

EFFECTIVE TEACHERS BUILDING RELATIONAL TRUST
WITH DIVERSE STUDENTS TO IMPROVE
READING ACHIEVEMENT

by

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DEDICATION

To mom and dad. For somehow instilling in me an internal motivation and belief that anything is possible.

To my sisters and brothers. I do not know why I am the way I am, but I have a feeling you all have a lot to do with it.

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ABSTRACT

Schools are measured by scores students receive on standardized tests. Yet, since the collection of student demographic data on these tests, it has shown students of color are not getting the same opportunities to learn as their white peers. As classrooms across the country continue to become more diverse, it is imperative to study how some teachers are effective in teaching *all* students. This study examined the questions of how effective teachers build trusting relationships, how relational trust impacts instructional strategies, and how relational trust impacts student reading achievement. The purpose of this research study was to add to the existing literature about how effective teachers build relational trust with their diverse students, therefore increasing academic achievement in reading. Critical race theory, deficit thinking, and critical consciousness were used as the theoretical framework in this study. Specific criterion was used to create a purposeful sample of four effective elementary reading teachers in a diverse district. Interviews with two principals and four effective reading teachers at two different elementary schools, observations of the teachers, and artifact/documents were collected throughout this multiple case study to help answer the research questions. It was determined all teachers believed in their students, used relationships as the basis of effective teaching, and used reflective practices. The teachers also used culturally relevant teaching practices and practiced cultural humility. The implications for these findings are discussed as well as future research.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was introduced as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" to provide additional educational resources to children from low income homes. The ESEA's main purpose was to provide federal aid that would help level the playing field for children living in poverty or from minority backgrounds. After signing the bill in 1965, Johnson remarked "by passing this bill, we bridge the gap between helplessness and hope for more than five million educationally deprived children" (Johnson, 1967, p. 413).

There have been numerous reauthorizations to ESEA throughout the years, but the most radical reauthorization was in 2001 with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act signed by President George W. Bush. The underlying premise of NCLB was identical to the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act, an opportunity to level the playing field so that every student was afforded the opportunity to learn. To ensure students were learning, a system of testing and accountability was developed. It proposed students to be tested every year from 3rd grade to 8th grade and once during high school. Schools that failed to meet adequate growth would potentially lose their federal funding. Another emphasis was to ensure all students were being taught by highly qualified teachers. Many disadvantaged students were being taught by teachers outside their field of study or being taught by uncertified teachers (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). It was

projected that all students would be proficient within a 12-year period, ensuring that by 2013-2014 all students would be proficient. No Child Left Behind sought to improve the education of all children by holding schools accountable. However, the reality of mandates, funding, and testing did not have the intended impact on students.

In 2015, President Barack Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This bill continued the work of ESEA and NCLB with adjustments to areas that needed improvements. President Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan (2010), stated that NCLB's accountability needed to be fixed because it allowed states to lower their standards and it didn't measure growth nor reward excellence.

Since 1965, President Johnson recognized the educational opportunities between students of color and students living in poverty were not equal to white students and affluent students. The achievement gap still persists, despite a deeper focus on educational practices, better curriculum, highly qualified teachers, and the amount of knowledge we know about how students learn.

Effective Teaching

All federal legislation up to this point in time has been passed with the fundamental principle of improving educational opportunities for all students, especially students of color or students living in poverty. The most important element in a student's educational success is the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Hattie, 2009; Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2012; Skourdoubis, 2014). Being a highly-qualified teacher is different than being a highly effective teacher.

The No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, understood the impact teachers have on student achievement and therefore stated all teachers must be highly qualified to prevent at-risk students from losing educational opportunities. However, NCLB deemed a teacher highly qualified based on their teacher certification, education, and competency. These three characteristics have proven to be inconclusive with their relationship on student achievement (Phillips, 2010). Teachers can be hard working and highly qualified, but not effective.

Determining what makes a teacher effective has been widely debated. Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) compiled a meta-analysis of teacher effectiveness and student achievement. They determined through an extensive literature search, four dimensions of teacher effectiveness (see Table 1).

Table 1. Dimensions of teacher effectiveness

Dimension	Area of Effectiveness
Instructional Delivery	Instructional differentiation Instructional focus on learning Instructional clarity Instructional complexity
Learning environment	Classroom management Classroom organization Behavioral expectations
Student assessment	Assessment for understanding Feedback
Personal qualities	Caring, positive relationships with students Fairness and respect Encouragement Enthusiasm

An effective teacher not only has great influence over the student during the immediate school year, but the effects of that teacher can be seen for years to come. Konstantopoulos (2011) conducted a study focusing on effective teachers in early grades in reading and math. He found that “teachers do matter and that they significantly affect mathematics and reading achievement not only in the current or the following year, but in subsequent years as well” (p. 1560). Pedersen, Faucher, and Eaton (1978) conducted a longitudinal study on one highly effective teacher’s first grade class. They found those students outperformed their peers in achievement, effort, leadership, and cooperation throughout their schooling years. As adults, those same students, ranked higher than their peers on adult success, the components of which included occupation, dwelling, cost of rent, cleanliness, and highest grade completed. Chetty, et al., (2012) followed students into adulthood and found students who were exposed to a highly effective teacher earned more money, were less likely to have teenage pregnancies, and were more likely to go to college. Having an effective teacher impacts a student’s academic and personal life into adulthood.

Despite research supporting effective teachers leading to increased student achievement, the question remains: why is the achievement gap between White students and students of color from 50 years ago the same today? Students of color make up the majority of special education programs (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Salend & Duhaney, 2005), have the most behavioral referrals (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014), and are under-represented in advanced placement and gifted and talented programs (Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2011; Sparks, 2015).

Students of color are not given the same opportunities as their white peers, and the majority of teachers have not been effective in teaching students of color.

Finding a way of educating students of color successfully is imperative not only to the individual, but to society as a whole. Black students are three to four times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers (U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, 2016). These suspensions and expulsions have a direct correlation to students dropping out of high school (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Knowing these statistics, schools need to start reforming their ways of thinking. While it could take a while for school systems to adapt policy and implement necessary steps, classroom teachers can do this immediately.

Researchers have identified that having an effective teacher is the most influential aspect of student achievement. Adams and Singh (1998) conducted a study that found teachers have a "positive impact on students above and beyond the impact of the school environment, students' prior levels of achievement, SES, and gender . . . the relationship between teachers and students may be an important link to academic achievement" (p. 58). Yet, the achievement gap persists despite decades of school reform efforts. Teachers must find ways to reach all of their students, especially the students who are different from themselves. "Culturally responsive teaching is the behavioral expressions of knowledge, belief, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning" (Gay, 2010, p. 31).

The importance of understanding students' culture and background is not a new concept. The 737-page Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), written in the 1960s, suggested that

“Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhoods, and peer environment are carried along to become inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school” (Hanushek, 2016, p. 20).

As educators, we cannot isolate students' backgrounds and cultures from their school day and expect to close the achievement gap that persists between white students and students of color.

Effective, culturally relevant teachers use whole group instruction, but provide most of learning time in small group and individual instruction. Collaboration is encouraged among the students and ideas are shared to further enhance a deeper understanding of the concept at hand. Effective reading teachers view comprehension as the ultimate goal of reading. Authentic literature is used, rather than basal readers to ensure literacy instruction is natural and holistic. While phonics and phonemic awareness are taught, they are not taught in isolation, but rather in the context of a story where the word is being used for a real purpose (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). Culturally relevant teachers allow their students to be participants in their learning, rather than dictating what must be learned and how, all while following state standards. “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 1970, p. 61).

Teacher Efficacy in Reading

Reading is arguably the most important academic skill a child can learn. Students' ability to read will influence not only how well they do for the remainder of their academic career but also their lives outside of school. However, according to The Nation's Report Card (2016) only one-third of students across the nation were proficient in reading by the end of fourth grade from the latest data collected in 2015. One-third of fourth grade students fail to gain basic reading skills.

Teacher efficacy is defined as the belief a teacher has in his/her ability to assist students in their academic achievement. There is a high correlation between teachers who have a high sense of efficacy and student achievement (Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990; Ross, 1992; Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011). Teachers who believe in their skills to deliver the lesson will work harder when a student does not understand. They will implement different strategies and be willing to use innovative programs (Ross, 1992) to offer the student a new way of gaining the knowledge. They will not lower their expectations of themselves or their students (Timperley & Phillips, 2003), but rather will face the challenges and persist until they find a solution (Tournaki & Podell, 2005).

Teachers believe in their abilities to help all students.

Teachers with a high sense of efficacy will expect more academic and behavior success out of their students than a teacher with low efficacy (Ross, 1992; Tournaki & Podell, 2005; Banks, Dunston, & Foley 2013). Not only do they set high goals and assist their students in attaining those goals, but they also take responsibility for the outcomes of their students (Ross, 1995). Teachers with a high sense of efficacy understand the

importance of building relational trust with their students. It is imperative teachers not only keep their high sense of efficacy, but also develop and influence their students' efficacy in reading. "Teachers need to be knowledgeable about self-efficacy and systematically stress self-efficacy whenever students read" (McCabe & Margolis, 2001), so they can assist their students in changing their attitudes about their abilities in reading. Teachers need to provide students with opportunities to be successful in reading, which Bandura (1977) refers to as performance accomplishments. Students who are given opportunities to succeed raise their mastery expectations; whereas, students who fail often, lower their expectations.

Culturally relevant teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy realize that their efficacy and their students' efficacies are connected (Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2012). It is the teacher's job to teach reading skills in "creative, holistic ways that preserve the sense of efficacy and empowerment that literacy should provide for all" (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 186). When strong relationships are formed between the teacher and students, trust is established. Therefore, students are given the freedom to fail without being defined by this failure. Students with high efficacy show perseverance while being challenged and higher motivation levels (McCabe & Margolis, 2001). Teachers can assist students in producing high efficacy by creating a culture within the classroom where rigor is expected, failure is part of the learning process, and respect and trust are built and maintained.

Facilitating Achievement Gap as College and Workplace Readiness

The achievement gap is a term that refers to the disparity between race and class on standardized assessments. Ladson-Billings (2006) has stated that focusing on the achievement gap leads us to short-term results and distracts us from addressing the underlying problems. She believes we do not have an achievement gap, but rather an educational debt, which examines the history, economics, sociopolitical, and moral decisions our society has created.

Others refer to the achievement gap as the opportunity gap (Milner, 2010). When students are sent out of the classroom for additional instruction, when students are first judged on what they cannot do instead of what they can do, and when students are taught with lower expectations, these are not issues of achievement, but rather opportunity. Students who are pulled out of the regular classroom are often involved in the “banking concept of education,” where “the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” the information (Freire, 1970, p. 53). Whether you call it an achievement gap, educational debt, or opportunity gap, the issue remains that students of color or students living in poverty are not receiving the same education as white students or students from middle class and affluent homes.

Standardized assessments are used to determine the achievement levels of students. “Diverse students are consistently underperforming compared to mainstream students” (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p. 44). In normative data, the average changes. So, a student who would have been “average” 10 years ago, is now deemed “below average” because the average score increased over the years (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). “Students

from low socioeconomic levels, students whose first language is not English, and students who have learning difficulties repeatedly make up the majority of students who fail to achieve the levels of average on these tests” (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 149).

Many of the standardized assessments given to students state they measure college and career readiness. High school students who fare well on these assessments, will have the knowledge, skills, and practices in reading and math to succeed in entry-level college courses. However, when students are provided high level classes, effective teachers, teaching that is flexible and responsive to the students’ needs, and extra support when its needed, “all students – regardless of achievement level- are much better prepared for college and career” (ACT, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

The achievement gap persists today, despite advanced research and analysis trying to identify the elements that contribute to this ever-growing concern. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has collected data on the achievement gap between Hispanics and Whites since 1992 in reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The same data were available between Blacks and Whites; however, there were additional data from NAEP long-term trend assessments dating back to 1980 in reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The main NAEP assessment is data collected from public school students nationally at grades 4 and 8, while the NAEP long-term trend assessment is collected from public school students nationally at ages 9 and 13 instead of at grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

While scores in reading for Hispanic students and White students have shown improvement, the gap between them are relatively unchanged. The reading achievement gap is not narrowing to a meaningful degree. The reading gap for fourth graders was at 26 points in 2007 and 25 points in 2009, while the reading gap for eighth graders was 25 points in 2007 and 24 points in 2009. The reading gap for fourth and eighth graders have seen a slight decrease over time (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2010).

The reading achievement gap between Blacks and Whites has shown little improvement in both fourth and eighth grade students. In 2007, the fourth-grade reading gap was 27 points, in 2005 it was 29 points, and in 2003 it was 30 points. The eighth-grade reading gap was 26 points in 2007 and 27 points in both 2005 and 2003. Despite these slight improvements, the average scores for Hispanics and Blacks in reading is much lower than the national average, while the average score for Whites is higher than the national average.

These current scores support the same findings that the Coleman Report concluded in 1966. Despite more sophisticated research methods and knowledge base, educators have not solved the problem on how to close the achievement gap. However, one pedagogical method that has proven successful with diverse students is culturally responsive teaching. To effectively implement culturally responsive pedagogy, a teacher must be caring and empathetic, reflective about his or her beliefs about others from different cultures, reflective about his or her own culture, and knowledgeable about other cultures (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Relational trust is a major component of being culturally responsive.

Building trusting relationships with students will positively impact the reading achievement of students. Zee and de Bree (2016) found that students who experienced relationships with teachers “marked by high levels of closeness and low levels of conflict generally tend to hold learning orientations that drive their willingness to master and persist at academic tasks” (p. 276) therefore increasing reading achievement scores. Building strong relationships with students is a necessary component of being an effective teacher. This study examined what methods teachers are using to build relational trust with students.

There have been numerous studies conducted (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Adams & Singh, 1998; Stronge et al., 2011; Muñoz, Scoskie, & French, 2013) to support the impact teacher effectiveness has on student achievement. However, researchers have not been able to precisely identify why “some teachers are effective year after year while others are not” (Hanushek, 2016, p. 24). Building relational trust will help close the reading achievement gap. The purpose of this study was to add to the existing research surrounding this topic by examining how effective teachers build relational trust with diverse students to increase reading achievement.

Purpose Statement

In this study conducted in a large school district in Northern Colorado 64% of the students were non-White, while 88% of the teachers were White. There, teachers were challenged daily to educate students who speak different languages, students who receive free and reduced lunch, and students who have different backgrounds than themselves

and to work with families who have been in the country for a short amount of time. This study examined how effective teachers were able to build relational trust and increase reading achievement in spite of these variables.

Research Questions

This research study attempted to answer the following questions:

- Q1 How do highly effective teachers build trusting relationships in a highly diverse elementary school?
- Q2 How does building relational trust impact instructional strategies in reading?
- Q3 How does relational trust impact student reading achievement of third, fourth, and fifth graders?

Conceptual Framework

“The common denominator in school improvement and student success *is* the teacher (Stronge et al., 2011, p. 351). The following dimensions of effective teaching derive from numerous research conducted in the field of teacher effectiveness. These qualities have proven to be instrumental in raising student achievement. However, these dimensions and elements alone have not been able to close the achievement gap. Therefore, culturally responsive practices were added to the framework to raise the achievement levels of not only white students, but all students.

Culturally responsive practices engage the teacher with their students taking into account their own background and the students’ background, and then continuously reflecting on opportunities to improve instruction, relationships, and knowledge.

“Culturally responsive pedagogy simultaneously develops, along with academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange; community building and personal connections; individual self-worth and abilities; and an ethic of caring” (Gay, 2010, p. 45). Many schools spend all their time and energy working on the dimensions of effective teaching to close the achievement gap, while they ignore the underlying values and beliefs of the teacher (Campos, 2008). These values and beliefs contribute to the success of students. Equity pedagogy embraces “teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate, a just, humane, and democratic society” (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995, p. 152). Teachers have the belief that all students have the ability to learn.

Culturally responsive pedagogy can be enhanced when combined with equity literacy. Equity literacy takes culturally responsive pedagogy a step further and not only examines culture but includes any “threat to the existence of inequity in their spheres of influence” (Gorski, 2016a, p. 225). The equity literacy framework equips educators with four abilities: (1) recognize inequities, (2) respond to inequities, (3) redress inequities in the long term, and (4) sustain equity efforts (Gorski, 2016a, 2016b). By adding equity literacy to the conversation, educators can expand beyond cultural diversity to include a “cultivation of equity literacy” (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015).

The Conceptual Constructs of Effective Teachers Raising Achievement of ALL Students (see Figure 1) illustrates the relationship that must take place between effective

teaching dimensions, culturally responsive practices, and equity literacy to ensure all students increase their reading achievement. For this study, the focus was the impact trust and relationships between highly effective elementary reading teachers and diverse students have on reading achievement, instructional strategies, and formative assessments.

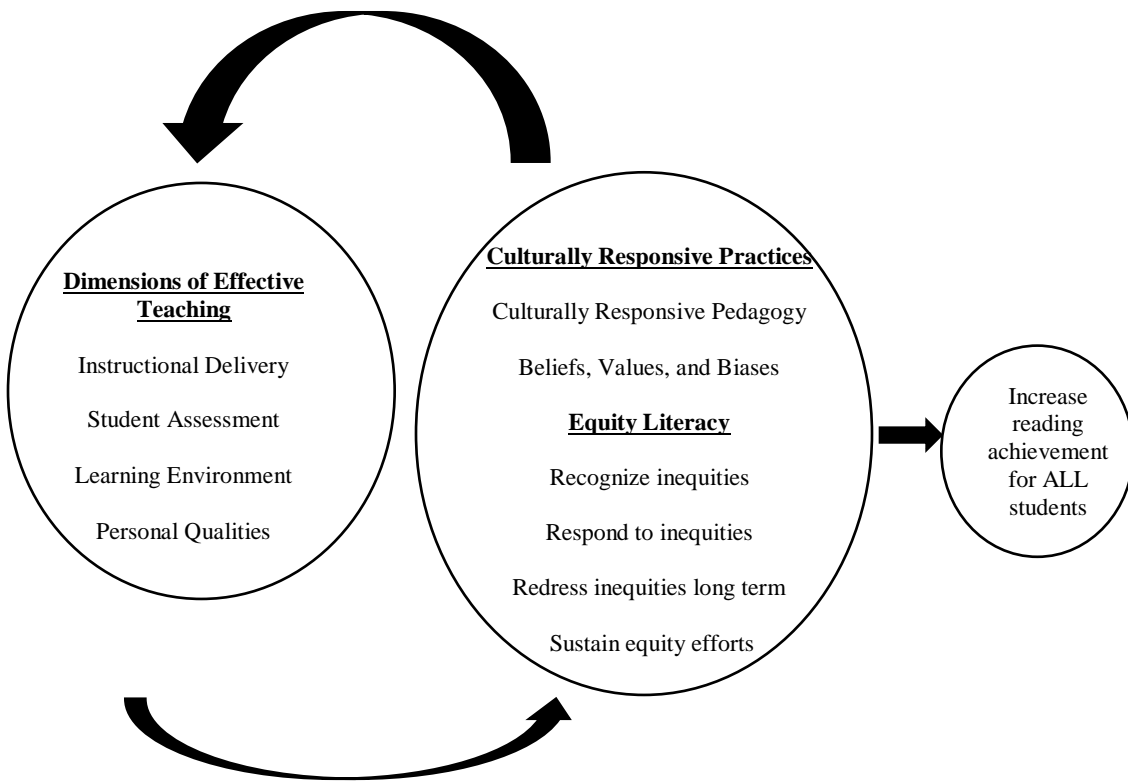


Figure 1 Conceptual constructs of effective teachers raising achievement of ALL students.

Overview of Methods

This study used a collective/multiple case study design. Within-case analysis and cross-case analysis were used during the collection of the data. The within-case analysis

allowed the researcher to focus on each individual being interviewed to create a comprehensive case so all variables can be examined (Merriam, 2009). Following the within-case analysis, a cross-case analysis can take place to generate general explanations.

Purposeful selection was used during this study. The goals of the study, existing theory, and research were established prior to the selection of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). According to Maxwell (2013), there are five goals of purposeful selection:

- (1) achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected
- (2) adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population
- (3) deliberately select individuals or cases that are critical for testing the theories that you began the study with, or that you have subsequently developed
- (4) establish particular comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals
- (5) select groups or participants with whom you can establish the most productive relationships, ones that will best enable you to answer your research question.

In the current study, schools were identified and ranked based on diversity. Starting at the most diverse school, the schools were contacted by a third party, to ask for their participation in the study. Two schools agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted with both building principals and two reading teachers deemed effective based on standardized reading scores and recommendations by their principals.

All participants were interviewed at their respective schools in their offices or classrooms. Interviews lasted about an hour. Following the interviews, recordings were sent out to be transcribed by a third party. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed by the researcher to establish themes to answer the research questions.

Limitations

This research study interviewed two principals and four teachers. In addition, observations of the teachers' classrooms were noted as well as documents and artifacts, which ranged from lesson plans to pictures of the classroom. Using purposeful selection for this study could introduce unintended biases. Conducting interviews and observations with six individuals resulted in a plethora of documentation to organize and code in a systematic way. Data that are not coded or organized correctly could lead to different interpretations than what was intended. Another limitation was allowing the researcher's biases to enter into the data collection and, therefore, skewing the findings and conclusions to the research questions (Yin, 2009).

Delimitations

The purpose of this study was to examine highly effective elementary reading teachers in a diverse classroom. This study was focused on teachers in northern Colorado who had been teaching for a number of years and had a history of improving student achievement. This study is focused on what was currently happening in the classroom. Analyzing professional development opportunities, home life of students, and college preparatory courses were specifically avoided throughout this study.

The theoretical framework used in this study supports the goals of social justice in schools. Culturally responsive pedagogy, equity literacy, and critical consciousness were the main foci of this research.

Definition of Terms

Achievement Gap: The achievement gap refers to the disparity in standardized test scores between racial/ethnic, gender, or socioeconomic status. For this research, the term achievement gap refers to imbalance between White students and students of color.

Critical Consciousness: Critical consciousness is a term created by Paulo Freire (1970) that engages learners in questioning the historical and social situations of society.

Critical Race Theory: Critical Race Theory is a theory that examines how race, law, and power are embedded in the fabric of society. It believes racism is engrained in the dominant culture.

Cultural Deficit Thinking: Cultural deficit thinking is the idea that teachers hold lower expectations of students that are different than them. They do not believe a student of color is as capable as a White student, therefore subconsciously not educating the student of color with the same academic demands they require from the White students.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy is a pedagogical practice “that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequalities that schools perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469).

Effective Teacher: “Highly effective teachers challenge and engage *all* students and adapt required curriculum, resources, and standards to meet student needs and interests” (Routman, 2012, p. 56).

Equity Literacy: Equity Literacy is a term coined by Paul Gorski and Katy Swalwell to cultivate teachers' knowledge and skills needed "to become a threat to the existence of inequity in their spheres of influence" (Gorski, 2016a, p. 225).

Relational Trust: "Each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role's obligations and hold some expectations about the obligations of the other parties . . . all participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41). In addition, Palmer (2007) states, "relational trust is built on movements of the human heart such as empathy, commitment, compassion, patience, and the capacity to forgive" (p. xvii).

Student Reading Achievement: The amount of growth a student shows in formative and summative assessments throughout an academic school year in reading.

Students of Color: Students of color include all students who are not White. This could include African American, Native American, Latino/Latina, and Asian students.

Significance of Study

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. The Board of Education*, declared "separate but equal" unconstitutional. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren delivered the unanimous ruling stating that segregating black students from white students does not allow black students the same educational and mental development they would receive in an integrated school system (1954). Sixty years later, students of color are still not receiving the same education as their white classmates. Therefore, it is perpetuating societal injustices.

Researchers have started to focus on how pre-service teachers can be exposed to culturally responsive pedagogy and the importance of understanding biases, but students cannot wait for those teachers to enter the classroom. Effective practices must be unveiled to enhance the achievement of students of color today. There are some teachers who have seen great success teaching students of color. This study will highlight what highly effective elementary reading teachers do to build relational trust in their diverse classrooms. By studying the positive impact these teachers have on student achievement, their ideas and skills can be replicated to begin to close the achievement gap that persists today across the nation.

This study will be significant in identifying how effective elementary reading teachers build relational trust with diverse students, the impact the relational trust built has on the instructional strategies they use, and the impact the relational trust established has on the formative assessments they take to enhance reading achievement in all students.

Chapter Summary

The achievement gap between White students and students of color has not changed in 50 years. Despite ongoing research on ways to address this issue, the gap has not closed. The demographics of students is changing, while the demographics of teachers remains the same. Schools cannot isolate the backgrounds of students and expect them to learn at a high level.

Teachers have the greatest influence on student learning. Highly effective teachers have a high sense of efficacy and will find ways to reach all their students. They build trust and relationships with their students. This trust contributes to their students' efficacy. When a student has success, it raises their own expectations which increases their achievement scores.

When highly effective teachers combine culturally responsive teaching practices and equity literacy, it yields an increase in reading achievement for all their students. The theoretical framework that informed this research study included critical race theory, critical consciousness, and cultural deficit thinking.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will present the theoretical framework for which this study is rooted, present relevant studies supporting this research's topic, and will identify the gap in the research in which this study will fill. This chapter will review the impact critical race theory and deficit thinking has had on students of color. It will also tie in how culturally responsive pedagogy, equity literacy, and critical consciousness can have a positive effect on student achievement in reading. Finally, it will highlight the importance of building trusting relationships with students.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) brings attention to the fact that the dominant white culture is embedded into the fabric of the American society, including its schools. CRT is evident in schools by the way curriculum is created, how teachers instruct, how students are grouped, what assessments are used to determine if students are achieving, how schools are funded, and how school boundaries are determined (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This theory brings racism to the forefront of the discussion and highlights how racism has not been merely demonstrated through isolated events by individuals, but rather is an ideology that has been woven into the fabric of our nation's story. "Teachers'

attitudes, beliefs, and actions, within the broader context of society in which these take place, are fundamental to understanding student learning” (Nieto, 2010, p. 189).

This ideology has contributed to a “deficit thinking that permeates society, [in which] schools and teachers mirror these beliefs” (García & Guerra, 2004, p. 154).

Critical Race Theory has been expanded in the field of education to include not only issues of racism, but other forms of oppression to include gender, class, and sexual orientation. According to Howard & Navarro (2016) there are five tenets, developed by CRT scholars, that guide research and inquiry on educational equity and racial justice: (1) Centrality of race and racism, (2) Challenging the dominant perspective, (3) Commitment to social justice, (4) Valuing experiential knowledge, and (5) Being interdisciplinary. CRT brings race and other educational inequities to the forefront of discussions when changes are made or policy is reviewed. If the achievement gap is going to close, CRT needs to be recognized as a major contributor.

Parker Palmer (2007) believes objectivism creates the disconnect between teachers, their subjects, and their students, but that all of it is rooted in fear. Objectivism “portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know” and “we can know the things of the world truly and well only from afar” (p. 52). In order to protect ourselves we close off the subjective self, so we don’t have to worry about our biases, privileges, and opinions. This idea of closing off our subjective-self aligns with critical race theory, in that it perpetuates the dominant view in the structure of schools, policy, curriculum choices, and instructional delivery.

In many schools across the country, educators pose potential excuses as to why certain students do not achieve. They blame the child's background, their home environment, the family's socioeconomic status, the lack of parental involvement, the child's English proficiency, etc., but rarely are they able to put themselves in that equation. These deficit beliefs prevent educators from enacting real change that will contribute to closing the achievement gap (García & Guerra, 2004).

Perhaps, the most troubling aspect of deficit thinking is that so much of it is unconscious thoughts and assumptions. "Culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn" (Gay, 2010, p. 9). Most teachers care deeply about their students and want their students to do well; however, they believe that by keeping them safe, feeling sorry for them, and being nice to them is enough.

In a qualitative study conducted by Garza and Garza (2010), four dedicated white teachers who taught in an urban school district populated by primarily Mexican American students were interviewed and observed. Despite teaching in a school where they felt it was their calling, none of the teachers displayed culturally relevant teaching practices; yet, all of them routinely enacted deficit thinking beliefs about their students, while maintaining that they loved their students. These teachers were displaying an emotionally centered approach to teaching, rather than an action-driven approach (Gay, 2010), which the students needed.

Unfortunately, creating an environment where teachers feel the need to "save" or "fix" children often comes at the expense of academic instruction, which leads to lower

expectations (García & Guerra, 2004). All students deserve to be challenged and have high expectations set for them. While culturally responsive pedagogy alone will not solve the achievement gap for our students, it is something that can be controlled within the confines of our classroom walls.

The dominant culture has the power to choose what is ‘right’, what is ‘successful’, and what is taught in schools. Freire (1970) stated that “education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (p. 59). To prevent this indoctrination, educators need to be willing to awaken the critical consciousness of their students. Critical Consciousness (CC) “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 17). It “consists of three components: the ability to critically read social conditions (critical reflection), feelings of efficacy to effect change (sociopolitical efficacy), and actual participation in these efforts (critical action) in both the educational and political/community domains” (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014, p. 1801).

Critical literacy is an excellent example of how to awaken students’ critical consciousness and be culturally responsive in your teaching practices. Teachers go beyond the intent of literacy acquisition of learning how to read and write to include “awakening the consciousness” and to “understand literacy as a social process” (Lyle, 2013, p. 371) to be able to engage in social change. Students are taught not only how to

read the text, but also to question the text to how it is “embedded in and shaped by ideologies” (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2015, p. 124).

Prior to engaging students in critical consciousness, teachers need to “have a thorough understanding of their own cultures and the cultures of different ethnic groups” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 182). Teachers can accomplish this by self-reflecting on their own beliefs about “ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity” (Gay & Kirkland, 2003, p. 182). Palmer (2007) states, “Only when we name and claim our own shadows and become accountable for the darkness we create will we be able to evoke ‘the better angels of our nature,’ inner sources of light that make both individuals and institutions more humane” (p. 206) and “everything depends on the lenses through which we view the world” (p. 27). By acknowledging their own biases and privileges teachers can begin to see the world through a different lens, which allows them to have open dialogue with their students. Teachers must embrace all diverse backgrounds and acknowledge injustices against students of color within the schools, community, and society.

Cultural humility invites individuals to examine how their position in life impacts people they work with (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2016). Cultural humility is a lifelong process that has five attributes (1) Individuals must be open minded and be willing to explore new ideas, (2) Individuals must be self-aware of their strengths, limitations, values, beliefs, behavior, and appearance to others, (3) Individuals must be egoless or humble and views others’ worth on a horizontal plane, (4) Individuals must practice supportive interactions, where exchanges with others are positive, and (5) Individuals must be self-reflective and critique one’s own thoughts, feelings, and actions in an endless process

(Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, & Ousman, 2016). Cultural humility takes into account an individual's biases and privileges, but through active participation of the five attributes, individuals can be successful in working with people who are different than them.

Critical consciousness can be taught to all students. Teaching students to question why things are the way they are, allows them to challenge the oppressive circumstances that surround them. The benefit of culturally responsive pedagogy and critical consciousness is that these practices are not isolated for one subgroup. These are best practices for all students including students of color and white students (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014).

Based on critical race theory, deficit thinking, and critical consciousness, this research looks to answer the following questions:

Q1 How do highly effective teachers build trusting relationships in a highly diverse elementary school?

Q2 How does building relational trust impact instructional strategies in reading?

Q3 How does relational trust impact student reading achievement of third, fourth, and fifth graders?

Effective Teaching Practices in Reading

In this research paper, effectiveness is defined as the ability to progress students in reading as proven by standardized testing results. "Learning to read is complex" (Fletcher, 2014, p. 306) therefore, teaching reading is going to be complex as well. Identifying specific instructional methods that separate effective teachers of literacy from ineffective teachers has been difficult. However, researchers have agreed that "sound

pedagogical practice in reading (and learning in general) is to assess, monitor and identify the individual student's needs and personal background and that data to provide contextualized learning opportunities to build and develop understanding" (Fletcher, 2014, p. 297).

In an effort to identify what effective teachers of literacy do, Wray, Medwell, Fox, and Poulson (2000) compared a group of teachers identified as effective to a group of teachers not identified as such. Through observations and interviews, they found six common characteristics effective teachers routinely did that enhanced student reading achievement. These six characteristics were: (a) Opportunity to learn, which measured students' engagement in academic activities, (b) Classroom Organization, which examined the amount of time teachers taught in whole group, small group, or individual teaching, (c) Task setting, which required teachers to prepare well to match tasks so students were successful and challenged, (d) Task content, which matched the appropriate content to the ability of the student, (e) Teaching skills, which analyzed teachers' time instructing, monitoring students, following a brisk pace, and demonstrating and modeling comprehension strategies and writing, (f) Teacher-student interaction, which focused on the relationship between the teacher and student to include the feedback and scaffolding that was provided. An additional finding of effective teachers of literacy worth noting was the extent of the dialogue between the teacher and student. Effective teachers also embedded specific skills within other disciplines to help students make connections and increase their knowledge (Wray et al., 2000).

In a systematic review of effective teachers of literacy, Hall and Harding (2003) stated effective literacy teachers use numerous amounts of strategies to enhance students' reading scores. They found they will blend direct instruction with holistic instruction when necessary, have great classroom management skills, scaffold and monitor students aggressively, allow students to discuss and write about their reading, have high student engagement, and develop strong relationships where a conversational dialogue is able to take place.

Research concerning what works with bicultural students has found consistently that in general students respond positively to high expectations, educational environments characterized by caring and respect, positive and close relationships with their teachers, and interventions and educational strategies that build on rather than demolish their native language and culture. (Nieto, 2010, p. 75)

Effective literacy teachers do what is best for their students.

The primary goal of education is to make all students literate. However, the education system, the school, and the teachers' preferences will influence how literacy will be taught and what will be emphasized as important skills (Ferdman, 1990). Students do better when they read books they can relate to and see themselves a part of. According to Palmer (2007) there are two truths about teaching. "The first is that what we teach will never "take" unless it connects with the inward, living core of our students' lives, with our students' inward teachers" and the second is that "we can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves" (p. 32). In order to be truly responsive to students' needs, teachers need to not only have good teaching practices, but also have an understanding of themselves and their students.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The origins of culturally responsive pedagogy come directly from critical race theory and deficit thinking. In the 1970s, multicultural education began due to the racial and ethnic inequities of students' learning opportunities (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive pedagogy expands the idea of multicultural education. Multicultural education "can be delivered to a classroom containing students from the same culture; the content presented is representative of various cultural perspectives" (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p. 45), whereas, "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Culturally responsive pedagogy responds to the actual students in the classroom. Content is connected directly to the students' backgrounds, current knowledge, and learning styles. While the intent of both ideologies is to offer, and embrace differing perspectives, CRP uses students' culture and backgrounds to drive classroom content and instruction.

Culturally responsive pedagogy and effective teaching practices overlap in many areas. Both teachers are constantly assessing, monitoring, and scaffolding to help students build and develop understanding of the material (Fletcher, 2014). In addition, culturally responsive teachers have high student engagement, build strong relationships with students, and have strong classroom management skills. When analyzing both culturally responsive pedagogy and effective teaching practices, the main difference is

understanding and using students' backgrounds to enhance achievement. While it could be argued that effective teachers do this, it was not emphasized in the literature.

Perhaps, the main reason effective teachers and culturally responsive teachers overlap is because “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 2007, p. 10). “*Identity* lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up my life, and *integrity* lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death” (Palmer, 2007, p. 14). Teachers need to examine their own lives, even the parts that don't always make us proud in order to be the best teacher we can be to our students. In order to effectively teach students that are different from yourself, a teacher must have spent some time reflecting on their own beliefs, ideas, and biases, just as a culturally responsive teacher is trained to do. Through these processes the teacher is examining their own identity and integrity.

It is imperative teachers embrace the background of their students and view diversity as an asset to the educational experience. Students of color have been required to “divorce themselves from their cultures and learn according to European American cultural norms” (Gay, 2002, p. 114). Cultural responsive teaching can remove the burden of assimilation from their students, by implementing opportunities for students to engage with the material in ways that align with their culture. Culturally responsive teachers, much like effective literacy teachers, understand there is not one program or approach that will work for every student.

As Ladson-Billings (2009) stated, cultural relevant teaching empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically. The focus of this pedagogy is to teach the whole child. Every aspect of the child is valued and kept at the center of instructional delivery every day. In order to teach the whole child, a teacher must be brave enough to teach from their “wholeness” and cognizant of the best way each student learns. They “may offer three or four ways for students to learn, helping to equalize learning advantages and disadvantages among the different ethnic groups in the classroom” (Gay, 2003, p. 34). One effective way students of color learn is through cooperative learning opportunities.

Cooperative Learning

Many researchers (Sharan, 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Franklin, James, & Watson, 1996; Stevens & Slavin, 1995) have proven Latino, Native Americans, African, and Asian American students have increased their achievement by working in cooperative learning groups. This teaching technique does not only improve minority students’ achievement scores, but it increases achievement scores for students with disabilities, gifted students, and both boys and girls (Stevens & Slavin, 1995).

Cooperative learning groups allow students to work together and learn from each other in a small group. Students whose first language is not English benefit from talking to their peers in these settings. Students who are reading below grade level have the opportunity to work with students who are reading on grade level giving them a better chance to understand the assignment (Cohen, Lotan, Scarloss, & Arellano, 1999). Cooperative

learning groups are not a random assignment of students, but rather a well thought out process that enables students to be successful in their understanding of the concept.

Slavin (2014) lists five features of effective cooperative learning groups. These features should be taught and refined until the students know the expectations of cooperative learning in order for cooperative learning to be effective:

1. Teams should be a diverse set of students, including different ethnicities, boys and girls, and high and low achievers. Teams should work together for a few weeks and then be changed.
2. There has to be a purpose for the group work. Students should have to produce a product, meet a target, or show how each individual completed their task.
3. Even though students are working as a group, there needs to be individual accountability. Each student should be able to explain the work produced.
4. Students should use teamwork and problem-solving skills when working together. They should practice active listening, explaining concepts and ideas, encouraging teammates, and completing tasks if they want to be successful.
5. Cooperative learning should be used in every lesson; however, it shouldn't be the only thing used during the lesson. Cooperative learning can replace traditional individual seat work that usually follows a teacher's lesson.

Using cooperative learning groups in a classroom with diverse students benefit all students. However, "cooperative learning in and of itself is a positive step that can bring

about other important changes in the classrooms, it will not necessarily lead to developing a critical multicultural perspective” (Nieto, 2010, p. 134). To be culturally responsive, cooperative learning groups must be implemented with the desire to adjust a teacher’s philosophy, thinking, or beliefs (Nieto, 2010).

Effective teachers using cooperative learning in their classrooms use this small group work to draw on the strengths of their students. Teachers present open-ended questions and real-world problems for students to work through. Many times, these problems do not have right or wrong answers, but students are expected to defend how they arrived at their answer. Thus, teachers set high academic expectations for the group. When used correctly, cooperative learning groups can help empower students.

By allowing students to work together, students slowly build their confidence. It is this confidence that culturally responsive teachers will handle carefully and use as a mold to empower their students “into academic competence, personal confidence, courage, and the will to act” (Gay, 2010, p. 34). Teachers set high expectations and challenge their students to achieve, but also “create infrastructures to support the efforts of students so that they will persevere toward high levels of academic achievement” (Gay, 2010, p. 34). In order to build confidence, the material presented must be meaningful and engaging.

Empowerment

Empowerment challenges the dominant way of thinking. “In education, empowerment suggests a redefinition of relationships between and among teachers and students, parents, and administrators” (Nieto, 2010, p. 132). Students who are

empowered have the ability to question the status quo and raise awareness in their community. However, teachers must be cognizant of the fact that gaining knowledge to be empowered can lead to a disassociation within the students' own community if used for personal gain (Klug & Whitfield, 2003). It is a teacher's responsibility to assist their students in embracing their identity that leads them to cultural humility.

Cultural humility was developed from the antecedents of diversity and power imbalance (Foronda et al., 2016). In order for a teacher to lead a student toward cultural humility, the teacher must also be working on it. By recognizing that a power imbalance exists, an emphasis on the relationship between self and others can be developed. Through this relationship, mutual empowerment can be achieved (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2016).

A teacher centered classroom is what Freire (1970) referred to as the "banking" concept of education. Teachers treat students as something they need to fill up. The teacher has all the knowledge and students are there to listen and accept what the teacher says. Contrary to this view, a student-centered classroom accepts students' experiences and backgrounds as vital pieces of information to the learning process. Both the teacher and the student work together, interchanging roles to teach each other. The teacher is not all knowing. The teacher uses students' cultures to increase critical thinking skills, so they can be successful in problem-solving tasks in their school and community. Presenting information to students in a way that relates to their real world and community, allows them to recognize that knowledge can be powerful. When information is relatable, it is more engaging.

A teacher who believes in a student-centered approach to teaching is constantly adding to their curriculum. Awareness of the make-up of their students for a particular year will drive teachers' knowledge as to what kinds of activities and discussions will be had. Lesson plans are constantly changing to reflect the interests, ideas, and beliefs of the students. Even though the activity will change, the objective of the lesson remains true. "We must become critics of the material we are using in our classrooms, questioning for accuracy, for the agendas represented, for the times, conditions, and cultural practices in order to inform ourselves about whether the material is appropriate for presentation to our students" (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 155). Teachers must keep the students at the center of all choices they make within the classroom setting.

Curriculum and Instruction

Culturally responsive teaching adopts a constructivist way of thinking. While explicit or direct instruction can and should be used at appropriate times, it should not be the basis of all instruction in a culturally responsive classroom (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Instruction is student centered, meaning students are seen as active contributors to the material being presented, and instruction is tailored to what is relevant in their lives. The teacher is not all-knowing, nor professes to be. The teacher and the students work together to solve problems using different perspectives. Students are a valuable part of the learning process.

The prescribed curriculum of a given school or district should not disable a teacher from being culturally responsive. Even within curriculum that is scripted, culturally responsive techniques can be used to pull in the students' backgrounds,

creating strong relationships with students (Toppel, 2012), and participating in the community outside of school hours all lend themselves to a more culturally responsive atmosphere in the classroom. While standards-based education supports all learners, standardized education eliminates the opportunity for students to bring their own knowledge to the classroom, and it allows teachers to present material in the same way (Stanton, 2008). While it is, more time consuming to deliver culturally responsive lessons, the best teachers will “educate and empower themselves professionally” (Stanton, 2008, p. 50) to ensure they meet the needs of their students regardless of the curriculum prescribed to them.

Curriculum must be examined and analyzed by teachers as it determines “who is seen and who is invisible” (Curtis, 1998, p. 138), insinuating who has value and who does not. The perspective of the literature used or the textbook adopted is embedded with oppression and privilege. While the way textbooks have been written continues to be debated in terms of their culturally biased perspectives, teachers are still required to teach from them. Culturally responsive teachers open the discussion to offer multiple perspectives to the same content, thus creating an environment where all students are respected.

Allowing students, the voice to state their opinions, especially when they go against the textbook, creates critical consciousness. This critical consciousness empowers and leads to trusting relationships because its full of acceptance of the backgrounds of students. Another way to accept students is to embrace their cultural dialect. While standard English must be taught to students, it should be taught as a way

to empower them to be successful in different settings (Delpit, 2006). Acceptance of differences and teaching of when and how to use different writing, language, and style in different settings will create strong relationships.

Culturally responsive teachers and other effective teachers have specific goals of what they want to accomplish with their students. A “realization comes to us as teachers that our teaching goals, and not necessarily the methodology used to attain the goals, are the most important aspect of our teaching success” (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 20). Effective teachers know there are many different ways to teach the material to students, and the important part is that the students learn, not in the way it is taught. They will differentiate and scaffold the learning so all students can access a text to practice the concept being taught. Culturally responsive teachers will adjust and adapt their instructional style when necessary to reach all their students. They are willing and able to do that because they have established strong relationships with their students, and they believe the extra planning time it takes is worth the effort.

Facilitating Student Growth and Accomplishment

Instead of measuring the achievement of students on one standardized assessment, we need to use measures that are process-oriented. These measures allow students to show if they can apply their learning to new situations. “If tests are the only measures used to determine student performance, some critical areas of achievement will be systematically and repeatedly overlooked” (Gay, 2010, p. 16). Assigning “grades and grade point averages is equally limiting because it brings up questions of inequitable

access and opportunity to learn, and it denies the enormous variability in prior learning experiences among students of different backgrounds (Nieto, 2010, p. 34). Service learning projects, portfolios, and experiential learning are alternative assessments that should be considered (Klug, 2012). The Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by 46 states to date, promote college and career readiness.

Standards include the ability to initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussion, work with peers to adopt rules for collegial discussions and decision-making, respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of evidence and reasoning presented. (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014, p. 1815)

Progressive Education insists on learning knowledge that can be applied to the real world. Students work together in small groups, creating a learning community, where they attempt to find solutions to problems presented in a project-learning format. “The idea behind this approach was that students would remember knowledge acquired, as they would link what they learned to what they actually experienced” (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 150). Not only will students remember the knowledge and be able to apply it, but it becomes purposeful. The students will see the value in learning the material that is aligned with multiple standards. The material is presented in a holistic fashion.

However, in most classrooms across the nation much of the information learned are pieces or parts of concepts that students have a hard time relating to the real world. The purpose of learning this knowledge is to do well on a test, and how this helps students in the real world is lost. The idea is “learning knowledge more for the

knowledge's sake" (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 150) rather than learning information that is purposeful in the students' real lives. This knowledge is typically aligned with a standardized curriculum that may not have any relevance to the students. It is also aligned with standards, but when learning is presented in this format, the standards are typically isolated from one another. It is difficult for students to transfer their knowledge from one problem to another.

Time after time students of color have proven to the education system that the way we are educating them is not working. Students of color have more office referrals for behavior and more out-of-school suspensions, and they have a higher percentage of students labeled special education when compared to their white peers. The educational system needs to start using strategies and techniques that have proven to work with students of color and white students. "The *critical issue* is identifying and enacting *effective and culturally appropriate strategies and actions* to resolve the inequalities needed to close the achievement gap" (Writer, 2012, p. 65). Only at that time will the achievement gap begin to close.

Equity Literacy

The focus of equity literacy is not so much in the practices of teaching, but rather an examination of our thoughts, beliefs, and actions to combat inequities. Equity literacy is "the knowledge and skills necessary to make every educator a threat to the existence of inequities in their classrooms, schools, and districts" (Gorski, 2016b, p.16). An effective teacher of diverse students probably possesses the abilities of equity literacy without even realizing it.

Equity literacy was developed as a response to critical race theory and deficit thinking theory. Gorski (2016b) highlights three ideologies present in schools involving poverty: deficit ideology, grit ideology, and structural ideology. Deficit ideology is perpetuated by misinformation and mythical ideas. People suffering from poverty ideology believe students are unmotivated, parents are irresponsible, and people who are poor don't value education (Gorski, 2016b). Buying into this ideology immortalizes inequities and forces the attention to issues that may not even be issues. Grit ideology is the belief that if students would work a little harder, they will succeed. However, typically the grittiest individuals are the ones who are the most marginalized (Gorski, 2016b). They are the parents who are working two to three jobs, the students who come to school despite not sleeping the night before, or the parents who get their kids to school without having access to a vehicle. Buying into this ideology eternalizes inequities and resources may be allocated to issues that are not issues. The final ideology is structural ideology. Structural ideology is believing there is no way to eliminate barriers that are in front of our students. These barriers could include lack of transportation, involvement in school events, or even health care issues. Someone who embraces a structural ideology would assume there is nothing that can be done. An individual who embraces equity literacy would create "policy and practices to be responsive to these structural barriers" (Gorski, 2016b, p. 16).

Another aspect of equity literacy that is important to note is the intentional absence of the word "culture" in its title. Swalwell and Gorski have intentionally left out "culture" because "culture is randomly and regularly used to explain everything"

(Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 104). Culture is all encompassing to include “race, class, language, and other issues that aren’t comfortably discussed as broad, vague ‘cultures’” (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015, p. 36). Terms such as multicultural education, cross-cultural education, and even culturally responsive pedagogy risk losing their main purpose of creating an equitable opportunity for students, due to the oversaturation of “culture.” “The idea is to place *equity*, rather than *culture*, at the center of the diversity conversation” (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015, p. 15).

Equity literacy is a combination of effective teaching practices and culturally responsive pedagogy. Educators need to have the knowledge of inequities in our country, but also examine their own beliefs and actions. With that knowledge educators need to teach students how decisions have been made to marginalize specific groups of people and how that is still evident in our society today (Swalwell, 2011).

Classroom Environment

With standardized assessments being the main accountability piece for funding, it has put pressure on schools to find ways to increase their reading and math scores. Most schools have done this by implementing new programs. Many of the reading programs implemented “do not necessarily result in functional and advanced literacy” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 313). Some of the programs could fit into the category of Freire’s (1970) “‘banking’ concept of education” (p. 53). In this type of teaching, the teacher possesses all the knowledge, and it is the teacher’s job to impart that knowledge onto the students. The students’ role in this type of environment is “to memorize the contents

narrated by the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p.61). Educators refer to this process as a teacher-centered environment.

Teacher-centered environments run the risk of indoctrinating students to adapt to the world of oppression (Freire, 1970), even though that is not necessarily the educator’s intent. “Schools tend to reflect the dominant culture . . . [therefore] children become literate in the cultural image represented by their school” (Ferdman, 1990, p. 189). By possessing a dominate presence in the classroom, the teacher is in control of everything, including what the student learns and how the student learns, and manipulates the student into thinking they are an active participant (Freire, 1970). Culturally responsive pedagogy and equity literacy attempt to move away from a teacher-centered environment and into an environment where the teacher and student are active participants.

Providing the environment where students can speak their mind about the content and delivery of the lesson, creates a student-centered classroom where students and teachers are learning from each other. Student-centered environments were born from abuses of the teacher-centered model (Palmer, 2007). This environment takes the teacher out of the center of attention and puts the students at the center. This environment allows students the opportunity to share from their cultural and family backgrounds. The emphasis is not on getting the correct answer, but rather creating a meaningful dialogue. From this dialogue, purposeful activities can be designed to meet the literacy academic standards put forth by the government and adopted by the states. However, Palmer (2007) believes student-centered environments have been abused as well, inciting that when differences arise in the classroom they are not discussed.

Parker Palmer (2007) suggests that “the classroom should be neither teacher-centered nor student-centered but subject-centered” (p. 119). A subject-centered classroom “honors one of the most vital needs our students have: to be introduced to a world larger than their own experiences and egos, a world that expands their personal boundaries and enlarges their sense of community” (Palmer, 2007, p. 122). He believes a subject-centered classroom makes the teacher and students accountable for something that is beyond the teacher or student, and it is at this time a true sense of community can emerge.

Palmer’s (2007) “The Community of Truth” (see Figure 2) is purposeful in its design. He puts the subject at the center of the diagram, not the teacher, to ensure everyone has the ability to relate to the subject. All “knowers” are equal and active participants in the discussion, to progress knowledge through an open and communal communication (p.104-106).

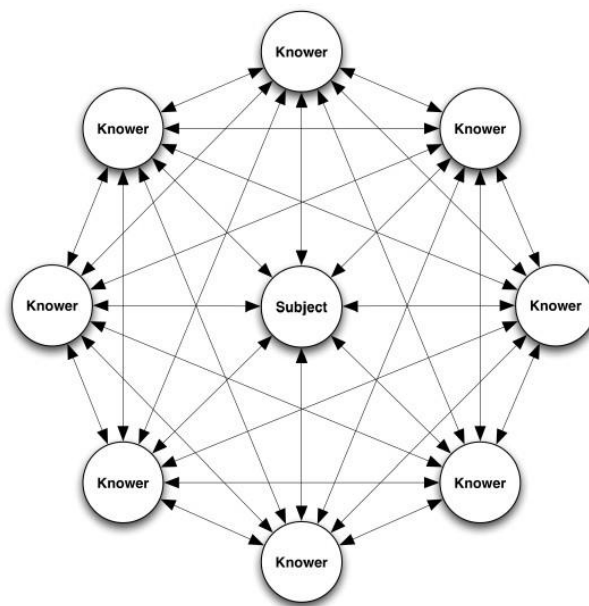


Figure 2 The community of truth

Paulo Freire (1970) has a different term he uses that aligns more with a student-centered or subject-centered environment rather than a teacher-centered environment. He calls it “problem-posing education” (p. 60). Problem-posing education is in direct contradiction of the banking concept of education. In Freire’s vision, “no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other” (p. 61). Students are constantly posed with problems that relate to the world they live in, which will challenge, engage, and commit them into the learning. Freire (1970) believes that through problem-posing education, students’ consciousness is awakened and they have the freedom and power to transform themselves in their reality. His belief is similar to Palmer’s vision and the student-centered vision in that the student is an important participant in the learning process. Teachers must consider their own and their students’ ideas, backgrounds, and beliefs in order to increase academic achievement in reading.

Critical literacy theory teaches readers to analyze the text and look for underlying messages within the text. The intent of critical literacy is not to focus on decoding the words in the text, but rather to understand and engage in discussions about the themes, morals, and messages of the text. “Literacy cannot be viewed as simply the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant standard language” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 142). Using this instructional strategy, honors the diversity in the classroom and raises the critical consciousness of the teacher and students, by giving them a voice. Using critical literacy theory aligns more with a student-centered environment than a teacher-centered environment. This could be expanded to include either Palmer’s vision and/or Freire’s vision.

Building Trust and Relationships

According to Delpit (2006) teachers from communities of color believe teaching begins with relationships. Delpit (2006) also suggests students of color value the social aspects of an environment and put an emphasis on feelings, acceptance, and emotional closeness. Teachers need to be aware that building relationships with all students, but especially students of color can greatly affect the academic achievement of students.

Finding a teacher that says they do not care about their students would be a difficult endeavor. However, many teachers confuse the ideas of “caring about” and “caring for” students. Gay (2010) states that “caring about” focuses on the feelings of another’s state of being. “Caring about” students of color have not been effective in schools. Teachers spend their time being nice to students and trying to be their friend, allowing students to be in school without setting high expectations. This kind of caring can cause more harm than good. Teachers who “care about” a student tend to feel sorry about the students’ current placement in life.

However, teachers who “care for” students participate in “active engagement in doing something positive” (Gay, 2010, p. 48). Teachers recognize and acknowledge the students’ current placement, but do not use that as an excuse for not teaching the child. Noddings (2002) explains teachers who “care for” their students take a vested interest in their students academically, socially, and emotionally. There are two main concepts with “caring for” students: engrossment and motivational displacement. Engrossment is showing complete receptivity to the other individual. There is a deep acknowledgment of wanting to learn from the student or individual. Through this engrossment, motivational

displacement, or the desire to help, occurs (Noddings, 2002). The most important aspect of “caring for” is recognizing it is a cycle of caring where engrossment and motivational displacement are reciprocated back and forth. It is through this cycle of caring that Noddings (2002) believes is the true foundation of education, not criterion referenced standards, norm-referenced assessments or character education programs.

“Teachers who genuinely care for students generate higher levels of all kinds of success than those who do not” (Gay, 2010, p. 49). They are “unwilling to tolerate underachievement” (Rychly & Graves, 2012, p. 45), will challenge their students, but also provide the necessary scaffolds for their students to access the content. Garza (2009) conducted a study where he examined Latino and White high school students’ perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring. He found five themes students continued to discuss to describe how their teachers cared: (1) provide scaffolding (2) kind disposition through actions (3) availability to student outside of class time (4) personal interest in students’ well-being and (5) affective academic support in classroom. Teachers did not lower expectations for their students, but rather provided scaffolds, additional time, and extra resources to help struggling students without alienating the students or making them feel “less than” because they didn’t know the material.

In a longitudinal study spanning four years, with 400 of Chicago’s elementary schools, Bryk and Schneider (2003), examined the impact relational trust had on student achievement in reading and math using standardized assessments as their measure. They found that schools with high levels of trust were much more likely to show academic improvements than schools that showed low trust levels. “[S]chools with chronically

weak trust reports throughout the period of the study had virtually no chance of improving in either reading or mathematics” (p. 43). There were four considerations Bryk and Schneider found when examining relational trust. These were respect (genuine listening), personal regard (extend themselves beyond the job description), competence in core role responsibilities (interactions with others to produce desired outcomes), and personal integrity (a moral-ethical perspective guides one’s work). When these four considerations were undermined, trust was not established.

When students feel like their teachers genuinely care about them, they will strive to reach whatever expectation the teacher sets forth. While personal relationships are important, personal relationships are not going to help a student succeed without high academic expectations (Dallavis, 2014). Besides valuing students as individuals, creating personal relationships with students serves as a pathway to connect the content to students’ lives. By learning about students’ interests, concerns, and strengths teachers can tie that back into the content (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The content then becomes more meaningful to the students and they are able to have better success. By pulling in examples the students are familiar with, the teachers display that they care for their students.

Caring for students is action-driven more than emotionally centered (Gay, 2010). It is not enough to only adjust and include students’ backgrounds within the content, real relationships must be built with students (Nelson-Barber & Estrin, 1995). “[L]ove is at the core of good teaching because it is predicated on high standards, rigorous demands, and respect for students, their identities, and their families” (Nieto, 2010, p. 127).

Dialogue is also used to establish trust and relationships with students. Dialogue is a conversation between two people and can be oral or written. Dialogue connects us to other individuals and provides the foundation for caring (Kim & Schallert, 2011). Through continuous dialogue the student will begin to shape who they are in relation to another person (Kim & Schallert, 2011). Teachers who are skillful at creating a dialogue with their students will have the opportunity to build strong relationships. It is also “an important way for students to become actively engaged in school” (Nieto, 2010, p. 123). Paulo Freire (1970) believed dialogue is the essence of transformation and humanization. Therefore, “dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the discussants” (p. 70). To have genuine dialogue, respect between the teacher and student must be established.

Dialogue cannot be transformational and humanized if the parties involved in the discussion lack humility (Freire, 1970). Teachers and students who show humility are self-aware and self-reflective when interacting with others (Foronda, et al., 2016). Therefore, individuals in true dialogue understand the importance of the other person with whom they are interacting. Both parties involved in the dialogue have something to offer to the conversation. Love and faith in people is a requirement for dialogue (Freire, 1970).

Chapter Summary

In an effort to synthesize material involving critical race theory, deficit thinking, culturally responsive pedagogy, equity literacy, critical consciousness, and the impact they have on reading achievement, a gap in the literature formed. This gap related to the practices teachers were using to build relationships and trust with students to increase reading achievement. Teachers have the ability to build and maintain relationships with students, however there wasn't concrete ways in how to do that. This study provides concrete ways with which teachers can use to build relationships and trust with students.

The solution to helping students of color achieve academically is not difficult. It is actually very simple--build relational trust with students, and achievement increases. Have a community of mistrust and poor relations and achievement either is stagnate or decreases. In order to help all students learn, a teacher must understand racism is woven into the fabric of our society, that deficit thinking can influence your ideas about students unconsciously, and there must be a willingness to look at your subjective self can help prevent some detrimental beliefs.

Teachers must be willing to look at their identity and integrity. They must be willing to reflect on their own deficits and embrace the differences of others. Teachers need to be open to the idea of having a dialogue with students and understanding students have just as much to offer in a classroom environment as the teacher does. Teachers who are able to do these things establish trust with students, which has been proven to enhance reading achievement.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the strategies highly effective teachers use to build relational trust to improve reading achievement in a highly diverse elementary school. Specifically, the research questions explored in this study were:

Q1 How do highly effective teachers build trusting relationships in a highly diverse elementary school?

Q2 How does building relational trust impact instructional strategies in reading?

Q3 How does relational trust impact student reading achievement of third, fourth, and fifth graders?

“We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Qualitative research can transform the world through the collection of data from open-ended questions, documents, and observations in a natural setting (Maxwell, 2013). From these multiple resources, themes and patterns emerge to reflect the perspectives of the participants in the study. In addition to the voices of the participants, the researcher was also a key component to a qualitative research approach. It was the researcher’s background that will inform the interpretation of the information (Creswell, 2013).

Therefore, the researcher provides an intimate account of their background, interests, history, and experiences that led them to the investigation of the topic.

Subjectivity, Reflexivity, and Role of Researcher

Prior to my first teaching assignment, I wanted to teach in a middle-class community similar to the one in which I was educated. When those schools didn't call me back for interviews, I wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and I spent the next year trying to get hired in such a school. It didn't happen. Much to my disappointment, the only school willing to hire me was a school on an Indian reservation. It was during this experience, I learned about biases, privileges, and differing perspectives. I am not sure what kind of a teacher I would have become if those middle-class schools would have hired me right out of college, but I do know my experiences would have been different.

I have been a third-grade teacher for six years, a pull-out interventionist working with second-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students for two years, and I am currently a fifth-grade teacher. Most of my students have been Native American, Hispanic, Asian, or African American. I have taught Caucasian students as well, but they have been the minority in my classes. The past three years I have been serving primarily as a reading and writing teacher.

In my experience, I have met and worked alongside effective reading teachers I respect and admire for the caring relationships they build with students and the high expectations they set for all students and how they embrace the persons their students are. These effective reading teachers differentiate their lessons so all their students have

access to the information, while continuously challenging their students with higher level questions in response to their reading. They constantly try new things to reach all their students in whatever way the students learn best.

Through this process, they build a relationship with the child learning their interests, about their family, and how they like to learn and routinely are in contact with their students' parents or guardians. These contacts are often to share celebrations about the student, not just when the student is struggling. In witnessing these teachers, their classrooms are organized and designed to make the learning environment rich in literacy, and they hold their students to high academic and behavioral expectations. Due to the relationships they build with their students, they have a vested interest in their academic and behavioral success. When a student doesn't fair well on an assessment, the effective teacher does not push that student forward, but rather makes sure to reteach the missed concepts and work with that student until they are proficient to move past that skill or concept.

Every student deserves a high-quality education and a teacher who respects them. Effective teachers are able to build trust and relationships with their students, present material in a fair and equitable way, examine their own biases and privileges, and challenge each of their students to achieve. It is my intent to systematically uncover what practices effective teachers in a highly diverse school are using in developing trusting relationships with their students to improve reading achievement.

Research Design and Approach

This research used a multiple case study design to understand how effective elementary teachers build relational trust and describe their instructional strategies and assessments in reading. According to Creswell (2013) a multiple case study examines a real-life case over time through interviews, artifacts, and observations. This research used a multiple case study approach to explore how effective elementary reading teachers build relational trust, and how the relational trust facilitates student reading achievement.

Case studies can be described in different ways, but researchers agree that a case study is bounded, provides a rich description, and is studied in real-life situations (Merriam, 2009). A bounded system means the phenomenon being studied is delimited. “One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be, that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 41). The bounded system used in this particular study was that of seasoned teachers whose students showed improved reading achievement data over the course of three years in a diverse elementary school.

Multiple case study was chosen as the research design because the researcher was “interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (Merriam, 2009, p. 42). For this study, four cases (teachers) were at the classroom level, and two cases (principals) were at the school level to help “illustrate the issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). This allows the researcher to show different perspectives about the same issue, therefore, allowing themes to emerge from the interviews and artifacts collected.

To further distinguish case studies from other research designs, one must examine its special features. A case study can be “characterized as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). Particularistic merely suggests that the research is focused on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon. Descriptive implies that the end product will offer a rich and thick description of the phenomenon. Heuristic suggests the reader will better understand the phenomenon being presented (Merriam, 2009).

A multiple case study was necessary to study the phenomenon of how effective elementary reading teachers were successful teaching students of color in their instructional approaches, building relationships and trust, and impact student reading achievement. By conducting in depth one-on-one focused interviews with teachers and one-on-one focused interviews with these teachers’ principals, collecting artifacts and documents, and conducting observations, the study provides a triangulation of data, strengthening its findings.

Purposeful Selection

Specific criterion was used to purposefully sample effective elementary reading teachers in a highly diverse school district in northern Colorado. This district was chosen for its highly diverse population. The researcher identified the two most diverse schools in a large school district in northern Colorado. Twelve K-5 elementary schools and five K-8 schools in the district were ranked from most diverse to least diverse based on students’ ethnicity. The USA TODAY Diversity Index, created by Phil Meyer and

Shawn McIntosh in 1991 and updated by Meyer and Paul Overberg in 2000, was used to rank the schools from most diverse to least diverse (Meyer & Overberg, 2001). I gained approval from the school district to contact schools. The most diverse school agreed to participate in the study, but the schools who ranked second through fourth refused the request. In the end, I conducted interviews with the most diverse school in the district and the fifth most diverse.

Upon identification of the two schools, I contacted both principals. I requested to analyze reading data from the state's standardized test, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) for third- through fifth-grade reading teachers who had worked for at least three years in that position. One principal informed me only two teachers met that criteria, but she considered both of these teachers to be highly effective. With the principal's recommendation, I interviewed these two teachers.

At the other school, I analyzed the reading data from PARCC for the previous three years. From this data, a list of the four top teachers was selected. During the interview with the principal, I presented the list of the four teachers and asked him which two teachers he felt were the most effective in teaching reading. With the principal's recommendation, I interviewed those two teachers.

Both interviews with the principals were conducted in their offices. Two of the four teacher interviews were conducted in the teacher's classroom, one was conducted in an office space within the school, and the fourth interview was conducted via email.

Participant demographics and characteristics are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant Demographics and Characteristics.

School	Gender	Role	Pseudonym	Years in Current Position	Years in Education
A	F	Principal	Principal A	8	37
A	F	3rd grade teacher	Amy	4	5
A	F	4th grade teacher	Molly	4	4
B	M	Principal	Principal B	5	14
B	M	4th grade teacher	Luke	4	9
B	M	4th grade teacher	Jake	1	20

Data Collection

The most important part of data collection is ensuring *quality control*, and it is essential the data collection is explicit to ensure replicability and credibility upon analysis (Yin, 2009). This study collected data during focused interviews, through the collection of documents and artifacts, and observations. The use of multiple sources of data used for triangulation increased the quality of the study. This is illustrated in Yin's (2009) "Convergence and Nonconvergence of Multiple Sources of Evidence" (p. 117) (see Figure 3).

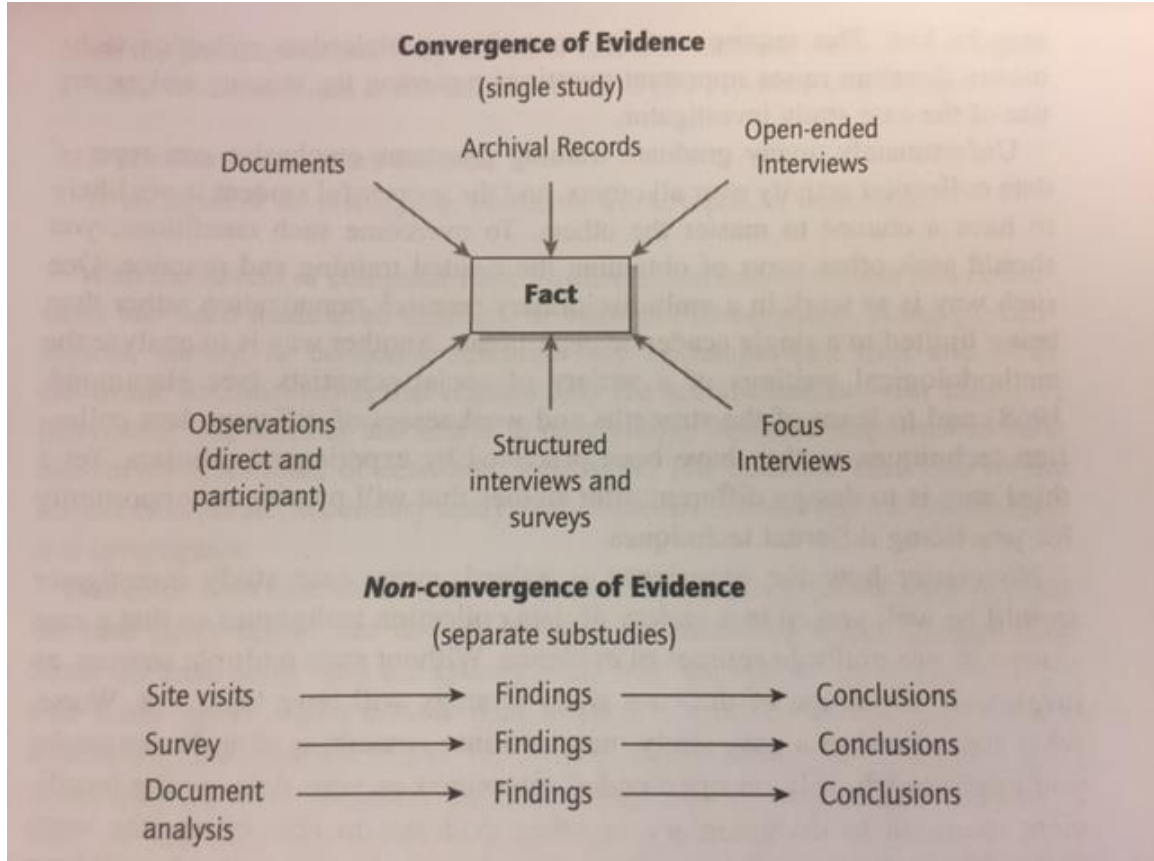


Figure 3 Convergence and non-convergence of multiple sources of evidence.

Focused Interviews

Focused interviews (Yin, 2009) were used in this study. Focused interviews are short, perhaps an hour long, that take place in a single sitting. The focused interview is conducted in a conversational manner with open-ended questions; however, the questions are structured and carefully worded (Yin, 2009). The interview questions are listed in Appendices A and B. All interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 50 minutes.

Five interviews were audio recorded using QuickTime Player on my personal MacBook Pro computer. I also scribed notes throughout the interviews, used initials to label each interview, and recorded the date on top of my notes. The interviews were sent

to a transcriptionist whom I have never met personally and who lives across the country. All data were kept confidential. During analysis, each participant was given a pseudonym.

The interview conducted via email was sent through our school account. The teacher typed her answers back to me without the questions attached. I requested several times to interview this last teacher face to face, but the teacher was unable to meet face to face due to events happening in and outside of school. The teacher suggested email as the format to conduct this interview. In follow-up questions related to the answers, the teacher responded without the questions attached.

Documents and Artifacts

Documents and artifacts were also collected and examined during the study to strengthen the findings of the study. Documents are all “written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” while “artifacts are things or objects in the environment differentiated from documents that represent some form of communication” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139). Documents and artifacts collected and analyzed throughout this study include physical space of the classrooms, weekly lesson plans, standardized test scores, and examples of student work. The collections of documents and artifacts helped support the overall picture and essence of the teachers selected for this study.

The physical space of the teachers’ classrooms created a collaborative work environment. Effective teachers provide a literate environment for the students. Books and materials are accessible to students, the space is flexible to provide whole-group,

small-group, pairs-of-students, and individual-student learning, and the walls are used as a story of what the students are learning and what may be coming next (Roskos & Neuman, 2011). The walls of the classroom are part of the story of an effective teacher. All of the teachers' walls enhanced the learning environment.

Observations

“Observation is one of the key tools for collecting data in qualitative research” (Creswell, 2013, p. 166). After the interviews took place with the four teachers, I scheduled a time to observe interactions in their classrooms while they had students. Each observation lasted only 15 minutes. The observation was completed to triangulate the data from the documents/artifacts collected and corroborate the information given during the interviews.

I started each observation as a nonparticipant observer, taking notes from a distance (Creswell, 2013) and only engaged with the students and teacher if they engaged me first. During these observations, I focused on how the teacher spoke to their students, the work/activity that was going on, and the engagement and demeanor of the students throughout the 15 minutes I spent in each classroom.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data in qualitative research is perhaps the most daunting, but the most important, aspect of the research project. Information from multiple sources was compiled and categorized in codes, which led to themes, and eventually, the conclusions of the study. During this process, the data were interpreted, which led to the findings of

the study. This current research project used the categorizing strategy of coding. “The process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (Creswell, 2013, p. 184). This research used open coding, where the coding categories emerged from the participants’ interviews. The interviews were transcribed and “rearranged into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107).

I received the transcribed interviews in a timely manner. I printed each interview on a different color paper, then I cut out the parts where I spoke. I started with the teachers’ responses. I mixed up the different pieces of the teachers’ interviews and put them in one pile, and then put all the different pieces of the principals’ interviews in another pile. As I read the selection, I coded it by writing words, phrases, or sentences on the back of the paper.

I laid all the pieces of paper out in columns. Then I took white index cards and wrote category names on each index card. In the end, there were 10 different categories represented (see Figure 4). I analyzed each teachers’ answer with how many times they highlighted one of the categories in their responses. These categories were then analyzed, and themes emerged and eventually led to answering my research questions.



Figure 4. Categorized codes for teachers.

I then conducted the same procedure using the principals' responses. After I coded by writing words, sentences, or phrases, I created four different categories. The principals' responses were important to this study because they triangulated the data received from the teachers. The categories created support the categories of the teachers. The principals' categories supported the themes established for the teachers' responses. (see Figure 5).

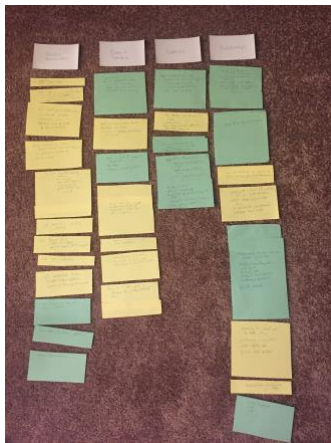


Figure 5. Categorized codes for principals.

Through this process some subcategories also emerged. These categories serve different purposes but could overlap in some areas. These categories are “organizational,” “substantial,” and “theoretical” (Maxwell, 2013). Organizational categories are broad areas to help sort the data, but they typically don’t contribute to the content of the participants’ knowledge. However, substantial and theoretical categories help the researcher categorize the information in a way “that explicitly identify the *content* the person’s statement or action” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107). Substantial categories are descriptive, usually obtained from open coding of the data. “They can be used in *developing* a more general theory of what’s going on, but they don’t *depend on* this theory” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108), whereas theoretical categories “place the coded data into a more general or abstract framework” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108). There were few organizational categories that were developed and these categories were not included in the 10 categories I included in my final count. The 10 categories were substantial and theoretical. As I went through the first time, I coded common words or messages from the interviews. When I re-read the interviews, I looked for the ideas their words encompassed.

All categories were responsive to the research questions. Categories must be sensitive to the data, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009). There were multiple categories at the beginning of the research analysis, but as the analysis continued, these categories were narrowed to the most relevant to the research questions. Ten categories were created before themes were identified. Themes were identified within each case as well as across all cases.

At the beginning of analyzing the data, the researcher operated at an inductive state of analysis. The main objective was to take segments of the data and put them together to make and name clusters (Merriam, 2009) of information. However, as the analysis continued and the researcher reached saturation, the thinking turned to deductive. The researcher tested the categories against the data to ensure they were accurate and that solid conclusions could be established (Merriam, 2009).

In order to produce an exemplary case study, the researcher had to consider five general characteristics. These characteristics could have the potential of making the current case study a lasting contributor to the literature. The five characteristics are the case study: (a) must be significant, (b) must be complete, (c) must consider alternative perspectives, (d) must display sufficient evidence, and (e) must be composed in an engaging manner (Yin, 2009). In order for a case study to be significant, it must be unusual or be of the general public's interest and an issue of national importance (Yin, 2009). The current study meets both of these criteria, as federal legislature is constantly being revised and resources are being used to help disadvantaged youths, and it is an ongoing national topic about which most people have an opinion, considering schools affect every individual in the nation.

A case study is complete by meeting three criteria. The boundaries of the case needed to be given explicit attention, the collection of evidence was exhaustive, and the research didn't end on nonresearched constraints, such as the researcher didn't have time or money to continue (Yin, 2009). The current research followed all three criteria to make it complete.

By presenting alternative perspectives, the researcher reduces the chances of biases that could be involved in the research consciously or subconsciously. These perspectives need to challenge the assumptions of the case, such as cultural views, different theories, or variations by stakeholders (Yin, 2009). This case study presented alternative theories.

In order to be an exemplary case study, it needs to present the most relevant evidence so the reader can make their “judgements regarding the merits of the analysis” (Yin, 2009, p. 188). The research has to be written in a way in which alternative perspectives are addressed so the reader has complete control of their conclusions. However, the researcher should illustrate the depth of their knowledge to the reader. The final criteria for an exemplary case study is that the research must be written in an engaging manner. “Engagement, enticement, and seduction” (Yin, 2009, p. 190) are three characteristics that will certainly lead to an exemplary case study. The reader should have clarity while reading, and the case should unfold where the reader wants to continue reading. This research study strived to meet all of the criteria for an exemplary case study report.

Trustworthiness

Replicability

Replicability in qualitative research can be met with the way the data are collected and coded. The researcher must obtain detailed field notes by using a tape-recorder and transcribing the tape (Creswell, 2013). Another way to enhance replicability of the study

is to use a third party or a computer program to code the data. Using a third party or a computer program minimizes researcher biases and reactivity, which can skew the data and interpretation. In order to obtain replicability, the researcher needs to provide specific procedures (Yin, 2009). The steps should be “as operational as possible” so another researcher could “repeat the procedures and arrive at the same results (Yin, 2009, p. 45). However, gaining the exact results in a qualitative study is difficult because human behavior is not static. Therefore, the main idea of replicability is “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221).

If an investigator were to conduct the exact same case study, they should yield similar findings and conclusions (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) also referred to this as a chain of evidence. The steps a researcher took to arrive at their conclusions should be transparent and concise, so the study could be replicated if necessary.

For the current study, replicability was achieved through the use of a third party to transcribe the audio recordings of the interviews. These audio recordings were sent via Dropbox, with initials attached to each recording. The transcriptionist did not live in the same state and had not met the researcher face to face. Replicability was also attained through rich and thick descriptions. Rich and thick descriptions were noted during the observations and interviews to provide a whole picture of what effective reading teachers were doing in their classrooms and their interactions with their students. Also, replicability was achieved through the use of specified criteria in purposefully selecting the schools and classrooms sampled for this study.

Credibility

Credibility is taken into account with the design, methods, and findings in a study. Establishing credibility within a research study indicates that the findings found are actually related to the phenomenon being studied. Flinders and Eisner (1994) suggested credibility has to have three criteria: structural corroboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy. “Structural corroboration refers to the weight and consistency of cumulative data” (Flinders & Eisner, 1994, p. 354). This study met the needs of structural corroboration through the collection of data from multiple sources. Obtaining information from multiple resources allowed the researcher to feel confident about the conclusions that were established from the study. The collection of information from multiple resources was triangulated to enhance the credibility of the study.

Triangulation is collecting data from multiple resources, so comparisons can be made from more than one source. The collection of these materials does not merely ensure credibility, but it reduces the chance of biases (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, interviews, documents, and artifacts were used to support the purpose of the study and provide detailed information in answering the research questions.

The current study also provided rich, thick descriptions. This is important because it allows the reader to transfer the results of the study into different settings. The researcher described in accurate detail the participants and the settings and also provided rich analyses of the themes that emerged throughout the study. The researcher was able to do this using verbatim transcripts of the interviews. The transcripts helped eliminate researcher bias by having the exact words of the participants in front of the reader

(Maxwell, 2013). The researcher used member checks to ensure the information being collected was not misinterpreted and the meaning the participants intended was captured accurately.

Consensual validation seeks the opinion of others to establish validation in the given area. This study intended to find common themes, descriptions, and interpretations from four different teachers. From the four different teachers and two different principals, an agreement in what an effective elementary reading teacher looked like in how they build trust and relationships, their delivery of reading instruction, and how relational trust impacts reading achievement emerged. “One reason for promoting multiple perspectives is that they contribute to informed choice and empowerment” (Flinders & Eisner, 1994, p. 350). The description provided by the researcher of these four teachers and two principals lent support to this study in gaining credibility.

In order to obtain in-depth and honest representations of the four teachers and two principals, the researcher built relationships with the participants. In the initial email request for an interview, the researcher explained the research questions, provided background on herself, and offered to meet the participants at any time or place that would work for their schedule. The researcher smiled and greeted each of the participants with a hand shake and asked about their day and year thus far. While the researcher set up, she talked to them about everyday things for a few minutes and reiterated the purpose for the interview to make them comfortable. Through these interactions, a relationship of ease and comfortability was formed. With the participant who was unable to meet face to face, pleasant emails were exchanged for weeks trying to

negotiate a time to meet face-to-face, but when that failed, professional emails were sent to maintain the relationship built. After each of the interviews, a handwritten thank you note was sent to each participant. Maxwell (2013) agreed that long-term involvement with the participants provides a deeper and more complete understanding of the participants. The researcher must build trusting relationships with the participants and make decisions about what is necessary information for the purpose of the study. By building these relationships, the content of the interviews was more substantial and trustworthy.

“Referentially adequate criticism tells its readers something about a particular work, its nuances, its style, its genre” (Flinders & Eisner, 1994, p. 354). For this particular study, referential adequacy was met by shining a light on the successful instructional strategies and assessments effective teachers used in their classroom to help narrow the achievement gap. Referential adequacy will guide future observations and enhance understanding (Flinders & Eisner, 1994).

“While structural corroboration gauges the degree to which the criticism is well informed, referential adequacy gauges the degree to which the criticism enables the reader to experience qualities within the situation that the critic claims to be there” (Flinders & Eisner, 1994, p. 354). This study aimed to contribute to an understanding of strategies that effective elementary teachers use to build relational trust to help students of color achieve. If this study is to be credible about its intended conclusions, structural corroboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy must be present.

It is necessary to ensure a qualitative research study has replicability and credibility, so it can be added to the existing literature about the topic. Readers must be able to relate to the study and see how it can affect their current situation. This is especially important for this study's topic of how to improve the achievement scores of students of color.

Limitations

This study is not without a couple of limitations. This study used the perceptions of effective reading teachers and their principals in how to build relational trust with diverse students to increase reading achievement. Teachers described the methods and activities they conduct to build relationships with their students and their students' families. However, the study did not address students' perspectives or the families' perspective on which activities and methods were the most powerful with building these relationships. Therefore, all methods and activities were discussed with equal consideration. The study is lacking evidence to rank the methods and activities used that created strong relational trust among teachers and their students. However, this was not the purpose of this study.

The selection of participants was another limitation. All the participants came from the same district and from only two schools. Future research should seek teachers from multiple school districts, perhaps different states, and different demographic backgrounds to see if their perspectives are similar. The replication of these results is needed. Obtaining similar data from different teachers would generalize the findings of this study. Teachers also may have felt pressured to participate in the study considering it

was based on the recommendation by their principal. Future research could extend a more comprehensive list of teachers for the principal to choose from so the teachers had the opportunity to decline if they wanted.

Chapter Summary

This study used a multiple case study design to explore the strategies effective elementary reading teachers use to build relational trust with diverse students and how relational trust and instructional strategies impact reading achievement. A criterion purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could add value to the study to explore the research questions. The researcher reached out to the principals of the two most diverse elementary schools in a large northern Colorado school district to ask for participation. At one school site, the principal selected two effective reading teachers who met the criteria for this research. At the other school site, the top four teachers were chosen based on analysis of standardized state reading data of third- through fifth-grade teachers over the past three years. The principal then selected the two most effective reading teachers from the top four. The participants were purposefully chosen to ensure they were effective reading teachers teaching a diverse population of students.

This study provided rich and detailed accounts through focused interviews of what the teachers did in their classrooms to embrace and allow students of color and White students to achieve. The focused interviews were transcribed, categorized, and coded into themes. From these themes, conclusions were created to answer the research questions. Classroom observations, documents, and artifacts were also collected to

present a rich account of an effective reading teacher. The results of these methods are provided in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how effective teachers were able to build relational trust and increase reading achievement with diverse students. The research was guided by the following research questions:

Q1 How do highly effective teachers build trusting relationships in a highly diverse elementary school?

Q2 How does building relational trust impact instructional strategies in reading?

Q3 How does relational trust impact student reading achievement of third, fourth, and fifth graders?

In this chapter, four teachers are introduced in their own words. Themes developed from each of the four teachers to include: differentiation, relationships, community, scaffold, engagement, students needs/being intentional, passion/excitement, and know students. From these within-case themes, three cross-case themes emerged. The teachers used effective strategies to teach their students, but the foundation of their success was built on the three cross-themes that emerged.

The principals in this study empowered their teachers to make decisions that were best for their teaching. The teachers took this model and applied it to their students. They empowered their students to learn by scaffolding the material, providing engaging lessons, and creating an excitement about the subject. Molly created lessons that started

at her students' instructional level and then moved them forward. Amy believed that every student can learn to read and continued to search for ways to assist her students. Jake used his students' success as a building block in which to start teaching and from there, individualized their learning. Luke believed in providing ample opportunities for students to read and adjusted his lesson so students grasped the concepts. All of the teachers provided the necessary resources to help their students.

The principals and teachers in this study worked together to enhance the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom. The teachers used this same method to work with their students to improve academic and behavior success. Molly provided her students with a good role model and treated them with respect. She ate lunch with her students, made positive phone calls home, sent parent surveys, and assigned culturally relevant homework. Amy created a positive community in her classroom. She invited parents into her classroom, sent home parent surveys, and produced activities and games at the beginning of the year and continued these throughout the year. Jake made his classroom a safe place. He had a star student of the week, invited students in for lunch, provided students with options, sent parent surveys, always used a calm voice, and asked parents to participate in his classroom. Luke wanted his students to *want* to come to school. He enacted a morning share time, invited students in for lunch, requested special volunteers for jobs, and created a Friday fun day. These activities were the foundation for the teachers' effectiveness.

When the principals observed teachers, they assisted the teacher on what they thought went well or could be improved. The teachers used this same model to help their

students. Molly made adjustments on how she interacted with a student who struggled behaviorally until his behavior improved. She also thought about how she could better differentiate her lessons to help her students. Amy constantly made adjustments with the curriculum through scaffolds to help her students succeed. She monitored their progress and adapted their groups, adjusted her planning and delivery, and examined their assessments. Everything Jake did in his classroom stemmed from the data he collected. He analyzed what each student had mastered, each students' area of struggle, and where to lead his students. He individualized the instruction based on this feedback and believed his teaching was only as good as his ability to assist his students. Luke had a continuous conversation with himself about the progress of the day. From these thoughts he changed his delivery style, the methods the students used that day, or questioned whether or not he should bring in outside resources. Every day the teachers in this study looked to improve their teaching practices so they could help their students succeed. Table 3 presents the themes of each case along with the themes across each case.

Table 3. Summary of Within-case and Cross-case Themes.

Within-case Themes by Case	Cross-case Themes
Molly Differentiation Relationships	1. Belief in every student
Amy Community Scaffold	2. Relationships as basis of effective teaching
Jake Engagement Student needs/being intentional	3. Reflection
Luke Passion/excitement Know Students	

Case 1: Molly

Observations in Molly's Classroom

Molly has taught fourth grade for four years in the same district. Teaching was Molly's second career. Prior to teaching, she worked in a corporate job for 15 years. She had always enjoyed the training aspect of her other job, so when the opportunity arose, she attended graduate school and studied elementary education. At the time of the study, Molly was getting her administrative license with hopes of becoming a principal.

Molly was very friendly and welcoming, but also has a no-nonsense aspect to her. I had met Molly on three different occasions. The first time was to interview her, the next time she walked through my classroom doing observations for her administrative licensure, and the final time was when I observed her in her classroom. When I went to

interview her, she welcomed me and we went to a conference room and then it was right down to business. When she conducted a walk-through of my classroom, it was very brief, but we greeted each other warmly. The final time I met Molly, I went to her current classroom as the school day began. During the fall, there was extensive damage to Molly's school due to a water main breaking. The school found placement for the rest of the year at a local church. After teaching in "a dual classroom co-teaching with about 50 students in our classroom" they were moved to a more permanent location. Molly's classroom was now in a portable next to the church.

As I walked up to the portable, there were five students standing out on the ramp laughing and talking while they waited for their teacher to open the door. They were quick to tell me stories about getting to school that icy morning, and they were excited to be at school that day. As Molly opened the door, she greeted me and then almost immediately the students started sharing all kinds of stories with her. Molly allowed them to share their stories as she continued to get some things organized for the day. The students walked around the classroom and talked with their peers. They all wore smiles and were laughing with each other.

One student shared a story with Molly about how he was grounded for lying. Molly in turn, shared a story about how she was grounded all of sixth grade, but that she couldn't even remember what she did. She told the students all she remembered was she had to go straight home after school and she couldn't leave the house. The students laughed and went on to share different stories. With each story they told, she commented or had a story of her own to add. She listened to their stories and paid attention. She

checked in with a student who had been absent the day before about how he was feeling. After a few minutes, she requested they all get a book out. One student complained about this request, but she looked at him and jokingly said, “What grade are you in?” The student stopped complaining.

The atmosphere in Molly’s classroom was relaxed and positive. Even though she gave them directions to get out their books, most of the students still walked around and talked with their friends. They were not being deviant, as Molly and her student teacher were also walking around and talking to the students. Eventually, Molly began to hand back math exit tickets and gave them feedback. She reminded many of the students to be sure to show their work, but she didn’t degrade them for not doing it. There wasn’t an urgency to get the day started because they were still waiting for most of the class to arrive. As time went on, more and more students trickled into the classroom. Students were bussed to this new location from the old school, so the start of the day was somewhat flexible.

After about 10 minutes, there were enough students to start the day. Just as she was about to get started, a student walked into the classroom with three dozen donuts for her birthday. The students got excited, and Molly allowed them a couple of minutes to discuss the student’s birthday. She asked the student if she wanted to share the donuts now or later in the day. The student chose later in the day, so they put the donuts on the back bookshelf. To get the students back on track, she said, “Ladies and gentlemen, take your seats.” Immediately, the class started to quiet down, and Molly began a countdown

in a calm voice. “Ten, 9, 8, . . . 3, voices should be off, 2, eyeballs this way, and 1, listening to instructions.” When she got to 1, all the students’ voices are off.

She explained to the students how they usually have morning work, but this morning was different because they had another teacher who wanted to come and read them a book. She requested they need grab their “time in text” book and start reading. She asked the lunch counter and breakfast person to do their jobs. Things began to get loud again as more students entered and the lunch counter and breakfast person asked who was eating. Molly quickly redirected the students again, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, what were the directions?” The room quieted down again, but it was not silent. Some students were reading from their book, and Molly commented to them about doing what she asked. Eventually, Molly rang a bell and said, “1.” She used a soft and calm voice to redirect the students and reminded them what time in text should look like.

She reminded the students to hang up their backpacks and not leave them on their chairs because they would fall off their chairs. She said, “They will fall and I will die if I trip on them. I don’t feel like dying today, people.” The kids all laughed. The teacher who was reading to the class that day, walked in and immediately told Molly about a student who had a backpack at his desk. The reading teacher said condescendingly, “Should this student have their backpack at their desk?” Molly didn’t stop what she was doing and said, “I’m not sure.” A few seconds later, Molly walked up to the student and asked that he hang up his backpack. He complied without a discussion.

Molly’s classroom was organized in a way that encouraged collaboration. There were two pods of six desks each, one long group of desks that ran through the middle of

the classroom, and two students had their own individual desks near groups (see Figure 6). There were also two tables set up for small groups. Despite it not being their regular classroom, in the short few weeks they had been in the classroom, Molly had tried to make the space inviting for the students. There were some posters on the wall of student work, posters about having a positive mind set (see Figure 7), and anchor charts for student learning. The teachers' desks took up the least space in the classroom. They were cramped in the back of the room.



Figure 6. Molly's classroom layout.

	INSTEAD OF ...	TRY ...
VIEWPOINT	I have to be perfect.	I love a new challenge.
SETBACKS	I've failed at this.	How can I learn from my mistakes and move forward?
CHALLENGES	This is too hard!	I can do this if I put in the time and effort.
EFFORT	Why should I try hard?	I will always give my best effort.
FEEDBACK	That advice isn't helpful.	I will try those suggestions.
RESULTS	This is good enough.	I'm always making progress and improving.

Figure 7. Molly's positive mindset poster.

In my interviews with Molly and her principal, observation, and interactions with her, it was evident that she built strong relationships with her students and cared deeply about them. When I asked her to tell me how her students would describe her, she said “funny and energetic and hard. . . I think they would say that they probably work hard in class.” Molly’s principal described Molly as someone who is “genuinely positive and data driven,” she added that when there was something to be done, Molly was “very efficient in getting things done in a timely manner.”

During my interview with Molly and her principal, every answer or story focused around relationships. Molly’s principal described Molly as someone who “values each and every student” and expected all of her students to be “respectful” and “supportive” of each other. Her relationships with her students included the family of the student as well. Molly’s principal explained that she welcomes parents into her classroom, and “she really tries to get to know those families and get to know their stories.” She went on to explain that Molly takes the extra time, “beyond contract hours,” to meet with families “to figure out how she can be supportive of not only the student,” but the families as well. According to Molly’s principal, Molly was in “constant communication” with students’ parents, and parents were “aware of how their child is doing academically, socially, and emotionally.”

Through her interview, Molly spoke about the importance of building a strong relationship with students and fostering those relationships. Along with saying students see her as being funny, energetic, and hard, she also included that students view her as “someone they could talk to.” Molly made it a point to work with students in her

classroom. She used “re-teaching and restorative justice” when working with kids through discipline issues. Restorative justice is an approach to discipline based on “respect, responsibility, relationship-building, and relationship-repairing. It focuses on mediation and agreement rather than punishment” (Dalporto, 2013). She also used the *Leader in Me*, which she thought gave her students “an opportunity to be a successful member of society.”

She shared a story how she has a box in her room that was labeled “Teacher’s Eyes Only.” This was where students could write down something they heard or saw, without feeling like they were tattling on other students. She has gotten notes in the box that said a student used a swear word. Instead of writing the student up and sending them out of the room, Molly approached that student when she had time to have a conversation with the student. She “stays calm” and doesn’t raise her voice level or “fly off the handle.” She tried to teach the students that it’s okay to make mistakes. It’s important to admit the mistake you made, let’s talk about it, and then “move on and the next day is a new day.”

She built relationships with the students’ parents as well. She makes “five positive phone calls a week.” She also used an app where she can text parents throughout the day, and it hides her phone number, so she could send out positive notes or pictures to students’ parents. Molly said these phone calls and texts were important because she wanted the students to see that “my parents and my teacher are both on the same side, and they’re working together to make sure that I’m the best student that I can be and the best kid I can be.” She tried “to get to know their story” from her experiences with the

student and their family. Molly doesn't like going to the last year's teacher because the kids should have a "fresh slate" and the "natural maturation" that happens between grade levels should be taken into consideration. By building strong relationships with her students, Molly is invested in them as students and people.

Perhaps because of the strong relationships Molly built with students, differentiation was also highlighted in almost every answer Molly gave. Molly was fully aware of the reading level of each of her students and understood that teaching students a skill from a text was "irrelevant if they can't access the text." She told a story about how she taught a science lesson using an on-grade level text. When she sat down to help her struggling readers, she realized they couldn't understand the skill they were working on because the text was too hard. She said, "I need them to have the skill, it's not so much about the content as can they find the main idea or the details." She explained that the following day she was going to give them a text on their instructional level, so they could "really focus on the skill, not necessarily the level of the text."

Molly tried to "personalize the learning for the student" as much as possible. In a fourth-grade classroom, she currently had students reading at a "first-grade level to a sixth-grade level." She explained that when she teaches reading, she tries to "meet the kid where they are." She needed to know what level they were at, where they struggle, and then she was able to meet "them on their instructional level to move them forward." She fully understood that not every student may be at grade level at the end of the year, but her job was to move them as close to grade level as possible in the given year. She "homogenously groups" her students "when she can" so she can provide them texts they

can access. These groups were flexible, based on “where they are and what they need.” She ran stations in her classroom, where she has a “what I need” station. At this station students were on a computer, and she sets-up each individual to work on skills they needed additional help with. She designed this so that “every kid gets exactly what they need.” She was very passionate about not wasting students’ time on things they already knew. She told her students, if you can prove to me “time and time again that you can do this skill, I’m not going to waste your time.” She found the areas they needed to work on and focused their “what I need” station around those skills.

At the beginning of a school year, as Molly got to know her students, she also gave them a “learning style survey” so she can deliver her lessons to best meet the needs of her students. By presenting the information to them in their preferred learning style, it “allows them to learn the content more easily because that’s the natural way they learn.”

Students have different academic needs, and they also have different behavior needs as well. Molly differentiates her management for individual students. She told a story about a student who was having a rough start to the school year. She was “trying to make him conform to school.” When she realized that she was trying to make him fit into a system that he wasn’t going to fit into, she changed things for him. She first started out by having him work for “10 minutes and then a 5-minute break” and continued to repeat this process. A few months into school and now the student was up to “25 minutes of work and a 5-minute break.” The other thing she did to support this student was “adjust the school day” to “meet his needs instead of vice versa.” She gave him a choice board, which had all the standards listed for what they would be working on that day. He

had the choice to do whichever ones he wants to do, whenever he wants to do them. Even if they were in reading and he wanted to do math, she didn't mind. She had adjusted the school day to fit his needs, and it had been very successful up to the point of the interview.

Themes in Molly's Teaching Practices

Relationships and differentiation were the two themes that stood out in Molly's case. The interview with Molly and her principal both supported these themes, along with my observation and interactions with her. Every comment, story, and answer Molly gave about her teaching centered around relationships. The relationships Molly built with her students were not in place of the content she was teaching, but they were established so she could push her students further into that content. She thought her students would consider her a "confidant," but also that she was "hard." She used humor to build relationships, and her students thought she was funny as well, as was the case when she asked them to hang up their backpacks so she wouldn't die. "They will fall and I will die if I trip on them. I don't feel like dying today, people." They shared stories about their everyday lives. When a student told her he was grounded, she told them a story of how she "was grounded all of sixth grade." She was committed to knowing them not only as students but people as well.

Molly used restorative justice and the *Leader in Me* in her classroom, which showed her students that she valued them as people and wanted them to be successful beyond the school year. The *Leader in Me* was used to "help grow good adults, to foster them and give them an opportunity to be a successful member of society." Restorative

justice is an approach to discipline where agreement and mediation is sought, rather than punishment (Dalporto, 2013). She taught them responsibility through jobs in the classroom. “Every single student in my class has a responsibility and has a job and they apply for that job and they can get fired from that job if they don’t do good with success.” Some of these jobs were “breakfast person and lunch counter.” This enabled Molly to build a relationship with her students expanding the typical student/teacher relationship.

Molly also went beyond the walls of the classroom to build relationships with her students’ families. She reached out to the students’ parents and invited parents into the classroom. Molly used an app called ‘Remind.com’ to text and correspond with parents throughout the day. She said, while “Remind is not the only way to help build relationships, it is a great avenue to quickly take a picture of a great moment in the student’s day and text it to their parent or share something funny that they said or how proud they were when they finally got something that day.” She contacted them for positive reasons as well as when she needed help with their child. Since, they were in a temporary location, she said the app was especially important because “they don’t have their regular extensions.” The app allowed parents to get in touch with her any time. It also allowed parents to warn her when their “child is having a bad morning, so she can prepare for their day a little differently.” By working with their parents, she was able to work with the student more effectively.

Building strong relationships with her students assisted Molly with the understanding of what they knew academically and where they struggled. Molly personalized the learning for her students to ensure they were getting the additional

practice they needed on the skills they struggled with. She used different techniques to help her students. She conferenced with her students over content material or behavior situations and was conscious of her voice level when she spoke with them. She “formed a pretty solid picture of where the kid was at and where they needed to move to” when she conferenced with her students. She used online components during her stations, such as iReady. Students took a diagnostic test to determine their current reading level, and that information assisted Molly in differentiating the instruction. It gave students extra opportunities for practice on skills they were lacking. She also worked with them in flexible small groupings. “We’ll have some practice time with our partners, and then I break them out into homogeneously grouped kiddos.” These groups are not always the same, so it “depends on where they are and what they need.”

She believed in meeting a student at their current level and then continued to push beyond that starting point. She made the material accessible for them by providing them text at their instructional level so the focus could be on the skill they were working on. “I need them to have the skill,” and the skill is “irrelevant if they can’t access the text.” Building strong relationships with students allowed Molly to differentiate instruction so that all students were successful in mastering the content.

Case 2: Amy

Observations in Amy’s Classroom

Amy had been teaching for five years in the same district. She taught one year as a first-grade teacher and the last four years as a third-grade teacher. Amy completed the

requirements for becoming a principal and obtained her school administrative licensure last year.

Due to extenuating circumstances, Amy and I did not have a chance to sit down for a face-to-face interview. Instead, I emailed her the questions and she replied. I then sent follow-up emails to her and she sent her responses. In these emails, Amy often spoke about community, and Amy's principal spoke without prompting of the positive community Amy builds in her classroom. Amy said her students would describe her as a "very positive, firm, fun, sarcastic, and organized" teacher. Even though the expectations are high, they "like to have fun and joke around." Amy's principal considered Amy to be very "positive" in her interactions with her colleagues and her students.

I had the opportunity to meet Amy face to face during an observation. Her demeanor toward her students was calm and friendly. The school day had already begun when I arrived at Amy's classroom. After the water main broke at her school, she was relocated to a portable next to a church for the remainder of the year. When I knocked on her classroom door, a student greeted me. Amy was at her desk, finishing up things to get the day started. Most of the students were sitting quietly at their desks reading and eating breakfast. Some students had their books out but were talking to each other. When Amy had a break from what she was organizing, she got up and greeted me.

Amy's classroom was very welcoming. Even though this was a temporary classroom, she had gone out of her way to make sure the room was decorated and felt comfortable. There were five pods of desks of four or five each, and a table for small group work. The walls were covered with colorful posters (see Figure 8). The posters

were academically driven, inspirational, and anchor charts done in class. The room was very organized and had stations for sharpening pencils, turning in work, checking out books (see Figure 9), and using hand sanitizer. In a small space, Amy was creative with the layout of her classroom.



Figure 8. Poster's in Amy's classroom.



Figure 9. Book station.

As the students read from their books, Amy asked them to raise their hand if they were eating breakfast. She then reminded them they would do “time in text” for another

15 minutes. Amy separated collections of papers and asked different students to run these to other classrooms. Amy spoke on the phone a few times to other teachers, trying to get their copies organized and sorted correctly. She then told the students that if it was their day to change their books, they were able to go do that. One student took her up on that offer and went back to the book area with a notecard in her hand. All of the books were organized and had a colored sticker on their spine. On the side of the bookshelf was a key for the different colored stickers. They are organized by Lexile levels. On the student's notecard, there were three different colored stickers that said "ok," "perfect," and "challenge." The student spent as much time as she needed to find a new book. Amy never ushered her to hurry up or get back to her seat. She allowed the student to go through books, finding the book she really wanted to read.

A student arrived late to school, and Amy immediately asked her for a form. When the student handed her the form, Amy responded, "Awesome, girlfriend." The student smiled and hung up her backpack and coat and went right to her seat and started reading. It was evident Amy had strong classroom management because all of her students knew what they were supposed to be doing. They made an effort to do what was expected. Even though there were some students talking or not reading, they knew to keep their voices to a minimum or sit quietly. At the end of the "time in text" reading block, Amy told them to meet up front, but they also needed to pick up their "breakfast scraps." Near the front of the classroom was a very small space between the desks and a whiteboard.

After a few seconds, Amy stated, “Please come up front” and she started a countdown. Most of the students went to the front of the room and squeezed into the small space, while some students near the front stayed in their seats. There was no discussion about who would stay in their seats and who would sit where on the carpet. Amy used many teaching strategies to keep the students engaged. She had signals for when she wanted them to read together or get their attention back on her. As she began teaching that day’s topic, she required all the students to participate. She asked them to read from the board, and when she only heard some voices, she stopped them and asked everyone to read. This topic was a review for them, so she often related it back to previous things they had done on the topic.

As she taught, she had a student change the slides for her at his desk. She reiterated to her class over and over again that they would have the opportunity for more practice on the skills they were going over that day. While she taught, all the students were engaged and watched her when she spoke. After this mini-lesson, students would be practicing these skills at technology stations and independent stations. Amy was organized in her lesson presentation, and she taught with a calm but authoritative voice.

In my observation and interviews with Amy and Amy’s principal, it was apparent Amy spent time building a learning community in her classroom. Amy spent a lot of time at the beginning of the year getting to know her students, creating a strong foundation for the classroom community. They “do lots of team building activities to learn about each other.” Some of these activities included teambuilding exercises such as “kindness web, straw/tape/tower activity, and puzzle pieces.” The puzzle-piece activity

showed the kids that they are all a different piece of the puzzle, and together, they make up a whole. Amy also reached out to parents and invited them into the classroom to “interact with their students.” Students took home a “family survey” so they could share their backgrounds with the class. Amy’s principal explained that Amy “welcomes the parents” of her students and assists the families with questions about the “educational system as well as community outreach opportunities” that may support families in need.

Amy also built the classroom community by asking a question on the board every week so the class can learn something new about each person. While the students are eating breakfast, they answer the question. The questions range from basic information such as their “favorite subject/color/animal” to questions about their “opinions” or “things to ponder, such as what their super power would be.” She tried to keep these questions engaging and of high interest for the students.

Another way Amy built community was by establishing trust with her students. “I take a lot of pride in fostering trust and building relationships with my students.” She believed trust and relationships were “the most important part in the success of a student’s education.” Amy’s principal agreed that there was “a lot of trust in [her] classroom and students feel safe. . .to become that community to work together.” She elaborated this saying that Amy created an environment where students were “safe in saying” whatever they wanted and were “able to share with one another.”

Amy approached discipline in a way that established trustworthiness in her classroom. She explicitly stated the expectations at the beginning of the year, and then continued to help students with them throughout the year. “When the students know

what is expected of them, they will know what they need to do.” Students had concrete rules and routines established to help them succeed. This provided Amy the opportunity to *re-teach* her students when they failed to follow the rules, rather than punish them.

When students struggled to follow the expectations, Amy used their school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) resources. Positive behavioral interventions and supports was designed to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students (OSEP, 2017). It was designed to be a positive and proactive classroom management system. She used the *Leader in Me*, “a lot of re-teaching of the expectations,” and had “conversations with the students to see where their refusal is coming from.” She did not set up these rules and routines, as a way to catch her students, but rather as a way to help them grow as people. She understood that when a student acted up, there was “always a reason for the behavior they are showing.” She believed it was the teacher’s job “to figure out the why.” By addressing behaviors and engaging her students in the team building activities she conducted, she established a positive classroom community where trust was evident.

Amy created a strong social and emotional community for her students, but she also provided a safe community academically through scaffolding for her students. Amy believed in every child and knew “that every child can learn to read.” Not only does she believe every child can read, but she also believed teachers needed “to continue to build the confidence in the child to make them believe that they *can* read.” Amy also recognized that not every student learns the same way and that “if one route isn’t working, try a different one.” She was “constantly adjusting the curriculum to meet the

needs of her students.” Amy looked at the curriculum and then scaffolds the material so her students could access it.

Amy scaffolds the learning for her students by providing different ways they can access the material. She had students work with partners or groups. During the reading block, Amy used a two-station rotation. These stations lasted “30-40 minutes each, depending on how long the mini-lesson/whole-group conversation/flipchart takes prior to rotation. One rotation was digital content on the computer, the other was a teacher-led/independent/collaborative group, focusing on the strategy/standard we are working on.” These groups changed on a weekly basis based on the students’ checkouts. The stations “allow us to really focus in on each student and differentiate based on their needs.” Depending on the skill being practiced she may choose to “group them into homogeneous or heterogeneous groups.” This “allows students to work with their peers in different settings to extend their learning.” The computer programs also helped scaffold the learning. This provided a “different path” for her to help the students reach the learning objective. These different methods not only helped her students who are low or have “language barriers,” but they were tools that helped all students.

Formative and summative assessments also supported Amy in meeting the needs of her students and providing the correct scaffolds for specific students. She used formative assessments to help “group my students on what standard” they are struggling with. It also gave her that quick check on what she needed to “re-teach” and cover again. By monitoring her students closely, she could “change and redo or adapt [her teaching] to meet their needs and get them to understanding and mastery.” Summative assessments

“allow me to see what the students have understood throughout a unit and what standard or skill they are still missing.”

Themes in Amy’s Teaching Practices

The two themes that really stood out in Amy’s case were community and scaffolding. Amy and her principal both spoke about the community Amy created in her classroom. Starting at the very beginning of the year, Amy started building the classroom community through team-building activities. She used “kindness webs, straw/tape/tower activity, and puzzle pieces” to illustrate how they can work together to accomplish one goal. They also go to know each other through these beginning activities. These activities were the foundation for creating a safe environment. Amy’s principal stated, “Students feel safe in their classrooms to be able to become that community to work together and feel that whatever is said that they’re safe in saying it and being able to share it with one another.”

She continued to build the community through how she managed discipline in her classroom. She used a positive reinforcement system and tried to be proactive when working with kids who were struggling behaviorally. When this system did not work for a student, she had conversations with the student and tried to discover what the root of the issue could be. “The relationships I build with students allow the discipline and the defiance of the students to be in check.” She valued her students as people by addressing them this way when they were struggling.

Amy took the time to include her students’ families when she was building this community. She invited the parents into the classroom and asked students to fill out a

survey, so the class could learn about their families. Amy's principal stated that the parents in Amy's classroom "are very aware of how their child is doing academically, socially, and emotionally." Amy kept in constant communication with parents throughout the school year.

Amy operated her classroom to meet her students where they were at. She accepted the fact that some students needed scaffolds in place to be successful with the standard being taught. She provided "different routes" for students to try and gain the knowledge of the material being presented. "There are different routes that can get them there. If one route isn't working [I will] try a different one." Amy constantly "monitored the students' performance" to see what she needed to "change and redo or adapt to meet their needs and get them to understanding and mastery." After every weekly checkout, Amy changed the stations and groups to focus on students' needs. Using the stations and groups allowed her to "meet with each student every single day and make sure they are mastering the standards we are working on." She gave them opportunities to work in groups or pairs, use technology, and when necessary, brought in additional resources.

Amy was "constantly adjusting the curriculum to meet the needs of her students" to make them more successful. Amy was able to implement scaffolds into the learning of her students because she was constantly monitoring their progress. "I use formative assessments to group my students on what standards I still need to reteach and continue to go back to." Using formative and summative assessments, she was quickly able to provide tools for the student to be more successful. Using these assessments, allowed Amy to see "what the students need and the levels they are performing at, and then that

allows me to look at the curriculum and scaffold as needed.” Amy built a safe community that allowed her students to take risks in their learning, and when they needed additional support, she was there to provide the necessary scaffolds to make her students successful.

Case 3: Jake

Observations in Jake’s Case

Jake has been in education for over twenty years. He has taught different grade levels in different schools and districts in Colorado. He was currently teaching fourth grade. Prior to this position, he was a literacy coach in the district. Jake is a highly regarded teacher, not only in his building, but across the district.

Jake’s demeanor was calm and soft spoken. While he stands close to six-feet tall, his presence was not intimidating at all. He was friendly and welcoming. When I met with Jake, it was always in his classroom. The first time we met was after school hours, so students had already gone home for the day. The next time I visited was at the beginning of the school day. As I walked up to Jake’s classroom, there were four to five students hanging around on the steps leading up to the classroom. Jake was standing in the doorway, laughing and joking with his students. When he saw me, he welcomed me warmly and invited me into the classroom. He began talking about the things on the walls and the projects that lined the cabinets. The students had been reading stories about earthquakes and natural disasters, so they had built structures to see how they could withstand water, weight, and wind. Jake explained they had tested them out the day

before, but some of the projects had some flooding, so the students had to go back, repair, and adjust their original ideas. They were going to test them out for the second time later that day.

Jake's classroom did not look like a traditional classroom. There were eight desks, two tables, and seating for eight on high-top tables (see Figure 10). There was an open area for kids to work on the floor when and if needed. Students had options for seating as well. Some chose traditional chairs, but others sat on exercise balls or wobble chairs. The walls were adorned with different Quick Response codes and classroom codes for different online sites (see Figure 11). Quick Response (QR) codes are barcodes that can be scanned with a smartphone and takes the user to a specific digital destination (Miller, 2011). There were two teacher sites in the classroom, one against the back wall where a large computer screen was housed, and the other, in the corner. The corner area looked and functioned more like a traditional classroom teacher's desk. This was where Jake took roll in the morning and conducted his morning administrative tasks. He also used this area to review the morning bellwork with the students. The morning bellwork was math review problems to get the students into an academic mindset immediately.



Figure 10. Jake's classroom layout.



Figure 11. Code displays in Jake's classroom.

As students entered the classroom, Jake greeted them as they walked by and he roamed around the classroom. Students came in orderly and quietly putting their coats and backpacks up on their racks as they had their last conversations of the morning with their friends. They found their seats in the classroom and immediately began working on their math bellwork. Throughout this time, Jake was an observer. He allowed the kids to do what they needed to do. Some students went up and talked to him privately and he was warm and welcoming with each and every one of them, giving them his undivided attention for those few seconds. Students quietly spoke with each other as they worked on their math problems.

Following the morning announcements, Jake introduced me, telling students I was going to join them for a few minutes that morning because I was working on my dissertation. He gave the students detailed information about the level of schooling I was working on and what a doctorate meant. The students listened attentively and then resumed their work. Shortly thereafter, a student approached Jake and explained to him that both of her parents “had gotten that as well.” Jake asked, “You mean they both have their doctorates?” The girl said “yes,” and Jake replied once more “they must be really

good at math, just like you.” Pleased with the conversation the girl went back to her seat and continued working on her math.

As Jake started to go over the math answers with his students, he asked the students to turn and talk with their neighbor, share their answers by putting up fingers, and had the kids vote on the method they used to solve the problem. While students talked to their neighbor and explained their thinking, or voted on the best answer, Jake sat at the front of the room and allowed the students to teach each other. He did not stand over students and interject his thoughts or feelings on the problems. His teaching came after the students completed the work individually and then conferenced with their peers. He then went over the answer on the board and allowed students to correct their mistakes if they needed.

One student walked into the class later than the other students. This particular student didn’t follow the same protocol as the other students. Jake noticed the student as soon as he walked in, greeted him and allowed the student a few minutes to get settled. The student sat down, slumped in his chair, and instead of getting out his math work and jumping into his bellwork assignment, he pulled out some object and put it in his mouth. After a few moments, Jake calmly walked over to the student, reminded him to get out his math work, and to throw away the object that was in his mouth. The student immediately got up and threw away the object, but he did not sit back down and do his work. Jake let a few more minutes pass before quietly calling the student up. Jake conferenced with the student shortly, and when the student returned to his seat, he got out his work and began working.

In my interviews with Jake and his principal, along with my observation and the examination of his lesson plans, it was apparent that everything Jake did in his class was calculated and planned to provide the highest engagement possible for students every single day. Jake was not a teacher who showed up to school and opened the teacher's guide and started teaching. Jake looked at the curriculum and used it as a guide. He believed you must be flexible and realized "I'm not tied to this." Jake told a story about how the curriculum instructed him to teach scientific concepts. Instead of reading the stories from the textbooks and moving on, Jake created an activity in which "the kids had to create a system where all those vocabulary words could be shown and explained." The students then set their creations up around the room and he and a student who had been absent quite a bit became the judges. They went around asking the students about their creations seeing if they could "adequately explain the different scientific concepts."

Jake wanted all his students to enjoy reading and learning. When the students read something boring, he found ways to combat this and make it more engaging. "I think there are ways to make even the driest reading entertaining . . . they have a game called *The Crazy Professor Reading Game* where the kids . . . read with a robot voice or a cowboy voice and it's pretty amazing because they are really able to comprehend the content probably way more than they would have otherwise and it's just because you took something that maybe wasn't as engaging and you turned it into something that's engaging." He also chose texts that his students would be highly interested in. He then taught them how to choose engaging texts for themselves. "I always tell the kids, if you're reading a book and you don't enjoy it, you need to only look in the mirror to

blame somebody because you chose it.” He gave them permission to abandon books as well. “You want to give a book a chance but know when it is enough to walk away instead of punishing yourself.” Jake believed “reading should be a lively experience, something that they’re having a lot of fun doing.”

As evident by the way his classroom was set up, Jake used a lot of collaborative learning in his classroom. Students engaged in projects together, turn and talked about their answers, and participated in daily “station rotations.” Jake understood that students learn in multiple ways. “I think giving them multiple avenues to express their learning . . . we do a ton of cooperative learning and collaborative work.” Jake also often changed the way he grouped students so that a group of students could work together on a skill they were struggling with. He also used technology to enhance engagement amongst his students. Jake’s principal told a story about how early on Jake wrote a grant to get iPods in his classroom. Jake would “conference” with the students through the iPods. He would give them feedback on their writing, and then the students were able to reference that feedback over and over again. As technology has evolved, Jake has continued to use the new enhanced versions in his classroom.

Jake used technology as the primary means for meeting his students’ needs. Jake’s principal stated that Jake “has always tried to be on the cutting edge of new, innovative approaches.” Jake has been using blended learning in his classroom for quite some time. Blended learning is an instructional method where students do some of their learning online and some of their learning in the traditional sense of school. Jake’s

principal said that Jake used blended learning to create that “individualized approach with kids.”

Students in Jake’s class logged onto different websites where he had posted assignments. Students worked at their own pace to complete the assignments. Depending on the assignment, students may have to watch videos about content and answer questions or they may be assigned a specific article to read based on specific skills they struggle with, take quizzes online, or participate in activities that interest them based on their strengths. This individualized learning was evident in the QR codes posted around Jake’s room. All these blended learning opportunities were routinely in Jake’s station rotations.

Throughout my interactions with him, Jake expressed that every student is an individual. He also believed that when you view students as individuals, every decision has to be intentional. “Every kid is an individual reader and so they all have their own hills and valleys so to speak . . . one of the tricks is really finding those hills and valleys, those successes that you can build on.” He was constantly using “ongoing assessments” to gauge the amount of knowledge a student has on the topic or skill. He was intentional with the formative assessments he gave based on “what’s going to give me the most bang for my buck.” He used different resources such as edpuzzle to help build students’ background knowledge, Caesar’s English to build vocabulary, Digital Readworks to assign specific skills, and Socratic Seminar to dig deeper with questions. With each of the approaches listed above, he was able to collect data on students and “be really intentional about placing them” in groups so he did not miss anything. “It’s all about

finding what their needs are and it's constantly revising the data and constantly regrouping kids to kind of maximize more bang for your buck as far as who needs what, when."

Jake's lesson plans reflected his belief on individualizing his reading instruction. Each week he began with quite a bit of support for his students and throughout the week, he gradually released responsibility to the students and used the framework "I do, we do, you do." He started off with a mini-lesson; then students worked with partners and eventually worked independently. During the independent practice time, he will "pull in individuals who need support" and assisted them with their learning. One of his stations was called "invitation station" where if a student was struggling with the content from the mini-lesson, an additional opportunity was provided for them to practice the skill. During this station, for example, he helped students by individually conferencing with them. "I'm pulling them in one on one to talk about their answers and talk about the thinking that's going on." If students were doing really well, he "will assign through blended content" and created "small-group lessons based on those [skills] instead." These groups were flexible and often regrouped. He was adamant that "not all kids are getting the same instruction, it's really based on what their needs are."

Jake knew that meeting his students needs was not only for academic reasons, but for behavioral reasons as well. He worked with students who struggled behaviorally by providing "choices." When a student refused to work, he gave them choices. He told the student, "Hey, it's totally okay with me [if you don't work now], but I need you to get it done. You can do it now or you can do it at recess. If you want to take it home for

homework, that's an option, we can call Mom and Dad and say that you're bringing home some special homework." Jake did not say this to the student to put him in his place, but he actually embraced the idea of providing the student options for when he completes his work. If it was a hard day for the student, he would give that student choices on when the work could be completed. Other students have had special plans they were on that consisted of breaks or rewards. Most of the time, though, Jake said that if a student is off-task, he would "go over and have a conversation" and see if there was something else going on.

Themes in Jake's Teaching Practices

To establish the themes of engagement and student needs/being intentional in Jake's case, I used observations, the interview conducted with his principal, an examination of his lesson plans, and Jake's own thoughts about his teaching. Everything Jake did in his classroom was centered around these themes. Jake went out of his way to make sure that even the driest reading was fun and engaging to his students by bringing in games to increase the enjoyment. He used the game "The Crazy Professor," where kids read using different voices if the reading was dry. He believed the most important aspect of reading is enjoyment. "If you can have them enjoy learning then they're going to buy into it." So, he gave his students the green light to change books if they are not enjoying the content. He taught them to give the book a chance, but he told them if they were not enjoying the book, then they have the wrong book.

He adapted and added to the curriculum the district used to ensure his lessons were engaging. Jake provided "multiple avenues to express their learning." He included

hands-on projects for his students. When students were reading about earthquakes and natural disasters, Jake had his class build structures to see if they could withstand water, weight, and wind. They then presented their projects, but they had to use the correct vocabulary. Jake also used group work, station rotations, and partner work. Students “do a ton of cooperative learning and collaborative work” to help each other learn. Students worked together on specific skills before going to their independent station. His lessons were designed “based on a gradual release of responsibility” using the “I do, we do, you do” instructional concept.

Students were highly engaged in Jake’s classroom not because all of his lessons were over the top, but because he was intentional with his planning and made sure the content met the students’ needs. He ran a blended learning community in his classroom where students accessed and practiced skills that were the most relevant to them. “All kids are not getting the same instruction, it’s really based on what their needs are.” Jake ran different stations in his classroom. At the “invitation station,” Jake assigned concepts each individual student needed additional practice on. Students have “blended content” or “small-group lessons” during this time. “I try to be really intentional about placing them, so that I’m not missing anything.” Students read articles and completed assignments within their reading range, or they were offered the necessary support through one-on-one conferences with their teacher or small groups. In preparation for assessments, Jake made “sure to be intentional and do the backward planning that I need to do” to ensure students were prepared. Jake did not teach to the test but used

intentional planning to support his students. “I’m a firm believer that if you’ve done a good job then kids will be successful on almost any test.”

Students were grouped in many different ways, and those groups were flexible. Using formative assessments, one-on-one conferences, and summative data, Jake individualized the instruction each student received through his blended learning component in his classroom. Jake used scaffolds every week from the most support needed to independent work, to increase student learning. Jake was very intentional with his teaching so that students were engaged and their needs were being met.

Case 4: Luke

Observations in Luke’s Classroom

Luke has been teaching for nine years. He has taught third grade for four years, he was a literacy teacher for first and fifth grade for a year, and then moved to his current position in fourth grade. He has been teaching fourth grade the past four years. All of his experience has been in the same district. Luke is a skilled reading teacher, but he has also received district praise for his math instruction.

Luke had an infectious personality and was full of energy. The first time I met Luke, was on a cold October day, at the end of a school day. I knocked on Luke’s classroom door, and he immediately opened the door to greet me. In the back of the classroom was his bicycle, which was his mode of transportation on that cold day. His clothing style yelled that he was laid back, while being professional at the same time. He was very friendly, and I felt comfortable right away.

On my next encounter with Luke, I visited his classroom when he had students. It was the beginning of the day and when I entered, they were in the middle of their morning meeting. Luke sat in his teacher chair, turned away from his desk, while all the students were sitting scrunched together on the carpet. Luke was leaning back in the chair with one leg crossed over the other, resting his arms on the armrests, and interlocking his fingers. He was listening as students were sharing about their evening the night before. Once one student was done sharing, all the other students immediately eagerly raised their hands, and Luke called on another student to share. While students were sharing their stories, Luke corrected their grammar in a gentle way, and after each story, he asked a question or made a comment before calling on another student. When students shared a funny story, he laughed with them, and when they shared stories that were sad or troubling, he showed that he was concerned. All the students were engaged with each other's stories, all laughing or showing concern through their gasps.

Luke's classroom was organized to give students the opportunity to collaborate. The desks were organized into pods of four or five desks together (Figure 12). There were two tables in the classroom as well, and one bigger desk against a back wall. The information on the walls was pertinent to the standards the students were learning and there was one side of the classroom full of different reading books (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Luke's classroom layout.



Figure 13. Displayed standards.

When they had finished sharing out their personal stories, something they did every morning, Luke told them that he wanted to practice their math facts for just a few minutes. All the students were excited when Luke said they were going to play “Around the World” for this practice. He explained they were going to work on 7s and 8s because those were the issues he noticed they were struggling with. He also told them a little story about how, when he was little, the 7s and 8s were the hardest for him as well. The winners of the game would get an extra lunch with him and extra school tickets. The students found a partner and lined up two-by-two in front of Luke. Luke stood in front of the first pair, with hands in his pockets, he leaned down to be eye level with them, and said “6 times 7.” The students yelled out the answer, and one went to one side, and the

other went to the other side of the room. The students in the back of the room were standing on their tippy toes trying to see what was happening or who got the right answer. Luke yelled out “6 times 12” to one pair. The students answered, and Luke had to take a second to solve the problem in his head. He then told the students that when he was younger, he didn’t have to memorize the 12s, so it took him longer to solve that one in his head. Throughout this game, the students were laughing and having a good time, just like their teacher. The game lasted about five minutes.

When a winner was declared, Luke told all the students to go back to their desks and get out their writing and homework. As the kids transitioned back to their desks, their energy was high. They were laughing and talking with their friends about the game they just played. Luke started walking around the classroom, checking homework. When students showed him that they completed their homework, he told them to go get some school tickets. He had the school tickets in a bucket. He didn’t monitor if the students got the right amount. While he was checking homework, the noise level was high, but Luke didn’t mind this. Students were talking, getting out their materials, walking around getting their school tickets, and talking to Luke. Once he was done checking homework, he put on classical music and told them it was time to start writing. Immediately, most of the class quieted down and got to work. He reminded students that if they could not make good choices, then they could go sit at one of the back tables. He never told any students to move to the tables. One student approached Luke, and he reminded the student that he could barely read his writing because his pencil was so dull. He reminded the student to use a better pencil next time and then started laughing with

the student about the creative story the student made up. It was evident in Luke's classroom that learning was fun. The energy was high and engaging.

In interviewing Luke and his principal and then watching Luke in action in the classroom, it was obvious that his passion and excitement radiated into his students. The culture of Luke's classroom was one of fun and engagement. Luke's principal had a hard time expressing what made him an effective teacher, but he was certain that he was. He described a teacher who was more of a free spirit, didn't really follow the norms of an effective teacher, but built amazing relationships with his students. He stated, "He does build strong and great relationships with his kids," but "he doesn't talk about or log his data . . . I don't think I necessarily see him carrying around like clipboard charts and coding and that sort of thing." The principal was perplexed by Luke's teaching methods, he told me a story about how Luke used to have this old rickety rocking chair and when the principal would walk in the classroom, "he would be in the rocking chair and the kids are all around him . . . and the kids love that." He described Luke as being more of an "in the moment kind of person. I think that's his spirit of who he is."

Although Luke may have some unorthodox methods, his principal was aware that, even though he didn't understand this teacher, he knew he was effective. The passion and excitement Luke brought to his teaching permeates through to his students' excitement about learning. One of Luke's main goals was to make his students excited about school. "You've got to get kids excited about school. You've got to get them excited about content material, and then once you have that relationship and they are excited about that, then they're going to do a lot better because they're going to want to

learn.” He really tried to get students excited about reading. One of his philosophies of teaching reading was to get them excited about it and give them ample opportunities to read. “The more they read, the more they’re going to get into reading as they explore different genres of reading, they’re going to get more excited to read a particular genre.”

He wanted students to know reading could be and should be fun. “Sometimes it almost feels like I can trick them into believing it’s great because of my excitement, I try to be passionate about it . . . [telling them] ‘This is the greatest thing ever,’ and they get that in their head and then a lot of times you see that joy for reading more as the year goes on.” He allowed them to explore different genres of books and let them choose books that appealed to them until they found something they liked. “Once they see that reading can be fun, they’re a lot more into it, and then they’ve got a stronger desire to be successful at it too.”

Luke was very passionate about his work. At times, this passion had hurt him and his students. He has learned over the years how to work with students who were deviant. Initially he would let students get under his skin. He would send the student down to the office just so he could get a break from him; reflecting back, he said, “I didn’t handle that well, I let my emotions get involved. I probably said things I shouldn’t have said.” Now, he reacts in a different way. He stays really calm and reaches out to the students to try and get to know them better.

Luke wanted his students to think of school as a fun and exciting place to be. He has adapted his homework policy so that kids do not go home and dread school. His homework consisted of 30 minutes of reading and “some form of activity for an hour,”

which could be playing outside. He believed this “helps them more with loving school more and loving their teacher more because they are not having to go home and do an hour or two of traditional homework.” He did not want his students to get “burnt out” on school. He also provided students an extra recess throughout the day, and his class can earn “Friday fun, some kind of activity that we do outside or in here.”

When I asked Luke to tell me how his students would describe him, he said, “funny, goofy, friendly but also that I can be firm or strict with them.” It was obvious during my interactions with Luke that he would much rather be the goofy, friendly, and funny teacher than the strict and firm teacher. He was able to be funny and goofy with his students because he had set high expectations and held his students to those expectations. He brought his personality into his teaching. “I think my personality gets them excited about learning. I think I use a lot of passion and energy . . . my quirkiness, goofiness, silliness, funniness, comes through [in my] teaching that makes kids excited to be there and to learn.” Luke’s personality was the foundation of his teaching, which was why his principal had trouble putting his effectiveness into words.

In order to bring his personality into his teaching, Luke had to know his students very well. He said that he brought a lot of sarcasm into the classroom and allowed students to use it as well, “The kids know they can kind of dish that out as well a little bit.” In order to be sarcastic with students, he had to know them as people. Based on a survey taken a few years ago, Luke realized he didn’t really know his students. Only 20% of his students at the time said their teacher knew a lot about them. This struck a chord with Luke, and so he started implementing different ways to get to know his

students. The one he sticks with to this day was the morning meeting “share time.” He spends about 15 minutes letting students “share anything that they want, anything they have on their minds.” He also invited students to have lunch with him regularly because he felt it was important to see them outside of the academic schedule and for his students to see him in a different light as well.

He also got to know his students academically. He was constantly taking inventory of his students. He has them work in partners or individually to see “if they’re getting what I want them to get out of the question, if they’re unpacking the question correctly.” He constantly asked himself these questions when reviewing students’ responses to their readings: “What are they doing well? What do they need more help with? How can we develop those better? What can we add to it? What can we change to make your answers better?”

Luke used a gradual release of responsibility when teaching. He started off each concept with direct teaching, then allowed students to move into partners or groups, and finally students shared out their answers. Given this information, he reflected whether or not he needed to reteach something or “teach it differently.” Some of his reflection was in the way he allowed students to work together on a specific task. “I shouldn’t have done that in partners, or I should’ve had them to that in partners or as a whole group,” then he went in the next day and made those changes.

He provided students the opportunities to work in pairs and groups so they could explore the material together. By collaborating with someone else, the engagement level increased. The purpose of partner or group work can make the learning more exciting,

but the main purpose was for students “to work together to help each other or share ideas with each other.” Luke used a lot of class discussion following his partner or group work. Students shared out their answers and had discussions about whether the answer could be improved somehow, or if the answer was great, “what could we do to make it even better?” The benefit of sharing out after partner or group work was “so that kids can hear what goes into a good answer.”

When Luke used collaborative groups, he “purposely groups them.” Luke had to know the strengths and weaknesses of his students to make these groups effective. Depending on the task, some of the groupings he used were “low with a low, medium and medium, medium with high. If it’s something where I feel like low kids might struggle, I might actually group them more like low with a medium/high type kid so that they can kind of teach each other and help one another.”

Themes in Luke’s Teaching Practices

The themes of passion/excitement and knowing students emerged from Luke’s case through my interviews with him and his principal, observation, and Luke’s demeanor and the way he spoke about his teaching. It was immediately clear that Luke was a fun and quirky teacher. His excitement and passion for teaching came out in his quirkiness and his inability to stop smiling when discussing his teaching. “I think it’s just that personality trait, that goofiness, quirkiness, or silliness, that kind of comes through with teaching that makes kids excited to be there and to learn.” He wanted his students to enjoy learning as much as he did, and he attempted to trick them into liking reading. “I try to be passionate about it and really like tricking them. This is the greatest thing ever!”

He believed that “if students don’t see reading as fun, then they’re really going to check out.” It’s much harder to teach a student who doesn’t enjoy the subject.

He was joyful and playful when he was in front of the class, and he allowed his students to act the same way. The culture in his classroom was one of high energy and excitement. After their morning meeting, he told the students they were going to play “around the world” to practice their math facts. Even though this lasted only five minutes, the students were excited and engaged. Just as he wanted students to enjoy reading, he needed them to want to come to school. “If you’ve got a good relationship then they’re going to be excited to come to school, they’re going to want to learn and they’re going to do better academically.” One of the ways he supported this idea was through homework. “My homework is to read 30 minutes a night and do a fun activity.” He wanted students to go home and be kids so they would be excited to return to school the next day. He also tried to make the school day an exciting adventure. While they did work hard, he also added in extra spontaneous recesses and Friday fun day. Friday fun day is “some activity that we do outside or in here [classroom].”

Luke knew his students very well. He didn’t always know his students well. A few years ago, he received a survey that his students filled out. On the question that asked “My teacher knows a lot about me,” only 20% of the students agreed. Immediately after receiving these results, he started to make a conscious effort to get to know his students. He implemented morning meeting time, where students have the opportunity to share anything they wanted. He also got to know them better by inviting his students in for lunch with him so they could have discussions about things not related to school, by

inviting students into the room to help him with different jobs in the classroom, and by assigning homework that gave him insight into his students, and by hosting Friday fun days.

In order to be effective, Luke must know his students academically as well. In order for the collaborative work to be successful in his classroom, Luke had to know in what specific areas students struggled and in what specific areas students were highly successful. He “purposely groups” his students accordingly based on the focus for that day. If students did not get the concepts Luke was teaching, he was able to adjust his lessons, so all his students could achieve. He adjusted the work by bringing in outside stories that were more engaging or for students who were struggling he would “have them focus maybe on one part of the short answer.” For students who were succeeding, “I might ask them to do a little more with it or challenge them on really diving deeper into their answer.” The excitement and passion Luke brought to his teaching enabled him to know his students on a meaningful level that impacted their academic and social lives.

Cross-Case Themes

Each case was broken down individually to highlight the within-case themes. A narrative of each individual case was provided that captured the essence of the teacher through their words, actions, and documents/artifacts collected. However, there were three themes that emerged that were consistent across the cases. The three themes were: (1) beliefs in every student, (2) relationships as basis of effective teaching, and (3)

reflection. Each of the individual case themes contributed to the overall cross-case themes.

The principals' interviews also support the cross-case themes in their words and thoughts. A principal that believes in all students, that relationships are the basis of effective teaching, and that reflection was an important process for a teacher to use, most likely led their school with these ideas as the foundation for effective teaching and learning. The principals' responses were embedded within the cross-case themes.

Belief in Every Student

All of the participants in this study showed they had a belief in their students that they could succeed through their actions and words. The teachers' principals spoke about their belief in their teachers and using their leadership in a collaborative way that enhanced teachers' strengths. Both spoke about having conversations with their teachers, the importance of being hands on, and empowering their teachers. The teachers used these same approaches with their students. They worked with their students to help them achieve through differentiating and scaffolding their assignments, providing engaging lessons, and creating an excitement about the subject.

Molly's philosophy in teaching was "to meet the kids where they are." She worked hard to move all her students "with the realization that not every single child will be at grade level at the end of the school year. So, long as I can show in my data and in my heart that they moved closer to being on grade level" she knew she was being an effective teacher. She discussed how meeting them at their instructional level was where she started so she could move them forward. To her, the most important focus for

students “to have the skill,” but “it’s irrelevant if they can’t access the text.” She ensured her students were reading at their instructional level, so she could teach the grade level skills to them, while pushing them along in their reading ability.

Amy’s philosophy of teaching reading was that every child can learn to read. She discussed how “there are different routes that can get them there,” and if one route isn’t working, she would try and a different one. She stressed the importance of the “continued search for different ways [to teach] if one way isn’t working,” even if that means “reach[ing] out to different resources for advice.” Amy believed in every child and their abilities and it was the teacher’s responsibility to find the correct path that would work for that child. Building a child’s confidence was important for Amy as well, you have to make the child “believe they can read.”

Jake’s philosophy of reading was to find the “successes that you can build on.” Jake knew each student had “their own hills and valleys so to speak, strengths and weaknesses” and “the trick [was] finding those hills and valleys.” Once he found their strengths and weaknesses he “individualized their reading instruction” and his teaching was “based on what their needs are.” Jake used any means he could find to help his students, including blended learning. He “utilized every tool” in order to find what his students’ needs were. He wanted to make sure he “maximized more bang for [his] buck as far as who needs what, when.” Jake spent time building background knowledge for his students through technology so his students would have the best opportunity to learn. He adapted lessons to fit each student based on their “hills and valleys” or “strengths and weaknesses.”

Luke's philosophy of reading was "getting kids excited about reading." Luke gave his students "ample opportunities to read" so they could find the joy in reading. Luke also adjusted his lessons to make sure his students were grasping the concepts. "If they're not getting it, I'll continue to reteach it or to teach it in a different way." He also "adjusted the curriculum based on ability" and gave students pieces or parts of the lesson that would challenge them, but not defeat them. Luke ensured his students grasped the concepts before moving on.

Never once in the interviews or observations did I witness or hear a teacher speak about a student in a defeated way. All the teachers spoke about meeting their students where they were and providing the resources necessary to help move their students along. They offered multiple avenues for the learning to take place, using partner and group work, stations, and technology. Amy said, "Every student can learn to read," and this sentiment was felt amongst all of the teachers. It is their job to find the way to reach them. Molly, Luke, and Jake spoke about finding readings that interest their students to draw them in. Even when language barriers get in the way of their lessons, these teachers find ways to make sure those kids are being taught as well. They pulled in other resources, allowed other students to assist in the translating, and used their culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) training. Jake explained, "If it's good for English Language Learners (ELL) students, then it's good for everybody."

Relationships as Basis of Effective Teaching

Throughout my interviews with the teachers and their principals, there was minimal discussion about instructional strategies. Instead, the conversations centered

around the relationships principals built with their teachers and the relationships teachers built with their students. The principal from Site B spoke about being hands on when working with his teachers, but also “letting them use their expertise.” The principal from Site A explained that she likes to have conversations with teachers so “it feels like we’re working and growing together and not from a top/down style.” The way the principals interact with the teachers was similar to the way the teachers interact with their students. Working together and helping each other built trust between two people, whether those people are both adults in the principal/teacher relationship or an adult and a student. While both principals did say they had conversations about teaching strategies and practices, they did not spend much of their time focusing on this area. Both principals expressed the importance of teachers establishing strong relationships with their students as a measure of what made them so effective.

Everything all four teachers discussed and shared directly related to the importance of trust and relationships between themselves and students. Molly described how many of her students came from “traumatic backgrounds,” and she tried to provide them with a “positive role model” and treated them with respect. In order to understand their backgrounds, Molly needed “to get to know their stories.” Molly had discussions with her students, had lunches with them, sent home parent surveys, made five positive phone calls a week, and assigned culturally relevant homework. These combined efforts allowed the students’ stories to emerge. Molly used the Golden Rule as a basis of her relationships. “I treat them the way I want to be treated, and I model that behavior for

them, and in turn they start to open up. We build that relationship.” Molly understood that these relationships can “make or break a class” and, therefore, effect their learning.

Amy concentrated on creating a positive community for her class at the beginning of the year, and she continued working on this throughout the year. She sent home parent surveys and invited parents into the classroom in order to get to know her students and their families. “I take a lot of pride fostering trust and building relationships with my students.” When Amy said, “Awesome, girlfriend” to a student who turned in a signed form, it was evident she had built a strong relationship with that student. The student smiled and laughed before putting away her backpack. Amy understood that “if a student doesn’t trust the teacher or feel like the teacher cares about them, then it becomes a lot harder for the teacher to get through to the student.” Amy was aware of students who come from troubled backgrounds or families. She wanted “to work even harder at building those relationships with them to show them that I love and care about them.” Amy knew relationships had to be the foundation of teaching children.

Jake taught his students how to “trust” him and their fellow classmates using Socratic seminar. Socratic seminar is a collaborative dialogue between students where respect for participants is necessary (Carter, 2013). He also taught them that their classroom is “going to be a safe place.” He also built relationships with his students by having a “star student of the week,” inviting students for lunch, and sending parent surveys. Jake also invited parents to the classroom for them to share their occupations or hobbies. Jake doesn’t use a lot of gimmicks around classroom management that used points, tally marks, etc. because he believed “it really is more a relationship thing.” He

had conversations with his students and he is “pretty big on choices.” Jake explained to his students that were reluctant to do work, “Hey, it’s totally okay with me, but I need you to get it done. You can do it now or you can do it at recess. If you want to take it home for homework, that’s an option.” He had these conversations with a calm voice, where the student really did have a choice. Jake understood students are going to have bad days sometimes or not want to work, but by having a strong relationship with these students, he ensured that one way or another, the student would learn what they needed to learn that day.

Luke believed “if you don’t have a good relationship with your teacher, you don’t want to come school. If you don’t want to come to school, you’re not going to be engaged with learning.” Luke tried to build these relationships through is morning “share time.” The students sat on the carpet in an informal setting, and they shared stories that happened the day before or what they were excited about happening in the future. Luke invited students in for lunch or to help him with special jobs to get to know them better. He also created a “Friday fun day” so students could work toward a reward at the end of the week. In these settings, Luke and his students can be “more silly” with each other. They are both able to see each other in a “different light.” Luke wanted his students to enjoy school and learning, and the best way he found was to build strong relationships with them.

These four teachers created relationships with their students because they cared about them and wanted to see them succeed, but they also understood that through these strong relationships, they were able to push them academically. After eating lunches,

conducting fun activities, and getting to know their students and their students' families, engagement and motivation increased in their students. Building these relationships helped the students and the teacher when the student began to struggle either academically or behaviorally. The principal from Site A believed that teachers needed to have a relationship with their students before they can focus on the content of what they were teaching. There has to be "safety within the classroom and that relationship exists" before the components of reading could take place.

Reflection

The main teaching practice or strategy that teachers discussed was reflection. All four teachers spoke about reflection in some form or another. They collected data so that they could revise their lesson plans, group students based on skills, re-taught their lessons if necessary, and plan their future lessons. The principal from Site A expressed how she had conversations with her teachers and helped them "reflect on their lesson for that day or on their overall practices." During any observation the principal had with the teacher, she was modeling how important reflecting on your practices could be to your overall effectiveness. These four teachers were reflecting on what they did daily and were constantly making adjustments.

Molly reflected on her teaching, not only involving academics, but also behavior. Molly had a tough student at the beginning of the year. She continued to try different interventions with the student, but nothing was helping. Finally, Molly "had an epiphany." She tried to "make him conform to school," and asked herself "Why am I trying to make him fit when he's not going to fit? It's not his style, it's not the way it's

going to be.” Molly reflected and adjusted the school day “to meet his needs instead of vice versa.” She reflected that “it’s been pretty successful for him.” Molly also reflected on her teaching. She told herself, “Oh, man, I really blew that lesson,” or “I didn’t approach that right.” Through this reflection, she would go back and make adjustments to her teaching to better meet her students’ needs. In order to differentiate instruction, Molly must reflect on the different levels of students to provide work at their instructional level. She created “homogeneously groups” so she was able to differentiate the text, to ensure they learned the skill.

Amy’s reflective practices are found in her planning and adjustments of the curriculum. Amy grouped her students into “homogeneous and heterogeneous groups” so students could work together in different settings. She gave formative assessments so she could see “what the students need and the levels they are performing at.” With this data she then would scaffold the information. Amy examined the formative assessments, then reflected on “what standard she needed to reteach.” She constantly “monitor[ed] the students’ performance to see how we need[ed] to change and redo or adapt to meet their needs and get them to understand.” Amy believed that “planning, delivery, assessment, and reflection all play a vital part in the success of reading. They all provide a different step in the success of a student and their reading potential.” Amy reflected so she could adjust her lessons to help her students.

Jake thought reflection was “everything.” Jake believed the reflection he does “leads to the quality of the feedback that the kids get, and the more often and more frequent and quickly that I can do that, the better it is for them. So, like I said, I think it’s

[reflection] everything.” Everything Jake did in his classroom stemmed from his reflection. He asked himself, “What should they have had, what are the pieces they needed to have that they don’t have now?” He was constantly “looking back and looking forward at what’s next.” He individualized student learning by how they were doing on the concepts being taught. He tried not to “miss anything” when he assigned digital content for his students to practice. Given these data, he would regroup students for “small group instruction.” Jake’s principal stated that the two areas that made Jake an effective teacher were, “his use of data to inform his instruction and also his reflective practices.” He went on to say that Jake could teach “the best lesson and still would find something that he would want to do better.” Jake believed his teaching was only as good as his reflective practices and feedback to his students.

Luke sat down at the end of every day and reflected on his lessons. Immediately, he started telling himself, “That was terrible, they didn’t get it that way,” or “That went really well, I’m going to do that again in the future.” He continued by saying, “I think about it every day to kind of refine my own teaching, to think about what worked and what didn’t work. Now, I can change to get it better.” Luke also thought about the style with which he chose to teach the lesson. He reflected through questions. He asked himself whether “partners” was the best method or should he have used “whole class?” Should he have stuck with the curriculum or brought in outside resources to “supplement my instruction?” Every day Luke reflected on the lessons so the next day he could improve.

Each of these teachers reflected on their lessons to improve them for their students. They wanted to improve their own teaching so their students could be more successful. They used formative and summative assessments. These assessments gave them information about specific students or how they taught the lesson. The principal from Site B spoke about how teachers needed to be reflective in the data they collected on their students. They should use multiple measures to understand students' strengths and weaknesses because using only one measure may give you misleading data. By reflecting on their lessons, teaching, and data every day, these four teachers made sure the needs of their students were addressed.

Chapter Summary

The analysis of the data collected was presented to investigate how effective teachers build relational trust with diverse students. The data were collected through focused interviews, emails, observations, and documents/artifacts. All of the data were triangulated to establish trustworthiness in this study.

Within-case themes were provided for each case. Molly differentiated the instruction for her students by providing students texts at their instructional level to ensure they could access the skills being taught. She also developed strong relationships with her students using humor, communication with her students' parents, and she used restorative justice and the *Leader in Me* in her classroom so discipline was handled with compassion and consideration of who her students were as people. Amy built community in her classroom through beginning of the year activities and games so students could get

to know each other and Amy could get to know her students. She also built community by establishing trust with her students with how she handled discipline. Amy provided scaffolds for her students by giving the option of taking different routes to ensure they would learn the material. Jake made sure his students were engaged. He allowed his students to change books if they didn't like it, allowed them to read with made up voices to make it more entertaining, and adapted the curriculum to make the learning more fun. Jake designed his classroom to focus on his students' needs and was very intentional with his planning. He individualized his students' lessons so they could focus on areas they needed extra support. Luke was very passionate and excited about teaching and brought his personality into all aspects of his teaching to show students learning is fun. He was goofy with his students, he played games with them, and provided fun homework so students would want to do it. Luke also believed knowing your students was a key to his students' success. He opened every day with a morning meeting, invited students to eat lunch with him, and asked students to help him with chores around the classroom.

From the within-case themes, cross-case themes were then established. Each of the four teachers had a belief in every student. They individualized their learning, provided scaffolds, differentiated the material, and went to extra lengths to ensure all students were learning the skill or concept. Each of the teachers also believed relationships were the foundation for effective teaching. They spent time doing activities and games with them at the beginning of the year, reached out to parents often, invited students in for lunch, and created morning share time all in an effort to build relationships with their students. Finally, each of the teachers discussed how they reflected every day

on their teaching practices and how they handled different situations that happened throughout the day.

In the next chapter, the findings will be framed so that assertions can be made. Belief in every student, relationships as the basis of effective teaching, and reflection will be discussed and analyzed. These themes will be tied together through culturally relevant teaching practices. Finally, implications for practice will be provided, along with future research recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This multiple case study examined how effective teachers were able to build relational trust and increase reading achievement with diverse students. The guiding questions for this research were:

Q1 How do highly effective teachers build trusting relationships in a highly diverse elementary school?

Q2 How does building relational trust impact instructional strategies in reading?

Q3 How does relational trust impact student reading achievement of third, fourth, and fifth graders?

In this chapter, I frame the findings and analyze the themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis. A discussion of the findings is presented, as well as implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Framing the Findings

The goal of this study was to find how effective teachers built relational trust with diverse students to improve reading achievement. All participants were purposefully selected to participate in this study for their effectiveness in teaching reading to diverse students. In addition, the study examined how effective teachers planned and reflected on their teaching to ensure all their students' needs were being met. By discussing how they build relationships with students, how they scaffold their instruction, and how they

reflected on their daily teaching, the participants were able to voice the importance of building relationships with students in the classroom to improve academic achievement.

Specific criterion was used to create a purposeful sample of four effective reading teachers working with diverse students. Teachers were selected from two different sites. They were chosen based on the criteria they taught third, fourth, or fifth grade reading for at least three years. At Site A, the principal said she only had two teachers fit the first criteria. She considered them highly effective teachers so those teachers were selected for the study. At Site B, after a list of teachers were created, PARCC reading data was analyzed to find the top four effective teachers in the school. The principal from Site B was then asked to choose from the list of four teachers who he deemed most effective in the area of reading. Data were collected and analyzed from interviews, observations, and documents/artifacts to show themes that emerged over each individual case. Three cross-themes surfaced upon further examination. These themes were:

1. Maintain a belief that every student is capable of learning, and it is the teacher's job to provide the necessary scaffolds so the students can achieve.
2. Relationships are the foundation of effective teaching to ensure every student has the opportunity to learn.
3. Reflection on teaching practices and strategies as well as interactions with students is necessary to ensure all students are getting the same opportunity to learn.

The rich and thick texture of evidence forming these cross-case themes demonstrate the following:

1. Teachers who believe in their students found a way to individualize the instruction for students when needed.
2. Teachers who believe in their students allowed students to engage in their learning in multiple ways.
3. Teachers who believe in their students adjusted and amended the curriculum to fit the needs of every student.
4. Creating strong relationships with students allowed teachers to set high expectations and push their students to higher levels academically and behaviorally.
5. Teachers who built relational trust with students helped build self-efficacy within students.
6. Effective teachers reflected on the data collected to inform their instruction.
7. Reflection allowed teachers to differentiate and present material in new ways.

Table 4 below provides a summary of the cross-case themes with the seven assertions.

Table 4 Summary of Cross-case Themes and Assertions

Cross-case Themes	Assertions
Belief in every student	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers who believe in their students find a way to individualize the instruction for students when needed. 2. Teachers who believe in their students will allow students to engage in their learning in multiple ways. 3. Teachers who believe in their students will adjust and amend the curriculum to fit the needs of every student.
Relationships as a basis of effective teaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Creating strong relationships with students allow teachers to set high expectations and push their students to higher levels academically and behaviorally. 5. Teachers who build relational trust with students build self-efficacy within students.
Reflection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Effective teachers reflect on the data collected to inform their instruction. 7. Reflection allows teachers to differentiate and present material in new ways

Every aspect of the data collection was imperative to answering the research questions. The interviews with teachers and principals, collection of documents/artifacts, and observations provided necessary data about each individual case. The themes that emerged from each individual case led to a comprehensive analysis so generalizations could be made. The cross-case themes provided consistencies among each of the

individual cases. From these cross-case themes, assertions could be made to answer the research questions. Table 5 (see below) includes a brief answer to each of the research questions.

Table 5 Summary of Answers to Research Questions

Research Questions	Brief Answer
How do highly effective teachers build trusting relationships in a highly diverse elementary school?	Assertions 4 and 5.
How does building relational trust impact instructional strategies in reading?	Assertions 1 – 3 and 7.
How does relational trust impact student reading achievement of third, fourth, and fifth graders?	Assertion 6.

Discussion

The participants shared the same perspective that relationships serve as the foundation for effective teaching. It was because of these relationships that the teachers were willing to scaffold the learning for their students, reflect on each day's lesson, and took the time to get to know their students and the students' families. The methods the teachers used to build relationships with their students can be used as a template to help other teachers build relationships, but unfortunately, the genuine affective nature of a teacher cannot be replicated. Throughout the examination of building relational trust

with students and the impact it has on student reading achievement, it is necessary to emphasize some additional topics throughout the discussion.

Belief in Every Student

Belief in every student moves beyond the general act of caring about the students. It combines “concern, compassion, commitment, responsibility, and action” (Gay, 2010, p. 48). The participants in this study used activities and games as a way to build a solid foundation with their students at the beginning of the year. They used different strategies such as morning meetings, lunches, and inviting parents into the classroom to continue these relationships throughout the year. This information helped their students achieve academically. By *caring for* their students, the participants understood that the students were an important and integral part of the classroom and the knowledge that flows throughout the classroom. Teachers adapted the learning for their students because they understood that knowledge was a continuous process. Not everyone was going to learn at the same rate or at the same pace. Ladson-Billings (2009) believed knowledge is a continuous process. The conceptions of knowledge are as followed:

- (1) Knowledge is continuously recreated, recycled, and shared by teachers and students. It is not static or unchanging.
- (2) Knowledge is viewed critically
- (3) Teacher is passionate about content
- (4) Teacher helps students develop necessary skills
- (5) Teacher sees excellence as a complex standard that may involve some postulates but takes student diversity and individual differences into account. (p. 89)

The teachers in this study embraced these tenets of knowledge with their students. They discussed how they included outside resources in their lessons, differentiated the

instruction when necessary, recognized each student as an individual, and constantly adjusted their lessons to meet the needs of the students.

By getting to know their students and setting high expectations for them, the participants in this study, could then push them to higher levels academically. Siwatu (2007) stated culturally relevant teaching is present when individualized learning is being facilitated, the classroom environment and the way it is managed is compatible with all students, provides multiple opportunities to learn in a variety of ways, and embraces the cultural identity and differences among students. Each of the participants in this study exhibited these teaching practices to some degree. However, the evidence from this study found these assertions about the belief in every student: individualized instruction, students engaged in their learning in multiple ways, and the adjustment of the curriculum to fit the needs of every student.

Effective teachers who believe in all their students find a way to individualize the instruction when needed. The participants in this study discussed ways in which they individualized the instruction for their students that included conferencing with the students, using online programs to support the areas individual students struggled, and computer-based reading programs set up to a specific skill or level for additional practice. Connor, Morrison, Fishman, Crowe, Al Otaiba, & Schatschneider (2013) conducted a longitudinal study that found students who received individualized reading instruction achieved higher reading outcomes. They also found that students benefitted from sustained individualized reading instruction over three years. Individualized instruction

allowed the participants in this study to provide their students with additional practice on skills or areas in which they struggled.

Individualized learning was conducted by the teachers through technology and stations. Teachers were able to personalize instruction (Byrd, 2016) because they had built a relationship with their students, and they understood the significance of students participating in “knowledge-building” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 88). Therefore, they were able to either personalize the learning by using students’ interest or personalize the learning to the concepts with which the student needed additional help with. Teachers took many avenues to ensure their students learned the concepts.

Effective teachers understand not all students learn the same way. Through the beginning of the year activities, the teachers in this study spent time getting to know their students. With this knowledge they exposed their students to multiple ways of learning. “It is important to remember that presenting information to learners in a variety of modalities helps all learners. . . it allows them to integrate knowledge and assists recall by providing different representation and links to information” (Rolfe & Cheek, 2012, p. 176). They offered whole group instruction, partner work, small group instruction, conferenced with their students individually, used technology, and provided different activities to expose their students to learning in a variety of ways. They continued to provide opportunities for their students to grasp the concepts being taught.

According to An and Carr (2017) teachers can provide higher academic success for their students by using “multiple sensory representations of information in class” (p. 413). The teachers embraced this idea of engaging students in multiple ways by

adjusting or amending the curriculum as well. “Highly effective teachers challenge and engage *all* students and adapt required curriculum, resources, and standards to meet student needs and interests” (Routman, 2012, p. 56). Teachers added student-interest based topics to the concepts being taught when the opportunity presented itself. They also added hands-on projects to go with units being studied in reading, such as the design of structures that could withstand water, wind, and movement during a unit on natural disasters. Teachers were not going to be able to provide learning opportunities for every students’ interest, but an effective teacher can arouse curiosity in the learner. “The curiosity brings learning, the learning bring interest, and interest brings curiosity. In this way, this cycle continues for life” (Kayalar & Ari, 2017, p. 2778). Teachers who constantly adapt, amend, and adjust the curriculum to engage their students raise the curiosity of their students.

The participants in this study set the stage for their students right at the beginning of the year. They let their students know they valued them as individual people when they got to know them as people and set high academic and behavioral expectations for them. “Teachers who genuinely care for students generate higher levels of all kinds of success than those who do not” (Gay, 2010, p. 49). By having a belief in every student, the teachers differentiated their instruction on an individual basis, engaged learners in multiple ways, and adjusted and amended the curriculum to help their students succeed.

Relationships as a Basis for Effective Teaching

Understanding relationships as a basis for effective teaching incorporates cultural relevance into practice. According to Ladson-Billings (2009) teachers practicing cultural relevant methods believe the following about social relations:

- (1) Teacher-student relationship is fluid, humanely equitable, extends to
- (2) Teacher demonstrates a connectedness with all students
- (3) Teacher encourages a “community of learners”
- (4) Teacher encourages students to learn collaboratively. Students are expected to teach each other and be responsible for each other. (p. 60)

The observations and interviews I conducted with these four teachers demonstrated these qualities. They were able to get to know their students first as people, and then were better able to serve them as students. “Teachers who really care for students honor their humanity, hold them in high esteem, expect high performance from them, and use strategies to fulfill their expectations” (Gay, 2010, p. 48). It is these types of practices and beliefs of *caring for* students that make teachers effective teaching diverse students.

Stronge et al. (2011) did a meta-analysis of the research and named four dimensions of effective teaching. Personal qualities were one of the dimensions, which included caring, positive relationships with students, fairness and respect, encouragement of responsibility, and enthusiasm. The participants in the current study incorporated many different ways to get to know their students and build relationships with them. These included inviting students to lunch, making positive phone calls to the student’s home, inviting parents into the classroom, sponsoring activities and games throughout the year, starting each day with a morning meeting, and using a calm voice. These practices of building relationships with students are not all inclusive. There are many other ways

to get to know one's students, but these are some ways every teacher could use to get to know their students. When teachers took the time to get to know their students, they began the process of building trust with that student.

To set the stage for learning, caring teachers purposefully know their students well and establish relationships with them. These behaviors reflect the theoretical position that learning takes place best within the crucible of relationships forged by caring competent teachers whose primary focus is the growth and development of students. (Collinson, Killeavey, and Stephenson, 1998, p. 3).

All participants spent time at the beginning of the year, before any instruction happened, doing activities and games with their students to get to learn more about them as people and their learning styles.

The participants demonstrated they cared for their students not only through their attempts to get to know their students, but also through the way they managed their classrooms. Each of the teachers believed in finding ways to work with students who were challenging. They did not like to send them to the office or kick them out of class. Rather, they tried to eat lunch with them, use a calm voice, or have students help them in the classroom to get to know them as people. They also reflected on instances in the past when their frustration would get elevated and how ineffective that was in helping the student. They recognized their frustrations were ineffective in building any sort of relationship with the student. The participants in this study set high behavioral expectations for their students and held them accountable.

Culturally relevant teaching practices were discussed, knowingly or unknowingly, by all the participants in this study. Culturally responsive pedagogy demands teachers set high expectations for their students. Teachers who practice this method of teaching

understand “the goal of education is empowerment via achievement, and this goal is made manifest by demonstrating a caring disposition that conveys high expectations for academic achievement” (Dallavis, 2013, p. 156). All four teachers discussed the importance of meeting students where they were at and assisting them with the necessary tools to help them progress. They would scaffold the material to help their students succeed. “Effective practices in supporting literacy learning include a multi-faceted range of teacher attributes and beliefs about children and learning” (Fletcher, 2014, p. 297). Teachers allowed students the time and opportunity to master the skills in a variety of ways including: (a) using small groups facilitated by the teacher, (b) using the use of technology, (c) working in partners or small group with peers, (d) using instructional leveled texts, (e) conferencing with the teacher one on one, and (f) using stations individualized to the needs of the student. These teachers wanted to make sure their students understood the concepts being taught and were exposed to multiple opportunities to be successful.

When students are successful, their self-efficacy in that subject is raised. However, when students fail over and over at a task, their self-efficacy is affected in a negative way. “Students need to experience success and build confidence about their capabilities to be encouraged to continue to work through challenging situations” (Gay, 2002b, p. 57). It is very important that effective teachers guide students with multiple opportunities to have success in reading. “Successes raise mastery expectations; repeated failures lower them, particularly if the mishaps occur early in the course of events. After strong efficacy expectations are developed through repeated success, the negative impact

of occasional failures is likely to be reduced” (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). The teachers in this study who built strong relationships with students were involved with the well-being of their students. They cared whether their students felt successful with the material, and when they didn’t, they provided additional opportunities to master the content.

The teachers had a solid understanding of the skill level of each of their students. It was the teachers job, not only to rise the students to new challenges, but also push them beyond what they thought they could do. Students who have high self-efficacy generally engage in tasks within their capabilities. When students have high self-efficacy in reading, they engaged and practiced reading more. It is the teachers job to model appropriate reading strategies and scaffold the material so students continue to be motivated by their effort (Halsey, 2003). It is imperative that teachers “focus on the importance of effort for success” (An & Carr, 2017, p. 417) with their students. Regardless of whether the teachers had heard of or understood what culturally relevant teaching practices entailed, each exhibited these practices in their classrooms. The term culturally relevant teaching practices was not used during the interviews or discussions with the participants. The foundation of the relationship and trust they built with their students challenged these teachers to meet the needs of all their students. “Relationships are created between the student and teacher in an effective classroom. These relationships should be based on trust where the student feels comfortable” (Vijayan, P., Chakravarthi, S., & Philips, J., 2016, p. 209). The teachers in this study used relationships as the basis for effective teaching. Once these relationships were built, they

were able to push their students academically and behaviorally to higher limits and these relationships helped develop self-efficacy in their students.

Reflection

Cultural humility is a lifelong process, where individuals are open, egoless, self-aware, engage in supportive interactions, and self-reflect and critique. A concept analysis of cultural humility is presented (see Figure 14 below) to show how cultural humility is a lifelong process (Foronda et al., 2016). Cultural humility asks an individual to look at themselves and others in an attempt to work together and understand one another. “We must know who we are before we can understand who our students are” (Klug & Whitfield, 2003, p. 96). Cultural humility is an important concept for education because it suggests that there is a division of power (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2016).

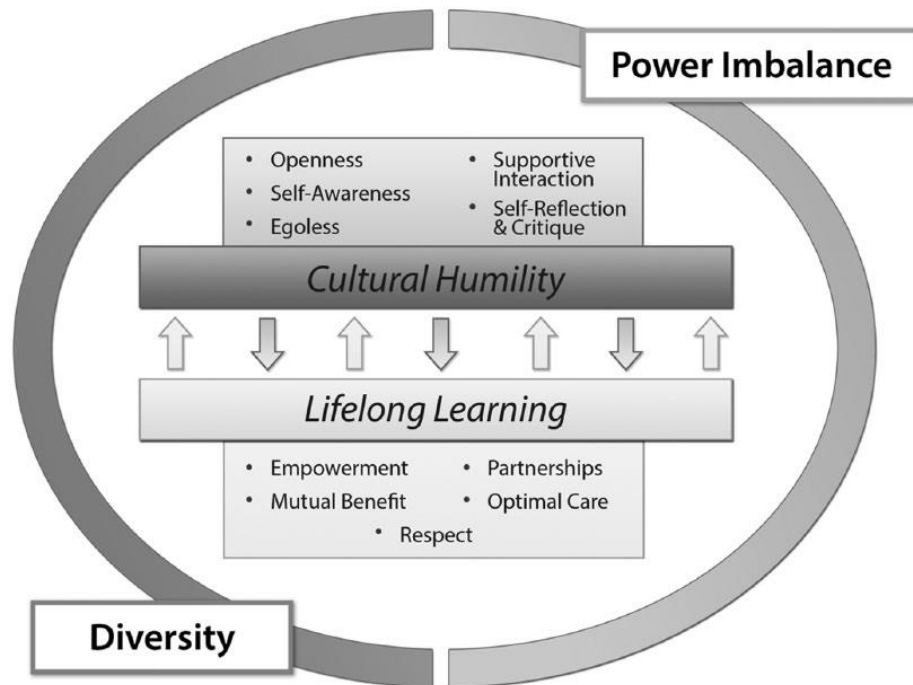


Figure 14. A concept analysis of cultural humility.

The four teachers and two principals I had interactions with throughout this research project demonstrated the attributes of cultural humility. Not once did the teachers suggest they were participating in the banking concept of education where they were all-knowing and the students were there to be filled with knowledge. It was a collaborative effort between the teachers and principals as well as the teachers and students to build relationships and assist each other throughout the learning process. “A person who adopts cultural humility as a way of being understands learning and growth are ongoing and constant with the realization there will always be more to learn and understand through interactions with others” (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2016, p.195). Through the varying years of experiences, the teachers and principals had, each one discussed how they would reflect to improve their methods, instruction, and relationships.

The teachers were never static in their thinking. They expressed when a lesson went wrong and how they would reflect on the delivery, method, or resources they used. They would make adjustments, explain to their students how they didn't teach it well the day before, and start again. When lessons went well, they discussed how they were always searching for improvement. They would jot notes to themselves for when that concept would come back around. Through the interactions with their students, they were always reflecting on how to best meet their needs and how they could improve. Cultural humility can be expressed through the content you are teaching, the resources you are using, or the relationships you build with your students.

One aspect of culturally relevant teaching is when an individual has a good sense of themselves and others, much like cultural humility. Ladson-Billings (2009) believed teachers who see themselves this way, share these same qualities:

- (1) Teacher sees herself/himself as an artist, teaching as an art
- (2) Teacher sees herself/himself as part of the community and teaching as giving something back to the community, encouraging students to do the same
- (3) Teacher believes all students can succeed
- (4) Teacher helps students makes connections between their community, national, and global identities
- (5) Teacher sees teaching as “pulling knowledge out” -like “mining.” (p. 38)

When a teacher is able to be self-aware and self-reflective they are better able to help their students of color. As teachers examine their own biases and privileges, it empowers them to reflect on social issues of equity and diversity. If they are able to embark on the journey of cultural humility, they are better equipped to work with their diverse students. “Cultural humility should be employed daily with all individuals in the basic interest of kindness, civility, and respect” (Foronda et al., 2016, p. 214).

In a study conducted by Fletcher (2014) she found effective literacy teachers shared a balance of direct skills with contextually grounded skills, the classroom environment showed highly engaged students, each had excellent classroom management, teachers provided scaffolding, and monitored students’ progress. The teachers in this study discussed the importance of reflection throughout our interactions with each other. They discussed how they were constantly collecting data from formative assessments to drive their instruction. Luke commented that he analyzed a survey his students took and when they said he didn’t know what their home life was like, he

immediately implemented his morning meetings so students could share about their lives. Luke was presented with some data and made a positive change. All the teachers discussed individualized instruction for students. An effective teacher is able to provide meaningful individualized instruction for their students only when data is collected and analyzed from their students.

The teachers also discussed how upon reflection from their daily lessons taught, they would go back and differentiate their instruction the next day. Molly shared a story about how she had provided a group of struggling readers with a text that was too complicated for them. She realized this after the lesson and was going to go back with a text at their instructional level so the students could learn the skill that was being taught. She knew it was more important for the students to be able to access the text and learn the concept, rather than spend their time struggling through the text. Teachers also considered the importance of reflection with behavior. They set high expectations for all their students, but some students needed differentiated plans to be successful. The teachers were willing to figure out different methods in working with these students because they cared for them as individuals. They wanted all their students to have a chance of success.

The practice of cultural humility is perhaps what sets apart teachers from effective teachers. Teachers who are practicing cultural humility build relationships and establish trust with their students. They continue learning with them and challenge themselves and their students to succeed to higher limits. Effective teachers, teaching diverse students, are self-reflective and aware when they interact with others. “We experience humility

not because we have fought and lost but because humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen-and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible” (Palmer, 2007, p. 110). Practicing cultural humility is transformational as the interaction between self and others is constantly changing an individual’s mindset.

Conclusion

Students of color do not fare as well as their white peers in reading achievement and haven’t for over sixty years. However, there are some effective teachers who have closed the achievement gap. This study highlighted what highly effective elementary reading teachers did to build relational trust in their diverse classrooms. Relational trust encompasses respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). The ideas and skills the participants in this study used can be applied to any classroom to close the achievement gap between white students and students of color.

Every teacher in this study built relational trust with their students by believing every student will succeed, they used relationships as the basis for effective teaching, and they reflected on their instruction. Teachers spent time at the beginning of the year getting to know their students, not only who they were in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom. They implemented games and activities, morning meetings, and lunch bunches before they started any instructional content. It was imperative the teachers knew who their students were.

With this knowledge of who their students were, the teachers believed in the success for every student. They knew their students were capable of reaching new limits. The teachers individualized their instruction for their students with the use of technology and online programs, they conversed with their students one-on-one, and provided station rotations that applied to the needs of each individual student. Students had opportunities to interact with the concepts in a variety of ways. Teachers provided students with learning the material in different settings, different mediums, and different modalities. A simple reading assignment about natural disasters turned into a hands-on activity where students built their own structures and tested against wind, water, and movement. The teachers adapted and amended the curriculum to maximize the opportunity to learn for each student. For example, teachers created hands-on projects to enhance the curriculum, showed videos to build background information, and they also brought in outside resources on the same topic so students could access the material. Teachers continued to find ways for students to be successful.

Prior to any instructional teaching, the teachers spent time getting to know their students and their students' families. They conducted student and family surveys, made phone calls to the home, and invited parents into the classroom. Relationships with their students had been an essential piece of the teachers' success. The teachers used these relationships as the foundation for effective teaching practices. The trust they built with their students allowed the teachers to push their students academically and behaviorally to higher levels. Due to these strong relationships, teachers also helped their students build self-efficacy. Teachers taught the material in a way that students could be

successful and continue to build on that success. They offered their students the right to succeed.

The effective teachers in this study used reflection to improve their instructional practices. Teachers used culturally relevant teaching strategies to engage all their students in the classroom. They used “multiple approaches to facilitate learning” (Dickson, Chun, Fernandez, 2016, p. 142) such as collaborative groups, hands-on projects, and the use of technology. They also pulled in real-life examples and the students’ interests into their lessons. Jake taught his students how to choose books that interested them, but also how to abandon the book if they decided they didn’t like it. The teachers constantly invited their students to be active participants in their learning. They assigned homework related to students’ cultures. The teachers were continuously using formative assessments to drive their instruction. Luke verbally checked with a handful of random students to ensure students were ready to work independently. If the students were unsure, Luke adapted the lesson on the spot and presented it in a different way before he sent students off to work independently. Molly realized the material was too difficult for students to read on their own, so she guided them through that day’s lesson, but the next day printed off readings on the same topic, but at the students’ instructional levels. At the end of the day the teachers each sat down and reflected on what worked that day and what needed improved. Each of these teachers pointed back to themselves when lessons failed. When they retaught the material, they approached it in a different way. They differentiated and presented the material in a new way when students did not understand. This meant they used different leveled texts, they changed from individual to

partner work, or they provided more scaffolds to help assist the students. “Culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students’ academic needs, not merely make them feel good” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 160). Through reflection the teachers identified the biggest weakness in the lesson and adapted or changed it completely. The teachers strived to have all of their students learning.

If the achievement gap between whites and students of color is ever going to close, it is imperative educators understand what the achievement gap really represents. The achievement gap is the term mostly used to show the disparity in academic performance between different groups of students. However, “explaining why some students succeed in school while others do not is extraordinarily difficult” and “numerous theories have been proposed to explain this variability” (Nieto, 2010, p. 200). Ladson-Billings (2007) described the achievement gap as an educational gap. The educational debt holds everyone accountable and “reminds us that we have accumulated this problem as a result of centuries of neglect and denial of education to entire groups of students” (321). One-way teachers can begin to close this gap is by building relational trust with their students and implementing culturally relevant teaching practices.

The teachers in this study built relational trust with students by having a belief in every student, they viewed relationships as the basis of effective teaching, and reflected on their practices. Teachers must believe in every one of their students. “Culturally responsive teachers have unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students” (Gay, 2010, p. 45). Palmer (2007) stated, “relational trust is built on movements of the human heart such as empathy, commitment, compassion,

patience, and the capacity to forgive” (p. xvii). Therefore, building strong relationships with your students is a necessity in order to be effective. One of the crucial elements of student success is “the need for teachers to forge deep and meaningful relationships with their students. In order to develop meaningful relationships with their students, teachers first need to transform their own attitudes and beliefs about the value and worthiness of nonmajority-group students” (Nieto, 2010, p. 124). Relationships matter for the success of students. Not only did the teachers in this study form relationships with students to build relational trust, but they also engaged in reflective practices. They reflected on how to meet their students’ needs. Reflection is a “paramount vehicle for enhancing the development of effective teachers” (Allen & Casbergue, 1997, p. 741). Effective teachers build relational trust with their students to ensure their students succeed.

Effective teachers understand closing this gap moves beyond technical instructional strategies and must include a belief in all students, an appreciation of the differences in students, a strong understanding of content material, an examination of self and others and ways that engage students as collaborative learners. In order to accomplish these elements, “caring is a moral imperative, a social responsibility, and a pedagogical necessity” (Gay, 2002, p. 109). I am convinced this is how we begin to help *all* students succeed.

Implications for Practice

The present qualitative study offers insight into how effective reading teachers built relational trust with their students and how relational trust impacted the academic

achievement of their students. The insights that could be taken from this study are as follows: (a) belief in all students, (b) getting to know your students, and (c) reflective teachers.

Belief in All Students

“The belief that *all students can learn*, although an admirable statement, has become little more than a slogan in much of the educational reform movement” (Nieto, 2010, p. 117). However, there are some teachers who embrace and believe in this notion. Highly effective teachers have the belief that all students can learn. That belief in students challenges a teacher to differentiate the instruction, scaffold the material, and make the text accessible to the student. Different methods can be used to teach students, including technology, small groups, conferencing, personalized learning, and independent work. These different means of instruction personalize the learning for each student and allows them to grasp the material at their own pace. Not every student learns the same way or at the same time. By allowing students extra opportunities to engage with the material in different ways, they have the opportunity to be more successful. Individual “opportunities to respond has been correlated with students’ positive academic and behavioral outcomes” (Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, & Hughes, 2015, p. 8). When a student is successful, their self-efficacy will increase.

Teachers who have a belief that every student is capable go to great lengths to ensure that that student does not fail or fall behind. Once a teacher has this belief, it takes the responsibility away from the student and puts it back on the teacher. It is the teacher’s responsibility to find a way to tap into the way a student learns and provide

assistance so learning can take place. However, teachers who “begin with the supposition that students bring nothing, they interpret their role as simply needing to fill students with knowledge” (Nieto, 2010, p. 136). Freire (1970) referred to this as banking education. Banking education “resists dialogue with students,” “treats students as subjects,” and “inhibits creativity” (p. 64). He also believed that this banking concept is reactionary. Effective teachers need to be proactive with their beliefs and ideologies of students.

Effective teachers hold the belief that students are contributing members of the classroom. They are not there to be fed information, but rather they are there to collaborate and learn beside the teacher and their peers. Fletcher (2014) found that effective “teachers provided scaffolding of learning and regularly monitored students’ progress. They talked to students in a conversational style rather than interrogational” (p. 301). In each of the classrooms of the teachers in this study, desks were set up in pods. This encouraged students to share together and be active participants in their learning. Collaborative learning “creates a more equal status among students of different levels of achievement can result in higher achievement for all and that working on common problems enhances interethnic understanding and solidarity” (Nieto, 2010, p. 121). Bazron, Osher, and Fleischman (2005) found students from diverse backgrounds have a better chance of succeeding if teachers create “an environment that enables teachers and students to connect with each other” (p. 83). In each of the classrooms I observed, students were collaborating with their peers.

Effective teachers must expect high levels of behavior and academics out of their students. “If teachers *expect* students to be high or low achievers, they will act in ways that cause this to happen” (Gay, 2010, p. 64). Effective teachers guarantee students to be high achievers based on the expectations set up in their classrooms. Without high expectations, students of color are routinely tracked into low-level classes (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005) where academic success eludes them. Prior to setting up these expectations, the teachers took the time to build relationships with their students. These relationships made it easier for the teacher to enforce higher levels of expectations on their students. The students trusted their teacher and believed their teacher was there to support them in any way possible. When the teacher worked together with their students, it showed the students that their voice was just as valuable as the teacher’s voice in the classroom.

Getting to Know Your Students

The methods and practices the four teachers used to get to know their students are methods that any teacher can use in their classroom. The only requirement is that teachers must be willing to want to get to know their students and put in the time and effort to do so. Getting to know students is a time-consuming task. “For a teacher who cares, it is an enormous and stressful job, especially if she teaches in the lower social class community because the low expectations of a whole school permeate through the self-esteem of these children” (Nieto, 2010, p. 118). The teachers in this study ate lunch with students to get to know them, invited them into the classroom to help with extra

jobs, and conferenced with students in order to know them better. Teachers accepted their students as people before they considered them students.

The teachers in this study created activities and games at the beginning of the year, reached out to parents throughout the year, and provided opportunities for the students to share about their lives in an attempt to get to know them. By building personal relationships with students, students feel a valuable part of the learning community (Nieto, 2010). When students feel part of the learning community, they achieve at higher rates (Nieto, 2010; Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005; Fletcher, 2014) because they are more engaged in their learning and feel more comfortable in their environment.

Effective teachers who build relationships with their students, use the knowledge obtained in the relationship to help the student succeed academically and behaviorally. “If you have a true, caring relationship with your students, you will know what their interests are, what information they relate to” (Irvine, 2010, p. 61). An effective teacher can provide a struggling student with material that is of interest to him/her to keep them engaged. On the contrary, an effective teacher could also expand and enrich the thinking of a student doing well, if they have built a strong relationship with that student. An effective teacher also has the knowledge of where a student may struggle and be able to provide scaffolds at the appropriate times.

The effective teachers in this study took the time to build relationships with their students to discover their students’ interests, but ultimately the students’ strengths. “Not knowing students’ strengths leads to our *teaching down* to children from communities

that are culturally different from that of the teachers in the school” (Delpit, 2006, p. 173). Teachers who do not take the time to build relationships with students do not value the potential of the student and therefore are ineffective. These kinds of teachers put all their energy into placing blame. Some of the common excuses by ineffective teachers, according to Ladson-Billings (2007) are: the parents just don’t care, children don’t have enough exposure/experiences, children not ready, families don’t value education, and they are coming from a culture of poverty. Teachers who believe these sentiments are ineffective and hurting students.

All teachers care about their students to some extent but caring *for* students goes beyond the feelings you have toward your students. Caring *for* students placed emphasis on setting high expectations for your students and assisting them on getting there. Caring *about* students focuses only on the concern for that individual (Gay, 2010). Teachers who focus primarily on *caring about* students get lost in their emotions about the students, feel bad for them, and therefore lower their expectations of their students. Strong relationships that are built between the student and the teacher are the foundation for effective teaching practices. “Caring interpersonal relationships are characterized by patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for the participants. Uncaring ones are distinguished by impatience, intolerance, dictations, and control” (Gay, 2010, p. 49). Caring *for* students allows effective teachers the ability to push their students to higher levels behaviorally and academically. “Love is at the core of good teaching because it is predicated on high standards, rigorous demands, and respect for students, their identities, and their families” (Neito, 2010, p. 127).

Reflective Teachers

Teachers that are self-aware and self-reflective are more effective than teachers who are not. This includes knowing about their biases and privileges as well as reflecting on the day's lessons for improvement. Stoddard (1991) researched outstanding people and found they possessed three qualities. These qualities were a sense of self-worth, respect for all people, and a hunger for truth and knowledge. If teachers are able to focus on these qualities within themselves, they can then help students find these qualities as well. However, in order to focus on these qualities, reflection is necessary. For these three qualities to be established in every teacher and student, "what needs changing first are the attitudes, beliefs, and values with which teachers approach their students, and the conditions in schools to support the high-level learning of all students" (Nieto, 2010, p. 194). Korthagen (2004) reported the importance of a teacher knowing themselves in order to be effective.

Effective teachers are constantly collecting data to inform their instruction. The teachers in this study collected the data so they could individualize the instruction for their students, provide different settings for the students to learn, and adapt the material in ways that were more meaningful for the students. Effective teachers are always thinking of ways to improve even the best lessons. "Reflection requires that a teacher be able to look back on his or her own teaching and its consequences" (Shulman & Colbert, 1989, p. 44). "Good teachers are always learning, and that there are no guarantees or infallible formulas for perpetual success in teaching" (Gay, 2010, p. 235). Therefore, teachers must reflect on their practices to best meet the needs of their students.

Effective teachers reflect on the day not only to improve their instructional practices but also to find new ways to reach their students. Through reflection, effective teachers ask themselves if their students understood the content material, and if not, how it can be adjusted and improved. They find time to reteach the concepts the students missed. In order for teachers to scaffold material, they need to “understand how students come to know or learn so that they can convey new knowledge through students’ own learning style” (Gay, 2010, p. 176). After they scaffold the material, the teacher must reflect on whether that method worked or to try another means. “Culturally responsive teaching is a continuous process of development” (Gay, 2010, p. 235).

Reflective teachers create learning environments conducive to the academic and behavior success of students. Effective learning environments do not automatically happen but are built over a period of time through reflection on what works for that particular group of students. In order to build a community of learning, Gay (2002) stated effective teachers need to scaffold the learning of students, care for the achievement of their students, create a strong partnership with their students, set high expectations for their students, and “genuinely believe in the intellectual potential of these students” (p. 110). These elements do not happen without serious reflection from the teacher.

Creating an environment of learning is essential to meet the needs of your students. “Students perform much better in environments where they feel comfortable and valued” (Gay, 2010, p. 232), but that doesn’t mean effective teachers lower their academic expectations of their students. The teachers in this study purposely created an

environment for learning in how their classroom was organized, what was displayed on their walls, and the materials included in each lesson. Students' desks were in pods, the decorations on the walls were relevant to what they were learning, and there was a classroom library, students could use. It was evident the teachers in this study set high expectations for their students, they believed "school conditions can be created in which all students can become successful learners" (Nieto, 2010, p. 194). The teachers had spent time going over behavior expectations because students knew when it was appropriate to talk and play with their friends in class and when it was time to get to work. Again, these procedures and routines were not created over-night. Routines and procedures are important in a classroom because they "help students make better sense of and engage in teaching encounters" (Gay, 2010, p. 220). By establishing these routines, students are more prepared for learning because they know what to expect. In order to meet the needs of all their students, teachers must reflect on what is happening in their classrooms and be willing to make adjustments when necessary.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several topics emerged from this study for areas of future research. First, the topic of relational trust needs to continue to be studied. Relational trust needs to continue to be studied at the classroom level to enhance the academic achievement of students of color. Teachers', students', and parents' perspectives need to be studied to ensure what we *think* is effective, is *actually* effective. Further research is needed to understand how relational trust affects student self-efficacy. A more focused study on these two variables

could yield additional research on effective methods in closing the achievement gap.

Another area of future research worth investigating is the relationship between students of color and individualized instruction. More research is needed in this area in terms of what are the methods that are most beneficial that fall under the individualized umbrella and what should be considered individualized instruction. The accuracy of teacher reflection could also lead to future research. Is a teacher truthful with themselves when they are reflecting on their practices? Given their reflection, does the teacher take appropriate steps to improve the situation? These are some ideas for future research at the classroom level.

Another topic that emerged from this research for future consideration is pre-service programs. Students coming into the teaching profession need the background knowledge and skills on why and how to build relationships with students. They need to be given opportunities during their pre-service training to work with students different from them to try and build a rapport with these students. Building relationships with students should be just as important as the pedagogical and methods courses pre-service teachers participate in during their teacher-training programs. Along with this, programs should include courses focused on the examination of biases and privileges that we bring into the teaching profession. Regardless of where a teacher ends up working or what students a teacher ends up working with, all pre-service teachers should be exposed to school districts that have a highly diverse population. Further research should be conducted between student-teachers who take these diverse courses and have these types

of experiences with student-teachers who do not in terms of the effectiveness they have with building relationships with their students.

The final topic for further research is the impact a principal or school leader has on the ability of a teacher to build relationships with their students. Does the way a principal or school leader leads the school heavily influence whether or not a teacher spends time getting to know their students? Does the relationship that exists between the leader and the teacher affect whether or not the teacher builds trusting relationships with their students? This would be an interesting research topic because, depending on the outcome, it could affect not only pre-service programs, but also the way principals are trained.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a discussion of the findings and the cross-case themes. The three cross-case themes that emerged from this study were: belief in every student, relationships as the basis for effective teaching, and reflection. Assertions were made from each of the themes. For belief in every student, the assertions were as followed: (1) Teachers who believe in their students find a way to individualize the instruction for students when needed, (2) Teachers who believe in their students will allow students to engage in their learning in multiple ways, (3) Teachers who believe in their students will adjust and amend the curriculum to fit the needs of every student. For relationships as the basis for effective teaching, the assertions were as followed: (1) Creating strong relationships with students allow teachers to set high expectations and push their students

to higher levels academically and behaviorally, (2) Teachers who build relational trust with students build self-efficacy within students. Finally, the assertions for reflection were as followed: (1) Effective teachers reflect on the data collected to inform their instruction and (2) Reflection allows teachers to differentiate and present material in new ways.

Effective teachers build relational trust by believing in their students, building strong relationships with them, and reflecting on their practices. Effective teachers find ways to meet the needs of all their students. They scaffold material, individualize learning, adjust or amend the curriculum when necessary, and engage students in their learning in multiple ways. They also take time to build relationships with their students so they have an understanding of who they are as people first, then students. By building strong relationships with their students, they are able to set high expectations both academically and behaviorally. These relationships help students build self-efficacy. Finally, effective teachers are constantly reflecting. They collect data to better inform or adapt their instruction and they differentiate to meet the needs of all their students. Effective teachers also are involved in a continuously pattern of improvement on themselves.

Implications for practice were established and presented on belief in every student, getting to know your students, and reflective teachers. Areas for future research were also examined. These included studies done at the classroom level such as relational trust and self-efficacy, the relationship between students of color and individualized instruction, and the accuracy of teacher reflections. An additional research

suggestion was made for pre-service programs to provide background knowledge and skills to pre-service teachers on how and why building relationships with students is necessary and important. The final area for future research was at the administrative level. An examination of the impact a principal or building leader has on teachers to build relationships with students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

Interview Questions for Principals

1. How would your teachers describe your instructional leadership?
2. What do you consider to be the most important elements of being a highly effective reading teacher?
3. How do highly effective reading teachers assess the achievement of their students?
4. What impact do teachers who build trusting relationships with students have on student achievement?

Present data on the four most effective reading teachers in the building.

5. Choose two of these teachers that meet your criteria.
6. Tell me why you selected these two teachers.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How would your students describe you as a teacher?
2. What is your philosophy in teaching reading?
3. What kinds of things have you done in reading to facilitate the academic success of all students?
4. In what ways, do you adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of your students?
5. What do you think is the most important element of teaching reading to students?
6. How do you foster trust and relationships with students?
7. How do you use formative assessments to inform your instruction?
8. How do you handle discipline? Briefly tell me about your classroom management style.
9. What kinds of things have you done to get to know your students and their families?
10. What is the one thing you would tell a new teacher on how to be successful in teaching reading to a diverse group of students?