and students to develop critical consciousness. As teachers struggled to establish connections with the students and serve the needs of the various learners in the classroom, the students felt misunderstood and discriminated. These relational disruptions prevented the formation of positive learning relationships. The students are trying to understand how prejudice, discrimination or assumptions play a role in their interactions with their teachers and their learning; they lack, however any foundational knowledge on how to begin to challenge the status quo or any inequalities they may believe to be experiencing.

**Students as Oppressors**

Students as Oppressors is another theme in students’ speech related to that of Powerlessness and Degradation. In addition to the tension of race and social class between teachers and students, it also exists between students. Students asserted that the English-speaking students mistreat their EL counterparts. It relates to powerlessness in that it perpetuates an existing power hierarchy, essentially giving some students power over their peers. In this case, fluency differences allow the English speakers to feel more powerful and the ELs to feel disadvantaged and degraded. When asked as part of a whole group, the English speakers dismissed the notion that they mistreat their EL peers by minimizing it. They described it as somewhat of a rite of passage and something that they all have gone through. This phenomenon is intriguing since more than half the group are current or former EL students. The tension is such that the current EL students did not feel comfortable discussing the topic with the whole group. As a result, we met privately, and they shared the following insights into the EL experience at School 42.

Elena stated the following: “We are treated badly [by English-fluent students]
because they make us feel less than them for not speaking English perfectly. They tease us when we participate and don’t speak correctly.” But a number described even more challenging experiences. Sandra made the following profound statement about the impact of this conflict on her learning: “My learning stopped because I was so disoriented at that time. Learning? I had so many things that my classmates would do to me that you could tell me something now and shortly thereafter, I would completely forget it.”

Elena then elaborated: “At first it was worse because I always had problems and the majority of [students] did not speak Spanish. When I tried to argue something, I would say it wrong, and they laughed at me anyway. That’s why now I don't speak with any of them and they don't bother me.” It was also noted that their participation in the advisory group sessions was reluctant and when prompted they only said the minimum and gave the responses in Spanish despite the fact that they are almost to the point of speaking conversational English.

According to the EL students, they were frequently teased and looked down upon by English-speaking Latinx students. It is my analysis that students internalize the negative attitudes and messages they are receiving from the media, school and maybe others within their community. The school is congruent with the larger culture that believes there is more value in students who speak English and that the city and people that live in it are unacceptable. As a school, we have not interrupted or reinterpreted these beliefs for the students, even as we see students act out those attitudes with one another. While they are all Latinx, they project those beliefs on students who are ELs, poorer and have less capital than themselves. As we see by Sandra’s statements above, it appears that the impact felt by the treatment of her peers was so detrimental that it
stopped her learning. By far, this affects students to such a degree that I question if any teaching strategy or practice could offset the impact of this dynamic on the oppressed student’s learning. It is critical for the staff to engage in changing the school culture of the school. After all, students also described similar experiences involving teachers as well. As a school, we need to be mindful not to neglect the learning and teaching environment by increasing our awareness and putting preventative measures in place that may prevent these situations from occurring.

Opportunities for Agency

Amidst all the difficulties just mentioned, there was a time when the students reported feeling valued and fully engaged in their learning. This is the lesser theme in that I found at least one opportunity or invitation made to the students so that they can be willing participants in their learning. “Opportunities for Agency” indicate moments in student-teacher interactions wherein there appears to have been the condition(s) for connection. During this time, the teacher applied a relational teaching approach and created relationships with the students that not only fostered a positive environment and trust but enabled students to take advantage of the learning opportunities in the class. The teacher, Ms. Jones, is an African American teacher who has lived all her life in the city where this study took place. She invests a great deal of effort into connectivity and relationships. These connections and relationships were used to provide students with emotional, academic, social and personal support. Because of her relational approach to teaching, Ms. Jones created multiple opportunities for agency in her classroom. The teacher leads and the students followed, because they trust their teacher. In fact, students
would not be able to take advantage of the opportunities for agency if they had not trusted their teacher. By opportunities for agency, I mean engaging activities that are designed to be meaningful, relevant and based on student interests. The lessons were designed to foster inquiry, creativity and reflection. These lessons were often self-initiated with the teacher taking on the role of facilitator who provided feedback. When a teacher is providing an opportunity for agency, he or she is giving students a voice in what and how they learn. In essence, students are included in all aspects of the class’ decision making. This theme substantiates the importance of relationships to the learning of marginalized students. Relational teaching is key for students to fully take advantage of opportunities for agency this educational approach emphasizes the importance of being connected to learning and relationships.

Ms. Jones established connections to learning for her students. Her relational teaching approach can be defined by her persistence and individualized approach taken with all of her students. When asked to describe what the teacher does that helps them do well in the class, they said she had conferences with them, and assisted them in creating academic targets for the marking period. They felt they could not fail because Ms. Jones provided continuous feedback and the opportunity to revise until they were satisfied that they had produced their best work. She created a learning safety net that allowed them to take risks.

Overwhelmingly, students described the same class as the place where they were most successful in terms of learning, grades, and level of participation. This is a seventh grade Language Arts class and students in and out of the PAG describe feeling most connected with that teacher, Ms. Jones.
In the following excerpt from the group, two students discussed Ms. Jones. Ray noted:

    We had a teacher in the seventh grade. She could really connect to us. Like, she always helped us out. When there was a problem, we could always tell her. We always felt that we were the most comfortable telling that teacher, because she’d understand us and she was one of the coolest teachers we ever had.

Magaly added: “Yeah, I agree, ‘cause the teacher I had last year kind of like, motivated me to do better in school. And understand how, literacy … especially writing, you will need it for everything.”

    I would like to suggest that students’ descriptions suggest Jones’s class has been a place where relational teaching goes on. Reichert and Hawley (2010) explained this key finding about relational teaching: “Students experience their teachers before they experience the lessons they teach” (p. 11). This certainly applies to the experiences of the Latinx students at my school. Ms. Jones appears to enjoy extraordinary relationships with her students and in turn the students have positive social and academic outcomes in her class. From the students’ point of view, these kinds of opportunities were rare as evidenced by the fact that there was only one teacher they described in this way.

    Ms. Jones has been at the school for four years and is originally from the city in which this study took place. Although the teacher speaks limited Spanish, English speakers as well as ELs identified this class as one in which they did not feel barriers to learning. Sandra stated: “I used to love that class; I was her favorite student.” Although she was an EL student, she reported feeling as though there was equity among ELs and English-fluent students. Her view—that ELs were empowered to engage in the lessons and be successful learners in the class—was echoed by all the other ELs with whom I spoke. Indeed, when telling me about Ms. Jones’s class, every student I spoke to expressed that they had never performed as well in any literacy class.
For instance, here is Juan:

I always enjoyed going to her class. I couldn’t wait to go to her class ‘cause I always loved going there. She made literacy fun. She really helped me out. And she actually, in my opinion, I think she cares and stuff like that. Every time she sees me, she’s like, ‘Hi, Juan,’ and this and that. And then we talk for a couple minutes, and stuff like that. She makes time for me and for all my fellow students. When we’re struggling with any work or anything, she’ll help us out. I remember my past years, like before all those years, I didn’t do good in literacy. I didn’t understand it that much, and I had D’s and F’s, and sometimes C’s. But as soon as I met her, I started getting C’s and B’s and A’s in her class and stuff.

Student success is also evidenced by the walls covered with samples of exemplary student work in and outside of Ms. Jones’s classroom. While all teachers are expected to have current samples of exemplary student work displayed, few have the quantity and quality as Ms. Jones. As part of my administrator responsibilities, I have been in this teacher’s classroom for walkthroughs, visitations, and teacher observation. I have noted over the years that she does not have the behavior issues that are common among the middle school team of teachers. When asked why they behaved so differently in her class, Pedro responded: “Everybody behaves in Ms. Jones’s class. I don't know why.” I asked Tomas this question, particularly because he has constant issues with his current Language Arts teacher and his response was “because that’s Ms. Jones.”

Students have identified various aspects of relational teaching as factors for the positive relationship they shared with Ms. Jones. Their statements portray a teacher who listens to them and makes the effort to withhold judgment of her students. Their comments describe a positive, welcoming and inclusive learning environment without disruptions to learning. Anytime the students describe their success in her class, it is inclusive of a comment pertaining to their relationship or high regard of her. The importance of relational teaching is highlighted as students describe their relationship
with her as synonymous with their success in her class. They are also reflective of the CRP’s tenets: academic achievement and cultural competence. As student testimony suggests, Ms. Jones is creating student-teacher relationships that positively transform them. It is not uncommon to hear comments such as Lisandro’s, where he stated the impact of Ms. Jones’s class on him: “Before Ms. Jones, I used to hate Language Arts.” While I cannot say the change in her students is long term, it certainly lasts for the duration of the time they spend with her. One important aspect noted by her students about Ms. Jones’s relational teaching is that she makes sure to listen to them. As noted by Juan, students often ask to speak to her when they have a problem because she listens, and they don’t fear she will judge them.

In addition, Ms. Jones creates many opportunities for student leadership in the class. This is important, particularly in a middle school where some students are better socially positioned than others. As mentioned, students take turns being assigned various roles and compete for “Bulldog bucks,” which they cash in for rewards. In addition, both EL and English speakers made statements which implied they felt they had a voice and equity in her class. Despite the consistent differences in culture and social class, there were no disruptions to the learning relationship. On the contrary students embraced every challenge and opportunity presented in the class. High expectations and student recognition are also foundational components of Ms. Jones’s class.

As Maria explained:

I think high expectations are important because it makes you work towards the expectations. I think everybody wants to be a very good student. Everybody wants to receive nice awards. Everybody wants to feel good. Everybody wants to feel admiration from their parents, and say, ‘wow, I’m proud of you, I’m proud that you did this.’ To not be disappointed because of like, nobody wants somebody to be disappointed at them.
Magaly added: “this recent teacher (Ms. Jones) pushes us to the limit and you know… want us to succeed in life. So that's their job, to push us to make us have more education and knowledge. Which I think is good.” Interestingly, students are not only able to identify circumstances when they deem teachers are not teaching them, they can also acknowledge good teaching and examples of a teacher going above and beyond to establish connections. It appears that the students are able to recognize and articulate when a classroom works for them, but it may be that they are able to feel when someone cares about them.

Sandra, who had had a largely negative experience as an EL student in our school, felt she was Ms. Jones’s favorite student. At that point, other students began arguing that indeed they were Ms. Jones’s favorite in the class. I found this to be fascinating because generally the students of the group expressed that they did not believe that teachers had a favorable opinion of them, yet they all felt they were special in Ms. Jones’s class.

Another aspect of Ms. Jones’s relational teaching is that the students feel she is authentic. Tomas said: “I hate fake teachers; they be one way in front of you guys and then they another way.” It is not uncommon to hear students refer to teachers as “fake,” but once again, they demonstrate that they can differentiate between being disingenuous and what takes place in this classroom. When students feel teachers are insincere, they in turn put up their own guards and that often tend to get in the way of real relationships.

From the social aspect, Ms. Jones supports the athletic events at the school by attending the games. This is especially significant since many of the teachers at the school would never go to neighboring schools or participate in evening events out of safety concerns. The students recognize that Ms. Jones stays late and shows up wherever
they are to support them. Students respond well when they think the teacher cares. They feel that the teacher is interested in them and believes in them.

When asked if they learn better when they think a teacher cares about them each student said yes. Elena explained: “Some teachers—for example, those I believe care and are interested in their job—like to help people and wait until one understands what they are explaining. They make every effort and won't stop until you understand.” Sandra echoed this: “If they do not care, then they are not interested in me.” Students such as Lisandro elaborated why they learn better when teachers care, explaining that teachers who care give personal support by helping students with “personal struggles.” He feels he learns better when a teacher cares because then he feels that “she believes in us.”

Based on the data, everything Ms. Jones does shows her students that she cares and is there for them. In a recent conversation, Ms. Jones described her approach to teaching, which is “It’s not so much how I teach them; it’s how I treat them” (personal communication, January 18, 2019).

Such remarks resonate with the following observation by Lisa Delpit (2012):

> It may be surprising to some that the students respond to such strong expectations and high demands. It is important to point out, however, that high expectations and strong demands are insufficient. When students believe that teachers care for them and are concerned about them, they frequently rise to the expectations set. When students believe that the teachers believe in their ability, when they see teachers willing to go the extra mile to meet their academic deficiencies, they are much more likely to try (pp. 81-82).

Ms. Jones’s pedagogy is based on building respectful relationships with her students. Unfortunately, she may be an exception at School 42, given how many students feel disrespected by her colleagues.

As Ray observes,
I would like to begin. I feel like that we don't get respected. They treat us like we’re some soldiers, you know? Just like today, we’re gonna have an essay to do in under 40 minutes. A whole five paragraph essay to do! It takes me 4-5 hours to do but the teachers gonna make us do it in a few minutes- that's it!

Ray’s comments underscore the importance of relational teaching and student connections to learning. The student’s feeling of disrespect before attempting to meet the teacher’s expectations could be explained by the relationship he has with the teacher. According to Delpit (2012), if he believed the teacher cared about him, he would be more willing to try to meet her expectations. Although there is not a substantial amount of literature in the area of Relational Teaching, particularly with Latinx students, the significance of the approach on this population’s academic success was witnessed. It became evident that positive student-teacher relationships are crucial to the learning of Latinx students.

With regard to Ms. Jones, the students have identified key components of relational teaching as factors for the positive relationship they shared with her. They described a learning environment that is positive, welcoming and understanding. They describe the importance of their relationship with her as they describe their success in her class. The students discussed the importance of being authentic and not “fake.” The students also describe being pushed and their appreciation for it and willingness to accept and meet those challenges. These relationships keep students connected to their teacher and their education as they accept invitation and experiences available to them. They perceive the teacher cares about them and as a result the students strive to meet her expectations. Students are invited to follow the teacher’s lead via her creative lessons. Through her relational teaching, Ms. Jones put in every additional support that would enable her students to maximize the learning experiences taking place in her classroom.
The student accounts of their experiences in Ms. Jones’s class, highlight that one of the few opportunities for agency in our school have arisen when a teachers have been purposeful in applying a relational teaching approach that enabled her to focus on helping students connect with the learning experience, one another, and with their teacher. This teacher’s relational teaching approach is conducive to opportunities for agency, which counter powerlessness and degradation. The school structure as a whole lacks school-wide practices or forums that involve the inclusion of student voice or agency, which in practice, refers to students being counted as principal members when making decisions pertaining to their education. The closest thing that resembled such an opportunity was the Student Government Association (SGA). Although an SGA existed, the students’ opportunities for leadership and agency within that capacity were still limited, denying students the opportunity for leadership or agency. It is not something built into our system. Not enough has been done to interrupt the conventional ways in which students make meaning at school—which is, largely, to assume their teachers feel negatively toward them. As a result, our school represents a learning context in which, for the most part, students feel powerless. We are also not disrupting the traditional system of schooling which does not invite nor account for student voice.

Co-construction of the Learning Experience

In conceiving of the final section of analysis to be discussed—Co-construction of the Learning Experience—this theme is closely related to the previous one: Opportunities for Agency. Both are based on the same premise that when offered the opportunity, the students take it and engage to the extent that they are allowed to do so. Also, both rely on the relational teaching component to help create a trusting space for
this process to take place. Over the course of this study, it has provoked wonder about what will most help students connect to the learning opportunities offered at School 42. Listening to students in the PAG, it has become clear that, when invited, students are willing to accept the opportunity to participate in helping to identify issues and to be equal partners in working towards a solution. This space helps students move from powerlessness to a space where they are accepting responsibility and not placing it solely in their teachers’ hands to take the lead; students actively engage in constructing their learning experiences. In other words, during the co-construction of learning, students did not put the onus on the teacher for creating a positive experience for them. During these times, the students accepted equal responsibility for their learning and participated in the process for change. I saw these small examples and I wanted to better understand them so as to begin developing curricular and classroom-level interventions that might encourage more of our students to co-construct their learning experiences in collaboration with teachers.

To begin, in the initial PAG meetings students created ground rules. This allowed them to establish the environment they wanted. The norms/rules were as follows: One person speaks at a time, be respectful, what is being said stays here, be truthful and committed. By committed, they said everyone should make every effort to regularly attend the meetings. Overall the rules expressed that the students wanted a space that was respectful and confidential. During our conversations, it was not uncommon for the students to refer to the rules when they felt someone was in violation; they held each other accountable. For the most part they referred to the rule about interruptions.

Another important rule for students was that of keeping our conversations
confidential and private. At one point the students asked to speak with me when the group discussion ended. Magaly began, “Ms., I or we wanted to let you know that someone in this group is telling people what we talk about.” Juan added: “Yeah, what are we going to have rules for if people ain’t going to follow them? I told her to stop.”

One strategy I used for encouraging the Co-construction of the Learning Experience was to encourage student-to-student dialogue through the use of open-ended questions. While I posed the questions, often times, the students led the conversations. The open-ended questions were posed to incite reflection and discussion. They allowed students to express their thoughts and build and challenge each other’s ideas and opinions. Students often posed questions of their own on the topic and it was also common for students to ask for a few minutes at the end of our meetings to solicit feedback from the group for help with a separate issue. Tomas, who had the most negative interactions with teachers regularly asked his peers for advice. For example, Tomas posed the following dilemma to his peers:

Okay so today, the teacher took off points because I did not want to copy what was on the board. She be doing the most. Like she be making you do so much work and write so much stuff down. And then her tests be so easy. And I’m like, Yo, leave me alone. If it’s not that hard, leave me alone. Because she be making us, like, ‘Oh, write this down.’ Like, no! This stuff is easy. And two, I don’t like to write stuff down. To me, I’m kind of different. I like to see things and then I just memorize it. What should I do?

The responses from some of his peers were for him to just copy things down if that is what the teacher wanted; meanwhile, others advised him to see his vice principal. He was advised to speak to his teacher privately, explain his point of view, and see if they could find a resolution together, if not he would involve the vice principal.

Students sometimes followed up on previous weeks’ conversations and requested
to add to or change a response. In one instance, students were asked if they believed the staff cared about them. Most of the students said that they did with few exceptions. At the outset of the discussion, Lisandro was one such exception. However, at the following session, Lisandro said, “I would like to change my answer to the question you asked last week, I think that the staff here does care about us students. I don’t know why I said that.” This is one of several examples that indicated the students were thinking about our discussions when they left the room and were committed to the process because they wanted me to have the correct information so that I could apply it to my work with the teachers later. It is evident that the students are invested in their education and learning; they have not unilaterally given up on the possibilities. Creating a space for students to dialogue invited ongoing reflection on the conditions of their education.

Voluntary attendance was another way in which students established their commitment to the PAG. Tomas is a student who participated in the PAG and was failing most of his classes. While everyone agreed that he was able to keep up academically, he had refused to do so. At our school, grade level is managed by a point system, which also affects student privileges, such as the ability to go on special field trips. Unfortunately, Tomas was not able to earn enough points to go on any of the quarterly field trips all year. Furthermore, teachers felt they had exhausted all of their resources and made every effort to motivate and engage him. Yet, according to the journal, Tomas was present at every PAG meeting. I noted that “Tomas was an active participant during our meetings.” In addition, Tomas was not suspended from school during this academic year: his attendance at and active participation in the discussions that took place during our meetings can be credited. A space was not only created for them to help teachers but
also to help one another grow. It was also noted that although the students had many examples of powerlessness, there were few examples of students and teachers working together to construct a better learning experience or of students actively participating and advocating in a process for change.

One example of how the PAG supported students to advocate for themselves is when the students brought up an existing problem. As a group, they expressed that some of them would not be attending the highly anticipated 8th grade field trip because they had not met the required points. Elena, Sandra, Juan and Tomas were not invited to attend the trip. The students who were not going took responsibility for their actions by acknowledging that they understood the reasons for their exclusion and agreed they did not qualify to go, expressing regret for their past decisions. As Juan noted, “I mean, I understand but I have done a lot of good things too. At the beginning I just didn't care and now they won’t give me a chance.” While preparing for the students to ask for me to reconsider and allow them to participate, I was surprised that they wanted to discuss an improvement to the system that would not benefit them but others in future years. They pointed out a flaw: the current point system only deducted points and was based on being punitive. Tomas raised the point with a question. “The teachers only take points. Why can’t we earn points back? I think that would motivate kids to do better.” Elena added: “They should change it [the policy] so people could earn points to go not just lose. I am not saying it for me, because I am staying home that day, but my little sister will still be here next year.”

The students recommended that in the future we incorporate the addition of points as an incentive for them to do the right thing. As many expressed, they have siblings in
the school and wanted to ensure that they had a better system in place. When I asked those who had been invited to share their thoughts, they agreed with the others. Magaly explained, “I see the point that we earned the opportunity to go but this is ‘once in a lifetime’ and I think everyone deserves the chance. I wouldn’t mind if everyone went.” In essence, the students were not just offering their ideas, advice, thoughtful suggestions, they were trying on a different role in their education – co-constructors with adults. This is in contrast to earlier examples where they didn't feel they had adult advocates in the school.

Another example of the student co-construction is the girls’ highlighting of the fact that there are not athletic opportunities for girls in middle school. The boys had basketball and soccer, but the girls did not have as many opportunities, Magaly said, “there are no sports for us to play or teams or join. I don't want to be a cheerleader, that’s all we could do – cheer.” The group collectively found a solution to the issue. Eighth grade, female volleyball teams were created, and a tournament took place that involved playoffs and a championship game. They were seeking equality; they wanted the opportunity to compete and to be respected as athletes. They were also aware of systemic opportunities or disenfranchisement and were using their voice to make a change.

On these occasions, students made me aware that the school did not offer any opportunities for students to contribute in the way they did during our PAG meetings. Here, they were able to explain problems, and took on the responsibility to find the solutions. Co-construction of learning experience is different from Opportunities for Agency because it goes beyond students being willing to participate and entails a higher level of involvement. During the Co-construction of learning, there is equity among
stakeholders, who engage in identifying problems and coming up with workable solutions for the good of the school. During these times, they worked to find solutions that would improve the learning environment for all students and try to find ways to keep it from recurring.

**Summary**

In this chapter, several ways have been noted in which our PAG meetings positively influenced the thinking of the students. They demonstrated that when invited, they are more than willing to participate in building connections and working to make the school a better place for themselves and others. This is likely the only time the students are able to engage in this kind of work. Students initially expressed not knowing how to deal with issues that stemmed from the disparity of race and social class between them and their teachers. Most times these interactions would leave students with feelings of powerlessness and degradation. During the discussion, students not only attempted to understand and make meaning out of their experiences, but they also expressed an overwhelming sense of powerlessness to affect their learning context. In addition, the students shared experiences when they felt degraded by their teachers and other students.

In contrast, the students described a class where there appears to have been the condition(s) for connection. This class has been referred to as the primary example of Opportunities for Agency. During this time, the teacher led, and the students followed. She put additional support in place and created relationships with the students, which were conducive to a positive learning environment, trust and student participation and learning. The students appeared to thrive in the class, they shared that they tend to do exceptionally well. While such experiences are crucial for students, as a school it is
necessary to bring students one-step further and into the role of “Co-constructors” of their learning experiences. As such students would capitalize on all chances to engage as equal partners in identifying and resolving issues that lead to the improvement of the school and learning conditions.

In analyzing the data in response to my question regarding how Latinx students could inform PD of CRP for teachers and how CRP and critical consciousness could improve the learning experience for this population, it became apparent that while we have glimpses of Opportunity for Learning, the classes do not yet reflect the routine learning experience for students. In the best case, this involves students being willing to be led by their teacher in the learning process. Nothing currently in place includes student engagement to the level imagined by students in the PAG (and described above under the heading Co-construction of the Learning Experience). Chapter 5 will further review how the findings of this study square with the extant literature, as well as the implications this research bears upon teacher practices and future research in CRP and critical consciousness.
Chapter 5
Implications & Analysis of Study Findings

This study examined how the views of Latinx students could inform teacher professional development on CRP and the critical consciousness component within it at School 42. It examined the lived experiences of Latinx students at the school where I am principal. The students discussed various issues that included their assumptions about teachers’ lives, school culture, language barriers, as well as learning and social experiences that have taken place at the school. The themes were derived from data that was collected during those discussions. The first step of a larger action research effort was to collect and document student voices. The students’ individual learning experiences and suggestions will ultimately be used as data to inform CRP and the preparation and development of teachers at the school.

In this chapter, I locate the findings of this study within the extant literature and emphasize the need for CRP and critical consciousness at School 42. In addition, I describe the implications this research has for educational leadership, teacher practice, and future research in CRP and critical consciousness. I also offer a brief overview of research in the field of relational teaching in which I show its connection to CRP and critical consciousness. I then build connections between a relational approach and what I observed firsthand with students at School 42. I close the chapter by sharing limitations of the study and making several suggestions for future research.
**Discussion of the Findings**

As the students shared their experiences and school life, the aforementioned themes were most noticeable and common. These data below encompassed students’ perspectives and learning experiences at School 42 as it relates to the extant literature. Students described what helped them learn and got in the way of their learning. The findings also offered a glimpse into how the students struggled to make sense of their interactions with staff and peers. Consequently, in the discussion of the findings, one can begin to understand what is lacking in the educational practice for Latinx students of School 42. As part of the discussion of the findings, I presented my understanding of the PAG and revealed the extent of the students’ contributions and the impact that their voice could have on improving the practice of its educators and administrators.

Schools prepare children to follow rules, to then prepare them to function in society (Westheimer, 2017). The structure of the school fosters student compliance of rules and practices, there is no opportunity to analyze or offer input in the decision-making process of the school. The curriculum and the structure used in schools is reflective of the society we want to create (Westheimer, 2017). Unlike schools in other countries, the U.S. does not have formal systems to encourage youth participation. In Europe, student voice or youth participation is supported by policies and national educational structures (Mitra, Serriere & Kirshner, 2014). It is no mistake that student voice is not a key component of most schools in the U.S. All the while, schools are not necessarily teaching children to be good citizens, yet they are indirectly teaching citizenship. “Whether teachers explicitly ‘teach’ lessons in citizenship or not, students learn about community organization, the distribution of power and resources, rights, responsibilities, and of course injustice” (Westheimer, 2017, p. 15). The students’
experiences in feeling degraded and their overwhelming sense of powerlessness to affect
their learning context has a significant impact on the way they see the world and
themselves (Gay, 2010). Besides content, teachers serve an inevitable influence on
molding children’s views on the world; these influences and experiences ultimately will
shape society (Biddle, 2019).

Students are not prepared to recognize ways in which the educational system has
failed them. They have internalized the oppression and blame and assumed responsibility
for the educational debt owed to them (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Irvine, 2010; Milner, 2010
& Milner, 2017). The PAG students also tended to think that if their peers did not
perform well academically, the blame would rest solely on the student (Buckingham,
Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013). Another example of internalized oppression
pertains to meritocracy. Marginalized adolescents who have been indoctrinated with
meritocracy, a notion that affirms their success is solely dependent on hard work,
perseverance, talent and grit have been shown to have a decline in self-esteem and an
increase in risky behaviors (Godfrey, Santos & Burson, 2017). Because the school
community does not have the tools to apply Freire’s concept of reading and
understanding the world, this belief has probably been perpetuated by well-meaning
teachers trying to instill hope and motivation in the students. These are part of deeply
embedded beliefs and acceptance of dominant ideologies on the part of people of color
that they are lacking in intelligence, beauty, resourcefulness, goodness, or potential of
success (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013; Monzo, 2016; Pyke, 2010). For Latinxs and other
people of color, this deficit is often attributed to race, their immigration status or
language (Monzo, 2016; Allen, 2012). Consequently, this is an illustration of the need for
the development of critical consciousness in staff and the students. Without these larger, alternative understandings these students are ripe for continuing to digest and internalize their own oppression.

Everyone wants their voice heard and acknowledged (Corso & Quaglia, 2016). Everyone prefers to be actively involved in something rather than being an observer or rejected (Comstock et al., 2008; Banks, 2016; Miller1976). When teachers include student voice, they take on the role of social equalizer because it ensures that all students know that their voice matters (Belle, 2019). Student voice and active participation can have a positive impact in many other ways (Mitra, 2012). The inclusion of student voice can help to create meaningful experiences that also meet the developmental needs “especially for students who otherwise do not find meaning in their school experiences” (Mitra, 2004, p.651). Promoting student voice has been linked to an increase in academic achievement in marginalized student populations, more classroom participation, and an increase in positive behaviors (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). When students have a voice, they are more likely to be engaged and invested in school because they feel like valued stakeholders. In addition, when student voices are acknowledged, they feel that they are included in the shared decision-making process and that the school or class is genuinely serving their needs (Mansfield, Welto & Halx, 2018). Teachers can and should invite students to share their views in order to gain insight and understanding of their perspective and to help identify issues and find a solution to educational challenges (Corso and Quaglia, 2016).

While such experiences are crucial for students, I have argued herein that as a school we need to bring students one-step further and into the role of co-constructing
their learning experiences. As such students would capitalize on all chances to engage as equal partners in identifying and resolving issues that lead to the improvement of the school and learning conditions (Mansfield, Welto & Halx, 2018). It also became apparent that while we had glimpses of what I have called Opportunity for Learning, the classes or other structures in the school, do not yet reflect the routine learning experience for students. In the best case, this involves students being willing to be led by their teacher in the learning process. Nothing currently in place includes student engagement to the level imagined by students in the PAG.

It is possible that subtractive schooling and oppression displayed by the students can be an extension of the existing classroom dynamics that marginalize EL students. Angela Valenzuela’s 1999 book *Subtractive Schooling* looked at how schools subtract resources from students. It described the process and effects subtracting the students’ culture, language and resources. Valenzuela (1999; Valenzuela, 2016) found this to be especially detrimental to the academic achievement and the assimilation of the students. It fostered the perceived lack of caring between the students and teachers, leaving them nothing to use as a foundation for academic advancement and or to use as a commonality to bond with others born in the U.S. The school is congruent with the larger culture that believes there is more value in students who speak English and that the city and people that live in it are inadequate. As a school, we have not interrupted or reinterpreted these beliefs for the students, even as we see students act out those attitudes with one another. The data demonstrated that there is a need for teachers and students to develop critical consciousness. These findings are in line with past research which affirms that issues stemming from the disparity of race and social class between the students and their
teachers are not uncommon in under-resourced schools (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Additionally, the same students experience educational disparities which are based on subtractive schooling, poverty, parents’ limited schooling, and EL proficiency among other challenges (Valenzuela, 1999, 2006; Gutierrez, 2008). These disparities often lead to negative interactions between students and teachers and may have a negative impact on the academic performance of Latinx students (Garcia, 1991; Garcia & Hun, 2016). The disparities in their everyday school life are also likely to impact the manner in which the English speaking Latinx students respond to the EL students, students who are lower on the school’s social hierarchy.

Teachers can improve the learning context for ELs and English speaking Latinx students by having the preparation to work with immigrant populations (Villegas, Strom & Lucas, 2012). As teachers struggled to establish connections with the students and serve the needs of the various learners in the classroom, the students understood the teachers’ practice as discriminatory but were not prepared to critically analyze their experiences beyond that (Valenzuela, 1999). Also, the students struggled to understand how prejudice, discrimination or assumptions impacted society and learning institutions (Mansfield, Welto & Halx, 2018). They were beginning to understand the role of poverty, language and social class on society and their learning; however, they lacked any foundational knowledge on how to begin to challenge the status quo or any inequalities they may have been experiencing (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Gandara, 2010). It is critical for educators to be aware and put preventative measures such as CRP in place that may prevent this situation from occurring (Milner, 2010). Critical consciousness may be a helpful tool to use to help students learn how socioeconomics
factor into bias, and discrimination. Most students described the negative interactions with teachers as a time when they felt confused and disconnected from their learning and school. Critical consciousness would be a useful tool to assist educators and students learn how to understand and address this complex perpetuation of a hierarchy of discrimination and oppression.

In contrast, the students described a class where there were conditions for connection. It was noted that students did not describe teachers monolithically; the exception was when they talked about this teacher. During this time, the teacher led, and the students followed. Based on the student responses, the teacher, who is African-American, and is not fluent in Spanish managed to create relationships with all of her students which were conducive to the establishment of a positive learning environment, student participation and learning (Villegas, Strom & Lucas, 2012). The students felt good about the relationship with their teacher and performed well (Nelson, 2016). Based on the students' accounts, it appears that the teacher put equal effort into ensuring students had a voice in her class, developing relationships with them and to the content she was teaching (Mansfield, 2011). In essence, it is my interpretation that she grew in a relationship with them as she cultivated their learning. While I only have the student accounts of her teaching, I have observed her practice over the years on multiple occasions. I understand that somehow, she has established relationships with students where they feel a sense of belonging and shine as learners (Nelson, 2016). As a result, English speakers as well as ELs identified Ms. Jones as a teacher with whom they felt connected and did not feel barriers to learning in her class. In this class, students expressed that they felt there was equity and respect among students and teacher, they
were empowered to engage in the lessons and be successful learners in the class (Mansfield, Welto & Halx, 2018).

Research supports the notion that one of the most powerful tools for positively influencing academic achievement is to give students a stake in their learning (Brasof, 2018). This might explain why students felt successful and vested in Ms. Jones’s class. The inclusion of student voice and student-centered teaching is conducive to a classroom that capitalizes on self-determination and increases achievement, motivation and belonging (Han, 2017; Baroutsis, McGregor & Mills, 2016; Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Furthermore, the students confirmed that Ms. Jones made a great effort to establish relationships with them, their parents and community (Belle, 2019). The students shared that Ms. Jones learned Spanish, used apps and translators to communicate with their parents, coached and attended games and afterschool activity in which they participated. These relationships are critical to student success (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). After all, perceptions of teacher caring have a direct impact on whether they could learn the subject matter, regardless of its difficulty (Lewis, et al., 2012). Motivating students to apply themselves in the classroom requires knowing them. As evidenced by the students’ statements, Ms. Jones not only knew them, but her teaching practices acknowledged their ethnicity, cultural heritage and language. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b; Nelson, 2016). These efforts help students make connections with her as it appeared, she was able to identify and address factors that could interrupt or interfere with establishing and maintaining positive student-teacher relationships (Nelson, 2016). However, despite all of Ms. Jones’s efforts and relational approaches, there was no evidence of critical consciousness taking place.
During our work in the PAG meetings, students demonstrated that when invited, they are more than willing to participate in building connections and working as equal partners to make the school a better place for themselves and others (Mansfield, 2011). This is likely the only time the students were able to engage in this kind of work. The PAG followed a format which was not part of a standardized curriculum, instead it involved asking questions that pertained to the lived experiences of the students. By definition my action research was an example of CRP methods. Our work together on the PAG empowered “students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 20). In addition, I was always cognizant of the relationship between content and the students’ background, and that understanding was the fundamental basis of my work.

This practical example could be helpful to other administrators or educators seeking to begin to incorporate CRP and critical consciousness in their classroom or school. Consistent with teaching critical consciousness, during the PAG sessions, questions were asked, followed by a pause for reflection and debriefing (Diemer, Rapa, Voight & McWhirter, 2016). Shifts in thinking, or discourse were pointed out to students throughout our discussions. Often times, questions were revisited as students reflected during their time away and wanted to make additional comments or deepen the discussion. As the facilitator, I had to work to identify personal feelings and biases that may unconsciously influence my work and affect the course of the discussion (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). For example, in one instance students were referring to their reactions to hearing teachers say, “I get paid whether you learn this or not.” At that time, the reason why many frustrated teachers have said this had to be explained. This was
highlighted as an example of how they would be helping School 42 educators grow since their point of view was adding a different and much needed perspective to our practice. The work pushed the thinking of the students to reflect on their academic and social experiences and determine their position on particular debated questions such as: Do you think you are receiving a quality education? or Do you think teachers have a positive perception of you and your community? etc. The content of our discussions was based on their lives and interests (Ladson Billings, 1994). The work also helped me focus on my purpose as an educator, pushed me to evaluate my role and that of the teachers, as well as the pedagogies and interactions that took place at School 42. It helped me to change my practice and become more reflective and purposeful.

During our discussions, students demonstrated the possibilities of reading the world by engaging in discussions that moved to a more analytical level. This is a skill needed in order to move to critical consciousness. As noted by Freire (1972), students need to learn to question and think critically to engage in critical consciousness. Once we had developed that skill, I would have supported them in identifying areas of concern. Our discussions would then be focused on issues they deem important to them. My role would have been to continue to support and plan the manner in which the students would actively engage in affecting change.

As it was, our discussions were student-centered, and I took on the role of a facilitator. The students were empowered and challenged, with the aim to cultivate their minds and push their thinking but it stopped there. There was no further action on the part of the students. We used some time at the end of the meetings for students like Tomas to share school life challenges with the group, as they advised each other how to
navigate their circumstances. Students found a commonality when speaking of shared struggles like the lack of support when it comes to help with homework and their insecurities and fear that they were not prepared for high school. The discussions recognized their cultural background and asked them to share why they thought other Latinx students were not performing well and share practices that they found helpful and would improve the learning for others of similar background. Students not only had to reflect on the learned content but began to scratch the surface of socio-political consciousness raising (Freire, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a). This was noted when they began to question the quality of education available to them in their city, the athletic options available to females, and their perceptions about what teachers think about them, their parents and community. Students also shared that seeing their parents getting by with very little education might be influencing their motivation and belief that only education can provide opportunities for a good life. They did not show an awareness that they still face an unequal playing field and their hard work and education only goes so far in providing opportunities.

The students were able to recognize that they were experts and had valuable contributions and information that was needed to address challenges within our school, although they were beginning to understand social inequalities (Irvine, 2009). During our discussions, students just began describing their perceived differences between life in the suburbs compared to the city where they lived. They were able to identify that life was harder in their city and were aware of their struggles to get resources like homework assistance, concerns for safety in school and their neighborhoods, quality of education etc. We had created a relational learning community (RLC), a space where there is
explicit attention given to the creation, maintenance of, and reflection on relationships (Raider-Roth, 2017). We created a space where students felt safe to be vulnerable and honest in their reflections. When students were asked if they felt prepared to compete against students outside of this city and whether they felt they received as good an education as those in the suburbs, many students said “No.” The discussion also included the attributes that inner city students have, that perhaps other students lacked, such as resilience and the ability to navigate challenging circumstances (Mansfield, Welto and Halx, 2018; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Also discussed was what they would need to develop in high school in order to be successful in college. This conversation was a beginning. It showed a glimmer of the possibilities to hold discussions which had the potential to yield life-altering results because they imparted an awareness and understanding that had a more permanent place in the students’ overall knowledge of the world. While participating in the PAG, students were not just learning passively by reading about issues, but instead were engaged in practicing critical reflection to improve their awareness of their social position and learning (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006; Milner, 2011).

In terms of my learning, I realized that the students needed an opportunity to be heard (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Students were willing to give up their lunch/recess period to sit and discuss matters that pertain to their education: i.e. problems affecting their education are not just systemic or centered around teacher practice. As the school principal, I too have been complicit in the oppression of our students (Khalifa, 2018). It became evident to me that all of these actions and systems were put in place “for their own good.” Well intentioned individuals put systems and curricula in place that were
focused on teaching and learning because of a lack of understanding that there were areas in the students’ education that were being neglected. Opportunities that would prepare students to not only pass a class but have the possibility of improving their lives. The process of helping students find their voice and preparing them to become agents of change takes time and dedication – much more than many can afford. It would require a school-wide shift in principles and practice toward critical consciousness and there would need to be the cultivation of skills to analyze the larger contexts of their education beyond the schoolhouse door.

**Need for Critical Consciousness at School 42**

According to Freire (1972), all people are striving for acceptance and affirmation, yet there are constant systems of oppression at play, — the educational system is no exception. The literature on critical consciousness has highlighted an existing need for the cultivation of student voice in inner city youth (Freire, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006; Howard, 2010; Milner, 2011). The PAG students’ shared experiences demonstrated a need for critical consciousness at the school. They were unable to identify how the school system had failed them and continuously absorbed the blame and responsibilities for their perceived shortcomings.

The students demonstrated that they were not equipped to deal with issues that stemmed from disparity of race and social class between them and their teachers. Their narratives made it apparent that the school has failed to offer another view to the message society sends them. In this study, the students recognize the disparities between them and their teachers, to be a result of differences in culture, race and social class, yet are not prepared to move beyond that point because nothing had been offered in their education.
that would cultivate critical consciousness and a more critical view.

During the course of discussions, connections were made; the possibility for critical consciousness was evident. They were starting to see educational and social disparities; however, the students lacked a sense of agency, the ability for a full analysis, the direction to move ahead or affect their circumstances. It is precisely for this reason that Freire (1972) conceptualized *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This framework describes a new relationship between teacher, student, and society that is grounded in education and empowerment. The element of critical consciousness is a key aspect of CRP, because it emphasizes the belief that students should move beyond being passive consumers of information (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006). It also emphasizes a different way for teachers and students to work together in order to help students engage with content and information differently. For this reason, critical consciousness at School 42 would mean that pedagogy would help the students actively interact with the content, not only to make meaning, but also to become self-aware and improve their position in the overall structure of society (Gay, 2010; Milner, 2011).

Students demonstrated their potential to move towards critical consciousness by their willingness to engage as equal partners to identify and address school challenges. This too is supported by Freire (1972), who argued that in order to empower the oppressed students and combat oppression, educators should create equality in the learning process. Essentially, the traditional hierarchically structured roles of teachers and students have to be redefined to a more equity-based model. As teachers fundamentally understand the context and their students differently, they can move towards applying a new pedagogy. In this new pedagogy, School 42 teachers would leave behind the
banking concept of pedagogy and instead learn to apply the problem-posing model, which empowers students to question their condition and encourages dialogue, —a crucial component of the change process (Freire, 1972). Students at School 42 are not used to being co-constructors of knowledge in their classrooms. Through dialogue teachers could gain insight into their students’ perspectives and help them expand their understanding of the world. Similarly, dialogue could help educators know the potential of their students and become aware of how their pedagogical practice fails to tap into the Latinx students’ social capital and their communicative and cognitive resources (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006).

Based on what was learned from this study, we must consider that authentic CRP, inclusive of all components such as critical consciousness, can be an excellent intervention in our current pedagogical practice. In terms of the issue with students oppressing other students, critical consciousness would help teach students to read the world and see the current arrangements of society as unjust and disenfranchising. Students may begin to recognize some pattern of behavior for being discriminatory and systemic and perhaps refrain from emulating and perpetuating it. In addition, it appears that the application of CRP and critical consciousness would also help students become more well-rounded and gain a sense of power, mainly due to the emphasis on its main components which are academic success, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness. Because students are empowered intellectually, socially and politically, they learn to advocate for themselves and would be less likely to convey powerlessness. They can begin to demand more opportunities and resources for themselves and their communities. Liberation must take place in two stages: The first stage is reflection and
understanding of the nature of the oppression, and second stage is action to change it (Freire, 1972). School 42 is approaching Stage One.

Implications

School Leadership

It is important for Culturally Relevant School Leaders (CRSL) to understand the history and contexts of the school community (Khalifa, 2018). Oppressive structures and practices will remain in school unless they are challenged and teachers and administrators know how to confront them (Minkos et al., 2017; Khalifa, 2018). These include creating fair policies for student misconduct and confronting bias (Minkos et al., 2017). Unfortunately, most principals perpetuate the oppressive policies and practices that have been passed on to them (Khalifa, 2018). It is important for ethical leaders to critically examine and challenge these practices and policies so they are not reproduced. However, this is not part of educational leadership preparation. Much like the students and teachers, school leadership education also lacks a critical component to read structures of oppression. On the contrary, often times school leadership courses teach that it is the responsibility of the administrator to promote and carry out the board’s directives. Research suggests that most school leadership preparation programs have not prepared school leaders to approach their position from a social justice perspective (Bustamante, Nelson & Onwuegbuzie, 2009).

It is the responsibility of CRSL to promote an educational setting that is conducive to the success of minority students (Khalifa, 2018, Smith, 2005). Considering that marginalized students and their families are already up against structural barriers in school and society, the school leader should work to engage and empower them
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(Bustamante et al., 2009). CRSL should approach their work from the stance of being champions for marginalized students, who tirelessly fight oppression (Smith, 2005). School leaders must be prepared to be critical reflective leaders that are not afraid to coach, mentor, and challenge others about their policies and treatment of children. Many teachers resist the application of CRP (Neri, Lozano & Gomez, 2019). A great deal of those who resisted noted the reason as their workplace was not conducive to applying and supporting this type of pedagogy (Borrero, Flores & De la Cruz, 2016; Esposito & Swain, 2009) therefore, a leader should see it as their responsibility to initiate and sustain culturally responsive schooling (Bransford et al., 2000). They should promote CRP within the school’s structure, policies, staff and curriculum (Khalifa, 2018).

This would be difficult because research suggests that some school leadership programs or curriculum do not adequately prepare administrators for CRP and critical consciousness. A number of principals have not learned to identify inequalities in education and society (Khalifa, 2018, Bustamante et al., 2009). They have also not learned how to develop teachers to obtain a deeper understanding of social realities that shape the lives of their students. In order to begin this work school administrators must have a social justice lens and know how to identify inequality and injustice and bring it to teachers’ attention. They should also know how to use a social justice lens to address curriculum or any school practice or policy that promotes injustice (Smith, 2005). There has not been enough attention given to the preparation of school leaders to assist them to model or lead changes that would improve the socio-political position of their students.

As a school leader, I also came to terms with the fact that it is easy to invite students to share their thoughts and views however, it is more challenging to release the
role of being an authoritative figure in the room. Educators must leave aside the roles in the educational power hierarchy and be willing to listen and learn with the students (Han, 2017). It will be important to continue this work and to look for other ways for student input to be integrated in everyday school life (Mitra & Sierriere, 2012), in order to create school-wide responsiveness and equity-based reform. Having created this space in my school for students to engage as equal members of the school community has helped me grow as a school leader and administrator. It has made me become more self-reflective and aware of the need to promote a vision of a culturally responsive school and an environment that is conducive to students becoming empowered. CRSL should invite students to the table in order to gain insight and understanding of their perspective and to help identify issues and find a solution to educational challenges (Corso and Quaglia, 2016). Inviting students to participate in the governance of their school enables school leaders to understand the necessary perspectives needed to effect change (Brasof, 2018). Listening to and considering student voice is crucial to ethical leadership. The gathering of student voices is not uncommon for schools. The problem is that schools tend not to include students as partners in an inquiry and change process (Mansfield, Welto & Halx, 2018). Schools cannot leaders do not seize the opportunity for students to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways as staff (Cook-Sather, 2011). Student voice is important to promote a culture of self-advocacy and inclusion. School leaders should reflect on their own position of privilege and oppression and how these matters might influence their personal attitudes and beliefs before engaging in critical pedagogy. CRP and the use of student voice is needed in order to tap into cultural assets as a means to enhance their school experience, “and challenge the power structures in place that
silence the voices of marginalized students” (Mansfield, Welto & Halx, 2018, p.17).

**Teacher Professional Development**

In analyzing the data in response to the question: How can Latinx student views inform teacher professional development on CRP? it was evident that CRP and the critical consciousness component within it were only minimally taking place in School 42, and that strengthening such pedagogies would improve the learning experience for the population it serves.

During this research students demonstrated a sense of powerlessness and degradation stood out in students’ discourse about their educational experience. During the discussions, students attempted to understand and make meaning out of their school experience, and their interactions with staff and peers. There were glimpses where they began making connections and the possibility for critical consciousness was evident. By the end of our PAG meetings, they were starting to see educational and social disparities; however, the students lacked a sense of agency, and the ability for a full analysis. They could not move beyond the point of identifying a problem since they had not been prepared to move towards the issue in order to affect their circumstances. At times, they absorbed the blame for not achieving academically or receiving an adequate educational experience. They lacked awareness and critical questioning as they have been indoctrinated with the meritocracy myth and the belief that everyone is on a level playing field, leaving no place to place blame other than on themselves. Consequently, in the discussion of the findings, one can begin to understand that critical consciousness is lacking in the educational practice for Latinx students of School 42.

Critical consciousness is grounded in the theory, pedagogy, and practice of Paulo
Freire (1972). The implementation of this holistic approach would help to prepare students and teachers identify and fight social inequalities and affect socio-political change (Freire, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2003, & 2006). Critical consciousness would help students develop the ability to critically examine their place in the world and see the possibility for transformation (Freire, 1972). For teachers, it could help them view pedagogy as a process to empower students to develop cultural competence, prepare for academic success and take an active approach in reforming the system (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2006; Milner, 2011).

It also became apparent that while we have glimpses of what has been called “Opportunities for Learning,” the classes do not yet reflect the routine learning experience for all students. In the best case, this involves students being willing to be led by their teacher in the learning process. Nothing currently in place includes student engagement to the level imagined by students in the PAG (and described in the previous chapter under the heading Co-construction of the Learning Experience). There is a need for teachers who want to bring about change through education and are willing to engage in pedagogy that disrupts the cycle of oppression. As noted by Ladson-Billings (1995a), successful teaching is primarily not about what to do, but equally about how we think about our role, students, communities we serve and equity and justice in society.

We must begin by finding a starting point to collectively engage in the work of disrupting or changing mindsets, culture and pedagogy in the school (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Much like the pedagogy we are trying to disrupt, we do not want the teachers to become receptacles of best practices or new knowledge. This method devalues their experience and capabilities. For that reason, the PD should not be
prescribed and must be teacher centered. This way the teachers can track their own learning and move on to the next phase of learning when they are ready. Ideally, teachers would have spent a substantial amount of time critically self-reflecting. Once ready, they could engage in learning how students internalize their educational experience at School 42 (Khalifa, 2018; Howard, 2003). These steps cannot be rushed, it is difficult for educators to learn and accept that students could be negatively affected or have perceptions of their practice that are way off the intended purpose. Continuous self-reflection should not only be focused on identifying their own biases, but on finding ways to turn PLCs into “humanizing communities of practice” (Khalifa, 2018, p.142). At the same time, teachers should be learning more about who their students are. These would be considered the starting points of initiating this practice. Khalifa (2018) suggested using the time teachers have in their Professional Learning Communities (PLC) for ongoing PD. At School 42, that would entail ensuring that our teacher learning communities are functioning effectively. At this time, they are used to taking that time to discuss student academic outcomes and behavior. It will be challenging to ask teachers to shift their focus to establishing shared beliefs and vision centered on CRP and critical consciousness. Together, the staff would be charged with identifying what they feel is necessary to create and maintain an effective community and school culture conducive to the desired changes in pedagogy. The PLC should discuss driving questions that are focused on CRP, and foster discussions on ethical, and professional issues and responsibilities of teaching marginalized students. They will also be encouraged to learn how socioeconomic status, poverty and race impact learning in School 42. The teachers will continue learning how to recognize, value and tap into the social capital that our
students bring.

To take it a step further, teachers can self-assess to measure the level of analytical and critical thinking that the students demonstrate in class. They can also reflect on what is missing and what stops them from pushing the students forward. Through inquiry, teachers can begin to plan what is ultimately needed to address the stated problems derived from the student narratives, analyze how it aligns with other data, prepare for questions and concerns that might shape the PD and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The ideal outcome, ways our school can successfully enact critical consciousness, provide an inclusive and supportive environment for all stakeholders. In a sense I envision teachers will receive PD but will also engage in some action research of their own.

The relational component is essential to the development of CRP, and it applies to the learning of teachers as well. In order for teachers of School 42 to be prepared to do this work, a relational learning community must be established. Shaping the environment is fundamental because it is formed and forms the quality of relationships of the learning community members (Raider-Roth, 2017). Overall, students expressed a negative quality of relationships throughout the school. Positive relationships are not only important for student-teacher relationships but are also crucial for teachers to have amongst themselves. “Prior research has demonstrated that in order to construct trustworthy knowledge, learners must be engaged in trustworthy relationships” (Raider-Roth, 2017, p.15; Raider-Roth, 2005). These relationships foster democracy, community, as well as connections with the content, self and others. Only then can we hope teachers will be willing to be vulnerable by self-reflecting and questioning and challenging their own fundamental
belief systems. In order for teachers to embark on tackling systemic inequitable and
discriminatory practices, they must have a clear understanding of their own biases, beliefs
and personal roles in the oppression. Through dialogue teachers can gain a new
perspective about how power, privilege, and access may be causing them to have a
marginalizing practice that might be hindering the educational opportunities of Latinx
students (Khalifa, 2018). As the teachers develop, they can begin to see the implications
for change in the curriculum, the school’s policies, and their own teaching practice.

Essentially, the data in this study has shown that in the typical learning
environment described by the students, they often felt alienated and discriminated
against. They were beginning to understand the role of poverty, language and social class
on society and their learning; however, lacked any foundational knowledge on how to
begin to challenge the status quo or any inequalities they may have been experiencing.
Teachers could learn that helping students develop a voice and advocate for themselves
would not only help avoid these perceptions and misunderstandings but would also
strengthen the relationship between the students and teachers. This level of understanding
could also enable teachers to provide alternate points of view to the students, which relate
to their backgrounds and more effectively helps them examine historical social injustice
and educational inequalities (Borrero, 2011).

In addition, staff might explore how practices of CRP might positively impact
learning, self-esteem, and belonging for these students (Khalifa, 2018). Teachers would
have to work to overcome the challenges of teaching content that is not typical to their
practice and experience. For example, Freire’s (1972) problem-posing approach is not
aligned to the general pedagogical practices of most schools nor is the concept of
developing curricula based on the existing needs of students. The notion of teaching students to be actively involved would have to be incorporated; helping students move towards becoming self-aware of their position in the overall structure of society to then challenge the status quo for a better future. This is a monumental task because every aspect of this pedagogy is foreign to most teachers.

Moreover, I would need to find a way for teachers to engage in learning experiences on how critical consciousness can empower students to use their voices to effect change and proactively engage to improve their condition and be counted as members of the school community by embarking on the same process. The stumbling block to avoid during this professional development is the banking system that we want to avoid for our students. It is important for teachers to work collectively and establish learning goals. For practice, they might work to identify an oppressive policy or practice and develop a plan to change it. This may include discussions on what makes the practice or policy oppressive, or dehumanizing, ways to engage in affecting change and then collectively engaging in the process to change it. Teachers can take their own experience and document the process and possible pitfalls that may arise so that they can use it as a guide working with students and varying contexts. Although, it is my goal that staff will be not only be receptive to professional development on CRP but will also commit to reevaluating their current pedagogical practices, this dissertation is only documenting the first step in that process: the gathering of students’ voices.

Observations at School 42: Relational Teaching as a foundation to CRP

The three goals of CRP focus on improving students’ academic achievement, sociopolitical consciousness, and cultural competence. In CRP teachers are expected to
take into account the culture of the student and use it to as a way to make the content relevant. As I have suggested throughout this dissertation, Paulo Freire’s notion of “Critical Consciousness” plays a central role in CRP, insofar as it is a pedagogy which helps students gain an awareness of the injustices in the world and the tools to challenge them. Although critical consciousness is part of the CRP model, far too often it gets left out in practice. This is detrimental to the practice of CRP because it is critical consciousness, which paves the way for teachers to prepare students to question sociopolitical inequalities and ultimately affect transformational change. Leaving this component out means that teachers are only touching the surface of the full potential of this pedagogy.

In the case of Ms. Jones, she used relational teaching and some components of CRP to engage her students. Students explained that they shared a unique learning relationship with her which made them excited about attending her class. These learning relationships can be defined as growth-enhancing relationships in which the teacher is learning in relationship with her students (Raider-Roth, 2017). Student accounts also made it evident that academic achievement and cultural competence were essential aspects of her teaching. Both English speaking and EL students shared that they felt successful in her class and that the content was made accessible for all. However, Ms. Jones only focused on the academic achievement and the cultural competence tenets of this framework. One cannot help but wonder about the potential of her students if she also incorporated a focus on socio-political consciousness.

Academic scholars like Ladson-Billings have sought to identify current flaws in the educational system that prevent effective learning for the marginalized, poor, and
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ethnic minority students, and have also identified the best practices for teaching minority students. However, research has indicated that there is a shortage of CRP literature that focuses on the teacher-student relationship, which is the primary conduit through which any and all course content must pass. Attention should be given to the conditions which include the learning environment and relationships that foster critical reflection and transformative learning (Raider-Roth, 2017). For teachers of CRP to be effective, they must first consider how they relate to students. In order for teachers to engage in critical consciousness, teachers are encouraged to take the stance that there is no hierarchy in learning and be prepared to learn and grow with the students. The CRP literature does not talk about the importance of the teacher student relationships and how they are preliminary and foundational for a sense of agency, student voice, and for critical consciousness to take place.

Male scholars of color in particular have written about the possibilities for male students of color however, the literature on CRP and relational teaching do not seem to meet. These two schools of pedagogical thought are always discussed separately despite the fact that both frameworks generally discuss the same population – African American students. CRP tends to focus on how to improve curricula and content in order to ensure that inner-city students of color can engage and do well in school. Meanwhile, relational teaching often looks carefully at the importance of building relationships between teachers and marginalized students in order for true learning to take place – and yet often does not necessarily focus enough on issues related to racial and cultural differences.

In Chapter 4, I noted several ways in which my meetings with students in the PAG demonstrated that when invited, they are more than willing to participate in building
connections and working to make the school a better place for themselves and others. I also realized that this is likely the only time the students have been able to engage in this kind of work and that these opportunities are not taking place at the school. My work as a relational principal means that I am committed to advocating for the inclusion of marginalized students (Khalifa, 2018). This is important because I am best positioned to motivate teachers to confront systems that are oppressive to students. I can also ensure that aspects of schooling are relational and culturally responsive. To have a culturally responsive school would mean that the school is a community that is focused on developing humanizing and culturally responsive policies and behaviors for staff and students, in addition to academic achievement.

My work with students in the School 42 PAG illustrated the necessity of building the teacher-student relationship before CRP can be effective is as follows. Although the students knew me, they only knew me in the capacity of principal. During the beginning our group, we still had some work to do to establish trust. As noted previously, I felt that the students sometimes said things to see my reaction. They wanted to see if they could trust that what was said during the group discussions would remain confidential. Eventually, as our discussions continued, trust grew among the group and I found the students willingly and enthusiastically engaged in all subjects and discussions presented. They were given the opportunity to voice their experiences and feelings about the ways they felt oppressed. They shared insight about exclusionary policies and day today practices that they find dehumanizing and made them feel marginalized. This experience brought me the understanding of the necessity and importance of relational teaching and the RLC they create. Students need to have those connections, relationships and
environments that allow them to have a voice in creating their educational experience.

Ms. Jones’s class is the only example the students mentioned where relational teaching took place. Ms. Jones had established strong teacher-student relationships, which is the foundation of relational teaching. The classroom dynamics in her class are not based on the traditional classroom model where there is a marked power difference between teachers and students. While she tends to assume the role of a facilitator or guide, her stance is that they are a learning community and will develop and learn together. Ms. Jones makes the work of forming positive relationships and connections with the students a fundamental part of her pedagogy. Ms. Jones uses relational awareness to monitor her classroom structure to make sure they are conducive to a warm and inviting learning environment and to remain attuned to connections or disconnections in the classroom. Ms. Jones ensures that the relational learning community is meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of the students.

Ms. Jones has an asset-based perspective of her students, which improves student-to-teacher learning relationships, as the students feel motivated and empowered. In addition, it inspires confidence and helps students develop and contribute their voice (Nelson, 2016). Because all the students at School 42 are from disadvantaged groups, they tend to be seen through a deficit lens, which makes her asset-based perspective particularly significant. An asset-based perspective is opposed to a deficit perspective, wherein teachers believe the students have negative relationships from home, and their community all resulting from their life of poverty (Nelson, 2016).

Ms. Jones’s inclusion of student voices and the additional support she provides fostered relational learning communities with her students. The positive learning
environment and trust enabled them to take advantage of the learning experiences in her class. She learned what to put in place to ensure students were committed to learning in her class. According to the students of the PAG, they were successful in her class, engaged in high levels of learning, and took advantage of the opportunities for agency made available to them.

The students took on roles and learning more than any other class. Teachers cannot engage in authentic CRP and critical consciousness if the students do not feel comfortable or trust their teacher. Teachers will also not take risks if they feel the students will misunderstand them or deem them as bias. It is probably for this reason, that the students indicated that Ms. Jones’s classroom was rare – the only one where they had those positive experiences. Based on our discussions, the majority of the teachers are fostering disconnection. This was a startling realization and important information to use as a starting point for PD.

**Relational Teaching: Research on Strengthening the Teacher-Student Bond**

In order to fully understand why the students only mentioned having a strong student-teacher relationship with Ms. Jones, and not with any other middle school teachers, the literature on relational teaching was further explored. Relational Cultural Theory illuminates why it is so important for educators to be purposeful in creating connections and relational learning communities with their students. Relational Teaching is closely connected to the framework of Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1976). This theory is grounded on the belief that relationships are fundamental to well-being and that *people grow through and towards relationships*. When there is a disconnection from others, yourself or community, it results in emotional distress (Miller & Stiver, 1997).
These concepts form the Cultural Relational Paradox. It is a paradox because it asserts that while people crave connections, everyone is afraid of being rejected. Therefore, students might be cautious when entering relationships and hide those parts of themselves that they feel might be rejected. In other words, in order to protect themselves from rejection, students may develop strategies to disconnect—which stand in the way of establishing the connections that all desperately seek (Comstock et al., 2008, Miller & Striver, 1997). This reinforces the concept that there is a strong need for positive relational dynamics in the classroom. Inability to transform disconnection leads to feelings of isolation. Comstock, (2008) explains

In this isolation experience, individuals carry a deep sense of shame and the belief that they are defective as human beings. Feelings of condemned isolation are reinforced when individuals from marginalized and devalued groups, who routinely encounter the myth of meritocracy, end up primarily blaming themselves for personal failures that are often linked to factors in the broader cultural context (p. 282).

Students with more positive teacher–student relationships attain a multitude of more desirable student outcomes than their counterparts with less positive relationships (Gelbach & Robinson, 2016; Roorda, Koomen, Split, & Oort, 2011). These teacher behaviors also have a strong impact on academic achievement. Students describe Ms. Jones as being empathetic and warm—characteristics which also promote positive academic outcomes for students. Rooda et al., (2007) writes:

[White’s] meta-analysis revealed a substantial association between person-centered teacher variables (i.e., affective variables, like empathy and warmth, and more instructional variables, such as encouraging learning and higher order thinking) and student outcomes (i.e., affective or behavioral and cognitive outcomes). The correlations between the combined person-centered teacher variables, on one hand, and participation, positive motivation, and the composite of all cognitive student outcomes, on the other, ranged from medium to large (p. 494).
These findings confirm the importance of connection.

Disconnections occur whenever a “relationship is not empathetic or mutually empowering” (Miller & Striver, 1997, p.51). When there is disconnection (no connection), students retreat from learning, teacher, classroom activities and participation, and themselves. They develop a sense of exhaustion and inability to take action. Disconnections can vary from discomfort or being out of touch to complete rejection. The consequences of disconnection are that they may impede the students’ capacity to learn, exercise agency, construct knowledge or experience academic success (Raider-Roth, 2017).

In Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins’s (1995) study, kindergarten students who had warm, close, expansive relationships with their teachers were better adjusted and had more positive student-teacher relationships in second grade than those that had hostile, dependent student-teacher relationships in kindergarten. The results supported the notion that student-teacher relationships are an important component of adjusting in school and play an important role in determining the course of future student-teacher relationships. Hamre & Pianta (2001) conducted a similar study which went to the 8th grade and also concurred that teacher-student relationships have significant implications for student academic success. These claims were substantiated by Rooda et al., (2007) who based their assertions on 99 studies. They also asserted that the need for positive student relationships remained through the 12th grade. These positive characteristics included being available to communicate with the students about personal matters, emotional warmth, and acceptance. Positive student–teacher relationships are a resource for at minority students, whereas conflict or disconnection between them and their teachers
tends to increase their risk factors (Ladd & Burgess, 2001).

Ladson-Billings (1994) suggested that the way students are taught has a significant impact on how they learn the content. Teachers using CRP pedagogy in the classroom are mindful of the connection between course content and the students’ background and work to avoid implementing a curriculum and pedagogical practice that does not take into account the students’ background or relation to the content being taught. For this reason, Ladson-Billings (1994) believed that attention should be given to the practice of the teachers and not just on the curriculum being taught. Ladson-Billings (1994) described culturally relevant teaching as “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). While the notion of cultural relevance uses the students’ culture to make learning relevant, there is an implication that relationships also impact learning.

These some things that get in the way of building relationships and could certainly get in the way of the application of CRP and cause students to disconnect. As teachers from other cultural backgrounds try to make time to learn about the backgrounds of their minority students, they may not be aware of the perils that interferes with students and teachers relating to each other and prevent them from working together. They following factors impede connections with the students and impede learning, CRP and critical consciousness from taking place: Educators that do not acknowledge who the students are or get to know their families, cultures, and communities (Belle, 2019); Teaching and learning that is not grounded on the knowledge that the students bring; Insufficient student voice and alternate points of view that relate to student backgrounds.
and failure to work with them to examine social injustice and inequalities (Borrero, 2011); A lack of understanding of the different ethnic groups and their impact on students’ attitudes and approach to learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b); Disregard of the need for students to learn to value their cultural heritage as well as the heritage of others; and the view the CRP is a strategy to be applied in the classroom, instead of a whole approach to teaching. Hence, all of the aforementioned pitfalls indicate that teachers must embrace true dedication and change in their practice and pedagogy and learn how to establish connections that will enable them to do their work (Borrero, 2011; Borrero & De la Cruz, 2016; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017). It is for this reason that relational teaching is the foundation needed to construct trustworthy knowledge that will address the aforementioned issues that get in the way of CRP and critical consciousness taking place. Raider-Roth (2017) sums up what relational teachers do to create an environment for CRP:

RLCs are learning environments where the shared goal is the construction of new knowledge that can change us and change the way we teach. When we create RLC to study facets of culture, where histories of oppression can be elicited, the holding environment of RLC offers an essential foundation for letting go of old assumptions and building new knowledge. It harnesses the collective power of the group to pave a walkway of new understandings (p.120).

In summary, Relational Cultural Theory illuminates that it is important for educators to be purposeful in creating connections and relational learning communities with their students. This theory is grounded on the belief that relationships are essential to a person’s well-being (Miller, 1976). Teacher relationships are an important component of adjusting in school and play an important role in determining the course of future student-teacher relationships and students’ academic success (Hamre & Pianta; 2001). Therefore, educators should consider the avoidance of the aforementioned pitfalls that foster student
disconnection and tend to get in the way of positive student-teacher relationships. In addition, establishing these connections will not only enable teachers to do their work (Borrero, 2011; Borrero & De la Cruz, 2016; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017) but it will also establish the groundwork for critical consciousness to begin.

**Limitations**

As with any other research method, this qualitative action research had limitations. The first is that it is not generalizable. “Action research has as its goal to address a specific problem within a specific setting, such as a classroom, a workplace, a program, or an organization” (Merriam, 2009, p. 4). As such, this research only looked at how these Latinx students “interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they have attributed to their experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Based on the study description provided, researchers and readers should determine if this research data can be used to further their understanding on the topic.

Another limitation which also affects generalizability is that the study was based on one site/location. This research involved a relatively small number of participants. To a certain extent these students are bound together by living in the same geographic area, having similar cultural backgrounds, attending the same school, and thereby sharing common characteristics and conditions. Since this is an action research, I only studied Latinx students in one school for a limited time of approximately 8 weeks. If I followed the students for a few years, I may have found very different data that may suggest some of the findings such as powerlessness and oppression of their peers was related to their developmental stage.

**Recommendations for Future Research**
Upon concluding this project, my primary observation is that researcher-practitioners need to look more closely at the importance of Relational Teaching for CRP and critical consciousness. Researchers can explore RLC and relational teaching as a foundational aspect of enacting CRP and critical consciousness. However, they will experience problems applying this type of pedagogy if a trustworthy and growth-enhancing relationship with the students has not been established. In addition, teachers should embrace the stance of relationships through learning by creating RLC which aim to create shared meaning making and transformative learning. Ladson-Billings (1995), does not emphasize enough the importance of establishing this relationship before teachers engage in a “pedagogy of opposition,” and embark on the exploration of a series of controversial topics (p. 160).

Additionally, there is a need for more studies that document best practices on how to support teachers during these very difficult conversations involving critical self-reflection as they prepare to teach CRP. Teachers are not prepared to manage discussions when they do not know the world of the students or when ideas may be at odds with their own value system, beliefs or cultural values (Samuels, 2018). If these issues are not addressed, teachers are more likely to steer clear of such discussions or topics. In some cases, teachers are not prepared to feel uncomfortable. Therefore, when they feel this discomfort, teachers find it easier to avoid those conversations and bring students into their own comfort level. For example, not every teacher is prepared to “use the students’ culture as a vehicle to learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). They may not feel equipped to lead a discussion involving Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ community or any other issue the students find meaningful (Samuels, 2018). Teachers might feel like
they must avoid controversial topics, especially if they have not established a trusting relationship with the student and fear they will be misunderstood. After all, the perception of bias on the part of the student will derail the purpose of CRP. Teachers also require a safe and supportive environment where they can express voice discomfort, as they prepare to manage those situations.

Moreover, there is very little literature on CRP as it relates to school leadership. There is a need for research that pertain specifically to school leaders. Most of the literature is based on the teachers’ lens and does not account for the responsibilities of a principal. Future literature on CRP and school leadership could look at ways to build a culturally relevant school. School leaders can use literature that helps them to motivate other educators, challenge teachers without disconnection, build consensus within the community, and create a culturally relevant school culture.

Ladson-Billings (2006) says CRP cannot be taught, because she is trying to avoid a one size fits all approach. However, it is recommended that future research focus on the possibility of creating a scaffold for the preparation of teachers and leaders for CRP. I recommend future research to focus on relational teaching, RLC, and Freire’s (1972) problem posing as prerequisite understandings to prepare teachers who are interested in engaging in CRP.

**Conclusion**

The focus of the study was to find ways that the Latinx students of School 42 could inform a PD for staff on CRP and critical consciousness. During my conversations with them, I realized that the students did not have any preparation to engage in critical consciousness. It was evident that they had never been asked to think at that level. They
had not developed the necessary critical or analytical skills. Ironically, it was their lack of experience and preparation that provided the most data about the many ways they could benefit from critical consciousness. In addition, while they shared their experience with one teacher, it also became evident that they had barely experienced CRP. Their descriptions of Ms. Jones and interactions which had taken place in her classroom led me to question the relationship between critical consciousness and RLCs. It seemed as if a positive relationship was the foundation to push the thinking of the students to the extent that critical consciousness demands. The conversations also showed that the students are willing and waiting to have their voices heard and take part in conversations that inform their educational experience. This data could be used to help teachers see a need to change their practice and embrace a new type of pedagogy that will benefit them and the students of School 42.


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[CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY]


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children-to-think/


Appendix

In Person Plea

Good morning,

I would like to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about how our students can help us better prepare to teach you. This study will involve participation in the first session of the Principal’s Advisory Group. The Advisory group will be in place for the rest of the year; this is one of 3 advisory group sessions that will last 8 weeks. Different students will be selected to participate in each session because it is my goal to ensure that everyone is represented in the advisory group. However, the study will only involve those selected for the first session.

It will take one period, twice per week over the course of 8 weeks –beginning in December and ending in late January or the first week of February (if we have snow days).

If you are in the 8th grade, you may participate in the Advisory Group. Participation in my study is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time, it is okay. There will be no penalty or reward for participation.

If you have any questions, please come by my office or speak to me about it during your lunch period today.

Thank you for considering participating in this study.