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CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM: THE IMPACT OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT
PEDAGOGY IN READING FOR ELEMENTARY AFRICAN AMERICAN
STUDENTS IN THE FOURTH GRADE IN RURAL EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

By
Cortrina Denise Smith

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University College of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Cortrina Denise Smith under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

Kathi Gibson, PhD
Committee Chair

Date

William Steve Stone, EdD
Committee Member

Date

Tesha Deans Isler, EdD
Committee Member

Date

Prince Bull, PhD
Dean of the College of Education

Date

Abstract

CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM: THE IMPACT OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN READING FOR ELEMENTARY AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN THE FOURTH GRADE IN RURAL EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA.

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This study explored K-4 teachers and school district curriculum leadership's understanding of and inclination to implement culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for teaching reading, especially for African American students. This qualitative study sought the potential basis that teachers and educational leaders retain from their experiences and perspectives regarding using culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for educating minority students. This study was conducted in a rural school district located in eastern North Carolina; all 13 elementary schools in the school district had teachers who participated. Data were collected by analyzing teachers' and school curriculum's definitions of the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy in reading for elementary African American students in the fourth grade in rural eastern North Carolina. This study used two research instruments: an online platform questionnaire called Survey Monkey and an interview protocol. This study found that teachers and school curriculum leadership are willing to implement culturally relevant pedagogical practices into their reading instruction. Interview responses and survey data were analyzed to determine how inclined teachers and school curriculum leadership were to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy practices intentionally. Student achievement, student engagement, and cultural awareness are positively related; the findings indicate when culturally relevant pedagogy is utilized in reading instruction for minority learners, student mastery of new skills is

more likely at a higher level. In addition, this study aimed to add to the current body of knowledge on achievement gaps, student engagement, and student achievement.

Keywords: student achievement, culturally relevant pedagogy, student engagement, curriculum and instruction, cultural awareness

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported from the Digest of Education Statistics (2019) that in the 2017-2018 school year, approximately 75% of public school students were ethnic minorities. The diversity in public school classrooms in the United States is a direct reflection of the communities in which students live. The demographic changes in American classrooms are happening quickly and continuously, especially in smaller, rural school districts (Emamdjomeh et al., 2019). While the demographics of public education students are becoming more diverse, the demographics for teachers tend to remain White, middle class, and female (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). Regardless of the racial makeup of the classrooms, students must show growth. The use of culturally relevant pedagogy is one instructional process that many educational scholars have endorsed to help teachers meet students' sociocultural and emotional needs (Knight-Manuel & Marciano, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Conceivably, culturally relevant pedagogy could become a methodology of choice for reading teaching of minority students; however, in America, little is known about culturally relevant pedagogy in rural, primary, and elementary classrooms (Augustine-Shaw, 2015).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a curricula framework inclusive of learners' cultures. Culturally relevant pedagogy facilitates motivation and interest, and it helps ensure student identity is honored (Johnson & Elliott, 2020). As Gay (2000) stated, "culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and, in turn, affects how we teach and learn" (p. 9). Teachers who are not always aware of or sensitive to diversity often ignore cultural dynamics, thus placing minority students at a disadvantage (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2017).

Student achievement is the focal point for most teachers, as they expect their students to perform at their highest potential; nevertheless, integrating culturally relevant pedagogy is a matter of working smarter (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Unfortunately, many teachers struggle to teach reading using culturally relevant methodology because of their lack of knowledge regarding students' cultures (Merga, 2019). In the words of Geerlings et al. (2019), culture matters when teaching ethnic minority students.

Overview of the Research Problem

The national assessment results of student progress in math, reading, writing, and science are shared annually in The Nation's Report Card. The Nation's Report Card (2019) showed that in 2017 in North Carolina, the average reading scale score for all fourth-grade students was 219. This score placed fourth graders just over the 25th percentile in reading nationally. The National Education Assessment Progress scores from 2019 revealed that the trend scale scores for White fourth graders in North Carolina ranged from 224 (just above the 50th percentile) to 230 (10 points from the 75th percentile). On the other hand, for African American students in that same grade level, the scores ranged from 192, or well below the 20th percentile, to 204. The scale score of 200 represents the high end of the 25th percentile range. Similarly, for Hispanic students, the range was from 197 (below the 20th percentile) to 209, or nine points above the high end of the 20th percentile (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019).

According to the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (2019), the average overall reading scores for all students declined by 5 points from 2015 to 2019, which is “a worse drop than in 36 other states” (p. 1). “We are failing some groups of students-especially

Black boys. Analyzing by race and gender, [the] average scores for nearly all groups of students fell over the last four years” (North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, 2019, p. 1). Nevertheless, the decline in reading scores for Black students was statistically significant (North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, 2019). The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation stated, “reversing a downhill slide will require taking an equity-based approach to early childhood systems” (p. 1).

The 2019 reading scores for the eastern North Carolina school chosen for this study were as follows: 32% (16 students) of the African American students in fourth grade scored at Level 1; 36% (17 students) at Level 2; 10% (five students) at Level 3; 24% (12 students) at Level 4; and zero students scored at Level 5 in reading (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). The state of North Carolina defines students in Level 2 as not proficient; students in Level 3 as demonstrating sufficient understanding of grade-level standards but need extra support; students in Level 4 as demonstrating a thorough understanding of grade-level standards; and students in Level 5 as demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of grade-level standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

The statistical data reflect the reading deficiencies of many elementary students in this country and North Carolina; nevertheless, the deficits for ethnic minorities are even more pronounced. Scholars have long contended that the inability to read and comprehend stifles progress in other academic areas. The need to explore the extent to which implementing a culturally relevant pedagogy framework for the teaching of reading, especially for children of color, warrants serious consideration (Warren, 2013).

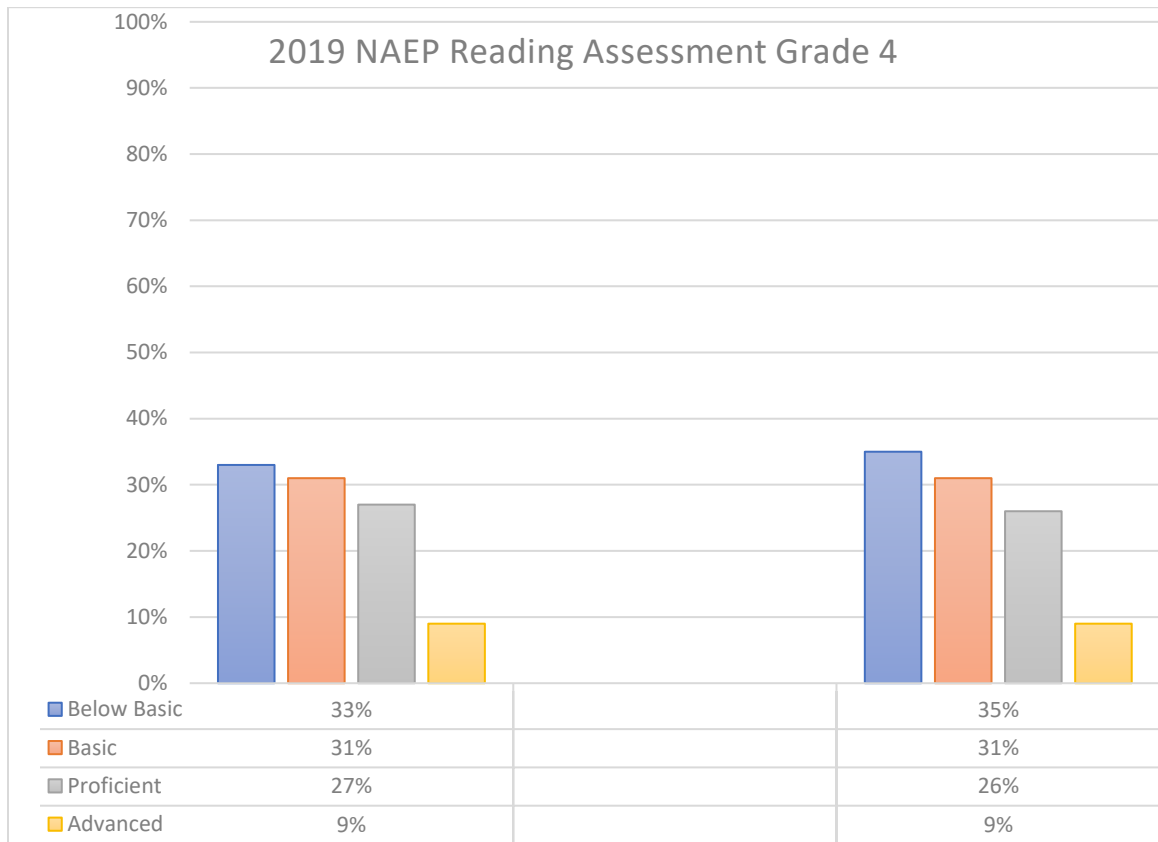
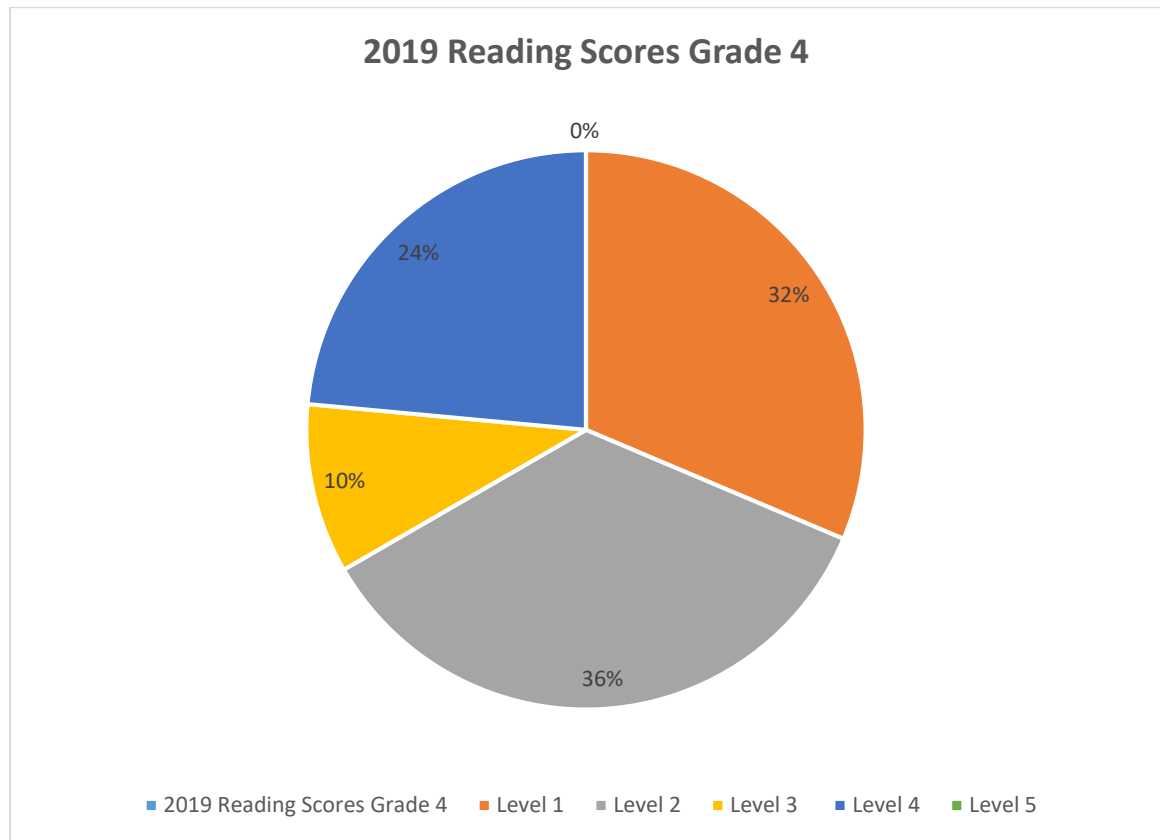
Figure 1*2019 NAEP Reading Assessment Grade 4*

Figure 2*Study Site School 2019 Reading Scores for Grade 4***Statement of the Research Problem**

The browning of the American public school population adds pedagogical challenges to teachers. Overall, teachers struggle to meet the reading needs of students, but when the concept of diversity is added to the mix, teachers struggle in developing an understanding of students' social, cultural, and emotional learning needs (Houck & Ross, 2012; Wennersten, 2013). Elementary teachers, specifically K-4 teachers, often struggle to meet students' reading needs because of the long-standing focus on long-standing, foundational reading skills and practices (Houck & Ross, 2012; Wennersten, 2013). According to Riddle (2014), teachers may implement culturally relevant reading pedagogy into their instruction, but they tend to veer away from ideas or cultural

practices when it becomes sociopolitical. For example, teachers may ignore topics like anti-racism or teaching about structures of oppression. While the teacher may feel they are being polite or even respectful, the truth is teachers often lack the courage to include the topics of race in critical conversations with their students.

Implementing culturally relevant pedagogy accuracy and intentionality promotes acceptance of other learners' cultural experiences (Milner, 2011). In this post-pandemic era, all viable options for improving reading skills warrant strong consideration.

Significance of the Problem

The findings of this study may create a pathway for school administrators to explore educators' understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and the challenges associated with its full implementation. The study may facilitate discussions about why it is so vital to structure learning environments conducive to learning for all students regardless of cultural differences. Additionally, this study may serve to prompt administrators in charge of curriculum decision-making to assess whether or not, with district support, teachers are free to explore the advantages of culturally relevant pedagogy. Increasing teachers' knowledge and confidence in teaching reading using culturally relevant methodology may increase the potential to advance reading skills, especially for minority students, as well as aid in the facilitation of social change. Social change may help students of diverse backgrounds to feel honored and to celebrate their own cultures. When students feel good about themselves, they are more inclined to learn.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore K-4 teachers' understanding of and inclination to implement culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for teaching

reading, especially to diverse learners. The research questions guiding this study were as follows.

Table 1

Research Questions and Data Collection Method

Research question	Data collection method
1. How do rural K-4 teachers in eastern North Carolina schools understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy practices?	Interview 10 elementary reading teachers in eastern North Carolina
2. How inclined are K-4 reading teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into reading instruction?	Survey 20 elementary reading teachers in eastern North Carolina
3. How do rural district-level curriculum administrators in eastern North Carolina schools understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy?	Interview five district-level curriculum administrators in eastern North Carolina
4. What are the challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in a rural community school district in eastern North Carolina?	Interview five district-level curriculum administrators in eastern North Carolina Interview 10 elementary reading teachers in eastern North Carolina

Conceptual Framework: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy supports the importance of infusing students' cultural influences in all aspects of teaching and learning within the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2009, 2014; Milner, 2017). Improving student engagement, achievement success, and college preparedness, particularly for students of color, may be a primary focus for teachers implementing culturally relevant pedagogy. This pedagogy involves an approach that empowers all students by using cultural influences to impart academic and

social interactions (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2014). Ladson-Billings (1995a) identified three relevant tenets to better understand the instructional practices of successful Black and White teachers of African American students. The tenets include academic, cultural awareness, and sociopolitical context (Escudero, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2014). Ladson-Billings (1995b) stated that teaching and theory are the core of educational reform practices that are detrimental to African American students' overall success. She aimed to interconnect students' cultures with their educational environment on various levels within their learning practices. The systematic application of practices defines "effective teaching" through critically examining methods, behaviors, attitudes, biases, and assumptions to understand one's teaching nuances (Escudero, 2019).

Gay (2010), who was focused on teaching strategies and practices, initiated the culturally responsive teaching framework. Teachers working with students of various cultures were to combine the concepts from multicultural education theory with everyday activities. Darling-Hammond and Harvey (2018) argued that all children could learn to master specific skills when teaching is filtered through an understanding of their own cultural experiences. Culturally responsive teaching exemplifies cultural understanding, prior experiences, and associated references, and demonstrates different performance styles of ethnically diverse students. This teaching style assumes that students are rich in cultural knowledge and have lived experiences learning new content (Gay, 2000).

Paris and Alim (2014) explored the culture and language that students bring to the classroom for academic success. This mindset would be a move towards the refocusing of diverse cultures as opposed to "responding" to them in order to break systematic inequalities in classrooms (Paris, 2012). Educators need to use the school as a support

system for young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic practices of their environment and creating a positive domain for themselves. Paris and Alim encouraged teachers to use the rich and intricate linguistic and cultural practices void of “pedagogies that are not filtered through a lens of contempt and pity” (p. 86). The importance of this process would simultaneously grant students access to the appropriateness of the culture (Mohamed, 2021). Instead of comparing students of color to the White, middle-class norms, Paris and Alim argued that being multicultural and multilingual should be seen as a path toward power in our diverse society. This framework has a broader, more holistic approach called culturally sustaining pedagogy. This approach adds more focus to the transformational cultures of students to better prepare them for multicultural societies (Mohamed, 2021). Culturally sustaining pedagogy is grounded in two theories. The first theory, funds of knowledge, highlights past cultural knowledge and skills essential for individual or family functioning and well-being. The second theory, third space, is a hybrid space created by class members bringing different elements of their culture into the school from home to create a new space (Ji-Yeony & Martinez, 2020). Third space principles allow a classroom’s culture to be creative for exploration, thus using funds of knowledge from the student’s home culture. It can be a collective space of various pedagogical practices viewed as an extension of the zone of proximal development, which focuses on how a learner’s cognitive activity is influenced by the individual (Ji-Yeony & Martinez, 2020).

Rationale for Methodology

This study was a qualitative design with embedded units of analysis. A qualitative research approach was appropriate when the study aimed to encompass “an inquiry

process of understanding a social or human problem, is based on building a complex holistic picture, formed with words, reporting the detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 1-2). The units of analysis consisted of 10 reading teachers (five African American and five Caucasian). Teacher participant selection came from an elementary school in rural eastern North Carolina. The teacher participants were purposely selected based on their years of experience in education, race, and an elementary teacher of reading. The data collection involved 10 virtual or face-to-face teacher interviews. Teachers’ emails were used to facilitate the distribution of surveys. A virtual communication platform called Zoom was used with the teacher and me for interviews. Semi-structured questions provided context for the interview protocol (Slayton, 2018). The recorded Zoom sessions were transcribed and analyzed by me, along with all data collected.

To collect data for answering Research Questions 2 and 3, participants were selected from district-level curriculum administrators. The data collection included virtual or face-to-face interviews with five administrators from curriculum and instruction. Emails were used for communication purposes. The interview protocol for all interviews was designed in collaboration with my dissertation chair and grounded in theories obtained in the literature review section of this dissertation.

To collect data for Research Question 4, participants were purposely selected. Teachers were invited via email to participate in this study. The criteria for selection of the 20 teachers requested for this study were as follows: must be a K-4 elementary reading teacher and have more than 1 year of teaching experience. The teacher participants were contacted through an email, with a companion consent letter. Teachers’

school emails were used for communications. The goal of the survey was to understand how inclined teachers are to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into reading instruction if permitted.

Data Analysis

Upon transcribing the data, the analysis process included three specific steps. First was the initial round of analysis reading, followed by assigning descriptive coding of emerging topics. This second step included value coding or assigning codes of values, attitudes, and beliefs to data passages (Miles et al., 2014). Next, the data analysis process included pattern matching codes to include ideas or similar conveyed meanings (Miles et al., 2014). The overriding themes served to answer the four research questions.

Definition of Terms

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Allows the teacher to acknowledge and honor attributes of the various diverse cultures of their students throughout their instructional presentations (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling (Paris & Alim, 2014).

Reading Readiness

When a child transforms from being a non-reader to a reader (Akubuilu et al.,

2015).

Rural Community

All population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

Two study limitations were inherent to the proposed study. While generalizability is not a trait of a qualitative study, the small sample of 10 elementary teacher participants from one school district and five district administrators from the same school district limit generalization. Each of the teacher participants taught reading in an elementary school. Given the sensitive sociopolitical topics inherent to this research, such as race and class, it was essential to consider that participants may articulate what they perceived I wanted to hear and fail to disclose true feelings and ideas they thought may not be taken favorably.

Delimitations of the Study

I limited the inquiry to include 10 reading teachers (five African American and five Caucasian) and five administrators from a particular rural eastern school district in North Carolina. The purpose of the number of educator participants for the study allowed for easy access and availability of study participants due to its location.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the conceptual framework and discussed the context of the research study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the select literature focusing on culturally relevant pedagogy research and other pertinent topics. The review highlights gaps in the literature between transformative learning and cultivating culturally relevant teaching

practices. Chapter 3 presents the research design and an overview of the school selected for this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the study. Chapter 5 presents the results for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Although the student demographics in American schools are more diverse than ever, the teaching workforce has remained somewhat unchanged. The majority of teachers serving predominantly African American elementary schools are White, middle-class women (Moss, 2016). Nevertheless, it is not enough to celebrate a multicultural month or presume that people can be color-blind when it comes to an understanding of the unique experiences and needs of students of color. Cultural experiences help to influence student engagement, which is crucial to leveraging academic success, especially in reading development and performance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Often, elementary teachers tend to struggle to meet students' reading needs because of the long-standing emphasis on foundational skills and practices (Houck & Ross, 2012; Wennersten, 2013). Many students may sound like they are reading proficiently but still have difficulty decoding new vocabulary, inferencing, grammatical development, and oral expression. Some students may begin to show that decoding or fluency skills develop around the third grade, but comprehension tends to slow down. Deficiencies in comprehension may show up when students take standardized tests, and even then, for some, it may go undetected. High schoolers who can call words may eventually need remediation in comprehension (Bigozzi et al., 2017). Lack of proficiency in reading has far-reaching effects and interferes with progress in other disciplines.

School leaders and teachers are charged with being more responsive to all learners, especially diverse populations. Principals must ensure that the school climate is supportive and inclusive. Further, family engagement strengthens community support and

involvement and engages family and community involvement, special education inclusion, and disparities in discipline (Jacques & Villegas, 2018). Administrators in charge of the curriculum must be open to ideas and strategies that may enhance student engagement. Ladson-Billings (1995b) suggested the following benefits of culturally relevant pedagogy: It raises expectations; it better meets the needs of students; it builds cultural competence; and it empowers students.

Thus, exploring the advantages of culturally relevant pedagogy warrants a further look. The purpose of this study was to explore K-4 teachers' and administrators' understanding and inclination to use culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for teaching reading. The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How do rural K-4 teachers in eastern North Carolina schools understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy practices?
2. How inclined are K-4 reading teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into reading instruction?
3. How do rural district-level curriculum administrators in eastern North Carolina school districts understand and define culturally relevant pedagogical practices?
4. What would be the challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in eastern North Carolina schools?

The literature review reveals the following topics: background or national perspectives on teaching reading, including reading laws and reports; the current status of diversity and achievement gaps in the United States schools; best practices for teaching

reading; and culturally relevant pedagogy.

National Perspectives on Teaching Reading

Federal Laws That Supported Education

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) funded primary and secondary education in 1965. This act supported federal funding used for professional development and instructional materials and resources for educationally deprived students. It offered grants for the purchase of textbooks and library books. The law required annual testing and reports that showed individual progress and growth. ESEA has been reauthorized every 5 to 10 years since its enactment under the authority of the sitting presidential administration (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). The most well-known reauthorization of ESEA is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). NCLB was enacted under President George W. Bush, and it called for all public school students to be at 100% proficiency by 2014. This reauthorization promoted accountability for all students.

Schools were required to meet yearly progress goals in reading such that students eventually would be on grade level by 2014. One goal of NCLB was to have highly qualified teachers capable of teaching all students and achieving proficiency in reading (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

In 2012, Race to the Top emerged as President Barack Obama's educational initiative. States were able to compete for federal grants by using specific educational policies and achievements. Also, in 2015, Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), also known as a civil rights law legacy. It returned some federal power over education back to the states, ensuring that every child had the opportunity to have a high-

quality education (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). This reauthorization continues at this writing, providing concise report cards annually that are easily understood by parents and accessible to the public (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016); however, the Trump administration rescinded most of the Obama-era regulations while states were drafting their ESSA plans. President Trump declared an executive order supporting the protection of state and local control over the educational capacity, including curriculum, standardized testing, and programming of schools and school systems (Wong & Mishra, 2020). In 2020, the Biden administration encountered the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, which affected the state's accountability systems under ESSA. At the time of this writing, it is too early to report the future educational initiatives of President Biden (Lake & Worthen, 2021).

National Reading Panel

In 1997, President Bill Clinton signed legislation into law to form the National Reading Panel (NRP). The Child Development and Behavior Institute, along with the U.S. Department of Education, helped establish NRP, which would review existing research to find the best strategies to teach children to read. NRP was tasked with providing a report assessing the effectiveness of various reading methods to effectively support teaching reading to children. The panel consisted of experts in education and psychology leading in the field of reading research, teachers, educational administrators, and parents (National Reading Panel, 2000). In 1999, NRP, organized by Congress, was tasked to come up with strategies for improving student reading skills. President Bush and the U.S. Congress adopted the report as the foundation of its literacy policy. The outcome of NRP's findings in 2000 showed the most effective-based methods for

teaching reading and suggestions for reading development and instruction in the future. The panel found that the cause of reading deficiencies was the lack of phonemic awareness. The panel suggested that implementing systematic phonics instruction would improve reading skills (National Reading Panel, 2000). NRP's report supports common standards of practice that are carefully implemented using research-based findings for effectively teaching reading (Shanahan, 2005).

The first suggestion is to implement the strategy of phonemic awareness. This strategy is the ability to recognize, think about, and understand spoken words (Edwards & Taub, 2016). The second method is phonic skills, involving a planned sequential way of teaching children how to read and write (McEwan, 2016). The third method is the ability to read words in a text accurately and fluently. Students will be able to read with accuracy, understand terms used including phrasing, and pace. The last method is the ability to apply comprehension strategies consciously while reading (Bigozzi et al., 2017). The panel recognized that many challenges with learning to read were affected by inadequate phonemic awareness.

The U.S. Department of Education encouraged public school systems to alter their reading curriculum and reflect NRP's research-based standards. Many curriculum publishing companies enhanced their grade-level materials to reflect the relevant research findings found by NRP (Shanahan, 2005).

The federal government followed up with additional research review panels such as the National Early Literacy Panel and the National Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. Despite the explicit determination of NRP, America's public schools are still enduring the same literacy challenges (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). Years have

passed, but too little has been done to support NRP's research findings into practice in the classroom, forcing the acknowledgment of some small victories (Seidenberg, 2013). The National Council on Teacher Quality findings reveal that more than half (51%) of its traditional education preparation programs only teach four of the five nonnegotiables. (Partelow, 2019).

The five nonnegotiables are phonemic awareness, oral reading fluency instruction, vocabulary and morphology, thinking strategies, and writing about text. As a result, we have a generation with poor reading skills (Riccards, 2021).

Current Research on Teaching Reading

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, teacher training programs are not equipping preservice teachers with best practices for teaching reading as suggested by NRP (Durrance, 2017). Darling-Hammond et al. (2016) stated that if teachers use the proposed research-based reading methods for teaching reading, the rate of reading failure could drop (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). NRP suggested that reading development methods develop good readers are phonemic awareness, phonic skills, reading words in a text with accuracy and fluency, and the ability to apply comprehension strategies consciously and purposefully (National Reading Panel, 2000). An intricate component for teachers is the developmental system supported when the whole child functions to create a stable and livable learning environment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This mindset clarifies that the developmental well-being and learning of children are created by the interactions with their environment, interactions with others, and learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Whole Language and Balanced Literacy

In keeping with the science of reading, balanced reading allowed the perspectives of both educators and the public to agree on how students needed to learn to read. The balanced literacy approach merged in 1990 with a compromise between the whole language literacy approach and phonics (Richardson, 2016). The whole language literacy approach was to teach children to read using whole words. This process does not allow children to break words down phonetically but uses a child's prior knowledge. In contrast to the whole language approach, the phonetic-based approach individualizes letters of a word into small and simple parts. Whole language approach includes the identification of specific letter sounds and pieces them back together (Clark, 2013). The balanced literacy approach includes the whole language concept of repeated experiences, including the print enriched text of leveled readers for independent reading practice. It includes specific skills necessary to decode words. Balanced literacy has seven components in its program format (Honig, 1996). The components are shared reading, reading aloud, guided reading, close reading, word study/vocabulary instruction, interactive writing, and reader's workshop (Dugger, 2019). Shared reading is an engaging reading opportunity to share and read a book with the assistance of the teacher along with a student. The teacher takes advantage of modeling strategies that support becoming a proficient reader (Dugger, 2019). The next component is reading aloud. This reading strategy allows children to experience the joy of reading language that makes sense in their world. Students' information processing skills, vocabulary, and comprehension improve with practice (Clark, 2013). Guided reading is another component of balanced literacy. Guided reading involves formal and informal testing with each student in the group, which helps the

teacher select the appropriate guided instruction (DiGilio, 2021). Close reading allows students to read strategically, interact with the text, and reread to uncover layers of meaning that lead to a deeper understanding. Word study/vocabulary instruction provides direct, systematic instruction for students to decode and comprehend (Sedita, 2005). Teachers bridge their instruction to demonstrate their ability to use writing skills and strategies (Hall, 2019). Interactive writing is an instructional strategy that assists with modeling the writing process for students. The teacher is able to create a piece of writing for students to work on as a collaboration together (Burns, 2017). The last component for balanced literacy is the reader's workshop, which provides a collection of books, emphasizing student choices of what is read (Hall, 2019). Although struggling readers can be overlooked and face challenges when given decodable books to read for practice, balanced literacy suggests that when children are given good books and taught strategies such as looking at pictures or context clues on the page, they can read words (Richardson, 2016). This framework creates a foundation for reading and writing achievement to be developed through differentiated instruction and various approaches (Bondie et al., 2019).

A study on balanced literacy by Mitchell (2016) focused on the effects of a balanced literacy program on the students' academic achievements over 3 years. The participants were 200 eighth-grade students and five teachers. This mixed methods methodology study centered on New York state English language test scores, which were dropping and not meeting the state's standards or national norms (Mitchell, 2016). Through quantitative research, the study's findings demonstrated that students' academic achievement and the corresponding test scores were lower than the previous school year

of 2005. During the 2006 school year, teachers were still going through balanced literacy training as students were being taught and assessed; therefore, teachers and students were learning this literacy framework simultaneously. The deviations in academic achievement can be explained by the adjustments in instructional styles and teaching. In 2006, while teachers were trained on balanced literacy, student achievement scores averaged 33.2%; the following year after implementation, scores averaged 35.5%.

Balanced literacy is in the middle of both the phonics approach and the whole language approach (Fink, 2020). In this model, students see reading and writing being modeled and shared with the teacher and are engaged throughout the process. This format allows for a gradual release from the teacher to enable capable learners to practice reading skills and then implement those skills independently (Shanahan, 2018). Not all students may need detailed instructions while learning to read, but most students would benefit from this type of literacy approach. The balanced literacy teacher would differentiate learning instruction according to individual students' readiness, interests, and learning styles (Shanahan, 2018). Unfortunately, some students may fall through the cracks when receiving balanced reading instruction due to the need for clear and systematic directions (Schwartz & Sparks, 2019).

Structured Literacy

Another concept aligning with the science of reading is structured literacy. The International Dyslexia Association coined another research-based method for teaching reading called structured literacy (Spear-Swerling, 2019). This approach not only supports students with dyslexia but is more than adequate for general education students. Structured literacy demonstrates how teachers should teach a reading skill and when

teachers should teach specific reading skills to the students. Structured literacy teaches the sound structure of language, letter knowledge, syllables, vowel sounds, spelling rules, and meaning (Sedita, 2021). The emphasis on the relationship between oral and written language is addressed for more intentional exposure when learning to read (Moats, 2021). Qualified teachers follow student progress, individualize student instruction, and teach prescriptively. The structured literacy approach allows teachers to easily recognize reading challenges during students' early childhood development stages (Cowan, 2016b). The structured literacy format enables teachers to use students' prior skills to introduce new material and new skills. Teachers are trained to be diagnostic while observing skill mastery, both formally and informally. The instructional pace is guided by student progress, not the curriculum (Hanford, 2018). This format enables all students to become successful readers, while teachers use scientific knowledge to integrate diagnostic reading instruction (Cowan, 2016a).

A study on structured literacy by Bradshaw (2014) investigated how a daily, structured literacy intervention impacted struggling readers' comprehension. The study site was an elementary school that housed a special educational program within a regular educational setting. Students in this program all had individual educational plans. The focus for this study site was supporting struggling readers who lacked the literacy foundation needed to be successful readers. This study focused on how structured literacy interventions impacted struggling readers and their reading comprehension as well as how structured literacy facilitated how schools accommodate children behind in their reading. The student participants were three males, one in fourth grade and two in the fifth grade. Before the beginning of this study, each student was reading significantly

below grade level. There were four teacher participants teaching kindergarten through the fifth grade. A mixed methodology was used as the research model for this study. This study used a specific structured literacy intervention plan with each of the student participants. Bradshaw used data from the four teacher interviews, field observations, and student questionnaires for common themes. Several recurring themes emerged from the data collected and analyzed. The first theme identified the way students were developing mastery during their literacy centers. Student performance outcomes demonstrated more confidence and independence during reading. Further, the students showed a sense of belonging to a community of learners. Students were more likely to take a chance with their newly learned knowledge and modeled social skills needed for everyday life (Bradshaw, 2014). The last theme showed the development of positive self-esteem, which impacted student behaviors (Bradshaw, 2014).

The findings from this study supported the theory that a structured literacy plan would support struggling readers. The first student began using levels C through N, which are first- and second-grade levels from the reading intervention plan. This student read level N with 97% accuracy, which expressed the development of sight words at the third-grade level. They read with 100% fluency. Even though their comprehension score was 70%, this student has begun reading more challenging content along with understanding on their own. The accuracy level was 98%, and self-correction showed one out of five times; they had begun to bring meaning to what they read. The second student read with 98% accuracy and self-correcting one out of four times. This showed that they brought meaning while reading and understanding. This student showed 100% fluency; they could give more details from the story being read (Bradshaw, 2014). The third

student participant read far below grade level prior to the study. They developed sight words leveled at the middle of the first-grade level. They read at 97% accuracy with comprehension at 70% (Bradshaw, 2014).

Structured literacy teaches children the framework of language in a specific and direct way. This approach encompasses all the strategies for a student to become a proficient reader. Structured literacy is based on research and structured to connect the needs of all learners, especially those who struggle with reading.

Evidence-Based Practices for Teaching Reading

Morrow and Gambrell (2019) suggested using evidence-based best practices to promote reading achievement in diverse learners. Although there is no best instructional format found to teach all students to read, evidence-based methods garner a higher academic success rate (Rosenshine, 2012). For example, Morrow and Gambrell suggested using a wide variety of texts (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and digital periodicals within and across all content areas). Integrating various literature allows the teacher to bring in different subject area content to reach students in meaningful and purposeful ways. Integrating literacy will assist students in learning and practicing literacy skills and subject area content simultaneously. The goal is to get students to want to read different texts and use differences of opinions to expand and explore other perspectives and allow students to use their literacy skills to create solutions with meaning (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019).

Secondly, understand that maintaining an engaged community requires the ongoing monitoring and adjustment of literacy practices (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019). As children begin to learn to read through literacy instruction, students can formulate

their own opinions after reading a given text. In a literacy community, a facilitator (teacher) guides the learning and establishes high expectations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). During this process, teachers must monitor and adjust instruction as students take more responsibility for their learning. Student engagement allows the literacy community to embrace the teacher's role as a facilitator of knowledge with students (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019). This relationship between the teacher and students encourages everyone to be active and capable decision makers learning alongside one another. The community members or classroom differences promote the celebration of diversity and the importance of valuing shared goals (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019).

Third, replace less-relevant guided practice (worksheets, repetitive center-based drills) with more authentic, inquiry-based opportunities to experiment with and apply evolving literacy strategies (Bridges, 2018). Authentic text is the language used to engage and connect readers with its content. Teachers use authentic text such as in subject-area content to gain the interest of their students for literacy activities. In these literacy activities, practical vocabulary and comprehension strategies will increase student understanding of new skills in that subject matter (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019). Bloom's taxonomy of a higher order of thinking encourages students to think critically and reach a deeper understanding of concepts (Armstrong, 2010). Students should demonstrate their mastery in various ways, such as creating a model, doing a video, writing about the experience, and class debates. Thinking or experiencing what they have learned provides a better understanding and develops new ideas for students (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019).

Fourth, ensure that all voices are heard and honored by reducing teacher talk and

prompting more student-led discussions (Malloy & Gambrell, 2011). Traditionally, classroom teachers lead the discussion with students responding to given questions about that skill or subject area. This tradition hinders student engagement and learning, diminishing their chance to explore what they are learning (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). A balance between the teacher and student creates an environment conducive to learning (Malloy & Gambrell, 2011). Research supports teachers using open-ended questions for students to engage in discussions about their learning content (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019).

Finally, implement practices that invite students to be active, contributing members of a literacy community (Malloy & Gambrell, 2011). At an early age, reading can open the world to children through fun storylines and using their imagination. During this early stage of a learner's life, parents play a significant role in helping their children read. Research has shown highly positive results with parent-child interactions within a group of early readers (Brown et al., 2019; Chen, 2020; Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). This inclusion of the home environment is naturally culturally relevant. The more a child becomes involved in their reading experience, the larger their vocabulary will grow and the more they will understand their world and their place in it, assisting their cognitive development and perception (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Moran and Senseny (2016) discovered that parents reading to their children was a critical indicator of the future child's reading success because it occurs in the child's home. Brown et al. (2019) and Ladson-Billings (2014) also discovered that parents struggle to support their children's reading development after the age of 9 or 10 due to a lack of knowledge. When teachers provide an environment of collective responsibility,

it constructs an understanding that young readers learn through social interactions.

When all members of the student's literacy community share roles, knowledge is not just for the student and teacher; it is created through dynamic interactions among community members (Marinak & Gambrell, 2016).

Diversity in Our Nation's Schools

American public schools are serving an increasingly diverse population of students. Ethnic and cultural shifts occur in every corner of the nation in rural and urban districts (Dordova-Cobo et al., 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), the percentage of minority children attending public schools is changing. The African American children population dropped from 15% to 14%, and the White population from 62% to 51%. Other minority groups have increased between the years 2000 and 2017, including Hispanics (16% to 25%), Asians (3% to 5%), and two or more races (2% to 4%; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

African American students often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and are identified as students with disabilities (Alismail, 2016). Due to the geographic location of low-income housing, African American students usually attend schools with less-qualified teachers, more teacher turnover, less-regular student attendance, and less-rigorous curricula (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). According to Garcia and Weiss (2019), minority children often live in challenging environments that do not provide them opportunities to explore and learn language, knowledge, and literacy skills before entering school. Underprivileged students come to school academically and socioeconomically behind compared to their higher-income classmates. When students start school behind, it is difficult to catch up and continue to advance academically

(Garcia & Weiss, 2019). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2019), only 35% of African American fourth graders performed at or above in reading in 2018, leaving 65% below proficient levels. The achievement gap experienced in early childhood for African American students may manifest itself in reading performance, hindering future opportunities for academic growth. Research reveals that African American students tend to score lower on standardized assessments and receive lower grades assigned by teachers (Kalogrides et al., 2018).

In North Carolina, students in Grades 3-8 are administered end-of-grade reading, math, and science assessments annually (third and eighth). These end-of-grade test results indicate whether or not students are mastering state standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). In the North Carolina school district where the study occurred, 13 elementary schools serve students in Grades K-5. In 2018-2019, this district had eight low-performing schools as categorized by the state of North Carolina. Low-performing schools receive a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of *met expected growth* or *not met expected growth* as defined by the North Carolina General Assembly (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). By law, low-performing schools must provide an improvement plan that is accessible to the public for review. The school in this study has consistently been identified as a low-performing school for the last 5 years since the school year 2013-2014 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

Table 2

North Carolina End-of-Grade (%) Results for African American Students in District Study Site

Level	2018	2019
1	37%	39%
2	30%	28%
3	11%	11%
4	20%	19%

Social and Environmental Factors That Impede Academic Success of Diverse Population

In 2019, COVID-19 became the fifth pandemic after the 1918 Spanish flu. The first report was from Wuhan, China. A cluster of pneumonia cases was observed for 4 months and spread throughout the world, becoming a global threat (Yen-Chin et al., 2020). The World Health Organization identified that the coronavirus could be transmitted between people. By January 2020, a Washington State man traveling from Wuhan, China, tested positive for the coronavirus. COVID-19 quickly spread throughout the United States, making it the epicenter of this virus (Samuels & Chalfant, 2020). Then-President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, freeing federal funds to assist local and state governments with billions of dollars (Samuels & Chalfant, 2020). The widespread use of this virus has taxed public health officials to never-before-enforced measures such as school closures, travel restrictions, imposing curfews, isolation, and quarantine (Gostin & Wiley, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced to schools to prepare for the arrival of the coronavirus. The first public school

closed on March 12, 2020, and by March 25, all public school buildings were closed in the United States. The shift to remote learning soon began (Gillis & Krull, 2020). A year into the coronavirus pandemic and students were still struggling. Many schools around the nation had opened their doors to students, while some were offering a mix of in-person and virtual learning (Gillis & Krull, 2020). In the United States, people of color have long been excluded from opportunities, pathways, and continued mobility. Inequities are apparent across social and economic areas such as education, politics, health, employment, and the justice system (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated and developed these inequities and jeopardized the next generation's success in numerous ways (Stiglitz, 2020).

As schools across the country have transitioned to virtual learning due to the pandemic, educational deprivation is even more pronounced in minority communities. Many households faced significant challenges in managing a learning environment comparable to a school setting at home. Although many families had some form of internet connectivity, for disadvantaged students, internet connectivity coupled with the lack of academic help in the home and a quiet place to work meant that African American children struggled even more (Dorn et al., 2020). Many families were under-connected, with mobile-only access and inconsistent connectivity. As a result, African American students disproportionately experienced learning loss (Stiglitz, 2020). Governing policies compounded existing damaging effects, leaving African American students with fewer and lower-quality resources, schools with significantly larger class sizes, less-qualified and experienced teachers, and less access to high-quality curricula (Stiglitz, 2020). Schools that served African American children were less able to support quality remote

learning for all students. Einhorn (2020) forecasted that African American students may lose one third of their reading skills as a result of the pandemic. According to NWEA (2020), which analyzed the results of tests given to nearly 4.4 million United States students in Grades 3 through 8 in the fall of 2020, most students did better than expected in the area of reading in 2020. Unfortunately, African American and Hispanic students in high-needs schools did not have similar results in reading (NWEA, 2020). African American students saw slight declines, suggesting that the pandemic has expounded educational disparities, possibly setting children who were already behind their White and more affluent peers even further behind (Dorn et al., 2020). Dorn et al. (2020) stated when schools closed in March 2020, many African American students did not learn any new material but possibly slipped backward (Dorn et al., 2020).

Chrastka and Mackley (2020) contended that early indicators suggest remote learning has proven very uneven. Teachers were most likely to have a much more extensive range of achievement levels in classrooms than usual when schools reopened in the fall of 2021. The extreme learning gaps will expand in the average classroom; teachers will have to structure their learning activities for several different grade levels (Hawkins, 2020). Considering the academic detriment that COVID-19 has already thrust on African American students, the inclination to change how reading and other academic skills are taught, especially when it comes to African American students, warrants exploration.

Science of Reading

The science of reading is about how we learn to read, according to cognitive and psychological experts across several subject areas, including education (Armes, 2020;

Farrell et al., 2019). Over 20 years ago, experts advocated for eradicating systems that did not effectively help students learn to read. Children have differentiated learning needs that require differentiated instruction and assistance to enable optimal growth in building a confident learner (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Actually, teaching students how to read is more complex than phonics-based teaching. Strategic pathways must develop while simultaneously completing specific vowel stimulating exercises to engage brain activity. Simple phonics do not provide the capacity needed to stimulate the brain's wiring capabilities (Burns, 2017). The science of reading techniques suggests implementing the techniques of phonics and phonological awareness, oral reading fluency instruction, writing about text, morphology, thinking strategies, and vocabulary (National Reading Panel, 2020).

Teaching Minority Students to Read

Compared to their White counterparts, the achievement gap among different ethnic groups can be attributed to educational disparities, socioeconomics, and differential treatment in a multi-racial mixed group (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Often, the challenge of the teachers deals with the demographic makeup of majority White, middle-class females who are not adequately prepared to teach African American students, along with their own beliefs and biases towards the learning abilities of minority students. (Amadeo, 2020).

With an educated workforce that broadly does not represent the students it serves, how can schools support the needs of the diverse learners who walk into their classrooms every day? Thompson and Shamberger (2015) identified best practices for teaching reading to African American students. These practices include teachers believing in

African American students, using diverse teaching strategies, and making the curriculum interesting and relevant; positive teacher-parent relationships; and teachers understanding that they are helping to save an African American student's life when they teach them to read.

Teachers must change their beliefs about African American students. As it pertains to effective reading instruction and improvement, students must learn strategies to decode and comprehend information through various texts. After reviewing a variety of reading assessment data, teachers should reflect on the low reading scores and the underachievement of many African American students still reading below grade level (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015). The teacher's challenge is figuring out what students' reading deficits are and how to remediate them to show reading mastery. Teacher expectations play a role in how African American students perform in their classrooms. A study focusing on how to increase teacher efficacy while teaching African American students through personal and professional development conducted by Thompson and Shamberger (2015) found that of the 237 respondents, 92% of the teachers do not know how to work effectively with African American students, and 60% of the respondents do not believe that African American students are capable of academic success. In the same study, 54% said that most teachers admit they do not believe African American students are as intelligent as their counterparts. African American students in a toxic learning environment of low expectations may never reach their potential. The environment may perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Some school districts elect to implement a specific reading program throughout their district per grade span as their teacher-direct curriculum. When using scripted

reading programs, teachers and students become disinterested and bored with the repetitive practices of drills. Some teachers have voiced their concerns about following the lesson plans as written because of the lack of opportunity to be creative and to individualize for students' academic needs (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015). However, when teachers are faced with challenges while using the scripted reading programs, they should provide student-friendly feedback, promote motivation by supporting student choice of reading materials, and utilize multisensory learning techniques (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015). While students are reading, students should have multiple opportunities to discuss what they have read; the teacher completes frequent checks for understanding and modeling the comprehension process (McEwan, 2016).

In order to improve African American elementary students' learning environments, teachers must make the lesson exciting and relevant to them (Miller, 2020). Students are more likely to find what they are learning exciting and stay engaged when teachers use positive motivational encouragement throughout their instruction. Unfortunately, many teachers acknowledge that they are not familiar enough with the African American experiences to prepare them to create Black history activities for class (Gay, 2013). Teachers can effectively include reading a variety of optimistic African American authors. Also, allowing students to read and write on issues about their community provides opportunities for teachers to understand why African American students need culturally relevant education (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015).

Parent involvement in school has a positive effect on the educational environment of students. When parents connect with schools, students are more likely to show academic success, enjoy going to school, have positive behavior, and graduate high

school (Chen, 2020). African American parents, especially in low socioeconomic districts, have strained relationships with school personnel. The assumption is that African American parents do not care about their child's performance in school (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015). Parents of low achievers may be stressed, but they still have concerns for their child's education (Chen, 2020). The first step for educators who teach African American children is to build a trusting relationship with parents to make them an ally instead of a foe (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015). Teachers have to create a positive attitude towards parents and disregard any negative opinions about African American parents. Teachers respecting their relationship with their parents will create a non-hostile school environment for positive school engagement (Wyatt-Ross, 2018). As it pertains to supporting struggling readers at home, using parents as partners in education will support parent engagement with their child's learning. Sharing resources with parents is another way to improve relationships with African American parents (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015).

Literacy remains one of the most empowering tools for African Americans. An African American student reading on grade level by the end of third grade is less than likely to be recommended to receive special education-related services, drop out of school, live in poverty, or land in prison (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). Young African American boys may feel that their teacher is afraid of them and can remove them from their classroom. Teachers have to be careful not to be quick to label African American boys as discipline problems. This act could position them for the school-to-prison pipeline (Warren, 2019). When teachers respect all cultures and use effective teaching methods, they may reach those troubled students before it is too late (Armstrong, 2022).

Reading is one of the most important civil rights acts. Some believe it is the equity of this era.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy is commonly understood to be a framework that supports the elements of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Research shows that students benefit when they understand their own culture and others while integrating this knowledge into their instructional content backgrounds (Byrd, 2016).

As implied by Byrd (2016), culturally relevant pedagogy is a growth mindset teaching philosophy. When embraced, culturally relevant pedagogy stimulates lifelong learning for both the student and the teacher. This conceptual framework acknowledges that students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences impact their learning within the classroom, across the school, and throughout their community. All students should be able to experience success and have the potential to learn new concepts that are relevant to them and their culture (Byrd, 2016). According to Ladson-Billings (2014), students will become more engaged and empowered learners when connected to their culture. When students visualize themselves in the curriculum, they value what they learn, and their academic skills improve. Visualization not only constructs meaning for students but also enhances their self-image. In this study, culturally relevant pedagogy theory can be defined and will be defined as follows: "Teachers from any racial and ethnic background could be successful with any racial group of students when they possessed or developed the knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, beliefs, skills, and practices necessary to meet students' needs" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 2; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2017).

There are three tenets of teaching that empower students (Ladson-Billings, 2014). First, student academic achievement requires the teacher to have high expectations that are transparent and meet the students' needs. Teachers must deeply know the content, understand their learners, and know how to teach the content to the learner according to their individual learning styles. Secondly, cultural competence requires the teachers to understand how culture and education will create a positive learning environment. Teachers must be willing to learn about their students' cultures no matter how different they are from their own culture. The influence of students seeing themselves reflected throughout their classroom and instruction provides the opportunities to learn more about and see others' experiences. Third, sociopolitical consciousness allows teachers to educate themselves and their students about issues that may affect them personally or throughout their community. Personal and sociopolitical issues that impact students' communities will encourage them to move towards transformation efforts and social change. Empowerment is critical for students and their way of thinking about improving society's status quo (Escudero, 2019).

Culturally relevant pedagogy theory supports how I view student learning and how research can conclude how culture and relevance influence learning outcomes (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy and effective communication strategies within a school setting help form the epistemology. Teachers are struggling to meet the individual reading needs of African American students. Therefore, exploring culturally relevant pedagogy as an instructional framework to improve the academic performance of African American students is not an alternate educational reality.

Research Studies on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

English language learners (ELLs) continue to face challenges and repeated

failures in the classroom as a result of inadequate services to conquer their limited language capabilities. Denton (2018) conducted a study focused on a group of White elementary teachers' experiences and their impact on the goals of ELLs to better understand their culturally relevant pedagogy and the learning experiences of ELLs. This study sought to help educators better understand how to define and implement culturally relevant pedagogy. ELLs continue to face challenges and repeated failures in the classroom as a result of inadequate services to conquer their limited language capabilities. The purpose of the study was to explore culturally relevant pedagogy's potential impact on the educational experiences of ELLs from the teacher's perspective. The study's six teacher participants had previous experience with culturally relevant pedagogy. The teachers interviewed spoke fluent Spanish from various cultural backgrounds and taught different grade levels. They had varying years of educational experience. The methodology used was qualitative case study research to identify opinions and beliefs about the experiences of ELLs and culturally relevant pedagogy. The research questions were (a) how do public school teachers define and implement culturally relevant pedagogy, (b) how does culturally relevant pedagogy impact the educational experiences of ELL students, and (c) what factors influence public school teachers' implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy? The findings showed that 67% of the teachers in the study did not know how to define culturally relevant pedagogy, and there was no clear evidence of its use throughout this study. The findings negatively impacted their implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy practices in their teaching style, social maturity, classroom environment, and parent-teacher and student-teacher relationships (Denton, 2018). As a result, teacher participants implemented their

individual teaching styles, and the degree to which students were engaged throughout the instructional process varied (Denton, 2018).

A study on culturally relevant pedagogy by Mustapha (2019) explored the influence of culturally relevant pedagogy on African American elementary students. The study's goal was to identify how culturally relevant pedagogy influenced student learning as well as teacher perspectives. The participants were African American students in first through fifth grades at a predominantly African American elementary school in California. The Los Angeles public school in the study served approximately 200 students, including an expanded transitional kindergarten. The staff was required to participate in ongoing professional development due to the high percentage of the African American student population, which was 70% (Mustapha, 2019). The professional development focused on culturally responsive or culturally relevant pedagogy. At the time of this study, there were 11 teachers at the school site. Six teachers were recruited to participate in the study using purposeful sampling as a selection process. The teacher group consisted of five females and one male with 5 to 29 years of teaching experience. This study used a qualitative case study as its research model with a triangulation of multiple data resources. Multiple data resources were used to gather information from participants: semi-structured open-ended interview questions for focus groups, individual teacher interviews, and classroom observations. The individual teacher interviews provided detailed information about inadequately equipped teachers, lack of professional development opportunities, and lack of time to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in their instructional presentations consistently. Student focus groups were divided according to grade level, first through third grades and fourth through fifth grades. The

student focus group interviews revealed student perspectives on topics such as relationships and rapport at school. The students shared that positive friendships were important to them (Mustapha, 2019). When relationships between students and teachers were positive and intentional, the school experiences produced more positive outcomes for everyone. Instructional classroom observations varied with no specific directions given to the teachers by the observer. Classroom observations lasted for 30 to 90 minutes, documenting the actions of the teachers and the students during the scheduled reading instructional time. The findings demonstrated that what teacher participants taught influenced relationships and how students received them. When students had a voice in what they were being taught, they seemed to be more receptive to the instructional presentation the teacher provided. Therefore, students were more willing to work towards mastery of a given skill (Mustapha, 2019).

In summary, Denton's (2018) study focused on using culturally relevant pedagogy from the teacher's perspective to impact student learning of ELLs. Teacher participants demonstrated efficiently an understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy on the learning outcomes of their students. As a result, teachers used a variety of teaching styles throughout this study that negatively impacted the successful implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. In Mustapha's (2019) study, the learning experiences of African American elementary students were demonstrated through various influences of culturally relevant pedagogy. Teacher participants recognized that when relationships with students are positive and intentional, there will be more positive learning experiences for students.

Comprehensive Synthesis

The literature review highlights four areas that can affect the outcome of teaching African American elementary students how to read successfully. The four areas are national perspectives, teaching practices, diversity and achievement gap, and culturally relevant pedagogy.

The national perspective explains the federal mandates created to ensure equity of education for all students. The ESEA enacted in 1965 during President Johnson's administration provided funds to support continuous professional development and resources to support educational and parental programs for low socioeconomic students (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). This act continues to be reauthorized every 5 to 10 years. When Congress recognized the nation's poor reading output, especially during the early elementary period, they realized that a more concise and effective method of teaching reading was needed. In 1997, a panel of educators and experts in education, psychology, and higher education was commissioned to examine literacy instruction. In 2000, a report was released by the group entitled Teaching Children How to Read (National Reading Panel, 2000). It highlighted the components of effective teaching reading to be used by teachers (National Reading Panel, 2000). The panel's report laid the foundation for NCLB (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). In 2001, President George W. Bush's NCLB initiative required schools to meet the reading on grade level goal by the end of 2014. The ESSA enacted in 2015 by President Barack H. Obama continued to ensure equity and quality education by returning some federal powers back to the state (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015).

In light of what NRP reported, the literature review provided a more in-depth mindset of the importance of the science of reading. The science of reading premise

provides a better understanding of how one learns to read, what skills to teach, and what works within the brain for reading development. One of the reading frameworks used was a balanced literacy approach (Farrell et al., 2019). The balanced literacy approach is two entities compromised between the whole language literacy approach and phonics. It suggests that with good books and effective strategies, children can read words. Another reading framework discussed is the structured literacy approach (Richardson, 2016). Structured literacy dictates how a skill is taught along with what skill is taught. It allows for teachers to recognize student struggles with reading early in the learning process rather than much later (Cowan, 2016b).

American public school student demographics have increasingly changed along with having more diverse learning styles (Dordova-Cobo et al., 2016). It is worth noting that African American subgroups often include students from low socioeconomic statuses and students with disabilities. Less-qualified teachers with high turnover serve these schools with irregular student attendance, and low teacher-student expectations exist (Alismail, 2016; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). The use of evidence-based practices to teach African American elementary students how to read could positively impact students who are struggling to read fluently. An African American student reading on grade level by the end of third grade is less than likely to be recommended to receive special education-related services, drop out of school, live in poverty, or land in prison (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). A study conducted by Thompson and Shamberger (2015) found that 92% of teachers do not know how to work effectively with African American students, and 60% do not believe these students are capable of academic success. In the same study, 54% said that most teachers admit that they do not believe African American

students are as intelligent as their counterparts. Teacher expectations play a role in influencing the learning outcomes of African American students. At this time, low performance from African American students on standardized assessments, along with receiving lower grades assigned by teachers, is the reality in American public schools (Thompson & Shamberger, 2015).

Research shows that students benefit when they understand their own culture and the culture of others while learning their instructional content (Byrd, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a growth mindset teaching philosophy that gears towards academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Byrd, 2016). In light of what we already know about culturally relevant pedagogy, this framework could be used to support how student learning can integrate culture and relevance, thus influencing learning outcomes for elementary African American students in reading.

Summary

The gap in African American elementary reading skills reflects the need to adjust the learning environment. It also supports the status quo that African Americans have fewer opportunities to experience academic success (Samuels, 2020). The literature review demonstrated that the academic achievement of African Americans is contingent on several overarching factors such as parental involvement, student-teacher relationships, a robust learning environment, and a desire on the part of the teachers to create a prosperous future for all students. Culturally relevant pedagogy could check off all the variables mentioned above. Chapter 3 explains the complete methodology chosen for this qualitative research study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study proposed the idea that culturally relevant pedagogy is useful in elementary schools to improve the academic success of African American students, especially in reading. This qualitative study aimed to explore K-4 teachers' understanding and inclined use of culturally relevant pedagogy for teaching reading. This study shared the experiences and perceptions of African American and non-African American teachers in Grades K-4 as they contemplate the concept and value of culturally relevant pedagogy in their practices of teaching reading.

Qualitative research assumes that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds; therefore, collecting information through conducting interviews and surveys provided a way for me to discover perceptions of teachers' biases (Ajayi, 2011). This qualitative study sought to explore the understanding and potential basis that teachers and educational leaders retain from their experiences and perspectives regarding the use of culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for educating minority students.

My review of related literature revealed limited studies on the significance of culturally relevant pedagogy in teaching reading to African American students during early childhood years (Hale, 2016). In Chapter 3, I restate the research questions and detail the design for the study. This chapter also includes details about the selection of research participants, data collection, and data analysis.

This dissertation explored answers to the following research questions:

1. How do K-4 teachers in rural eastern North Carolina schools understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy?

2. How inclined are K-4 reading teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into reading instruction?
3. How do rural district-level curriculum administrators in eastern NC school districts understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy?
4. What are the challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in rural eastern North Carolina?

Data Collection Process

Ten teacher participants were chosen: five African Americans and five Caucasians. Typically, qualitative inquiry focuses on relatively small samples purposefully selected to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2015). As Patton (2015) stated, “You’re hoping to elicit relevant answers that are meaningful and useful in understanding the interviewee’s perspective. That’s basically what interviewing is all about” (p. 471). Participants were selected based on their years of experience. Preference was given to a variety of experience levels above Year 1. After the district’s program coordinator selected the elementary school study site, I created a list of possible study candidates from the current teaching roster of elementary teachers from an eastern North Carolina school district.

In addition to the 10 teacher participants, five district-level curriculum administrators and 20 elementary reading teachers (at least one teacher from each of the district’s elementary schools) were surveyed about culturally relevant pedagogy instructional implementation in a rural eastern North Carolina school district. The data collected served to answer Research Questions 1 and 4.

In this study, the data were collected by interviewing selected participants.

Interviewing is an ideal and valuable tool since it allows the researcher to gain insight into the feelings and thoughts essential in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). An interview protocol using semi-structured questions was created from the literature chapter and collaboration with my committee chair. Before any interviews began, the school system in which the study took place needed to grant permission for research. Participants were asked to complete an informed consent document. After receiving approval, the interview sessions were scheduled at different times at each school location.

The interview process utilized in this study was piloted prior to the start of the study to refine the interview protocol and solicit feedback.

While piloting is concerned with whether something can be done and whether and how we should proceed with it, it has a further dimension; piloting is implementing something or part of something, in a way you intend to do it in the future to see whether it can be done in practice. (Eldridge et al., 2016, para. 17)

Given the geographic location of the study as well as the time limitations of this pilot study, teacher participants selected from other schools in the district were asked to validate the protocol and process. The criteria for selection of volunteer participants included teachers currently working in an elementary school setting as a teacher, ethnic identification, and years of experience. The pilot study participants confirmed their willingness to participate via emails, and the interview sessions for the study were conducted face-to-face or via Zoom and recorded electronically with the consent of the participants.

With the district's consent, the scheduling of interviews with the study's teachers

was mutually decided. After establishing the timeline of meeting dates, I met with the participants to explain the purpose of the study. The interview questions to the teachers focused on their experiences as K-4 teachers in eastern North Carolina and how they understood and defined culturally relevant pedagogical practices. The interview questions to the district-level curriculum administrators focused on how they understand and define culturally relevant pedagogical practices and the challenges to adopt and implement those practices within their school district. Additionally, 20 elementary reading teachers were surveyed online on how inclined they are to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into their reading instruction. At the beginning of each interview, I explained the purpose of the study and the interview, reiterated how long the interview may take to complete, and explained the consent form.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and stored on a password-protected computer. I took notes to aid in understanding and interpreting the participant responses.

Once the interviews were complete, the data were transcribed, and folders were created for each participant and labeled. Interviews were transcribed verbatim (Saldana, 2016). A contact summary form was completed reflecting each interview and summarizing critical highlights of trends that were identified in each interview.

Data Analysis

An informal data analysis began after each interview session. Zoom was used to record and transcribe interview data. The information was read, interpreted, and critiqued by creating categories that best described the information provided during the interviews. The next step in data analysis was the initial coding. Upon transcribing the data, the

analysis process included three steps. First was the initial round of analysis, which involved descriptive coding or assigning codes that summarize the basic meaning, themes, or reoccurring topics. The first step in data analysis was the initial coding. Initial coding involved organizing the data “into small categories of information...and then assigning a label to the code” (Creswell, 2013, p. 184). The second step included value coding or assigning codes of values, attitudes, and beliefs to data passages (Miles et al., 2014). The last step, the data analysis process, included pattern matching codes like ideas or similar conveyed meanings (Miles et al., 2014). Creswell (2013) described a systematic process for coding data in which specific statements are analyzed and categorized into themes that represent the phenomenon of interest. The themes with the most input served to answer the four research questions.

Procedures

This study consisted of three phases. The first phase was participant interviews. I used the categories developed from the interview protocol refinement framework to refine further the interview protocol I used in the pilot interview study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), an interview protocol refinement framework provided me with purposeful, rich, detailed, and meaningful data from interviews of study participants. The interview protocol refinement process consisted of four phases: aligning interview questions with research questions, inquiry-based conversation, feedback, and piloting the interview protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The first phase was creating an interview protocol to map the interview questions against the research questions to ensure their alignment. In Phase 2, I balanced inquiry with a conversation with the interviewee, organized and precise, and allowed free-flowing

conversation. Phase 3 involved me obtaining feedback on their interview protocol through close reading and think-aloud activities. The feedback gained through these activities provided me with an opportunity to fine-tune the interview protocol.

Lastly, Phase 4 was the piloting stage. In Phase 4, I gained a realistic sense of the timing needed for an interview session, and participants were able to answer research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Table 3

Interview Protocol Refinement Method

Phase	Purpose of phase
1. Ensuring interview questions align with research questions	Focuses on developing an interview protocol aligned with the study
2. Constructing an inquiry-based conversation	To create an interview protocol that balances inquiry with conversation
3. Receiving feedback on interview protocol	To obtain feedback on interview protocol
4. Piloting the interview protocol	To pilot interview protocol with a small population sample

This interview protocol refinement protocol helped enhance the research instruments and provided robust and detailed interviews that accurately addressed all research questions.

Research Procedures

The first phase was participant interviews.

1. Interviews were scheduled to accommodate participant schedules and conducted in public settings of the participants' choosing, such as their

classrooms.

2. No interview lasted more than half an hour, in person or via Zoom, and were recorded electronically with the participants' consent.
3. I used the following criteria for selecting 10 teacher participants: an elementary reading teacher, years of teaching experience, and race.
4. I interviewed the study site's five district-level assistant superintendents at the district office to gain a perspective on the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in the study's school district.

The second phase was surveys.

1. There were 20 elementary reading teachers who completed a Survey Monkey, not participating in the interview session.
2. This was an online survey consisting of five open-ended questions about implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms if given the opportunity.
3. Open-ended questions on the survey were to gain quality information from the teachers' intentional and relevant responses. This survey study was created on and distributed with the online survey program Survey Monkey.
4. The online survey was sent via email to all 13 elementary schools within the study's school district pool of possible participating schools, with at least one teacher completing the survey by the end of January 2022.
5. Electronic communication explained the survey format, timeline, and purpose via email.

The third phase was data analysis.

1. I used survey responses and transcripts from participant interviews, and the analyzing process consisted of coding, finding themes and patterns emerging from participant responses.
2. Throughout the data analysis process, the transcripts and the survey responses were reviewed, and notes were made to determine critical themes across multiple data sources that were comparatively the same and which traits are different (Saldana, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1997).
3. The data collected helped to identify emerging themes from the data resources (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016).

Summary

This study aimed to answer the four research questions dealing with the usage of culturally relevant pedagogy in reading for elementary African American students. As Creswell (2013) explained, “the purpose is to create a description of the essence of the experience” (p. 221). The data collected highlighted the belief of educators from the study’s site school district.

This chapter reviewed the methodology of this research to make sure the steps taken to perform the research and data analysis were clearly articulated and aligned with the goals of the study before transitioning to Chapter 4 to present the findings. Chapter 5 presents the conclusion and future research recommendations.

Chapter 4: Results

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore K-4 teachers' understanding of and inclination to implement culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for teaching reading, especially to diverse learners. The findings of this study may create a pathway for school administrators to explore educators' understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and the challenges associated with its full implementation. The study may facilitate discussions about why it is so vital to structure learning environments conducive to learning for all students regardless of cultural differences. Additionally, this study may serve to prompt administrators in charge of curriculum decisions to assess whether or not, with district support, teachers are free to explore the advantages of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Instrument

For this study, data were collected to analyze teachers' and school curriculum leadership's definition of the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy in reading for elementary African American students in the fourth grade in rural eastern North Carolina. There were two research instruments used in this study, an online platform called Survey Monkey (see Figure 3) and an interview protocol (see Figure 4). An online survey was chosen as a form of data collection for its efficiency. The interviews provided an in-depth understanding of how teachers and school leadership administrators defined and understood culturally relevant pedagogy and its use in reading instruction. I used a culturally relevant pedagogy framework in developing questions for the online survey and interviews. The questions included in the online survey and interviews were created

in alignment with the research questions. The administration of the online teacher survey was done through Survey Monkey; each teacher participant received an email with a hyperlink to access.

Figure 3

Survey Monkey for Elementary Teachers

<i>Questionnaire</i>	
Clicking the link below to continue on to the survey indicates your consent to participate in the study: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NX36SXX	
<p>Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Instruction Survey https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NX36SXX</p>	
1. What is your definition of culturally relevant pedagogy?	<input type="text"/>
2. Rate your knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy on a scale of 1-10 with 10 identifying as very knowledgeable and 1 identifying as no knowledge.	<input type="text"/>
3. How is it important for ethnic minorities to experience culturally relevant pedagogy?	<input type="text"/>
4. Why? Explain your answer.	<input type="text"/>

Figure 4

Interview Protocol

*Interview Protocol*Script read prior to the interview:

I'd like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview aspect of my study. As I have mentioned to you before, my study seeks to explore how teachers in your school district understand how the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in their reading instruction may support academic achievement specifically for African American elementary students. The aim of this research is to document the possible process of interconnecting students' cultural influences into their academic achievement.

Our interview today will last approximately half an hour.

You have completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording (or not) our conversation today? ___Yes ___No

***If yes:** Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record. **If not:** Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.*

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? **[Discuss questions]**

If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time.

I would be more than happy to answer your question.

The findings and data analyses are presented in this chapter. This study aimed to explore K-4 teachers' understanding of and inclination to implement culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for teaching reading, especially to diverse learners.

Four research questions guided this study:

1. How do rural K-4 teachers in eastern North Carolina schools understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy practices?

2. How inclined are K-4 reading teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into reading instruction?
3. How do rural district-level curriculum administrators in eastern North Carolina schools understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy?
4. What are the challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in a rural community school in eastern North Carolina?

Data Collection

Once I received university IRB approval, an elementary school in a rural school district in eastern North Carolina used in this study was identified by the school district's program coordinator. I created a list of possible study candidates from the current teaching roster for the identified elementary school to select participants for the teacher interview process. Ten teacher participants were chosen: five African Americans and five Caucasians. The teacher interviews took place on the elementary school's campus. Interviews were audio-recorded on Zoom, which allowed for convenient transcriptions. The interview responses were uploaded into a Word document verbatim, and I transcribed them by hand. Each interview was transcribed shortly after the interview, after which participants were allowed to review, adjust, and confirm their comments. The total time for each interview averaged approximately 30 minutes, with the total time for all interviews including teachers and school curriculum leadership being 12 hours. All interviews were conducted and completed in January 2022.

In addition to the 10 teacher participants, 20 random elementary teachers (at least one teacher from each of the district's 13 elementary schools) were surveyed using

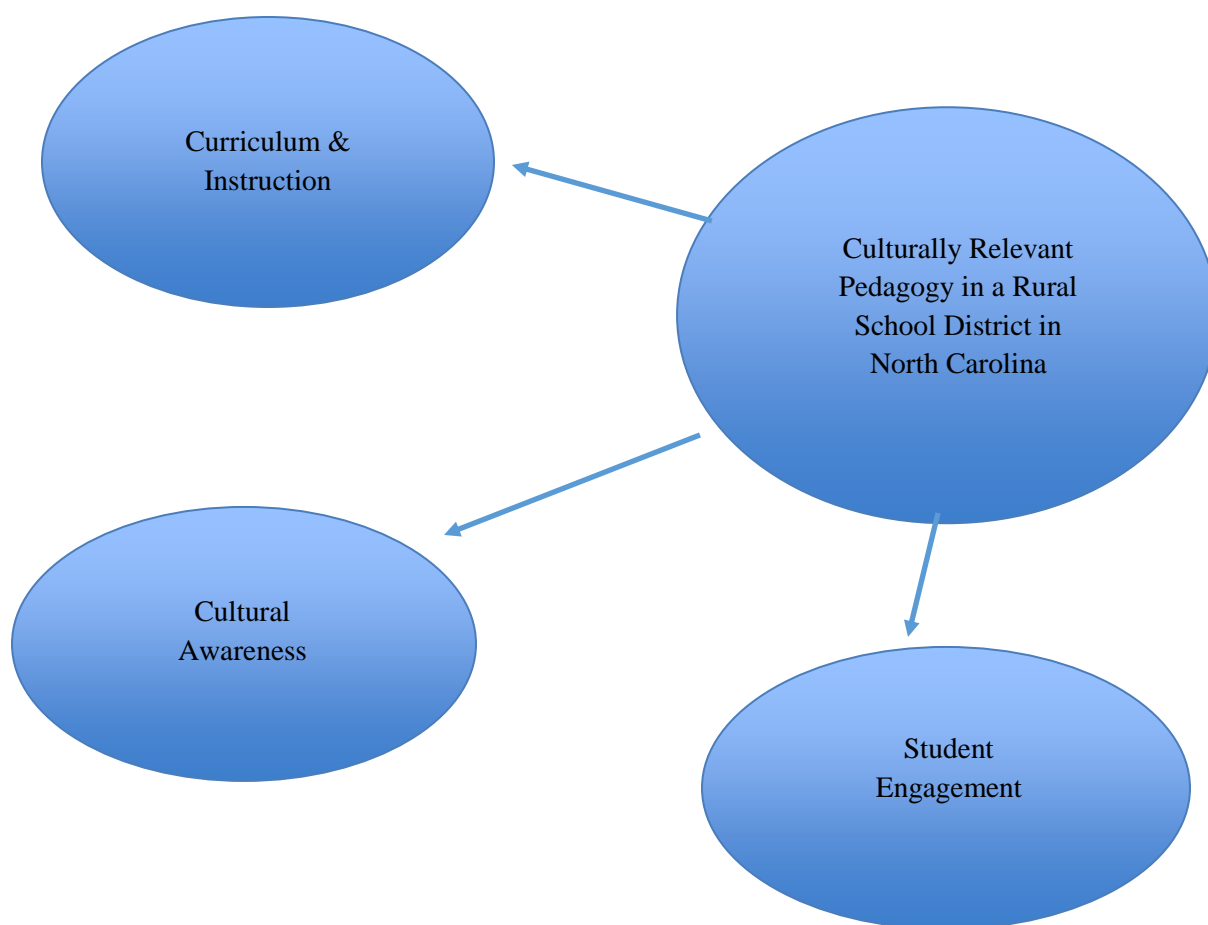
Survey Monkey about culturally relevant pedagogy instructional implementation in a rural eastern North Carolina school district. A total of 20 teachers received and completed the Survey Monkey online survey. It stated the purpose of the research as well as critical criteria for teacher participants: (a) a current elementary teacher, (b) teachers' race, and (c) the number of years of experience teaching. The email included a link, which sent the participant directly to sign up to participate in the online survey. The survey participants were different from the teachers who were individually interviewed.

Five school district-level curriculum administrators were interviewed. I conducted interviews with the district curriculum administrators at their district offices. District administrators were sent an email requesting an opportunity to answer two questions about culturally relevant pedagogy implemented throughout their school district.

Interviews were audio-recorded on Zoom, which allowed for convenient transcriptions. The interview responses were uploaded into a Word document verbatim, and I transcribed them by hand. Each interview was transcribed shortly after the interview, after which participants were allowed to review, adjust, and confirm their comments. The total time for each interview averaged about 30 minutes, with the total time for all teacher interviews being 5 hours. All interviews were conducted in January 2022.

Table 4*Teacher Participant Characteristics*

Teacher names (pseudonyms)	Years of teaching experience	Race	Education level
Ms. Beard	6	African American	Bachelor
Ms. Best	10	African American	Bachelor
Ms. Britt	11	African American	Bachelor
Ms. Bryant	11	African American	Masters
Ms. Tatum	12	Caucasian	Bachelor
Ms. Coley	15	Caucasian	Bachelor
Ms. Sasser	18	Caucasian	Bachelor
Ms. Carter	23	African American	Masters
Ms. Wallace	23	Caucasian	Masters
Ms. Mason	26	Caucasian	Masters

Figure 5*Research Study Emerged Themes Results***Table 5***Themes With Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Curriculum and instruction	Instructional focus and teaching practices impact
Student engagement	Academic achievement and cultural understanding
Cultural awareness	Teacher awareness and instructional resources

Research Question 1: How Do Rural K-4 Teachers in Eastern North Carolina Schools Understand and Define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Practices?

For the purpose of this study, in Research Question 1 (see Appendix A), there were 10 elementary teacher participants chosen: five African Americans and five Caucasians. Participants were selected based on their years of experience, with preference given to various experience levels above 2 years. A list of teacher candidates was created of possible study participants from an eastern North Carolina school district. The criteria for selection of volunteer participants included teachers currently working in an elementary school setting as a teacher, ethnic identification, and years of experience. The teachers who were interviewed answered questions about their definition and knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy, how important it is for minority students to experience it, and if they would be willing to teach it in their classroom. An informal data analysis was done after each interview session. The information was read, interpreted, and critiqued by creating categories that best describe the information provided during the interviews. The analysis process included three steps. First was the initial round of analysis, which involved descriptive coding that summarized the primary meaning, themes, or recurring topics. The second step was value coding, or assigning codes of values, attitudes, and beliefs to data passages. The last step included pattern matching codes like ideas that conveyed meanings. This study collected the data by interviewing the selected teacher candidates. An interview protocol using semi-structured questions was created from the literature chapter and by my committee chair. Participants were asked to complete an informed consent document.

Theme: Curriculum and Instruction

In capturing the teachers' understanding and definition of culturally relevant pedagogy, the theme of curriculum and instruction emerged through how they used the students' cultural identities and interests in their instructional focus and how teaching practices are impacted by culturally relevant pedagogy.

Instructional Focus

In the subtheme of instructional focus within the theme of curriculum and instruction, the teacher participants' culturally relevant understandings and practices emerged through their attention to the students' cultural identities, relatability to their environment, and life experiences.

Teachers believed cultural identity is essential and used cultural identity to tailor their instruction for various reasons. Ms. Coley shared that she “uses students’ cultural identity to make it [instruction] relevant and support academic content. When students can keep their focus on cultural identity [through the curriculum], it adds significantly to the roles such as the value of relationships.” When connecting instruction and students’ unique cultural learning needs or identities, Ms. Carter highlighted student differences and how these differences can inform teachers’ instructional focus and students’ learning experiences:

You cannot say that you do not see differences among the students in your classroom. The learning process is what makes each learning experience unique and meaningful. Once you [the teacher] add that particular attribute to your instructional presentation that connects to a particular student that has been resistant, he or she may be more willing to trust you to try something new in the

future.

Ms. Britt commented that students' cultural backgrounds are compelling because the demographics can cause a disconnect among different cultures, which may lead to a lack of being willing to learn new concepts:

Some students want to buy into the fact that there are some preconceived notions about their own ethnic/racial groups being less knowledgeable in specific subjects such as math or reading. Unfortunately, negative perceptions seem to stop students from even trying to do their work, especially when it becomes problematic.

Negative preconceptions seem to threaten how African American students see themselves as successful when it comes to learning new skills at this school.

How Teaching Practices Are Impacted by Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Transitioning during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were using a variety of teaching practices to close the achievement gaps while focusing on more rigor in curriculum and instruction to meet the learning needs of all learners. "Our schools were having to deal with a social disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic during the last 2 years, learning formats were thrown into emergency and crisis management plans," commented Ms. Beard. Teachers have focused on asynchronous learning and other learning apps that many of them were not able to connect to equity and cultural relevance with the online teaching format. Once transitioning schools headed to a more normal teaching format, teachers would have to change their teaching methods to be more relatable for students' learning experiences. "The traditional ways of face-to-face teaching changed a lot, taking a different route, and a new way of teaching and learning

seemed to be here. It became our new norm,” said Ms. Best. While all students have their unique strengths and challenges, it is vital that the goal for every student is motivated to excel. “I am the type of teacher that models high expectations [for all students]. My goal is to focus on all of my students to reach high academic achievement. With the appropriate teaching resources,” said Ms. Wallace. By offering teachers a stronger foundation of tools to create unique and intentional teaching strategies, school district leaders freed teachers to spend more time directly working with students. Ms. Sasser stated that time and resources readily available in the classrooms are integral to increasing teachers’ opportunities to design relevant learning experiences for all students. “Planning and using culturally relevant teaching practices that support the learning process that will support connecting to students is my ultimate goal,” said Ms. Sasser. Teachers wanted to be intentional about their content knowledge while providing content of interest to the students in their classrooms. The district stressed the importance of knowing the district’s and state’s expectations for each child’s mastery level. Teachers preferred to support the school district by implementing different teaching models that would include some guiding “look-fors” to help teachers design their unique, culturally relevant activities. Ms. Tatum stated, “Having a teaching model [framework] for integrating culturally relevant pedagogy that gives specific instructional expectations by our curriculum and instruction department aligning with the state's curriculum would help support mastery for all types of learners.” “I am not sure how to implement culturally relevant pedagogy across all subject areas that I teach. This would be my challenge,” said Ms. Mason. It was a typical response from teachers that they would struggle with the lack of professional development support provided by this school district. Ms. Bryant said,

In the past, we have participated in professional development sessions covering whatever educational trend there might be highlighted at that time. Then we go back to our schools, and we either try to infuse them into our existing instructional presentations or put them on a shelf. There is no follow-up or refreshers provided on long-term bases.

Also, Ms. Coley, a Caucasian teacher, felt that she would encounter some difficulty if she tried to create meaningful relationships with her African American students and other students of color while implementing culturally relevant pedagogy into their instructional activities. “I do not want to overstep or make anyone feel uncomfortable when discussing certain topics such as race, racism, or religion at any time,” said Ms. Coley. Teachers want to exhibit cultural sensitivity during their instruction presentations to all learners.

Research Question 2: How Inclined Are K-4 Reading Teachers to Implement Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Into Reading Instruction?

In order to gain an understanding of how inclined elementary teachers are to use culturally relevant pedagogy in reading instruction, 20 elementary teachers participated in an online survey via Zoom in this study. Along with being elementary certified, teachers taught all subject areas in a specific eastern North Carolina school district. Principals emailed the survey link to their teachers, and random elementary teachers consented to participate in the survey. This survey asked district teachers to answer five questions on how inclined they are to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in their reading instruction. Zoom was used to record and transcribe the interview data. The information was read, interpreted, and critiqued by creating categories that best describe the information provided during the interviews. The initial round of analysis involved

descriptive coding or assigning codes that summarize the essential meaning, themes, or recurring topics. The next step was value coding, assigning codes of values, attitudes, and beliefs to data passages. The last step of the data analysis process included pattern matching codes like ideas or similarly conveyed meanings.

Theme: Student Engagement

In gaining an understanding of teacher implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy emerged the theme of student engagement in reading instruction. Student engagement is demonstrated as a student's level of interaction with their teachers and other students in a quality learning environment using efforts through instructional activities for success. A group of 20 random elementary teachers from the study's school district was given an online survey of five questions about culturally relevant pedagogy in reading in their classrooms. The teachers' responses expound on their willingness to learn how to appropriately implement culturally relevant pedagogy practices into their daily reading instruction. The subthemes presented are academic achievement and cultural understanding.

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement, as a subtheme within the theme of student engagement, emerged through teacher attention to building relationships with their students. Teachers shared that they want to build relationships with students to motivate them to learn. Ms. Carter stated, "Building on students' experiences not taught in class helps integrate relevant activities that will enhance their learning outcomes." The survey revealed that capturing students' attention is very important to teachers while presenting instruction, especially when introducing new skills. "I have seen when students, regardless of their

cultural backgrounds, seem to be more engaged when the content is relevant to them,” said Ms. Coley. Student interest in their curriculum helps to increase their participation in the activity that will build on an understanding of the curriculum, noted Ms. Coley. Student dialogue helps build a rapport among students, encouraging student connection to their learning. Ms. Bryant's response was, “The deeper connection helps make class time more interesting for students, and the students are more engaged in whatever curriculum we are working on.” When this happens, teachers can equip students with the skills needed to succeed in and out of school. Ms. Wallace suggested implementing culturally relevant pedagogy strategies to increase student learning by bridging those gaps and engaging students from underrepresented cultures within the classroom. “I would like to have specific foundational training on culturally relevant pedagogy strategies that include more intentional, hands-on implementation,” said Ms. Best. “Yes, I would like to integrate this framework into my daily instructional activities if provided by the district. It seems that it would be an overall win for all learners,” said Mrs. Mason. Some teachers identified that the lack of continuous district support, including professional development and teaching resources, would hinder them from effectively implementing it for all learners. In the increasingly diverse and multicultural society, it is more important than ever for teachers to be more aware of the cultural influences of their students that could help to support academic achievement. Ms. Tatum said,

To understand those students that I teach and know the issues they face daily is time-consuming, but taking the time to understand how they learn and what matters to them is paramount to making any breakthroughs. This is what I think it would look like when asked about implementing culturally relevant pedagogy into

my instruction.

“The goal of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in my instructional presentations would be to increase academic awareness in my teaching by being more intentional for each unique learning type,” said Ms. Sasser. “Student interest, engagement, and learning connections will encourage confidence when learning new instructional practices or skills that show real difficulties and give a more practical method for understanding what students want and need,” said Ms. Wallace. Ms. Britt said, “Closing the achievement gap is a goal every year, and I think that promoting diverse cultures through the district's educational initiatives would help close the achievement gap between my Caucasian and African American students.” Teachers noted on the survey that students’ prior knowledge could be used as a foundation to build on their new learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. Ms. Mason added an example about an experience that she has observed with her students and prior learning experiences:

I know that I have given a pre-assessment in math on long division to a group of students. Some of the students participated in an enrichment activity earlier in the school year and presented on that same topic. It was pretty apparent from the results that the group's prior experience using long division helped with their performance on the pre-assessment. Learning something new can be implicated in what one already knows.

“Culturally relevant pedagogy shows students that their teachers understand and want to learn more about them in and out of the classroom,” said Ms. Britt. Ms. Tatum commented, “We all want to be accepted, loved, and respected. The actions shown towards one another are earned rather than demanded.” When the teacher shows the

desire to learn more about their students, including things that make them who they are, such as their family or what is important to them, it demonstrates an act of belongingness in their classroom. “Teachers can provide diverse instruction specific for each student in their classroom that can connect them with that topic, making it relevant to them,” responded Ms. Best. The connection in the lesson plan will foster the various learning styles and languages students use within their own culture, making it more natural for students. Ms. Beard responded about what connecting to her students demonstrates:

I will purposely write down some interesting facts about my students to add throughout my instructional presentations. They are often shocked to hear themselves mentioned during my conversation, but it says so much when I see a smile on their faces.

Students seem to become more interested in trying a new skill or doing their best on their assignments afterward. Ms. Carter said,

Children we teach need to know and feel that we care about them unconditionally. We often withhold praise and affection and recess or other ways of punishing them for students misbehaving. Nevertheless, when a child feels angry, those are the exact moments that children most need our reassurance and compassion.

Instilling a love of reading would give children a head start with learning the vocabulary to self-confidence when facing new challenges. “It will help them make sense of the world around them, specifically their classmates' different cultural practices,” said Ms. Best.

Cultural Understanding

“I have read that when culturally relevant pedagogy is integrated into instruction,

it should help students understand their community and their role within their community,” said Ms. Mason. Ms. Mason continued to note having a goal of supporting all students with their identity in their own culture while developing fluency in other cultures. “I want students to feel that it is important for all students to understand different cultures and backgrounds in a safe learning environment,” said Ms. Tatum. When learning through other cultures, students understand why people do things the way they do, said some teachers. It has the understanding that others may create students’ sympathy toward different situations, mutual trust, and understanding. Ms. Wallace said, “Culturally relevant pedagogy would give minority students a greater understanding of their culture and shows the importance of the contribution of their own culture to others.”

In comparison, Ms. Coley noted that culturally relevant pedagogy practices would be influenced by everything from race and ethnicity to religion, providing appropriate information to support the learning process. Cultural understanding and understanding of your students would be critical attributes to consider while intentionally planning their unique instructional activities. “As I reflect on what it would take to become proficient using this framework, I know it will be a process. I just want to do right by my students, especially supporting them to become successful readers,” said Ms. Best.

Teachers have observed that some students may not feel any representation throughout their educational resources or activities implemented consistently in their instructional day. The survey reflected that some teachers acknowledged that even though there is a lack of available resources, cultural representation should not only exist during holiday months that recognize people of color. Ms. Coley stated, “Exposure to a variety of high-quality cultural resources would assist teachers with making changes in the

inequalities of societal misconceptions. It would help to adjust the critical perspectives of individuals' expectations." When the misrepresentation of people of color is being taught daily in classrooms through textbooks that are not diverse, it is nearly impossible for misunderstandings and disregard to decrease in our communities. "I remember the only time I read about people that looked like me was during Black History Month. During that month, I read about African Americans that seemed to have difficulties or needed to overcome some awful condition," said Ms. Batts. She continued to comment that representation matters to all her students and how it affects their mindset.

The survey revealed that at least two teachers acknowledged their lack of any knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy prior to this survey. They had no understanding of this framework and how it could be used to support student learning, especially for African American students.

Table 6*Teacher Interview Question 1 Responses*

Interview Question 1: What is your definition of culturally relevant pedagogy?	
Teacher	Response
Beard	Culturally relevant pedagogy is teaching students how to correlate course work with their culture. The teacher is aware of students' cultures and shows positive representation of students' culture in the classroom.
Best	A teaching strategy that focuses on the various aspects of student achievement and supports students to uphold their cultural identities through their learning community.
Britt	A model that allows student achievement in their own cultural identities while becoming aware of other cultures as well.
Bryant	Using a student's cultural identity to support their learning and understanding of academic content. It is relevant and useful to them.
Carter	When you purposely provide a variety of cultural learning opportunities for the students that you serve.
Coley	Something that focuses on student achievement and helps students to keep their cultural identity.
Mason	Teaching practices that focus on the students in all subject areas. Instructional materials are relevant to the students.
Sasser	Teaching practices geared towards students in class. Instruction that is planned, so that students can connect to the teaching resources that is relevant to each student.
Tatum	Curriculum that includes students' cultural background and references in different aspects of learning.
Wallace	This focuses on student achievement using various levels while considering their cultural identity and meshing them to promote success.

Table 7*Teacher Interview Question 2 Responses*

Interview Question 2: Rate your knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy on a scale of 1-10 with 10 identifying as very knowledgeable and 1 identifying as no knowledge.

Teacher	Response
Beard	6
Best	4
Britt	5
Bryant	5
Carter	3
Coley	3
Mason	4
Sasser	5
Tatum	4
Wallace	7

Table 8*Teacher Interview Question 3 Responses*

Interview Question 3: How is it important for ethnic minorities to experience culturally relevant pedagogy?	
Teacher	Response
Beard	It is important to have multiple cultures represented in a classroom. Students come from all cultures, and it is important that they feel represented.
Best	Extremely
Britt	I think that it is relevant and important for several reasons. The impact of cultural understanding in an academic and social setting can only benefit all students. When norms are understood and made a daily part of a student's environment, all areas of life can experience growth.
Bryant	Extremely important.
Carter	No answer
Coley	No answer
Mason	It helps students to identify with their culture while along with learning about others.
Sasser	They can be unfairly denied access to the instructional material if it is presented in an exclusive manner.
Tatum	It is very important to ensure students are participating in lessons that are a reflection of themselves.
Wallace	It is important for students to experience a learning environment that is inclusive of everyone.

Table 9*Teacher Interview Question 4 Responses*

Interview Question 4: Why? Explain your answer.	
Teacher	Response
Beard	If a student feels their culture is positively represented they will feel more proud of themselves and have higher confidence. This will hopefully reflect in an increase of class participation and improvement in grades.
Best	Their cultural identity will may be lost if not represented in a child's life. If it is done consistently and in a positive matter too.
Britt	Cultural relevance allows for connections, motivation, and engagement. I also believe cultural acceptance and relevance helps to facilitate a safe and inclusive classroom.
Bryant	Culturally relevant pedagogy is extremely important in order to support, foster, and empower student learning. It helps further academic learning, achievement, and respects their culture. Life experiences will help to transform and promote a well-balanced student (emotionally and socially).
Carter	No answer
Coley	No answer
Mason	To have respect and understanding for those that are different from yourself. The matter that cultural differences are presented to students will determine how students respond to supporting their own community. Cultural identity is valued differently. So it is important to be intentional about supporting all students and giving them a voice.
Sasser	If I can't access the curriculum, why am I here as the teacher
Tatum	Students should participate in lessons that are culturally relevant to them.
Wallace	When a student's needs are being met, he/she is much more likely to excel in all areas. The unique perspective of being a minority brings a vastly different view that can improve one's drive to be successful.

Table 10*Teacher Interview Question 5 Responses*

Interview Questions 5: If permitted to implement by your district, would you be inclined to use culturally relevant pedagogy to teach reading? If you feel that you are already implementing culturally relevant pedagogy, would you share it with other teachers to use in their classroom?	
Teacher	Response
Beard	Yes
Best	Yes
Britt	Yes, as long as it is academically sound, age appropriate, and inclusive in order to build cultural fluency.
Bryant	Yes
Carter	Yes
Coley	Yes, if it was explained and demonstrated of the expectations for success or mastery.
Mason	Absolutely
Sasser	Absolutely
Tatum	Yes
Wallace	Absolutely

Research Question 3: How Do Rural District-Level Curriculum Administrators in Eastern North Carolina Schools Understand and Define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

The school district's five curriculum administrators participated in this study. This group consists of an assistant superintendent (Dr. Thomas), a director of Title I (Ms. Williams), a director of Teaching and Learning (Ms. Pentagraph), and Teaching and Learning coordinators (Mr. Jones and Dr. Dale). Dr. Thomas has over 30 years of

educational experience, including teaching, curriculum facilitator, principal, and executive director. Ms. Williams has over 16 years of educational experience, including teaching, principal, and assistant Title I director. She is responsible for supporting and enhancing educational services to schools that receive federal funds from Title I. Ms. Pentagraph is the director of Teaching and Learning. She has educational experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal and is responsible for supporting all curriculum and instructional needs, such as professional development and instructional resources for Grades K-12. Mr. Jones is a Teaching and Learning specialist for half of the district's 31 schools. He has experience as a teacher, curriculum facilitator, assistant principal, and principal. As a teaching and learning specialist, Mr. Jones provides additional support for individual schools to enhance their professional development experience, specifically in reading instruction. Dr. Dale supports half of the school district's schools as it pertains to the area of math. She has experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. The five district-level school administrators were selected by their role in curriculum teaching and learning, including teacher support for the district.

Table 11*Administrator Participant Characteristics*

District administrator name (pseudonyms)	Years of experience	District role	Race
Dr. Thomas	30	Assistant superintendent	African American
Ms. Williams	16	Director of Title I	African American
Ms. Pentagraph	15	Director of teaching and learning	Caucasian
Mr. Jones	11	Teaching and learning specialist	Multi-racial
Dr. Dale	27	Teaching and learning specialist	Caucasian

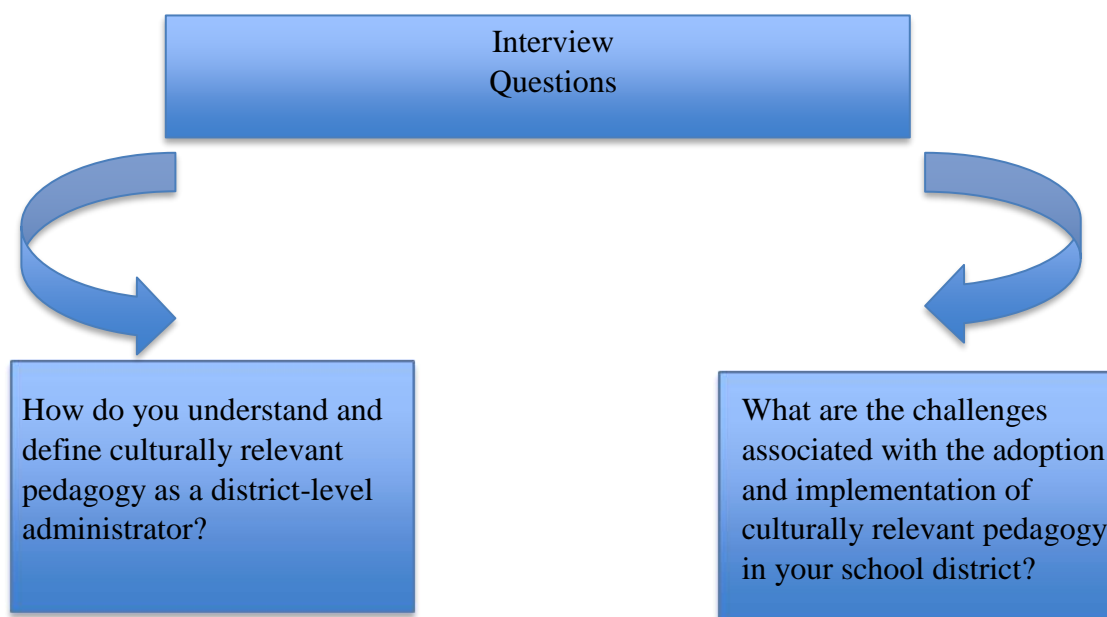
Figure 6*Administrator Interview Questions*

Table 12*Administrator Interview Question 1 Responses*

Interview Question 1: How do you understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy as a district-level administrator?	
Administrator	Response
Dr. Thomas	It is instruction that is inclusive and representative of diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious subgroups.
Ms. Williams	Culturally relevant pedagogy is access to learning resources that provide factual information to understand the sensitive nature of one's culture and beliefs.
Ms. Pentagraph	Culturally relevant pedagogy requires that I routinely take time to examine my own frame of thought and biases regarding societal norms and realize that I cannot impose my own thoughts and subjective bias on others, but rather routinely try to understand that every individual has some subset that impacts their thoughts/actions. I have to be sensitive to those norms of other cultures.
Ms. Jones	Instruction is relevant to all cultures, multiple perspectives, and understanding of how to teach the whole child, to empower students.
Dr. Dale	Instruction that draws on students' culture of origin positively and supports critical consciousness and problem solving.

Table 13*Administrator Interview Question 2 Responses*

Interview Question 2: What are the challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in your school district?	
Administrator	Response
Dr. Thomas	Availability- there is not an abundance of quality texts that represent diverse cultures with any dept. Cost- prior to Covid-19 pandemic relief funds, there was no funding stream for textbooks, supplemental materials, or professional development. Only Title I schools had funds available but these funds were used on personnel. Reluctance- there is a reluctance to embed culturally relevant instruction as it is now skin to being controversial.
Ms. Williams	Sometimes instruction is not aligned to culturally relevant pedagogy. Sometimes, the test can fit more for one culture than all cultures. Educators are afraid to implement it because they prefer to teach to the test to ensure they receive the best EOG or EOC score. The adoption would need to be statewide to ensure alignment based on the standard course of study.
Ms. Pentagraph	Teachers are often forced or indicate that they are forced into cookie cutter modes that drive their instruction. In turn, the time research and implementation of activities that are sensitive to the needs of other cultures is often limited.
Ms. Jones	There is a lack of understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom.
Dr. Dale	Challenges are parents and other public entities that are not open or willing to understand culturally relevant pedagogy adoptions. Comments such as why isn't there a book about 'White Culture' by parents. Ideas and beliefs that have changed over decades have not changed the mindset of those teaching or leading from past decades.

Theme: Cultural Awareness

The school district administration was able to further gain data for Research Question 3 (see Appendix B). The theme that emerged while analyzing the responses is cultural awareness in the classroom. The administrators' responses demonstrate efforts to support school reform by recruiting and retaining effective teachers who will implement

culturally relevant pedagogy throughout their instructions. The subthemes presented are teacher awareness and instructional resources.

Teacher Awareness

“Sensitivity to different cultures other than their own demonstrates the willingness of teachers to support the effort of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy into their instruction,” said Dr. Thomas. Dr. Dale stated that the teachers’ understanding and recognition of the different cultures and beliefs of the students they teach would help break some barriers of negative misconceptions. “If we want to teach the whole student, we have to make sure that we respect their cultural background and who they are as students [what they bring with them],” said Ms. Williams. Most teachers in this school district would strive to implement a different teaching framework, such as culturally relevant pedagogy, to add to their already full teaching agenda. Administrators said that as they are faced with schools becoming more diverse at a rapid pace, it requires them to change their vision to reflect a diverse cultural population of students throughout their school district. “Teaching in a diverse environment should expose students to the various cultural groups within their classroom and school. This will help prepare them to become better citizens where they live,” said Dr. Thomas. When teachers know students’ culture, they can make effective instructional decisions to help students relate to lesson content. “Being knowledgeable of and sensitive to the different cultures, teachers tap into their students’ knowledge that should maximize learning opportunities,” said Ms. Pentagraph. Teachers becoming more aware of biases exhibited in a child’s learning environment can help improve their interactions with other classmates, thus decreasing a sense of unease in touchy contexts and making better choices.

The goal for instruction integrated with culturally relevant pedagogy is to reflect on the different demographic makeup of students in the classroom. The administrators in this study positively supported that the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy into instruction should include problem-solving and critical consciousness to support overall student achievement. “The relationship-building component is the responsibility of each teacher. Connecting with others throughout the instructional presentation teaches that there are differences and similarities among everyone,” said Ms. Jones. Educators should embrace diversity and support cultural inclusivity in classrooms to help every student succeed. Administrators acknowledged that teachers could teach students of different cultures that may empower their thoughts and actions towards contributing to their community. “There are no two children alike, even if they share a lot in common. We have to consider all the different traits of culture that can affect their attitudes and behaviors,” said Dr. Dale. However, the challenges faced by this school district are providing the opportunity for teachers to receive appropriate professional development along with continuous support on effective culturally relevant pedagogy for instruction. Dr. Thomas said,

Funding resources usually came from Title I, which was usually used to provide additional personnel. Since the pandemic, our district has received funding through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief [ESSER] which is federal and state-funded. These funds would provide more opportunities for teachers to participate in appropriate culturally relevant instructional professional development. Teachers need support to create and implement meaningful instructional activities for each unique learner. Teachers need to have the skill to

create a sense of belongingness to make all students feel respected and challenged.

Research Question 4: What Are the Challenges Associated With the Adoption and Implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Rural Community School in Eastern North Carolina?

Instructional Resources

When talking to the district's school leadership about the subtheme instructional resources within the theme of cultural awareness, administrator participants identified challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in their schools. Administrators stressed the importance for teachers to be able to connect with their students through their instructional activities. "Teachers [are] expected to ensure that students are experiencing the various influences of other cultures while learning their grade-level appropriate curriculum. Students will better understand one another through this process," said Ms. Jones. Ms. Williams noted that understanding how to empower students assists with moving the focus from indifference to inclusivity among students in a diverse setting. "Implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in various ways may affect and change a student's thoughts and actions," said Ms. Williams. Administrators would like their teachers to use this empowerment to encourage students to use what they learn to achieve academic growth. "I feel that teachers would like to embrace culturally relevant pedagogy, but they lack the instructional materials necessary to do so," said Ms. Pentagraph. A challenge identified from the administrator interviews was how to prepare teachers with the knowledge of the culturally relevant pedagogy framework to consistently and effectively implement it into their lesson plans. "With my

understanding, embracing high-quality instructional materials that are both rigorous and relevant is imperative to engaging equity in their instructional activities,” said Dr. Dale. “The availability of culturally-based resources was limited prior to the pandemic. There was not a stream of funding for textbooks, supplemental materials, or professional development,” said Dr. Thomas. Title I funds typically were to fund personnel resources. Dr. Thomas stated, “The lack of quality textbooks with abundant, diverse representation and depth is troublesome.” This allows for the inconsistency in the alignment with the state’s standard course of study in the curriculum. “If culturally relevant pedagogy could be integrated into all tested subjects, it would need to support the state's end of grade and course assessments,” said Dr. Dale. Instructional materials would need to integrate more cultural influences that relate to the demographic of students served. One barrier acknowledged among the administrators seems to be that pedagogical frameworks are usually not considered when creating a state assessment but are more focused on the test outcome, commented Ms. Jones. “Teachers feel a lack of understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, and there seems to be no time to have quality planning for instruction in preparation for the state assessment, said Ms. Williams. “The lack of planning time and consistent support and professional development training could contribute to teacher burnout, which already exists with some [teachers],” said Dr. Thomas. “Teachers need to have the opportunity to critically self-reflect on their teaching practices that encumber race, gender, ethnicity, linguistic, and cultural relevance,” responded Dr. Dale. In this district, a culturally relevant pedagogy framework was not identified to be used among teachers as part of their curriculum. Teachers’ understanding of how reflectivity influences their development of becoming more aware of culturally relevant pedagogy is

critical. “Teachers seem to lack the knowledge of the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and equity for all learners,” said Dr. Thomas. “Teaching practices are stifled by normalizing societal perceptions in the classroom. Teachers' resistance to culturally relevant pedagogy is evident due to the lack of highly effective instructional resources available to them,” said Ms. Pentagraph. Teachers having the opportunity to build a positive relationship with students would provide a better understanding to know the individual student and gain a sense of trust with them. “When a student has a relationship with a teacher, they usually work hard for that teacher to be more successful,” said Ms. Jones.

Conclusion

Although several other themes were revealed throughout the analysis process, the three findings shared in this chapter were the most relevant and applicable to the topic of culturally relevant pedagogy in reading. The teachers’ and administrators’ responses to these themes were very positive, and these themes transcended across the races. Educators (teachers and administrators) of different levels of teaching experiences and cultural backgrounds seem to agree that this change would most positively affect students’ learning experiences in reading.

This study examined how teachers and district administrators understand the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in reading for African American fourth-grade students. The study findings in this chapter were based on data analysis of documentation and interview transcripts. Although the collected data revealed participants’ individual experiences, understandings, perceptions, and beliefs, three themes emerged from the findings, organized under the following headings: curriculum

and instruction, cultural awareness, and student engagement. The identified themes indicated participants' formal training on culturally relevant pedagogy and the prevailing skills participants believed were indicators of being a culturally relevant educator.

Chapter 4 interpreted the findings related to this study's literature review, and Chapter 5 includes recommendations for practice and future studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The previous chapter revealed the results of this qualitative research study. This chapter discusses the results and future applications for culturally relevant pedagogy in reading for African American students in the fourth grade. The conclusion of this chapter provides recommendations for future research.

This chapter discusses the research findings and possible future research studies around the original research questions to explore how culturally relevant pedagogy impacts reading instruction for African American elementary students in reading.

Problem Statement

American schools are constantly evolving. What once seemed consistent is now a fluid, rapidly changing environment. An influx of impoverished students with dynamic learning needs, as well as increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students with a wide range of educational expectations, is coming. African American students seem to score lower than Asians, Caucasians, and Latinos on standardized tests. Social efforts to overcome the negative effects of prejudice and discrimination against African Americans have not deterred the results of any academic improvements; there continue to be inequities in almost every aspect of life, including education. Elementary teachers, specifically K-4 teachers, often struggle to meet students' reading needs because of the long-standing focus on long-standing, foundational reading skills and practices (Houck & Ross, 2012; Wennersten, 2013). In order to create an inviting learning environment for our increasingly diverse student population, teachers' practices on how to support students' unique developmental needs must also evolve. Providing inclusion and awareness of other cultures and taking a culturally relevant pedagogical

approach to teaching support all learners. They create a greater understanding and awareness that will help provide inclusivity for students of different backgrounds to be successful. Our present K-12 teaching force, which is 84% female and 84% White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), faces significant changes in the demographics of student populations with little professional development directly related to those changes. Teachers in the United States generally do not reflect or look like the heterogeneous groups of students they teach. Many teachers in the United States, predominantly White and female, feel ill-prepared to instruct students from backgrounds different than their own (Meckler & Raabinowitz, 2019).

Purpose

The findings of this study may create a pathway for school administrators to explore educators' understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and the challenges associated with its full implementation. The study may facilitate discussions about why it is so vital to structure learning environments conducive to learning for all students regardless of cultural differences. The purpose of this study was to explore K-4 teachers' understanding of and inclination to implement culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for teaching reading, especially to African American learners. Additionally, this study may serve to prompt administrators in charge of curriculum decisions to assess whether or not, with district support, teachers are free to explore the advantages of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How do rural K-4 teachers in eastern North Carolina schools understand and

define culturally relevant pedagogy practices?

2. How inclined are K-4 reading teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into reading instruction?
3. How do rural district-level curriculum administrators in eastern North Carolina schools understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy?
4. What are the challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in a rural community school in eastern North Carolina?

Overview of Methodology

This study is a qualitative design with embedded units of analysis. The units of analysis consisted of 10 reading teachers (five African Americans and five Caucasians). Teacher participant selection for individual interviews came from an elementary school in rural eastern North Carolina. The teacher participants were purposely selected based on their years of experience in education. The random elementary teachers who participated in the online survey were from the same rural school district. The data collection involved 10 face-to-face teacher interviews. To collect data for answering Research Questions 3 and 4, participants were selected from district-level curriculum administrators. The data collection included virtual or face-to-face interviews with five administrators from curriculum and instruction. To collect data for Research Question 2, participants were purposely selected. Teachers were invited via email to participate in this study.

Data Analysis

The analysis process included three specific steps. First is the initial round of

analysis reading, followed by assigning descriptive coding of emerging topics. The second step provides value coding or assigning codes of values, attitudes, and beliefs to data passages (Miles et al., 2014). Next, the data analysis process will include pattern matching codes with related ideas or similar meanings (Miles et al., 2014). The overriding themes will serve to answer the four research questions.

Findings

The findings of this study explored the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy in reading for elementary African American students in the fourth grade in rural eastern North Carolina in reading. The major themes from the results of this study included curriculum and instruction, cultural awareness, and student engagement.

Research Question 1. How Do Rural K-4 Teachers in Eastern North Carolina Schools Understand and Define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Practices?

Rural K-4 teachers in eastern North Carolina schools have a limited understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. Although the responses given by teachers did not provide a common interpretation of this framework, some teachers reported having heard of the term culturally relevant pedagogy but had no direct discussion before the study. However, all the participants' responses indicated a rudimentary understanding of the concept and its definition. The themes that emerged from the data analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions related to their limited views and beliefs surrounding culturally relevant pedagogy. An overall implication was creating a classroom community with the equitable treatment of all cultures.

Some teachers identified the importance of connecting to the world in which their students live while teaching them. A teacher's goal for instructional focus is to use the

various cultural identities of students to support their presentation of relevant academic content while teaching to their unique learning styles. Teaching about the multiple cultures within your classroom provides exposure to various cultural groups and preparation to become better people to serve their communities. Students need to become more accepting and understanding of the different cultural backgrounds of their classmates; they should begin to realize the importance of how everyone connects to each of their learning experiences. With culturally relevant pedagogy teaching strategies, it is important to remember why diversity and cultural awareness are so significant in the classroom and how they benefit students. Students are no longer learning in isolation but collectively. The instructional focus is supported intentionally by the connections made among all learners, including their teacher, in a conducive learning setting. In order to create a culturally inclusive classroom, both teachers and students should build relationships with each other. Students are motivated by teachers they respect and are respected by their teachers. Teachers show genuine interest and concern for students by holding them accountable and by acknowledging their good work. Teachers who show that they care are more successful in reaching students, including those who are struggling.

Often, the challenge is the demographic makeup of the teachers is usually majority White, middle-class females who are not adequately prepared to teach African American students, along with their own beliefs and biases towards minority student learning abilities (Amadeo, 2020). Thompson and Shamberger (2015) identified teaching practices that support the instructional focus, such as believing in African American students, using diverse teaching strategies, and making the curriculum interesting and

relevant. Culturally relevant pedagogy will help with lessening the opportunity for students to disengage with the content if it has some significance or relatability with African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

The district's lack of effective professional development for teachers has hindered their willingness to consider using culturally relevant pedagogy resources in their teaching activities. Teachers did acknowledge, however, that they added some culturally relevant teaching strategies or resources specific to cultural holidays such as Black History Month or Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Having highly effective teaching resources that reflect the changing student demographics was hard to obtain for this school district before receiving Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding. Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding provided additional funding aside from their Title I funds to purchase relevant learning resources for all grade levels. Culturally relevant pedagogy should not be an add-on as a teaching extension; it is a framework that incorporates teachers' teaching lens for change (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy is that instructional leaders should support teachers to self-reflect and analyze the curriculum that is implemented for specific areas of growth. Building awareness and knowledge of racial and cultural concerns will allow teachers to understand and recognize their own biases and the overall cultural forces present in their classroom environment. Teachers can support this effort by incorporating a curriculum reflective of the students in their class. Without a connection to the learning content, students' lack of interest will not maintain long enough to develop the skills needed to be successful. Teachers can see student growth as

they work towards mastery of a new skill. Student achievement is geared towards their engagement in and during class, including motivation (Burns, 2017).

Research Question 2. How Inclined Are K-4 Reading Teachers to Implement Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Into Reading Instruction?

K-4 teachers are inclined to implement culturally relevant pedagogy into their reading instruction. The teachers' responses exhibited their willingness to learn how to implement culturally relevant practices into their daily reading instruction appropriately. Teachers shared that they wanted to build relationships with students to motivate them to learn. Building on students' experiences that were not taught in class helps integrate relevant activities that will enhance their learning experience (Claiborne et al., 2022). A teacher who practices culturally relevant pedagogy is aware of this work because of their inclination toward educational equity. Ms. Wallace, a teacher, suggested that implementing culturally relevant pedagogy strategies may increase student learning by bridging those gaps and engaging students from underrepresented cultures within the classroom. "Yes, I would like to integrate this framework into my daily instructional activities if provided by the district," said Ms. Best, a teacher.

K-4 teachers would like to infuse culturally relevant pedagogy into their reading instruction. Morrow and Gambrell (2019) supported integrating various literature, allowing teachers to bring in different subject area content to reach students in meaningful and purposeful ways. The goal is to get students to want to read different texts, use differences of opinions to expand and explore other perspectives, and allow students to use their literacy skills to create solutions with meaning. Children have differentiated learning needs that require differentiated instruction and assistance to

enable optimal growth in building a confident learner (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Thompson and Shamberger (2015) identified best practices for teaching reading to African American students. Some practices prescribed by them include teachers believing in African American students, using diverse teaching strategies, and making the curriculum interesting and relevant.

Teachers were willing to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy into reading instruction. This teaching practice would require teachers to examine the curriculum to increase rigor and relevance and explore teaching resources to deepen teacher understanding (Escudero, 2019). The systematic application of practices defines “effective teaching” by critically examining methods, behaviors, attitudes, biases, and assumptions to understand one’s teaching nuances (Escudero, 2019). Culturally relevant pedagogy encumbers the essence of effective teaching with its tenets of academic success, cultural awareness, and sociopolitical context.

Research Question 3. How Do Rural District-Level Curriculum Administrators in Eastern North Carolina Schools Understand and Define Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

Rural district-level curriculum administrators’ understanding and definition of culturally relevant pedagogy are not evident in their valiant attempt to define culturally relevant pedagogy and its practices; the data analysis revealed obvious gaps in their attempts. The lack of formal training on the subject impeded the administrators’ ability to accurately offer a precise explanation of the meaning of culturally relevant pedagogy or its practices. The district administrators’ responses supported some efforts of the use of strategies for school reform, such as recruiting and retaining effective teachers who

would implement culturally relevant pedagogy in their instructional activities.

School leaders are charged with being more responsive to all learners. The school leadership in this study was unable to clearly define culturally relevant pedagogy; however, they would support efforts that will infuse a culturally relevant pedagogy framework into students' instructional activities to assist with the mastery of academic skills. Administrators in charge of the curriculum must be open to ideas and strategies that may enhance student engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). It is unclear whether the school district's curriculum leadership supporting the inclusion of all students' cultures into culturally relevant pedagogy practices understood what teachers would need to gain an in-depth understanding of the specific cultures of their student populations (Gay, 2013). The leadership team's awareness of culturally relevant pedagogy seems limited, and the district's cultural climate is not progressive enough to build up.

The school district's curriculum leadership has some understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy, but it was unclear of being able to provide a definition. In this school district, teachers lack effective training regarding the meaning, practices, and processes for carrying out culturally relevant pedagogy teaching practices. Sleeter (2014) supported a shift toward culturally relevant pedagogy that must be taught throughout various times in a teacher's educational experiences. The school district curriculum leadership that participated in this study are the leaders who are responsible for creating and executing effective professional development for their teacher.

Research Question 4. What Are the Challenges Associated With the Adoption and Implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in a Rural Community School in Eastern North Carolina?

The school district's curriculum leadership consistently made it clear that while they might agree with this teaching practice, they often face challenges within the community's cultural relations. These cultural relation interactions hinder progress from being made with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy throughout the school district. The assistant superintendent for teaching and learning, Dr. Thomas, said, "Teachers seem to lack the knowledge of the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and equity for all learners." She believes that it is important that teachers are able to create an environment that is respectful and inclusive, an environment where students are valued. Teachers can model positive interactions among their students and encourage students to reflect on their own cultural experiences.

The school district's challenges of adopting and implementing culturally relevant pedagogy affect whether or not teachers are able to provide relatable and relevant content that students are required to learn. Culturally relevant pedagogy is grounded in the premise that students perform much higher when the content is based on the cultural assets they bring to learning (Escudero, 2019). Students of various cultural backgrounds have a disconnect between their education and themselves and struggle to be successful academically. Teachers need to be able to support the unique learning needs of all students, but every teacher needs to have the opportunity to have specific pedagogy training. Therefore, if teachers are not provided with the necessary support and training to adopt culturally relevant pedagogy in their teaching environment, the cycle of student

disinterest and lack of investment in their education will never end.

The school district seems to have challenges with adopting and implementing culturally relevant pedagogy, precluding the essence of this framework's goal. Some challenges shared by the teacher participants were the lack of fully understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy practices, no professional development support, and the availability of teaching resources. The school district administrator participants noted the lack of additional funding and overall community support for implementation. No matter a student's culture or background, teachers must attend to students' learning needs. The environment the teacher creates allows students to feel safe being themselves. Teachers practicing culturally relevant pedagogy provide students with a curriculum that builds upon their previous experiences and uses their culture as a catalyst for learning new information. Oftentimes, students perform based on their interactions with their teachers and how their teachers respond to them. The process teachers use to set student expectations, along with communicating them to students, is possibly a more important influence on their classroom performance (Riddle, 2014). Finally, teachers who incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy provide students with opportunities to think critically about society and act upon social inequalities (Escudero, 2019).

Implication for Further Action

There are a few implications of the study for teachers and school district-level curriculum administrators. The first implication is teaching practices that touch on culturally relevant pedagogy practices with those multicultural-themed subject matters. These teachers need to work on implementing the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy that contribute to being culturally relevant to all learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). The

tenets are academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.

School district-level curriculum administrators could assist with helping teachers to become more confident with culturally relevant pedagogy implementation that is more inclusive to the learning environment and community. The school district in this study needs to work to implement culturally relevant pedagogy practices to be more consistent throughout all grade levels. Professional development and analysis of curriculum are ways for teachers to gain culturally relevant pedagogy competence.

School district-level curriculum administrators could add the components of culturally relevant pedagogy to the district's teacher evaluation instrument. This would encourage teachers to implement these pedagogical practices and know that this framework is valued by the school district. Culturally relevant pedagogy would prepare teachers to be more intentional with providing students an educational environment students deserve to have for learning: an inviting and welcoming environment that allows for all to be celebrated for their identities, cultures, and experiences. This type of learning environment would nurture their endless possibilities for growth and mastery.

Recommendation for Future Research

It is imperative for the schools in this district to provide professional development opportunities for teachers and district administrators in the area of culturally relevant pedagogy and its teaching practices. The weakness in this area, considering that the district is 33.9% Caucasian and 33.4% African American, should signify there is a concern about African American students achieving academic success as compared to their Caucasian counterparts. The participating school district should partner with the local university to create and implement a professional development module on culturally

relevant pedagogy. While this study concentrates on African American students, culturally relevant pedagogy professional development for all staff should be nonnegotiable and should be a part of the district-wide initiative and teacher training.

The school district should hold training opportunities on best teaching practices in literacy and how teachers should select different reading resources that reflect culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers participating in the suggested district-wide training on culturally relevant pedagogy would receive additional support in the area of literacy. Teachers would more than likely become better literacy teachers.

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study suggest that culturally relevant pedagogy experience in the study's school district would have a positive impact on all learners. Teachers seem to understand the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and were willing to try to improve student achievement and bridge the gap; however, their reluctance is not having readily available teaching resources and consistent professional development. Ms. Jones responded,

In the past, we have participated in professional development sessions covering whatever educational trend there might be highlighted at the time. Then we go back to our schools, and we either try to infuse them into our existing instructional presentations or put them on a shelf. Unfortunately, there are no follow-ups or refreshers provided on long-term bases.

Elementary teachers and district curriculum administrators supported implementing this framework into their instructional practices, especially in the area of reading. "The goal of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in my instructional presentations would be to increase academic awareness in my teaching by being more intentional for each unique

learning style,” said Ms. Sasser. The relevance of cultural identities and awareness within our public school classrooms are under scrutiny around the country today. “Closing the achievement gap is a goal every year, and I think that promoting diverse cultures through the district’s educational initiatives would help close the achievement gap between my Caucasian and African American students,” said Ms. Britt. As participating teachers acknowledged, it was discouraging to see the lack of understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy that would hinder them from choosing wise teaching practices and useful teaching resources. “Teachers can provide diverse instruction specific for each student in their classroom that can connect them with that topic, making it relevant to them,” said Ms. Best. As a result, teachers need consistent professional development in culturally relevant pedagogy. “The lack of planning time and consistent support and professional development training could contribute to teacher burnout, which already exists with some [teachers],” said Dr. Thomas.

School district curriculum leadership had a strong understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. Administrators acknowledged that teachers could teach students of different cultures, which may empower students’ thoughts and actions towards contributing to their community. “There are no two children alike, even if they share a lot in common. We have to consider all the different traits of culture that can affect their attitudes and behaviors,” said Dr. Dale. Dr. Dale continued, “The lack of quality textbooks with abundant, diverse representation and depth is troublesome.” School district curriculum leadership listed the following challenges for implementation: lack of highly effective teaching resources including minority representation, funding to provide teaching resources and high-quality professional development, follow-up support for

culturally relevant pedagogy training, lack of planning time, and state assessment alignment with state curriculum. “Teachers need to have the opportunity to critically self-reflect on their teaching practices that encumber race, gender, ethnicity, linguistic, and cultural relevance,” said Dr. Dale. “Teachers’ resistance to culturally relevant pedagogy is evident due to the lack of highly effective instructional resources available to them,” said Ms. Pentagraph.

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Appendix A

Teacher Face-to-Face Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of culturally relevant pedagogy?
2. Rate your knowledge of culturally relevant pedagogy on a scale of 1-10.
3. How is it important for ethnic minorities to experience culturally relevant pedagogy?
4. Why? Explain your answer.
5. If permitted to implement by your district, would you be inclined to using culturally relevant pedagogy to teach reading?

Appendix B

School District Curriculum Leadership Face-to-Face Interview Questions

1. How do you understand and define culturally relevant pedagogy as a district-level administrator?

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2. What are the challenges associated with the adoption and implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in your school district?