CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES IN A SCHOOL
CLOSING AN ACHIEVEMENT GAP:
A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine which culturally responsive practices, if any, were in a school that is closing an achievement gap between White and Black students. Through a qualitative case study, the researcher documented the use of culturally responsive practices school-wide, in a school making significant gains narrowing an achievement gap between White and minority students. The findings indicated all areas of the school program were enhanced with culturally responsive practices. These practices served to mitigate the imbalance of power and privilege that have been historically present in schools where African American students are educated. Practices were found in leadership, learning environment, pedagogy, home and community engagement, and cultural competency. Recommendations support a comprehensive approach to implementing culturally responsive practices as school reform rather than separate interventions. A conceptual framework for culturally responsive whole-school reform is proposed.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Dr. Dorothy Garrison-Wade
DEDICATION

My sincerest appreciation and love are extended to my heavenly father. Thank you for all the gifts you have so generously endowed to me. It is my prayer that I wield them to your honor and glory.

To my loving mother, Dr. Kamalee Williams, you are and will always be my greatest inspiration. Due to your sacrifices, I experienced a culturally responsive school in my youth. I have been seeking to replicate the experience for others ever since.

To my wise and wonderful husband and friend, Steve. I can scarcely speak your name without tearing with gratefulness and joy for your presence in my life. Thank you for your unwavering support and patience through this process. You came late in the game, but you are by far my most valuable player. I will love you with all of my heart for the rest of my life.
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CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION

In the sociopolitical space that occupies the dialogue and policies on improving low-performing schools and eliminating inequity in educational contexts, there is considerable discussion on how to create equitable learning conditions and decrease gaps (Barton & Coley, 2009; Brown, 2007; Marshall, 2009). Some might argue improving pedagogical skills is the solution (Murrel, 2002; Saifer & Barton, 2007). Without question, poor instruction results in deficient learning (Belfiore, Auld, & Lee, 2005; Lubinski, 2007). If that was all that were necessary, why after more than 50 years of recognizing the indefatigable presence of the achievement gap do we still struggle to close it?

The researcher believes the answer lies in the deliberate inattention to the root of the achievement gap and inequitable conditions in schools, as well as the flawed assumptions underlying approaches to a resolution. Several prominent approaches for closing the achievement gap have been tried, but not sustained.

Achievement Gap Problem Solving Approaches

Desegregate Schools

This particular approach assumes if White, dominant schools have better teachers, more resources, and a higher number of students transitioning to postsecondary options then the sensible option is to bus minority students into White schools and White students into minority schools. Such action forces schools to rise to the same level of performance and provides equitable opportunities for minority children. The underlying assumptions
of this approach are; all minority dominant schools provide an inferior education; White teachers faced with a new population of minority students treat all students equitably meaning they would make the same assumptions about all about all students; and the environments and culture in which students were raised is not relevant to their schooling.

The fact is school segregation and housing segregation are inexplicably linked (Atkinson, 1993). One could not be dismantled without the other (Condron, 2009). White enrollment declined in schools where busing was mandated (Raffel, 1980). White flight drove parents to suburbs where their children could attend school locally without the threat of busing or many chose to enroll them in private schools (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Thus, in many communities a resegregation occurred (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Subsequently, discriminatory assumptions and beliefs about schooling for minority children were not completely dissuaded, eliminated, or alleviated by the mere integration of schools (Allen, 2008). In some communities, little more occurred beyond the unique version of busing musical chairs.

**Monitor Progress.**

The progress monitoring approach requires every school to test every student regularly in order to follow the progress of specific minority subgroups. This method ensures students are making academic progress. The assumption is if schools are required by law to make sure every student makes at least one of growth growth, then, low-performing schools will dramatically improve student performance. The consequences of the school’s failure are to face public scrutiny and possible school closure. Other assumptions include:
1. When White teachers are faced with a population of underperforming minority students, they treat all students equitably;
2. Minority students have a positive experience in any school environment; and
3. The social environments and culture in which students are raised is not relevant to their schooling.

Although increased accountability for schools is a welcome improvement in educational policy, the fact is little has been done to address achievement gaps, improve culture, or promote the holistic development of children (Gori & Vidoni, 2005).

According to Neill,

The test and punish structure in NCLB will not overcome the systemic inequities of race and class, the real “gap.” While promoting educational equity is essential and should be the central focus of federal support, real progress will require more money and a shift away from the mania for “accountability.” The truth is that test based accountability for schools is not effective at closing real opportunity and learning gaps (Neill, 2008, p. 27).

Provide Funding and Technical Assistance.

Funding and technical assistance gives underperforming schools the necessary resources to improve academic performance. Officials may choose to close the school, reopen as a charter school, replace half the staff and all of the administration and turn themselves around with appropriate technical assistance, or transform with the support of an external provider. The external provider or charter school organization, in turn, works with them to improve schooling for poor and minority students. One assumption is if
schools have sufficient funding and technical assistance from an experienced external provider, the low-performing schools improve. Another assumption is that when White teachers are facing a population of minority students, they will treat all students equitably. A third assumption is that minority students will have a better learning experience in a charter school environment. A final assumption is the social environments and culture in which students are raised is not relevant to their schooling.

The fact is not all charter schools are capable in creating equitable learning environments. In fact, many have not (Hernandez, Kaplan, & Schwartz, 2006). Furthermore, not all external providers are equipped to create equitable learning environments. A great many have not (Gori & Vidoni, 2005). Attitudes, perceptions, and assumptions of teachers in regards to students of color are not addressed in this solution. However, the interactions between students and teachers is the most important predictor of learning (Cummins, 1997; R. Marzano, 2003). The culture of students is not addressed in this approach, yet it is integral to the learning process (Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003). Furthermore, the elimination of protected rights for school personnel throws opens a Pandora’s box of political scheming and warfare that is common in governmental entities (Dingerson, 2010).

In 1955, the United States Supreme Court reinforced the ideology that all students deserve equitable educational opportunities. However, American public schools still reflect apathy towards academic mediocrity for poor and minority children because one critical issue remains unscathed in the battle for equity in education (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002a). The issue is the influence of one’s culture in the educational process.
Culture, as defined by Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003) is “the set of practices and beliefs that is shared with members of a particular group and that distinguishes one group from others (p.14).” Racial and ethnic culture lends historical context to the education of poor and minority children (Allen, 2008; Cross, 2007; Gardner, 2007; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; King, 2005). Racial and ethnic culture is linked to the history of disparate education for children of color in the United States. Beyond the 50-year identification of an achievement gap, one’s racial and ethnic culture has influenced educators’ assumptions, perceptions, and attitudes about their students.

Individuals designed the public education system to give privilege to some and handicap others (Suriel, 2010; Tate, 1997). This tainted ideology was grounded in underlying assumptions of minority intellectual inferiority and an overarching premise that education and dominant culture acculturation are but the same goal (Freire, 1993; Watkins, 2001). It may well be the last defining criterion explaining the lingering disparities in subgroup academic performances. Race, socioeconomic status, and privilege issues are woven into the fabric of American culture and dressed in the educational systems. These issues are often reflected in lower expectations and minimal rigor in schools (Belfiore et al., 2005). They are equally reflected in the construction of power and privilege roles in schools (Delpit, 1997). A growing number of educators are choosing to obliterate these issues through culturally responsive practices.

Culturally responsive schools are places where history, values, and the cultural knowledge of students’ home communities are integrated into the curriculum. Johnson (2007) defines these schools as places where, “critical consciousness exists between students and faculty to challenge inequities in the larger society (p.51). Culturally
responsive schools have learned to deliberately confront issues of racism, classism, and distribute shared responsibility for equity (Bazron, Osher, & Fleishman, 2005). The staff understands racism is as transparent as the wallpaper or can be sometimes unintentionally rendered. Therefore, there are intentional communication structures, which allow authentic conversations and professional learning of practices that mitigate students’ experiences with racism and prejudice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; (Ladson-Billings, 2006); Solórzano, 1998). Students are taught to recognize how their attitudes, personal assumptions, lived stereotypes, and self-destructive prejudices affect their future if they are not confronted (Bae, Holloway, Li, & Bempechat, 2008; Hart, 2002). Their successful educational and ensuing professional life are dependent upon the fluency of their academic advocacy, self-awareness, personal pride, and resiliency (Trusty, Mellin, & Herbert, 2008).

What we know about child development and self-identification is that a child’s self-esteem and his evaluations of individuals and groups different from himself occurs at an early age (Armor, 2006; Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Day-Vines et al., 2003). Thus, as early as elementary school, children are involved in understanding their own identity and the value that others place on that identity (Spencer & Castano, 2007; Trusty et al., 2008; Whiting, 2009; Wiggan, 2008). Rist (1978), states, “though analytically, the conception and evaluation of identity must be distinguished, in reality they are inextricably interwoven” (Rist, 1978, p. 114). If identity is then socially constructed, poor and minority children need to be in an environment where their culture and identity are accepted, promoted, positively reinforced, and celebrated (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). When schools neglect to positively support the construction of self-identity, the long-
term impact one’s self-esteem can result in self-defeating patterns of behavior (Day-Vines et al., 2003).

Admitting the presence of racist assumptions, perceptions, or underlying beliefs in schools ushers us beyond the hushed whispers of racial inequity to an open dialogue on its pervasive impact on the educational opportunities for children of color. Society inevitably pays for ignoring its existence. Furthermore, now is the time to confront the influence of economic disparities in the education of children and acknowledge student performance is significantly impacted by social and environmental influences in which they live. If these factors are not mitigated within the school, it continues to plague their academic progress (Delpit, 1997; Kozol, 1995).

**Background: The Challenge to Create Educational Equity in America**

Disparate academic performance between minorities and Whites began well before *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954 (Abul, 2008; Paige & Witty, 2010). The disparity began early in the country’s history and was instituted by those who intended to educate two classes of people. One group to rule while the other group to serve the ruling class (Allen, 2008). Although this notion is explored in Chapter II, a brief synopsis follows.

During the first 250 years of American history, education was administered through communities and religious organizations (Allen, 2008). It was not until 1635 when Americans established a publicly supported school system (Allen, 2008). Federal support did not follow until over a century later. Throughout the interim, numerous laws and policies that restricted or denied minority education were instituted. African Americans became the only involuntary immigrants for whom it was illegal to provide an
education (Hayes, 2008). Alleged separate but equal educational institutions were eventually established for minorities (Cross, 2007; Glen, 2006).

In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruled that public facilities such as schools that were separated by race were legal as long as they were equal. The decision was struck down in 1954 in *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. This court case initiated a process in which the federal government intervened to enforce equitable educational opportunity (Hayes, 2008).

The 1960s and the 1970s gave birth to leaders and initiatives that endeavored to mitigate the impact of racist policies that had resulted in educational inequities for poor and minority children (Foster, 2009b). Several significant federal initiatives were passed to improve educational opportunity for poor children. The Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 to provide Title I funding for the improvement of reading and math skills for poor children (Hart, 2002). The federal government further intervened in each succeeding decade. In 1972, Congress passed the Title IX Education Amendment ensuring female students were not discriminated against (Denevi & Richards, 2009). In 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated a free and appropriate education to students with disabilities (Allen, 2008).

With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1981, many states developed curriculum standards, high-stakes tests, and accountability measures for student learning. President George H.W. Bush called upon state governors to create a list of educational objectives for the nation titled, Goals 2000 (Borko, Wolf, Simone, & Uchiyama, 2003). Subsequently, Congress passed the Improving American Schools Act, which reauthorized
ESEA and provided major increases in funding for bilingual and immigrant education (Hart, 2002).

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation strengthened the role of federal government involvement in public education (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). When NCLB passed, the stated focus was to see every child in America – regardless of ethnicity, income, or background – achieve high standards (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). Conversely, one of the largest criticisms of the NCLB movement is the absence of funding to support its ideals. Since sanctions were placed on schools that failed to make adequate improvement in achievement (Gardner, 2007), it proved particularly punitive for already struggling schools.

During fiscal year 2009-10, the Obama administration supported the ideals of equity in education with an unprecedented $10 billion dollars in stimulus dollars for school reform (Economist, 2009). For the first time in American history, schools would be given both the ideals of equity and excellence in schools and the financial support to achieve them. Of the $10 billion dollars, $3.5 billion dollars were allocated for turning around chronically low-performing schools. Four billion dollars was set aside for supporting innovation through a program titled Race to the Top (Economist, 2009).

**Statement of the Problem**

Armed with substantial federal funding resources, schools and districts began preparing to confront inequitable educational conditions that had impacted the lives of millions of poor and minority children (Dingerson, 2010). Districts, schools, state departments, and external providers approached this call to arms from a variety of research proven strategies.
As this historical moment in educational history approached, the researcher searched for tangible explanations for why the gap still lingered (Cummins, 1997; Delpit, 1997; Wells & Crain, 1997). Why were schools that were using effective strategies still struggling to close an achievement gap? Gordon (1979) states, “This gap in White and minority students is present at all socioeconomic levels and may even be widest at the upper end of the income distribution” (p. 20). Would adequate funding alone alleviate the numerous factors outside of the classroom that influenced student achievement? For failing schools caught in the web of poverty and institutionalized racism, culturally responsive practices appeared to be the most salient response. A lingering question was if practitioners shared this perspective as well.

In recent years with the substantive federal and philanthropic financial investment allocated to improving schools, there initially appeared to be a collective sigh of relief amongst educational policy makers. Finally, funding had met the ideals of equitable education for all students. The possibility loomed that the gap between the achievements of economically diverse students could be eliminated. With adequate funding schools and districts could hire the support needed to help all students. Certainly, barriers to educational equity could be eliminated with proper financial support to the schools that need it most (Burris & Garrity, 2009). However, the history of educational inequity loomed over the shoulder of school reform. This insidious, almost invisible creature of historical racism and our lack of ability to confront it presented the reason for the existence of inequitable opportunities for people of defined lower class, status, or social capital (Gordon, 2000).
The challenge to create equitable educational opportunities for all Americans has been a long standing goal of American educational policy (Blackmore, 2009). Nevertheless, the political desire to achieve equitable educational opportunities seemed forced—legislated and inconsistent. The financial dollars to support it had now been adequately funded but the problem historically, socially, and economically, is whether the issue of educational equity can be achieved without addressing or discussing the underlying prevalence of racism and its influence in educational systems. The question remains whether culturally responsive practices that intentionally confront racist conduct, biases, or beliefs further the goals of educational equity.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify culturally responsive practices in a school that is closing a racial achievement gap. The research focuses on a case study of a school identified as narrowing an achievement gap. The researcher wants to know if she can find culturally responsive practices in place in the school—either intentionally or unintentionally. Next, the researcher wants to know which culturally responsive practices are present.

The study provides guidance to state departments of education, districts, schools, and external partners for strategic approaches to closing the achievement gap in schools. This study differs from similar studies of achievement gap correlates because little is known about the kinds of culturally responsive practices being implemented in schools successfully closing the achievement gap. In previous studies, characteristics of schools closing achievement gaps are usually equally weighted and of similarly relative importance (Allen, 2008; F. E. Bishop, 2007; Caldwell, 2009; Campos, 2008; Carlo et al.,
2008; Chenoweth, 2009; Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Gordon, 2000; Hardy, 2009; Lubienski, 2007; McGlynn, 2009).

This knowledge expands on the body of literature on effective strategies in closing an achievement gap. Furthermore, this study guides the decision-making process for schools and districts as they determine where to spend their time and efforts in increasing equity for all students. The influence of culturally responsive factors continues to be ignored in the national educational policy and federal reform arena. Students, staff, and parents have little time to waste on inferior reforms with minimal success. They needed guidance yesterday. This study supports them in their work.

**Functional Definitions of Key Terms**

**Achievement Gap:** The observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the performance of groups of students identified by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007).

**Race:** The phenotypic make-up of individuals that has been used as a political category (Hilliard, 1995).

**White:** A member of a group or race characterized by light pigmentation of the skin; of relating to the characteristics of White people or the color of their skin (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white).

**Practice:** A pattern of professional activity or professional performance. The pattern of practice includes: the design and enactment of professional activity, the situational and cultural context of the activity, and the consequential outcomes for the student (Murrel, 2002).
**Culturally Responsive Practices:** Practices which recognize, respect, and use students’ identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments (Center, n.d.)

**Multicultural Education:** A process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (e.g., ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the schools' curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families. These practices encompass the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (Nieto, 2004)

**Research Questions**

This study examines current practices used in a school successful in narrowing an achievement gap. It turns a critical eye particularly on culturally responsive practices. The literature review identifies characteristics of culturally responsive practices in major areas of the school program. Next, the researcher examines which practices, if any, were in a school with a diverse population of students. In the school selected there is little, if any, gap between the academic growth of Black and White subgroups. The study evaluated teachers’ belief systems in the schools by questioning participants’ perceptions
of the impact of culturally responsive practices and if the beliefs were taught or inherent.

The research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Are culturally responsive strategies employed in a school that is closing achievement gaps? If so, which ones?
2. How do teachers and school leaders in the schools perceive the importance of culturally responsive practices in contributing to closing an achievement gap?
3. What are the belief systems of teachers and school leaders in these schools and how did they acquire them?

Methodology Overview

This was a qualitative case study. Interviews, focus groups, and observations were methods of data collection. Data was analyzed by coding text and observation data, line by line, into defined categories of culturally responsive school program areas.

Limitations, Delimitations and Assumptions

This was a qualitative case study. Interviews, focus groups, and observations were methods of data collection. Data were analyzed using Constant Comparative Analysis by coding text and observation data, line by line, into defined categories of culturally responsive school program areas.

Limitations of the Study

The population under investigation is limited to one middle school in a public school setting with a gross population of 1,500 students. Additionally, it is considered in comparison to other schools, an open and uncontrolled environment, therefore definitive cause and effect attributions are not studied.
Delimitations of the Study

This case study was an analysis of culturally responsive practices in a school environment. The analysis examined practices in the school in five distinct areas of a school program. Constructs of leadership, student management, pedagogy, and learning environment are explored. Interviews were conducted with staff members in an on-site observation setting by a minority researcher. The researcher opted for volunteer interviews over administrator-mandated participation.

Assumptions

Study participants were selected from the staff at a school that displayed progress towards closing racial achievement gaps in math and narrowing gaps in reading. All participants were employed at the school for a minimum of one year and were familiar with the practices and routines of the school. All respondents were informed prior to the survey about the focus of the study. It is assumed participants answered questions with honesty and authenticity. Participants were knowledgeable about school practices and the school’s goal of closing the achievement gap. All respondents in this study were interested in closing the achievement gap. Finally, practices observed in the school were not “staged” on behalf of the researcher but were an integral part of the culture of the school.

Researcher’s Perspective

My upbringing was privileged in many ways, as both my childhood and teenage years were spent safely nurtured in a physically and emotionally safe educational environment. As a product of private school education, all of my teachers were Black until high school. I was taught to be proud of my heritage and background. It was firmly
believed that one could accomplish whatever one set out to do. For example, it gave the students delight when the principal grew a large afro and donned a leather jacket for work. He looked like a regular Black activist, and I thought this was the coolest thing in the world! Role models were abundant throughout the campus with frequent visits from Black dignitaries and professionals within the community. My classmates’ parents were doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, city directors, and other professionals. Field trips were organized around the state from San Diego to San Francisco to Santa Barbara to Riverside to the Los Angeles area. On the first Tuesday of every month, there was a school-wide assembly and each class participated in the program presentation. I gained my first experience in public speaking at the tender age of six.

In retrospect, this private school was in many ways a culturally responsive educational environment. Teachers actively integrated culture into the instructional strategies, school processes, and curricula. It affirmed the individual, strengthened personal understanding of knowledge and skills, and prepared me for a world where these attributes are constantly challenged. Every child should have this education. As an educator and parent of two Black males, I have witnessed educational systems that function differently. I have witnessed teachers who express indifference, fear, anger, apathy, and even hatred for particular students. I have seen staff members express varied levels of expectations for students based on their skin tone or economic status. I have observed educators playing tactical games of politics for their own gain with little regard for the implications to students. I have heard White teachers, Black teachers, and administrators make shocking prejudicial and biased statements about people of color. Therein lays the researcher’s own bias.
As a Black school administrator, I have seen and experienced racism in all of its ugliness. With measured impatience, I have battled on behalf of students of color and, at times, fallen prey to the politics rather than the parity of education. After 25 years, I may have seen too much, and my perspective on race, class, and bias in the educational system is one of a cautious skeptic. When reflecting back upon my own early educational experiences, a flicker of hope ignites. It is that flicker, which fuels interest in this study, and it is that same flicker of hope, that silences bias during its process.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the notable gap between the academic performance of White students and students from historically underserved populations in America based on standardized tests (Thompson, 2007; Wiggan, 2008). The study examines interventions used at a school that is successfully closing academic gaps and cross-examines culturally responsive strategies that mitigate the influence of White privilege and power. It is thought that schools actively closing the achievement gap are using culturally responsive practices and schools that are not using culturally responsive practices are probably not closing achievement gaps since the root causes are ignored.
CHAPTER

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Achievement and Opportunity

Despite a number of reforms, poor and minority students underperform on standardized tests. Disparate academic achievement between minorities and Whites in America was duly and formally planned (Allen, 2008). As the United States breathed life into the establishment of educational systems, separate and unequal systems evolved.

The first compulsory education laws, enacted in 1642, required all children to have a basic literacy education (Allen, 2008). If parents failed to allow their child to be educated, the child was subject to be removed from the home and placed where they could receive an education (Friedman, 2004). This law, however, was only enforced if the children were White males (Allen, 2008). Females were not required to be educated, and the education of African Americans was illegal (Lerone, 1975). It was unlawful to educate anyone of African descent to read (Allen, 2008). Watkins (2001) discussed pronouncements made which stated that people of African descent were incapable of formal learning thereby allowing masked plans for cultural genocide (Watkins, 2001). If successful in obliterating the culture, language, and familial community of involuntary African immigrants, White settlers systematically created and sustained a European colonial class system similarly established in other countries. The system contained a ruling elite class and a subservient class destined to serve them (Lerone, 1975). In order to facilitate this process, Africans were stripped of their previous cultures, forbidden from speaking their native tongue, or practicing rituals. Families were torn apart often (Cohen...
& Garcia, 2008). Cultural repression, which permeates the whole system, especially the education system, ...[was] used to make the oppressed ashamed of themselves and their values and their history (Lerone, 1975, p. 211).

Two opposing methods were used to oppress African Americans. First, they were denied an education, thus limiting their social and economic possibilities. Second, when allowed an education, it was controlled with the hegemonic values and beliefs of White superiority that elite Whites wanted them to embrace. The “planned cultural retardation of a whole people and systematic repression of their values, insights, and expressions” was intentionally created by design (Lerone, 1975).

Slaves who attained freedom were allowed an education if they could manage to attend school regularly without neglecting their economic survival (Lerone, 1975). Many were bound to individual persons who agreed to provide food, clothing, shelter, and education in exchange for labor. Educated African Americans were a novelty. The educated few in this group were compelling speakers in the abolitionist movement (Lerone, 1975).

After emancipation, African Americans did not fare better in terms of educational opportunity (Hart, 2002). Some Whites opposed the education of ex-slaves. Schools were burned and often teachers were threatened (Rosette, 2008). This intimidating practice instilled fear, distrust, and envy amongst African Americans. This discouraged them from attaining an education or progressing economically for centuries (King, 2005).

White scientists conducted studies theorizing that Blacks were biologically and cognitively inferior to Whites (Watkins, 2001). Rendering Black people as inferior helped further justify and rationalize the colonial plundering of their assets, economic
domination, and denial of equitable educational opportunities (Fasching-Varner, 2009). The rationalization of Black intellectual inferiority provided a framework for denial of social privileges during the 20th century (Watkins, 2001).

As higher educational institutions evolved, several prominent White Americans established schools and colleges for Blacks (Abul, 2008). These institutions differed vastly from their White counterparts (Lerone, 1975). Blacks were taught how to cook, clean, perform physically challenging work, and do mentally menial tasks (Watkins, 2001). Hampton University, for example, was established to prepare Blacks for the service industries, particularly domestic service (Lerone, 1975). Black higher education institutions were structured to be highly regimented and students adhered to a strict course of discipline (Condron, 2009). Samuel Chapman Armstrong, founder of Hampton University, argued, “Blacks belonged to "savage races" and were mentally sluggish and indolent. Only with character training could they be salvaged” (Watkins, 2001, p. 57).

Schools which chose to deviate from the established curriculum by offering courses in the hard sciences were denied funding from their wealthy White benefactors (Tate, 1997). The goal for Black education was to create an obedient and stable semi-skilled Black work force (Hart, 2002). According to Darder (2002), education was thus used as an “institutionalized politicizing process for conditioning students to subscribe to the dominant ideological norms and political assumptions of the prevailing social order” (Darder, 2002, p. 156).

Early Black scholars largely attended Black colleges and universities after 1945. Campuses were typically small and only half of them were accredited (Harper et al., 2009). Black scholars were prevented from using White libraries, laboratories, or
attending scholarly association meetings (Harper et al., 2009). Although Black scholars who attained doctorate degrees attended universities, such as Harvard or Columbia, they were barred from teaching in these institutions (Anderson, 1980). In 1941, there were only two Blacks on the faculties of White universities and neither one of these scholars held teaching positions (Harper et al., 2009).

Disparities in the quality of K-12 education continued with dissimilar levels of funding, facilities, and resources in schools that African Americans were allowed to attend (Anderson, 1980). Watkins (2001), stated, “Black education experienced a separate tradition in funding, administration, teacher training, and curriculum” (Watkins, 2001, p. 180). Furthermore, *Plessy vs. Ferguson* affirmed that these practices were legal (Paige & Witty, 2010). Schools could be segregated by race if they were equal. However, they were not assessed to determine the extent to which they were equal (Tate, 1997). White educational institutions made increasing advancements in the public education system. Meanwhile, educational opportunities for Native Americans and Blacks was severely limited in the North and almost nonexistent in the South (Tate, 1997).

By the end of the 1940s, the NAACP began a class action suit for the integration of schools. The class action suit ended with a decision in 1954 by the Supreme Court to abolish segregated schools with “deliberate speed” (King, 2005, p.157). This legislation did little to sway public opinion of integrated schools (Atkinson, 1993). In 1957, President Eisenhower was forced to send federal troops to assure the security of nine students who integrated Central High School in Arkansas (Foster, 2009a). Additional support for desegregating schools would arrive in the form of the Civil Rights Act of
1964, which prohibited discrimination against students and provided financial assistance to schools and districts attempting to desegregate (Barlow, 2010).

A year later, President Johnson’s declaration of unconditional war on poverty in America was followed by one of the most influential pieces of educational legislation in American history, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (Haycock, 2006). This bill would more than triple the amount of federal dollars allocated to support poor citizens in public school systems (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). ESEA was later expanded to include Native Americans and English language learners (Rosette, 2008).

In the following years, an increasing number of African Americans saw education as the great equalizer (Raffel, 1980). Opportunities to increase the number of minorities attending higher institutions opened up briefly during the 1960s when President Johnson signed an executive order for affirmative action (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004). Many colleges and universities followed suit by recruiting minorities (Harper et al., 2009). However, in 1978, a White student challenged the legality of this policy (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004; Wells & Crain, 1997). Subsequent years brought a diminishing number of minority students to predominately White colleges and universities (Wells & Crain, 1997).

Blacks integrated into established K-16 educational institutions at an increasing rate (Atkinson, 1993). However, by the mid-1960s and early 1970s disturbing trends and patterns emerged. Disparities in the academic performance between minorities and White students were highlighted in The Coleman Report in 1966 (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). By the early 1970s, NAEP tests in reading and math confirmed that minority children were
not academically performing as well as their White counterparts in both lower and middle
class schools (Raffel, 1980). If that wasn’t alarming enough, in early in May 1972, the
National Education Association reported that thousands of Black students were pushed
out of school, suspended, harassed, arrested, and in a few instances, killed or maimed
(Horsford, 2010). African American students in segregated schools were systematically
excluded from extracurricular activities, tracked into vocational classes, and confronted
with condescension or hostility (Atkinson, 1993). Twenty-five years after Brown vs.
Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, school desegregation was uniformly achieved.
However, equity and the underlying beliefs enabling it had not withstood the trial
(Atkinson, 1993).

Several agencies sought to rectify apparent disparities in the educational
experiences of Black minorities (Caldwell, 2009). A report from the National
Association of Black School Educators, (1984), titled Saving the African American
Child, asserted that academic excellence could not be reached without cultural
excellence. The article further emphasized the need for "truth" on the curriculum for all
students (Andrews, 2007). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) legislated schools and
districts to examine the achievement of minority subgroups in schools (Haycock, 2006).
However, this legislation simplified the complexity of factors, which brought education
to this vortex. Few questioned the deeply ingrained belief systems of teachers and staff
who were now teaching diverse student populations (Bae et al., 2008).

Little work had been done in schools to help teachers understand minority
students and families with whom they had little interaction in their social or private lives
(Andrews, 2007). Few schools addressed cultural influence within the learning
environment and were offended by seemingly odd behaviors of students (R. Bishop, 2007). Teachers and faculty largely ignored race, privilege, and equity as part of their continued learning as professionals and sought to create strict and regimented systems which privileged some, disciplined most, and disenfranchised others (Hart, 2002; Howley, Woodrum, Burgess, & Rhodes, 2009). School staff developed a kind of color blindness that ignored the race of children and diminished the importance of culture while espousing respect for all children (Kopkowski, 2006). Students who learn differently and reflect behaviors and mores of their culture are challenged in the current educational systems (Gandara, 2010). These students that learn at different rates or in different ways are struggling (Gardner, 2007).

This “deracination” is dehumanizing and promotes one culture and one standard to which everyone should assimilate (Saifer & Barton, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2007; White-Hood, 2007). Yet, not all children assimilate in the way the current educational system is devised (Foster, 2009b). Poor students, suffering from socioeconomically deprived environments, or demonstrating learning outside the parameters of standardized testing are considered at risk and are caught within what we now know as achievement gaps (Gordon, 2000). This persistent, prevailing, historically rooted, academic achievement gap and our ability to mitigate the roots of its existence is the subject of this study.

Achievement Gap Defined and Constructed

In 1964, the U.S. Department of Education established the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Barton & Coley, 2009). The role of the NCES was to establish a national test which superintendents could use to compare data between
academic progress of students in their districts and others nationally (Manzo, 2008). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was developed five years later and administered to students on a voluntary basis (Anderson et al., 2007). The NAEP, given every four years, is administered to sample groups of students in grades four, eight, and twelve in reading, writing, math, and science (Manzo, 2008). In 1971, researchers noted a 39-point gap between Black and White 13-year-old students in reading. By 2008, it fell to only 18-points then widened to 21-points in the 1990s (Matthews, 2010).

The NAEP provided one method to examine achievement gaps on a national scale. However, the achievement gap is defined, measured, and approached from various perspectives (Anderson et al., 2007). Achievement gaps are analyzed by dropout rates, graduation or completion rates, and grade point averages (Anderson et al., 2007). Additionally, specific race, ethnicity, language acquisition, or social class categorically quantifies achievement gaps (Barton & Coley, 2009). Interventions to close gaps are undertaken by entire schools, concerning specific subject matter, course taking patterns, targeted reforms, or postsecondary transitions (Gori & Vidoni, 2005). When discussing achievement gaps, it is important to gain clarity on which gap is being examined, how it is measured, and how interventions are distributed (Barlow, 2010). For this study, achievement gap is defined as the difference between the academic achievements of Black and White students as measured by a standardized state assessment.

**Interventions to Close the Achievement Gap**

Districts endeavoring to close achievement gaps encounter numerous challenges. The impact of poverty on student learning, inclusive of violence, poor nutrition, and meager healthcare prevention affects student learning (Berliner, 2010). In addition,
districts are faced with teacher shortages, high staff turnover, lowered expectations, and limited curricular offerings (Belfiore et al., 2005). Despite these issues, educators have fought to introduce research-based interventions that support and enhance educational experiences of Black children, with some to measurable success (Chenoweth, 2009). This section discusses strategies identified for closing achievement gaps. Strategies include curriculum enrichment, extended learning time, standards-based instruction, leadership, and professional development.

**Curriculum Enrichment and Differentiation**

Not all students learn the same content at the same rate (Ford & Kea, 2009). Differentiated instruction is a strategy that gives students access to the same curriculum, but allows them to acquire the knowledge at different rates. Differentiated instruction further allows students to demonstrate their understanding through a variety of modalities (Burris & Garrity, 2009). Teaching practices go above and beyond the lower levels of comprehension or they diminish accountability efforts (Belfiore et al., 2005). Students who are academically at grade level or advanced levels need differentiated instructional strategies to continue advancement (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008). When given enrichment with accelerated and differentiated opportunities for learning content, student engagement increases (Reis & Renzulli, 2010).

With the pressure of high-stakes testing, children in underperforming schools are more likely to be subjected to a basic curriculum with limited enrichment opportunities (McClure, 2007). More gifted and enrichment opportunities increase the achievement of students in urban schools (Whiting, 2009). In a study conducted on urban students, those who received an accelerated or enriched curriculum in engaging areas of interest
increased their academic achievement overall and in some cases reversed underachievement (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). In another school with 75% of students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch rates, the staff was able to increase the achievement of their poverty students by designing curriculum that incorporated student interests and talents. The school differentiated the curriculum to accommodate all learners and extended the school day for enrichment activities (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008).

**Extended Learning Time**

One goal of achievement gap closure is to target certain students to accelerate their learning. Schools that provide extended time for student learning have reported some success (Murphy, 2009). Extending learning time is gaining momentum as more schools adjust their time and schedules to accommodate the needs of struggling learners (Gewertz, 2008). Between 1991 and 2007, 300 initiatives in 30 states were implementing additional time in schools for learning (Gewertz, 2008). Additional learning time can appear as a number of different programs. It might be after-school programs, additional time for the school day, a longer school year, Saturday School, or learning time on computers during a non-school day. Many districts are rethinking summer school programs (McGlynn, 2009). Secondary schools are staggering schedules to allow for varied times of student learning (Gewertz, 2008). Extra time does not necessarily mean to implement more of what is already occurring (Chenoweth, 2009). Researchers caution that extra time should be spent in creative and innovative curriculum or instructional approaches (Clark & Linn, 2008).
According to Bloom (1971), teachers increase the variation of learning time and instructional approaches in order to effect better instruction. In mastery learning, teachers organize the curriculum into instructional units, followed by a formative assessment designed to give feedback to both the teacher and student on what they have learned and what they need to learn better (Guskey, 2007). West End Elementary in Virginia closed achievement gaps with their special education students by instituting a double block of literacy, using a common planning time, and creating a strong focus on professional development (Hawkins, 2007). In another study conducted with 88 students, students with learning disabilities were allowed additional time to complete an algebra exam. These students scored significantly higher than students with disabilities who performed under a timed test (Alster, 1997).

**Systematic and Explicit Standards-based Instruction**

Instruction tied directly to state learning standards and assessed accordingly is an intervention that has increased achievement for some students of color (Baker, Fien, & Baker, 2010). Delpit (1997) notes that unless the knowledge to be acquired is made explicit, underperforming students do not perceive that teaching is occurring. Concrete visual concepts along with clear sequential steps are recommended (Campos, 2008). Teachers should build connections between new material and previously learned material or background knowledge (Chenoweth, 2009). When needed, learning is scaffolded so all students can comprehend and review the material periodically over time. Students have ample time to practice it with automaticity and review it so they know it deeply (Clark & Linn, 2008). Many core reading and math programs organized in this manner have documented success in closing achievement gaps (Guskey, 2007). Richmond Elementary
in Virginia was successful in implementing a culture of high expectations as well as closing achievement gaps by ensuring that all staff members received professional development on state learning standards and the intended curriculum (Hawkins, 2007). In addition, they scheduled regular learning walks for the staff to tour each classroom in the building, increased the rigor of their reading instruction, and involved staff in hiring decisions that resulted in more highly qualified staff. The result was their achievement gaps narrowed over 40% (Hawkins, 2007).

Increasing high expectations can be challenging if staff members have spent a fair amount of time in dysfunctional educational settings and have not seen or experienced academic environments where high expectations are the norm (Cross, 2007). Anyon (1997) advocates for teachers in urban settings to see and experience firsthand what successful schools look like and how they operate. Teachers can then begin to network with their successful colleagues collaboratively (Anyon, 1997).

**Vocabulary Instruction**

Poor and minority students with little or no exposure to early educational programs arrive at school with a significantly lower range of vocabulary than students in literacy-rich homes. To close achievement gaps in reading performances, students need focused instruction of vocabulary that includes direct instruction when encountering words in context, spelling, pronunciation, morphology, and syntax (Carlo et al., 2008). Additionally, English language learners need instruction on how to infer meaning from newly encountered words they read (Cummins, 1997). Active learning strategies which engage students continually in the process of learning have demonstrated increased learning outcomes (Cummins, 1997). Students need to engage in the learning process by
utilizing all of their senses and acquiring content through a process of exploration, experimentation, and high levels of peer interaction (Belfiore et al., 2005).

Explicit vocabulary should be taught to students to access content-area and enrichment words (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Marzano (2003) recommends the strategic development of a vocabulary continuum with standards-based words taught at every grade level and in every content area. Using his five step process, words are introduced before the lesson, reinforced during the lesson and reviewed through the use of games periodically (R. J. Marzano, 2003). Students in underperforming schools need to experience success early and often (McClure, 2007). Increasing vocabulary is one method to help them experience success in reading (Andrews, 2007).

**Leadership Efficacy**

Strong leadership is the key to success of any initiative. Leadership for closing achievement gaps is no exception (Reeves, 2008). First, it takes someone willing and capable of confronting barriers to advancement for students of color (Paige & Witty, 2010). It is not an easy task to challenge the status quo or to take a stand on a position that is socially or politically unpopular, but that is the kind of leadership needed to close achievement gaps (White-Hood, 2007). The leader should not be afraid to address the influence of race, class, social status, privilege, and equity (López, Magdaleno, & Reis, 2006).

Second, leadership should act within the context of moral purpose (Paige & Witty, 2010). Simply legislating a commitment to equitable practice is not enough to change school practices alone (Lubienski, 2007). Instructional leadership, albeit important, does not eliminate underlying biases or unsurfaced prejudices that interfere
with high expectations (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002). Leadership with the resolve to closing achievement gaps rallies educators around the moral purpose which led them into the field of education and challenges them to utilize their talents in creating a more equitable world together (Paige & Witty, 2010).

A school principal’s actions play an important role in the level of professional effort exercised by staff. According to researchers, principals utilize five “accomplishment” areas when supporting staff in this manner (Bellamy, Fulmer, Murphy, & Muth, 2003). Accomplishment areas are resources, operations, staff support, and school renewal support. The success principals have in these areas impact the degree to which student learning increases (Bellamy et al., 2003).

**Better Teacher Professional Development and Preparation**

Jean Anyon (1997) noted while implementing reforms in Newark that staff development is often “fragmented, ineffectual, and inefficient” (p. 174). Hiring experts in various content and curricular fields can be effective for advancing teacher skills. She advocated for developing teachers’ ability to deliver content knowledge with effective pedagogy while fostering teachers’ “proactive moral responsibility for respectful treatment” of students (p. 174). Anyon (1997) stated that staff development needs to be “continuous, comprehensive, and directly connected to classroom practice and curriculum development and implementation” (p. 174).

In a professional learning community, there is an inherent expectation that teachers work together cooperatively to increase student performance and regularly plan together on the rigor of the curriculum (Barton & Coley, 2009). As the challenge of the curriculum increases, so do levels of support (Reeves, 2008). Professional development
that is job embedded has a level of accountability for implementation and systematic follow-up is more likely to be sustained over time and implemented with consistency (Borko et al., 2003). Classroom coaching is one means by which teachers get support and feedback on their planning efforts to increase student achievement and provide collaborative support within a professional learning community (Sailors & Shanklin, 2010).

**Why Does the Gap Persist?**

Despite having access to research on proven strategies for closing achievement gaps during the past 50 years, these gaps still persist (Allen, 2008). Several theories have emerged over the years which explain the persistence of disparate achievement between Black and White students. Burris and Garrity (2009) argue that low expectations are to blame for the Black-White achievement gap (Burris & Garrity, 2009). Studies show many teachers display different expectations for students of color in urban schools (Corbett et al., 2002). For example, Kozol (1991) described a high school visit in which he asked about postsecondary preparation. Advanced placement programs were nonexistent and the number of students taking SAT exams remained at a distinct disadvantage in comparison with schools having structured Advanced Placement curricula (Kozol, 1991). Schools with high populations of minority students often offered a limited or watered-down curriculum (Banks, 2006). Teachers’ expectations become a student self-fulfilling prophecy as students rise to a level of expectations demanded or to a level of mediocrity (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b).

Gaps are further explained in relation to parental involvement. Parental involvement in the life of the school supports increased student achievement (Auerbach,
2009). Some educators believe that parental disengagement is due to indifference (Marshall, 2009). Other professionals may surmise that parents do not care about their child or their school performance if they are not present at traditional parent functions, such as Back-to-School Night or parent-teacher conferences (Andrews, 2007). Corbett, Wilson, and Williams (2002) encountered these perceptions when they visited urban classrooms. In one school they studied, teachers responded through surveys and interviews on their beliefs about parents. The researchers found that a sizeable number of teachers felt parents impeded their work by influencing students negatively at home, failing to return communications, harboring negative experiences from their own schooling, or being unwilling to provide more support from home (Corbett et al., 2002). Overall, the teachers envisioned themselves as being more committed to student success than the parents were. When questioned by the researchers, parents expressed similar sentiments toward teachers (Corbett et al., 2002). One causation for a lack of parent involvement is parents do not always feel welcome in schools (Johnson, 2007). There are cultural differences in how minority parents define parental involvement (White-Hood, 2007).

Another persistent theory related to the sustainment of gaps is rooted in the perpetuation of class structures in society (Cross, 2007). Schools that track students or fail to prepare them for postsecondary options perpetuate a cycle of economic failure (Fasching-Varner, 2009). African American students are routinely placed in classes with lower academic expectations (Horsford, 2010). These classes do little to prepare them for college and generally relegate them to vocational careers (Jay, 2009). Conversely,
African Americans are often over-identified for inclusion in special education classes where they do not necessarily have access to the regular curriculum (Kunjufu, 2005).

Kozol (1991) quotes one urban administrator who stated that although the curriculum for the inner-city school they were visiting was appropriate for that neighborhood, it would be unacceptable in a suburban school setting. Kozol further stated, “The evolution of two parallel curricula – one for urban and one for suburban schools has [also] underlined the differences in what is thought to be appropriate to different kinds of children and to socially distinct communities” (Kozol, 1991, p. 75).

There are a number of theories postulated to explain achievement gaps such as Critical Race Theory.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) presents one of the most salient explanations for the persistence of achievement gaps because it considers the larger sociopolitical environment in which schools are situated. CRT explains the social construction of race in America, the economic oppression of certain racial groups, and the socioeconomic policies that impact schools (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). There are several themes of CRT pertinent to a discussion on achievement gaps. They are the pervasive permanence of racism, interest convergence, social construction of race and benefits of Whiteness, and counter storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The first theme is the pervasive permanence of racism. Racism is so common and ingrained into the culture of America, that it is seldom questioned and often Whites are oblivious to its presence (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). While most people are familiar with the overt kinds of racist remarks and epithets that typically symbolize racism, modern
racism is not overt (Banks, 1996). Racism presents itself in the subtle insinuation of Black intellectual inferiority and White supremacy (Banks, 2006). There are no flagrant accusations, but rather subtle nonverbal micro-aggressions (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). Examples of nonverbal micro-aggressions include, but are not inclusive to, the teacher who consistently fails to challenge his students of color with higher order thinking questions or the school that fails to identify students of color for advanced classes. Racism has become more difficult to identify, cure, or address, particularly when it is not seemingly blatant in its approach or consequences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Issues of racism are more than isolated events of seemingly intellectually deficient individuals (Fasching-Varner, 2009). Racism is perpetrated when the person of color is denied access, availability, or opportunity because of the implication of inferiority (Banks, 2006). Children of color who languish in schools with minimal resources, inadequate funding, dilapidated facilities, and diminished curriculum are allowed to do so because of an implied assumption of inferiority (Hale, 2001). Groups of students poorly prepared to pursue postsecondary options are permissible if their implied social status is one of subordination (Hale, 2001).

A second theme of CRT is interest convergence. Interest convergence suggests elite Whites do not address racism except when it advances the interests of elite White and working class people (Crenshaw et al., 1995). For example, the bus boycotts of the 1950s eliminated laws that required African American citizens to sit in the back of public transportation vehicles and relinquish their seats to White citizens. The laws, which had remained on the books for years, were reconsidered only after public transportation systems experienced a significant loss of income from Black boycotts. The boycotts
threatened the survival of the company and possible loss of jobs for working class employees.

Watkins (2001) further illuminated why the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were rendered to serve the converging needs of elite Whites and the working middle class. The objective of the ruling order may have been more to wed Constitutional freedom with social subservience (Raffel, 1980). With the passing of civil rights laws and the desegregation of schools and neighborhoods, more Blacks became professionals and transcended into middle class America (Watkins, 2001). The creation of the Black middle class has been indispensable to the country’s racial politics (Raffel, 1980). No marginalized group in the American context is viable without a middle class juxtaposed against a struggling lower class (Raffel, 1980). With a subpopulation of Blacks thriving in society, elite Whites could point to them as the model group. They were an example of all that is possible through meritocracy while simultaneously oppressing, ostracizing, and incarcerating a majority of people of color (Alexander, 2010). It becomes inherently more difficult to make claims of racism embedded in the culture when a subgroup of the population appears to be doing well (Alexander, 2010). While the new Black and Hispanic middle class were firmly entrenched in maintaining their status and acquiring privileges through assimilation, the lower economic groups fought to maintain their very existence (Watkins, 2001). Granted, there have always been Black individuals that have transcended the caste systems in the United States, even during slavery and Jim Crow (Alexander, 2010). Blacks have always demonstrated tenacity, intellectuality, and ingenuity in their economic assests. The primary point is the rise of the Black middle class subsequent to the passage of the civil rights laws benefited elite Whites and Blacks.
The miseducation of poor and minority students is seemingly of marginal concern to White elites and the working class (Atkinson, 1993). The children of the elite and middle class are generally in capable educational hands, while poor and minority students are often matched with less capable teachers and lower expectations of performance (Woodson, 1990). Students that graduate from failing schools or school systems often blame themselves for their failure to achieve, which presents very little threat to the social order (Watkins, 2001).

Freire (1993) provides additional insight into why we have not seen the inequitable learning conditions challenged more actively. He notes that when oppressors perceive the reality of their role in creating an unjust system, they take critical intervention (Freire, 1993). However, if the intervention contradicts their class interests, the facts exist, but “it becomes necessary to see it differently” (Freire, 1993). This explains the emergence of theories that blame victims or their parents for school failure, including legislation that punishes students for failing to pass culturally biased standardized tests (Cummins, 1997).

A third theme of critical race theory is the social construction of race and its benefit to Whites (Tate, 1997). There is no biological or genetic basis for the classification of race (Rosette, 2008). It has nothing to do with personality, moral behavior, or intelligence (Knaus, 2009). Rather race is used to label and classify people with inalienable traits and characteristics (Fasching-Varner, 2009). One erroneous claim with a long history is that Blacks are genetically and intellectually inferior to Whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This theory has been promoted since African Americans were brought ashore as perpetually indentured servants (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). It is
thought, by some, that Blacks are more inclined to excel in areas where they can exert physical strength (Tate, 1997). Unfortunately, many Whites and some Blacks still believe this (Rosette, 2008). The labor of closing achievement gaps is hindered when educators draw broad assumptions of students’ intellectual capacity based on race (Milner, 2006). When educators uncover personal biases which assume students of certain ethnicities are lazy, ignorant, indifferent, or any number of other characteristics prejudicially assigned to characterize a racial or ethnic group, the students in those classes achieve at lower levels (Masko, 2008). George and Louise Spindler (1994) expand on the impact of assumptions, biases, and perceptions further. They state,

Teachers carry into the classroom their personal cultural background. They perceive students, all of whom are cultural agents, with inevitable prejudice and preconception. Students likewise come to school with personal cultural background that influence their perceptions of teachers, other students, and the school itself. Together students and teachers construct, mostly without being conscious of doing it . . . (p. xii).

This aspect of critical theory provides a compelling explanation for the persistence of the achievement gap when students are racialized and labeled in terms of their capabilities. Dominant society racializes different minorities at different times (Tate, 1997). Negatively racialized images of minorities shift depending upon the interest being served (Milner, 2006). At one moment in history, a group can be characterized as mild mannered, child-like, and simple-minded, but during another period in history, the same group can be seen as menacing, dangerous, and scheming. African American students are often characterized with negative academic and social traits and unfortunately, some
students embrace this prejudice as part of their culture (Masko, 2008). Some African American students are not performing well because they identify with their racialized identity (Horsford, 2010). Some students associate behaviors such as, studying hard, reading books, asking questions in class, getting high marks in school, and completing educational degrees with “acting White” (Fasching-Varner, 2009). Black students’ academic performance improves when they possess a positive self-concept (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

The benefit to Whites of socially constructing race is it remains a way to retain and grant privilege and power. “White privilege not only remains intact, but it has succeeded in making itself invisible, and thus all the more powerful” (Abby, 2011). Whites are often surprised to learn how widespread racism remains. “What little they learned about recent racial history focused on the accomplishments of the civil rights movement. The story of the civil rights movement, however, is also . . . a story about how White people attempted to maintain their power and privilege” (Abby, 2011). White privilege has distinct advantages that Whites have as a result of the disadvantages of people of color (Fasching-Varner, 2009). Examples of White privilege include the ability to not be viewed as a thief, followed around a store, or thought of as intelligent or bright by virtue of color. Reverse examples are true for people of color who are often automatically characterized as criminal in their intent. A second reverse example is when one is thought to hold less intellect or ability than their peers regardless of their qualifications. Other example is when minorities are discriminately eliminated from job considerations based on the ethnicity of their names (Foster, 2009).
A fourth element of critical race theory is the importance of storytelling. People of color have varying experiences with racism which need to be heard (Crenshaw et al., 1995). They are uniquely qualified to discuss race and racism from their inimitable perspective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory advocates for storytelling and counter storytelling. This allows others to hear a situation from multiple perspectives and value discourse from marginalized or oppressed groups (Knaus, 2009). Students of color need to be heard and their experiences acknowledged (Shanklin et al., 2003). Communication structures allowing for respectful dissent, pedagogical feedback, and exchange of perspectives on school and classroom events and experiences create an environment of mutual respect (Knaus, 2009).

Another element of critical race theory is the critique of liberalism. Equity is not be confused with equality. The solution to the problem of racism is to not make all things equal (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The solution is not to give everyone the same thing in the same manner. Nor is the solution to adopt a colorblind approach to seeing people and minimalize someone’s culture as if it does not matter (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Equity means treating people as individuals. To make a situation equitable, those who are neediest might get more and those who are less needy would receive less. It sees people as unique individuals and embraces rather than ignores their culture. Ladson-Billings (1995) notes, “Traditional civil rights approaches to solving inequality have depended upon the "rightness" of democracy while ignoring the structural inequality of capitalism (p. 52).” To close achievement gaps, an equitable distribution of services and resources need to be allocated to those most in need.
One of the critical reasons for the prevalence and persistence of achievement gaps for students of color is the failure of school systems to recognize the influence of one’s race and culture and enhance school practices with this knowledge (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Knaus, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theory lends unique perspective on the vestiges of racism that still inhabit schools and continue to promulgate the existence of inequitable schooling for poor and minority students.

The history of racism and apartheid educational structures in the United States is not erased by mere implementation of academically rigorous instructional and curricular practices (Belfiore et al., 2005). School reform efforts aimed at closing achievement gaps may have to address culture, attitudes, and beliefs, especially of students, staff, and parents in order to achieve sustainable results (Kendall, 1996). Geneva Gay (1994) supports this approach by noting that instructional programs that emphasize only the technical and academic dimensions of learning may not stand the test of time. Furthermore, in a study on school improvement conducted at an urban high school, Shanklin and colleagues (2003) found some school issues require technical solutions. But by only staying within the technical realm, the schools avoid confronting institutionalized practices that subordinate some stakeholders (Shanklin et al., 2003). Tending to only one component of a complex problem like inequitable learning and achievement for minority students is comparable to watering the leaf of a dying plant. The plant may well be in need of water but growth cannot be sustained until the water reaches the deepest levels of the roots that nourish, feed, and support the entire plant. The attitudes and beliefs of the school community manifest themselves in the policies, procedures, and practices of the
school both inside the classroom and throughout the system (Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser, 2009). They make up the complex system of the school culture. They feed and nourish the system. Without acknowledging their influence or deliberately nourishing their growth, reform efforts wither on the vine (Bae et al., 2008).

**Culturally Responsive Practices**

In the early 1970s, multicultural education emerged as an inclusive approach in which diversity was affirmed and actively supported (Nieto, 1992). There were several approaches to delivering multicultural education. Kendall (1996) identified five approaches. The first approach was to help students who were not from mainstream America acquire skills, language, and cultural values of the dominant society (Kendall, 1996). This approach is known as a deficit approach in which children of color are viewed as coming to school with certain deficits and the role of the curriculum is to help them assimilate thereby negating the value of their home-based culture (Cooper, 2009).

The second approach was aimed at improving human relations in which teachers focus on tolerance and appreciation (Kendall, 1996). Creating a caring community where everyone appreciates the qualities of different individuals is the goal. One example is encouraging students to share personal information about themselves and their families.

The third approach termed the Singles Group Studies approach was introduced in postsecondary settings. Classes were offered which focused on the contributions of people from a singular group, thus helping students feel proud of their heritage and empowered for their potential (Kendall, 1996). Classes in Women’s Studies or Black Studies are examples of such curricula.
The fourth approach addresses changes in the curriculum. Students read material from authors of various cultures, learn about events from various perspectives, and see pictures of others like themselves represented in curricular material. An example would be enacting a unit on the Holocaust.

The Social Reconstructionist approach supplements an additional dimension by teaching students how to alter society so that power is shared equitably (Kendall, 1996). It challenges students to reconstruct society to better serve the interests of all people. Students are exposed to issues of social justice and encouraged to question the status quo (Kendall, 1996).

By the 1980s, multicultural education and diversity training was embraced by businesses as well as the education sector as workplaces became increasingly more diverse (Banks, 2006). The Civil Rights Act and affirmative action legislation created a response in the marketplace in which diversity departments were established to create a more diverse workforce. Departments were created at colleges, universities, and in school districts. The term diversity grew to also encompass sexual orientation, disability, gender, and age tolerance (Nieto, 1992).

Multicultural education has undergone a period of evolution since its initial emergence (James Banks et al., 2001). At one time, multicultural education seemed distinctly different from cultural responsiveness (Kendall, 1996). Multicultural education provided knowledge about culture and respect (Banks, 1996). Cultural responsiveness incorporated the sociopolitical context in which multicultural education resided and the operationalization of its principles (Bazron et al., 2005). In recent years, the two concepts
have merged and are used almost interchangeably, as noted in Sonia Nieto’s (2004) definition of multicultural education,

A process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the schools' curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 346)

Cultural competence, another term for this body of knowledge, is defined as a set of knowledge and skills that allow one to function effectively in culturally diverse organizations (Geron, 2002). According to Lindsey, Robbins, and Terrell (2003) cultural competency is developed along a continuum. There are five levels of overlapping progression with cultural competency as the highest level of attainment (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003).

The first level is cultural destructiveness. Cultural destructiveness promotes assimilation into the dominant culture as the standard and suppresses any cultural practices that are different. Individuals or groups refuse to acknowledge cultural
differences that are deemed unimportant. An example of this would be school policies that inhibit students’ use of their native language.

The second level is cultural incapacity is a belief system which posits that one culture is superior to another. The individual or organization ignores differences and takes a neutral stand on their importance. There is no attention, time, teaching, or resources devoted to understanding and supporting cultural differences.

The third level, cultural blindness, acknowledges cultural differences but pretends they do not matter. Cultural differences may be noticed but are inconsequential and of no value. Colorblindness is encouraged. No resources, attention, or time, are devoted to understanding cultural differences. Everyone is the same.

At cultural pre-competence, the fourth level, staff members recognize cultural differences and their limitations in addressing them. They desire to respond to cultural differences more effectively by addressing non-liberating structures, teaching practices, and inequities. This serves as a first step in eliminating some of the incapacitating practices that limit the educational progress of diverse learners.

Cultural competence, the final level in cultural proficiency, interacts with cultural groups effectively using a set of cultural standards. Organizations and individuals find ways to celebrate, encourage, and respond to differences. Teachers and students regularly explore issues of equity, cultural history, social justice, privilege, and power relations (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003).

**Culturally Responsive Practices Defined**

A number of varied terms are used to describe the ability for one to understand the influence of one’s culture in the educational process and operationalize knowledge to
interact effectively within a diverse context. Such terms include: multicultural education, cultural competency, and diversity training. The researcher prefers the term culturally responsive practices. The word “responsive” is an action verb that communicates a way of being and an urgency to meet a need. The National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems defines the term as,

Culturally responsive practices are educational practices, strategies, team processes, and curricula content that value the culture, language, heritage, and experiences of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds while creating spaces for teacher inquiry, reflection and mutual support for cultural differences (NCCREST, 2004).

Culturally responsive practice is a thoughtful, deliberate approach that recognizes the individual needs of students. For this study, the researcher married the terms from New England Equity Assistance Center and Sonia Nieto’s (2004) definition of multicultural education as follows: “culturally responsive practices are approaches to school reform that value culture, language, heritage, and experiences of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It challenges and rejects racism, while it accepts and affirms pluralism. The practice permeates curriculum, instructional strategies, team processes, and educational practices, as well as, personal interactions. It uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and promotes democratic principles of social justice.”

**Conceptual frameworks**

A number of researchers have defined key elements present in schools, which acknowledge the presence of a diverse student population and the need for these students
to make relevant connections between their learning and themselves (Andrews, 2007; Banks, 2006; James Banks et al., 2001; Bazron et al., 2005; Brown, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These researchers represent a summation of the components that present in previous studies as well as respective differences in approaches while serving a diverse student population.


Whole school reform through culturally responsive practices needs a range of strategies to successfully managing a school that embodies the ideals of social justice and equitable education. Culturally responsive pedagogy helped educators focus on one of the most influential areas of a school program but the entire school program needs to reflect the thoughtful care and respect of varied cultures (Gay, 2000). Building on a body of scholarship that promotes equity, (Banks, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Levin, 2007; Reeves, 2008; Tate, 1997), social justice (Blackmore, 2009; Cooper, 2009; Nieto,
urban school leadership in diverse contexts, (Andrews, 2007; Bazron et al., 2005; Cooper, 2009; Davis, Galinsky, & Schopler, 1995; Harriott & Martin, 2004; Johnson, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2003; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Orr, Berg, Shore, & Meier, 2008; Scribner & Reyes, 1999; White-Hood, 2007), achievement for African American males, (Murrel, 2002), and cultural relevance in classrooms (James Banks et al., 2001; Corbett et al., 2002; Cummins, 1997; Fiedler et al., 2008; Gay, 2000; Kendall, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Montgomery, 2001; Murrel, 2002; Ooka Pang, 2001; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995) helps to create a framework for culturally responsive school practices. Based on a review of the literature, there are six areas of a school program that can be responsive to students’ cultures. They are leadership, home and family connections, pedagogy, learning environment, student management, and shared beliefs. Although shared beliefs are not typically thought of as part of a school program, they are included in this framework because none of the other components could flourish without the proper belief systems. Aside from shared beliefs, the tenets are not hierarchal and can be exercised independently of each other. One can be responsive in one program area without being responsive in another. These tenets align with previous research on school reform program areas. Reeves (2003) found five common schooling practices present in 90/90/90 schools with 90% of poor students, 90% minority, and 90% at or above proficient on state tests. These practices included a focus on achievement, curricular choices, frequent assessments, assessments through writing, and external scoring of student work.
Leadership

The literature on culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership for social justice frame the recommendations in this section of school practices. There are six identified leadership spheres to help students mitigate cultural mismatches, a lack of cultural power, or privilege (Belfiore et al., 2005). First, leaders establish a welcoming and supportive culture through institutional adjustments (Belfiore et al., 2005; Magno & Schiff, 2010). A welcoming and supporting culture creates a sense of belonging for all stakeholders. Sample actions may include leaders assigning student mentors to acclimate them into the school culture (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b) or organizing peer tutoring to help new students adjust to the rigorous learning expectations (Barlow, 2010). Cultural clubs could be established to encourage others to learn and experience various cultures while enhancing intergroup relations (Cummins, 1997).

Second, cultural responsive leaders assist teachers with integrating cultural experiences in their classrooms (Magno & Schiff, 2010). They assist and support teachers in confronting barriers to achievement for all children (Jones, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2003; Reeves, 2008). They may provide specialized training for integrating culture into their lessons or create an intervention where students receive extra credit for interviewing and writing about other students’ culture or heritage (Brown, 2007). Leaders understand the unique needs of their population and design interventions to support them, such as working with mainstream teachers toward appropriate classroom accommodations and grading for English language learners (Andrews, 2007).

School leaders maintain a network of cultural informants that help them understand current and historical events occurring in the community that may impact the
emotional, social, and academic environment in which they operate (Cooper, 2009; Scribner & Reyes, 1999). Students do not learn in isolation from their social context (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Students living in oppressive conditions of poverty experience its pervasive influence in the classroom as well (Trusty et al., 2008). Hunger, depression, and violence, for instance, influence academic outcomes (Rothstein, 2008). The problem is poverty has become such an integral structure of our capitalistic society that people seldom question the rationality of its existence anymore or its historical roots (Levin, 2007). West (1994) states, “The urgent problem of Black poverty is due primarily to the distribution of wealth, power, and income. This distribution, influenced by the racial caste system, has denied opportunities to most Blacks until two decades ago (West, 1994, p. 93). Society aims to separate educational systems from the economic systems to which they are subject, however, they are inextricably linked (Florence, Asbridge, & Veugelers, 2008). Responsive leaders utilize their understanding of the culture to mitigate the economic disparities of their students (Allen, 2008).

Culturally responsive leaders challenge the status quo and enforce high expectations (Murrell, 2007; Touchton & Acker-Hocevar, 2001). They command a “no excuses” approach to increasing student achievement (Corbett et al., 2002). They communicate high expectations through their actions as well as their words (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Kams, 2010). While holding students to rigorous standards, they jointly provide adequate resources to help them succeed (Barton & Coley, 2009). High academic expectations for all students is evidenced in numerous ways, such as the rigor of academic assignments, the types of curricular offerings or the ways in which teachers
deliberately direct student aspirations, class offerings, and academic opportunities (Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005).

A culturally responsive leader has come to terms with their racialized past and understands the personal bias and perspectives they bring to their position (Lindsey et al., 2003). They seek to eliminate bias and preconceived assumptions about people of color, and they understand that this position may be met with resistance (Dovidio, 2009). Horsford (2011) defined this dimension of the leadership role as follows,

As with any form of organizational change, efforts to demonstrate and engage culturally relevant leadership in schools will face challenge and resistance from those who prefer to keep things the way they are. Educational leaders must therefore become familiar with not only the guiding principles, continuum, and essential elements of cultural proficiency but also the obstacles and resistance they will face as they seek to dismantle oppression and reveal privilege and entitlement within their respective organizations (p. 598).

All members are developed as leaders (Bazron et al., 2005). Governance of the school is a shared collaborative amongst all stakeholders and members are taught how to collaborate, negotiate, and advocate for an equitable and socially just world (R. Bishop, 2007). Students are taught they have sociopolitical influence which can be used to transform systems (Bemak et al., 2005). They learn how to use their influence judiciously and are empowered to exercise leadership throughout the school community (R. Bishop, 2007; Price, 2008).
Responsive Home & Family Connection

Drawn from literature on family engagement, (Auerbach, 2009; Boyd & Correa, 2005; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Scribner & Reyes, 1999), urban school leadership, (Corbett et al., 2002; Johnson, 2007; Jones, 2002; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002a, 2002b; Orr et al., 2008), and leadership for social justice, (Cooper, 2009; Kendall, 1996; Normore & Blanco, 2006), there are recommended actions for how a school might be responsive to the cultures of its parents and family community. Schools can be responsive to parents by building the cultural capital of parents and the community. These actions include valuing the home lives of students and welcoming parents into the school environment. (Cooper, 2009). Schools can also encourage parents to become involved in school life in ways they feel are important, and school leaders can offer varied opportunities that are sensitive to the work hours and lifestyles of the community (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b).

Involving parents can be challenging when parents have had negative experiences in schools or have made erroneous assumptions about the school or staff based on their own cultural background or experiences (White-Hood, 2007). Responsive schools give parents tools to help navigate systems. Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) developed a cultural reciprocity model in which educators and parents openly communicate their cultural and ethnic beliefs. They further discuss assumptions they are making which might otherwise impede a fair process of parent-teacher collaboration to improve student outcomes (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). The epistemological basis for practices in which people share multiple perspectives is rooted in Critical Race Theory. An important theoretical
tenet of CRT is the opportunity for people to hear the counter stories of events and develop a respect for the examination of issues from multiple lenses.

Schools with culturally responsive family connections recognize the socioeconomic context of the school (Rothstein, 2008). Staff recognize that students who live in poverty are immersed in a subculture that often involves violence, abuse, pain, and loss (Levin, 2007; Normore & Blanco, 2006; Rothstein, 2008). These types of external factors in the community can affect the emotional and physical well-being of students and their families (Kozol, 1995). A student's motivation and ability to succeed in school are influenced by the hardships they face. Moreover, the cultural norms students bring from home add new subtleties to the dynamics in the school. Staff seeking to understand the home lives of their students, connect with them on a practical level by providing resources to support students in academic and non-academic areas (Boyd & Correa, 2005).

Bemak (2005) recommends an interventional type of school counseling termed empowerment groups where students determine the agenda for discussions and can openly discuss challenges in their lives without judgment (Bemak et al., 2005). Meal programs, food banks, on-site mental health or medical care, and uniform exchanges, for example, mitigate the influence of poverty and help parents connect to the school (Normore & Blanco, 2006). Additionally, the home lives of students are valued as parents are welcomed into the environment both formally and informally (Cooper, 2009). Parents become involved in school life in ways they feel are important and varied opportunities for involvement are provided at times that are sensitive to the work hours and lifestyles of the community (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b).
In a culturally responsive school, the staff is cognizant of the fact that students may live in homes where their dominant culture and language may differ from the culture and languages used in school. Students are essentially transitioning between cultures every day (Anyon, 1997). Culturally responsive schools assist students during this transition allowing them time to adapt and develop biculturally (Bazron et al., 2005). Strategies such as explicit teaching of expectations, appropriate language for school, and acceptable behaviors are integrated into the instructional practices and messages seen around the school (Auerbach, 2009). Social skill development and learning how to demonstrate courtesy and kindness, as well as, the ability to navigate a variety of social situations fluently is supported in the literature (Harriott & Martin, 2004). Students learn social skills and are given ample opportunities for student interaction amongst each other and the teacher.

Students living in poverty are immersed in a subculture that often involves violence, abuse, pain, and loss (Levin, 2007; Normore & Blanco, 2006; Rothstein, 2008). Culturally responsive schools recognize external factors in the community can affect the emotional and physical well-being of students (Kozol, 1995). Therefore, culturally responsive schools incorporate programs that support the emotional well-being of students. Schools may implement programs such as breakfast or summer lunch programs, food banks, on-site mental health or medical care, and uniform exchanges for students. Bemak (2005) recommends an interventional type of school counseling termed empowerment groups where students determine the agenda for discussions and can openly discuss challenges in their lives without judgment (Bemak et al., 2005).
Parents benefit from a close relationship between the home and school (Boyd & Correa, 2005). Parents and caretakers better understand their role and responsibilities with regards to the education of their children when staff coaches them on the culture of schooling in the United States. They also have a deeper understanding when they can access resources and educational options both for their children and themselves (Bazron et al., 2005; Scribner & Reyes, 1999).

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Geneva Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) as “teaching that reflects a belief that you are responsible for the academic achievement of all students regardless of race” (Gay, 2000, p. 252). It examines multicultural perspectives and is enhanced with cultural knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students come to school with varying degrees of cultural background knowledge (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Some students have had ample preparation for schooling with access to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs (Condron, 2009).

Responsive teaching builds upon the existing knowledge base while valuing the unique cultural knowledge children already possess (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Discussions, surveys, and rapid assessment techniques help inform the teacher on what students already know about content and mine their cultural knowledge base (Bazron et al., 2005). Instructional strategies are varied and constructivist (e.g., integrating movement, music, rhythm, exploration, and social interaction). Problem solving, experimentation, innovation, and discovery are integral to the learning process and authentically evidenced in both instructional and assessment programs. Infused with a curriculum that reflects a wide range of cultures, every subject area and discipline is integrated with multicultural history and experiences while providing instructional
coherence for students to process, reflect, and respond to the content (Banks, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Visual and manual representations of concepts are introduced as part of the instructional process so students can see, touch, feel, and experience concepts first hand.

Many students may arrive at school with varying levels of vocabulary development so key vocabulary is taught intentionally alongside concepts to support the comprehension of English language learners and deprived language learners. Culturally responsive pedagogy provides varying amounts of wait time for students who may struggle with language expression or varied cognitive processing times (Bazron et al., 2005). Language development plays an integral role in the lesson design with multiple opportunities for practicing language skills throughout the learning process. Students’ progress is also assessed regularly for vocabulary development and language fluency (Carlo et al., 2008; Cummins, 1997; Gandara, 2010; Haycock, 2006).

The curriculum denotes what is important for students to know, when they will learn it, and what materials will be used to facilitate learning (Shaw, 1978). Geneva Gay (2003) denotes culturally responsive curriculum as having several critical characteristics. First, it legitimizes the cultures of all peoples through acknowledging its influence in attitudes and approaches to learning while integrating its content into the curriculum. Second, it connects meanings between home and school experiences. Third, it utilizes a variety of instructional strategies to address different learning styles. Fourth, it builds affirmation and acceptance of others people’s cultural heritages. Finally, it incorporates multicultural resources in the content and skills (Gay, 2000). Gay (2000) states,
The cultures of schools and different ethnic groups are not always completely synchronized. These discontinuities can interfere with students’ academic achievement, in part because how students are accustomed to engaging in intellectual processing, self-presentation, and task performance is different from the processes used in school. Demonstrating knowledge and skills may be constrained as much by structural and procedural inconsistencies as by lack of intellectual ability…congruency between how the educational process is ordered and delivered, and the cultural frames of reference of diverse students will improve school achievement for students of color (p. 12).

It is imperative for schooling to be integrally tied to student cultures (Tate, 1997). Curriculum touts the accomplishments and contributions of the Greeks, Latin, Hebrews, and Europeans, while ignoring the contributions of Africans or African American peoples. Woodson (1990) argued that this practice was the worst sort of lynching. He said, “It kills aspirations” (Woodson, 1990, p. 3).

The curriculum is both relevant to the lives of students and rigorous in its delivery of the curriculum (Barton & Coley, 2009). Curriculum is rigorous when it challenges students with critical thinking, reasoning, and evaluative skills (James Banks et al., 2001). McLaren (2003) outlines two types of objectives important in classrooms. Macro-objectives help students make connections between methods, content, and the structure of a course. They also help students see how the content fits into the larger social context in which students operate. This approach helps students acquire a political perspective where they uncover the hidden curriculum and develop a political cognizance (McLaren,
The micro-objectives presented narrowly define the path of inquiry. It is the
macro-objectives, however, that help students make connections between the current
knowledge they are acquiring and its larger sociopolitical implications (McLaren, 2003).
It attunes them to regularly examine the underlying political, social, and economic
foundations of the larger society (Blackmore, 2009). This kind of process used within a
curriculum challenges traditional concepts by interrogating them from various
perspectives. This method also has the potential for helping students to feel more
liberated. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Teachers help students consistently challenge
inconsistencies, discrepancies, and omissions in historical and current events (Ladson-
Billings, 1995). Complex cognitive skills are used to discuss issues of equality and social
justice (Montgomery, 2001).

Liberation and empowerment are common themes in culturally responsive
teaching. Within a framework of social justice, students learn how to transform
oppressive systems (Cross, 2007). Student empowerment and self-transformation trains
pupils to construct a society based on non-exploitative relations and social justice (Delpit,
understand and engage the world around them but enabling them to exercise the kind of
courage needed to change the social order where necessary” (McLaren, 2003, p. 85).

Assessments that allow for the authentic evaluation of students’ knowledge and
skills are a salient component of the learning process. However it can be complicated to
assess what students know when language differences interfere with verbal or written
responses (Scribner & Reyes, 1999). Assessment is also an important component for
ongoing feedback. Students receiving constructive feedback on learning and behavioral
standards feel empowered and respected (Reeves, 2008). According to Bloom (1971), instructional feedback should be twofold. One aspect would provide information to students on their progress and give them data on their errors. More specifically, students need to assess the kinds of errors they are making so they can avoid doing so in the future (Bloom, 1971). Feedback can be given on behavioral as well as academic expectations (Cohen & Garcia, 2008).

Assessment and feedback pertains to the teacher as well (Clark & Linn, 2008). Teachers can self-assess their instructional performance and material as a regular part of the instructional process (Chenoweth, 2009). Examining the materials, gauging the engagement of students, and determining the efficacy of learning for all students are ongoing criteria for self-reflection of professional practice (James Banks et al., 2001).

Learning Environment

The recommendations for culturally responsive learning environment are drawn from literature of culturally responsive classrooms and schools (Bazron et al., 2005; Brown, 2007; Fiedler et al., 2008; Harriott & Martin, 2004; Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005; Montgomery, 2001). The learning environment creates a space for belonging, respect, affirmation, and acceptance (Montgomery, 2001). As children are developing their sense of identity, a cultural responsive learning environment affirms children in being confident of who they are without the need to feel more superior than another (Chen et al., 2009). Students learn how to demonstrate care and exercise social skills (Harriott & Martin, 2004). This sense of caring is critical as it allows students to feel safe and free to take risks in the learning environment (Jones, 2007).
Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2002) developed a framework for culturally responsive practices that encompasses promoting a positive learning environment while increasing students’ intrinsic motivation to learn. According to the researchers, there are four motivational conditions that students and teachers need to continuously create. These conditions are: (1) creating an environment of inclusion whereby students and teachers feel mutually respected (2) developing attitudes in which students utilize personal choice (3) establishing relevance to create a favorable attitude toward learning; integrating students’ perspectives and values, and (4) demonstrating a belief in students that they can accomplish anything they decide is important (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) indicate these conditions establish the basis for a learning environment in which students are affirmed, feel valued, and are ultimately motivated to achieve at greater levels. A primary factor for why many minority students drop out of schools is their lack of positive relationships with teachers and their failure to see the relevance of the curriculum for their future (Bridgeland et al, 2006).

Familial structures are indicative of responsive environments (Jones, 2007). These are structures where students can form caring relationships with teachers and students (Andrews, 2007). A sense of caring may be evidenced in various ways. For example, it can be seen by how teachers treat each other, how students treat each other, how parents are welcomed, and the types of activities community members are engaged in (Bemak et al., 2005). Caring can be demonstrated by how staff and students treat the school facilities and properties (Biffle, 2006). Communicating caring fosters resiliency which is a necessary skill in supporting children’s emotional health and well-being (Biffle, 2006).
A responsive learning environment promotes achievement and communicates high expectations (Wiggan, 2008). A culture of success promoted in which achievement is shared and celebrated with traditions, ceremonies, and processes reinforce the ideals and values of the school community (McGlynn, 2009). For example, role models of various ethnicities may be invited to inspire achievement. Furthermore, public acknowledgement is given for meeting goals and student work is displayed in halls.

**Student Management**

The literature from leadership for social justice, (Blackmore, 2009), leadership in multicultural environments, (Andrews, 2007; Monroe, 2005; Ooka Pang, 2001; Scribner & Reyes, 1999), the education of African Americans,(Day-Vines et al., 2003; Kunjufu, 2005; Murrel, 2002; Thompson, 2004; Webb-Johnson, 2002), culturally responsive schooling, (Bazron et al., 2005; Brown, 2007; Fiedler et al., 2008; Johnson, 2007; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbell, 2008), and urban schooling, (Murrell, 2007; Webb-Johnson, 2002; Wells & Crain, 1997), provides a basis for the recommendations in this section. Culturally responsive student management is an approach for managing student behavior which respects and affirms students’ identities (Monroe, 2005). Staff members understand which behaviors are representative of the cultural mores of the students, typical of children in this stage of emotional development, and intended to be disruptive (Monroe, 2005).

In culturally responsive schools, student management and disciplinary policies are embedded within the context of respect and follow a natural progress of rewards and consequences aligned with the stated values of the school (Andrews, 2007). For example, a universal policy might be for the student and the teacher to discuss disruptive
behavioral actions and their impact on classroom learning privately. As part of this discussion, the teacher may iterate how the specific behavior aligns or conflicts with the agreed upon values of the class and organization. As a matter of respect, it allows both parties to discuss their intentions, surface their assumptions, and discuss their perspectives without defaulting to the role of teacher as the enforcer of power and privilege (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b).

The policies, programs, and procedures developed within the school to manage student behavior are responsive to the cultures and respectful of all students (Bazron et al., 2005). Disciplinary policies are distinctly tied to the fulfillment of the agreed upon values (Brown, 2007). Students are taught that transgression of these values impacts not simply the individual but the school community as a whole (Cummins, 1997). Student management serves to reinforce not only the singular responsibility a student has and the importance of self-discipline in controlling their actions, but the greater importance of how their actions impact the community and the school environment (Monroe, 2005).

Social skills support the students in creating a caring environment (Harriott & Martin, 2004). Students learn fundamental skills in interacting with members of other cultures. They understand how to respond when members of other groups behave in ways that are inconsistent with their own norms of behavior such as bullying (Cummins, 1997). Students are prepared to take ownership of the environment and help reinforce the values of the community (Clark, 2003).

**Culturally Responsive Shared Beliefs**

Beliefs and attitudes play a unique role in directly influencing what occurs in schools (Bae et al., 2008). Banks (2006), states, "Every educational decision is imbedded
within a particular ideological framework" (Banks, 2006). Such decisions can be as simple as arranging classrooms in rows or as multifarious as the regularity with which culture is integrated into the educational process (Middleton, 2002). Other decisions can include understanding how certain cultural beliefs can permeate instructional decisions and become a shared belief for the entire school (Benard, 1996). Therefore, beliefs have to be interrogated and examined for bias (Middleton, 2002). Beliefs and bias have to be critiqued as they determine what teachers ignore, what they pay attention to, what they value, and what behaviors they deem important, not important, and for whom (Chen et al., 2009). Understanding who you are and what your limitations are is a process that may look different depending upon one’s social attitudes. Chen, Nimmo, and Fraser (2009) propose an introspective self-study tool which is intentionally challenging and uncomfortable. The tool is divided into four parts and participants examine their beliefs and biases in one section, their selection of materials and resources in another section, their intended and unintended messages to children a third section, and how they build relationships with children and their families in a fourth section. This kind of deep probe of beliefs is deemed necessary before implementing culturally responsive practices that can be sustained over time.

The underlying beliefs of the staff and administration are demonstrated through the policies, procedures, and practices of the school (Bae et al., 2008). Belief systems influence everything from the budgeting to funding of major innovations to displaying posters in the halls (Benard, 1996). Lindsay, Robbins, and Terrell (2003) recommend having staff categorize school policies, practices, and classroom actions along a continuum of culturally proficient development (Lindsey et al., 2003). In a culturally
responsive school, teachers receive regular professional development that cultivates their cultural competency and reinforces the espoused values of the school community (Kelly, 2008). Issues of bias, prejudice, equity, privilege, and power are regularly examined to reveal underlying values and beliefs (Geron, 2002).

Understanding your beliefs, values, and ideals is not just a process for staff. Students also need to know how their culture has influenced their thinking and actions (Cummins, 1997). They need to be ever cognizant of prejudicial attitudes or negative stereotypes they may hold of themselves or others (Cummins, 1997). It is just as importantly for students in a culturally responsive school to be taught to identify negative images in the media or other social contexts and how to transform an oppressive system as a change agent (Spencer & Castano, 2007).

A shared belief in a responsive school is the importance of discussing bias, equity, and race. Improved teaching and learning occurs when teachers are prepared to examine their practices through the lens of equity and anti-racism (Singleton, 2006). Educators cannot effectively implement culturally responsive teaching if they are unwilling to examine race (Kopkowski, 2006). Singleton (2006) recommends establishing a core of teachers that help support their peers through reflective practice, courageous conversations, and action research that helps them develop their understanding of race and supports them in fulfilling their vision of quality instruction (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

**Conceptual Framework**

This study examined whole-school practices in each of the program areas. Next, they were cross analyzed for evidence of practices that were responsive to students’
cultures. These areas, represented in Table 1, provide the conceptual framework that
guided the study. Shared beliefs are not a part of the school program but permeate the
practices in all of the other areas.

**Table 1. Culturally Responsive School Practices Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Responsive School Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Culturally Responsive Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Respectful Home-Family Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Culturally Responsive Learning Environmnet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Culturally Responsive Student Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Responsive Shared Beliefs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Can the Achievement Gap Be Closed Without Culturally Responsive Practices?**

When you look at the research-based interventions for closing the achievement
gap and the culturally responsive practices as interventions for student achievement, there
is clearly some overlap. This overlap consists of providing effective teaching and
learning that engages students actively in the educational process (Saifer & Barton,
2007), supporting leaders who are willing to confront academic barriers (Andrews, 2007),
and building the capacity of teachers and staff through ongoing professional development
(James  Banks et al., 2001). Culturally responsive practices as whole school reform
acknowledges and respects the culture, language, and heritage of students in all areas of
school practice (Oplatka, 2009). It rejects racism and affirms pluralism in all areas of
school practice (Montgomery, 2001). It promotes democratic principles in all areas of
school practice (James  Banks et al., 2001). It affirms the importance of culture and
integrates it into the fabric of the school (Geron, 2002).
Given the long and storied history of disparate academic achievement in the United States, it is difficult to believe the achievement gap could be overcome through the mere implementation of technical interventions. Culturally responsive practices do far more than institute effective instructional practices. They unearth assumptions and bias that interrupt their efficacy. Culturally responsive practices do more than implement standards based curriculum. They are integrated with cultural knowledge that validates and affirms students. Furthermore, culturally responsive practices do more than ensure appropriate assessments are administered. They allow students to demonstrate their learning in culturally appropriate modalities.

Culturally responsive practices that are effective in closing school achievement gaps deserve to be explored in depth. Affirming and celebrating the value of the individual educates, emancipates, and empowers students to challenge the status quo and liberate themselves and others from oppressive systems. This allows them to be the champions of social justice in a world they help to create.
CHAPTER

III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the research design and rationale for using qualitative inquiry. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What culturally responsive practices, if any, are in a school that is closing the achievement gap between minority and White students?
2. Which strategies are utilized?
3. How do teachers and school leaders in these schools perceive the importance of culturally responsive practices in contributing to closing achievement gaps?
4. What are the belief systems of teachers and school leaders in these schools and how did they acquire them?

These questions are explored by using qualitative inquiry and a case study approach.

Research Design

This study examined a conundrum. First, there was an established presence of disparate learning outcomes for students depending upon their race. Next, there were research-proven strategies implemented to increase minority student achievement. Yet, there were stagnant or declining achievement gains. This situation was impregnable with possibility and embedded in the womb of qualitative inquiry. According to Youngstrom (1990) a good problem is “(1) of interest, (2) embedded in theory, (3) likely to have impact, (4) original in some aspect, and (5) feasible – within your conceptual, resource, ethical and institutional limits” (p. 7). This study presented a ‘great problem.’
The study of culturally responsive practices, up to this point, has centered largely on pedagogical practices (Bazron et al., 2005). Culturally responsive pedagogy has proved to be beneficial to students increasing their engagement in learning and ultimately improving achievement (Andrews, 2007; Banks, 2006; Gay, 2000; Harriott & Martin, 2004; Jones, 2007; Murrel, 2002; Saifer & Barton, 2007). Yet, it is not necessarily a strategy that is always linked to the plethora of interventions aimed at closing achievement gaps (Allen, 2008; Carlo et al., 2008; Lubienski, 2007; Manthey, 2007; Marshall, 2009; McClure, 2007; McGlynn, 2009; Murphy, 2009; Reeves, 2008). If culturally responsive practices proved to be embedded in a school closing an achievement gap, the solution had the potential of narrowing interventions for schools working to achieve equity.

**Qualitative Inquiry**

This approach was selected because a field researcher can be immersed into the environment and see the work with fresh eyes (Janesick, 1998). In addition, qualitative inquiry was selected because it served as a means to examine cultural elements in a school that is closing achievement gaps between White students and minority students. In designing the methodology for this study, the researcher was cognizant of the fact that she would fundamentally examine the experiences of students of color and the impact of specific interventions designed to increase their success in school. Milner (2007) recommends that researchers involved in the study of people of color engage in a process of self-examination prior to beginning their study in order to eliminate the possibility of misrepresenting the data. Accordingly, the researcher reflected on and disclosed personal
bias in Chapter I ensuring the cognition of how that might influence the perspectives and observations (Milner, 2007).

**Case Study**

Merriam (1988) describes three preconditions for a qualitative case study approach that determines its appropriateness. First, the desired outcome focuses on humanistic outcomes or cultural differences. This study turned a microscopic focus on a culturally diverse school that is closing achievement gaps. The researcher was interested in the sociocultural constructs within the school that were mitigating the impact of historical poverty and disparate learning expectations for students of color.

The second precondition for using a qualitative case study was the researcher was looking to eliminate erroneous conclusions and arrive at a compelling interpretation of facts (Merriam, 1988). The study took into account numerous research-based approaches aimed at closing an achievement gap and acknowledged their usefulness in increasing achievement. However, one goal of the study was to interpret the data gleaned from observations and interviews to determine which culturally responsive practices might be instrumental in closing an achievement gap. This was of particular interest during school observations in which the school was utilizing a variety of approaches to close an achievement gap.

The third precondition for utilizing a qualitative case study approach was the uniqueness of the situation (Merriam, 1988). There are numerous schools around the United States working to close an achievement gap (Suriel, 2010). However, few schools utilize culturally responsive practices as a primary means of doing so (Brown, 2007). This case study, therefore, examined a unique context. It was concerned with more than
the academic achievement of students of color, this study focused on the context in which students were learning and the interventions the school employed to address the culture of students. The information gleaned from the participants provided a unique perspective on their belief systems and where they were attained or reinforced. This type of data could only have been retrieved via a case study.

Case studies, by design, are an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single phenomenon” and can offer insights into a phenomenon (Merriam, 1988, p. 121). Case study is defined by Abercrombie (1984) as “the detailed examination of a single class or phenomena (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1984). This study entailed the detailed examination of a school undergoing a unique phenomenon, which is closing an achievement gap through the possible utilization of culturally responsive practices. From intensive observations over the course of a week and equally focused interviews with the staff and the principal of a middle school, a snapshot was captured of the culturally responsive practices occurring within a natural week of school life.

A case study was appropriate for this type of examination as it lent itself to the four characteristics of case studies as outlined by Merriam (1988). The case study was particularistic, meaning it focused on a specific phenomenon and was designed to address a problem in everyday practice. Furthermore, as a case study, the research described the phenomenon. The descriptions were stated using terms of events, quotes, and observations. Moreover, the study was heuristic. It was designed to enlighten colleagues and fellow researchers in understanding the phenomenon. Previously unknown relationships and variables might emerge from this study as suggested by Stake (1981). The last characteristic of a case study was inductiveness, meaning that it relied on
inductive reasoning or reasoning that arrived at some conclusion or understanding (Stake, 1978). Having previous work experience in schools for several years afforded the researcher some bias on speculation and observation. The researcher had genuine hope to discover new relationships, concepts, and understanding that would lead her to a rethinking of this phenomenon.

Case studies require observation in the natural setting of participants, where the researcher witnesses interventions and behavior as they occur. The achievement gap phenomenon is historically complex. Therefore, careful introspection and observation of the interventions employed and mitigated presented the ideal structure for a case study. What one does in this environment is simply “observe, intuit, sense what is occurring in a natural setting – hence the term naturalistic inquiry” (Merriam, 1988, p. 17). Therefore, the study occurred within its natural setting, with one primary researcher collecting data.

Closing achievement gaps is not a new phenomenon and the strategies successful schools are employing to close a gap have been previously studied (Allen, 2008; Anderson et al., 2007; Armor, 2006). However, the notion that schools used culturally responsive practices as part of their approach, either deliberately or unconsciously, was the phenomenon that undergirded this research. This case study examined the practices utilized and narrowed the focus of recommended school improvement strategies for similar schools. Furthermore, the beliefs necessary to embody and fulfill the practices were queried during the study.

**Sampling**

Purposeful non-probability sampling was used to identify the school and interview participants (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Purposeful sampling allowed the
researcher to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon experienced by a selected group of people. Observations were focused and interviews were conducted solely on participants in a school that was closing an achievement gap and sustaining its success over time. The researcher wanted to observe which, if any, culturally responsive practices were in place. “This approach to purposefully selecting a site and participants for a study acknowledges the complexity that characterizes human and social phenomena and the limits of generalizability” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 56).

Various sectors of the school community were interviewed in groups. This provided a cross sectional snapshot of the school constituents. Research indicates that 80% of all public school teachers are White females (Tab, 2007). Consequently, the researcher anticipated that most of the participants implementing the practices would be White females. The student population, however, needed to be diverse. At the selected site, 75% of the students are minorities, with slightly more Hispanics than Blacks. This school was chosen from the handful of schools in this western state that have successfully narrowed an achievement gap and sustained that achievement for five years.

**Site Selection and Participants**

The study occurred in a middle school located near a major metropolitan city in the western part of the United States and was selected based upon specific criteria. Because this study examined a racial achievement gap, the school needed to have a racially diverse student population. Therefore, the first criterion was a school with both White and minority students. The next criterion was that the school needed to have a school improvement plan that actively addressed closing an achievement gap with ongoing assessments for evaluating their progress toward this goal. Agreed upon goals
included in school improvement plans increase the level of accountability for all stakeholders at the school (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). Finally, the population to be examined was determined to be a middle school, as the age variations are less than those of whole elementary or high school. The observations of the interventions implemented met principles of sampling recommended by Krathwohl (1998). Krathwohl, (1998) notes that when there is little variation among the units of the population, a small sample is suitable. A middle school with only three grade levels of students provided smaller variation among the levels of interventions. The use of a smaller sample size intentionally minimalized the variations within the sample.

To select a school that was successfully closing an achievement gap the researcher reviewed academic achievement results by subgroups for middle schools in a western state. A growth model was used to analyze individual growth of students longitudinally (CDE, 2010). This measure analyzed the school’s progress on closing an achievement gap. School growth rates were determined by combining growth percentiles from individual students. Growth rates for individual students were calculated by comparing their state assessment scores over consecutive years. These individual growth scores were combined into a single number, which was the school’s median growth percentile. The state median growth percentile for any grade is 50. Groups with medians less than 50 grow at a slower rate than the state and conversely, groups growing at a rate higher than 50 are growing faster than others in the stated (CDE, 2010).

The growth model was preferred as an analysis tool because it provided a common measure of how groups of students were progressing from year to year toward state standards and based on where each individual student begins. This model relates
normative information about student progress reveals where the strongest growth is happening. The standard analysis of data could mask the actual growth that students are making.

**Setting**

The name of the school was altered to give anonymity to the staff, students, and the community and as a condition of the agreement with the district. For the purposes of this study, the school name changed to Melody Middle School. The school was located in the suburbs of a major metropolitan city in the west. With approximately 1,500 students, 60% of its student population received free and reduced-priced lunch. Of the 100 teachers on staff, more than 50% held graduate degrees.

The median growth rate at the school was above the average for the state with the average academic growth for minorities at 57% in 2008 and 55% in 2010. Whites’ median academic growth rose from 53% to 55%. In math, minorities’ median growth rate was 58% in 2008 and is 63% in 2010; Whites’ growth remained stable at 61% and 62% respectively. Growth rates for both minorities and Whites were above the state average in both reading and math.

**Table 2. Melody Middle School Median Growth Percentile: Reading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. Melody Middle School Median Growth Percentile: Math**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7. It is not enough to empower students academically if you fail to empower them behaviorally.

Given these findings, I propose a new framework presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. A New Framework for Culturally Responsive Schools**

In the new conceptual framework for culturally responsive practices proposed in Figure 1 all school practices rest on a plane of equality. These practices are implemented through a filter of professional development that is enhanced with cultural competency. For example, home/family connections are fostered through a culturally responsive filter, as are leadership practices. By the time the practices reach the student level, students are exposed to culturally responsive home/family connections and culturally responsive leadership practices. Wherever they go within the school environment, the environment is enhanced with practices considerate of their culture. Students need not worry that they may meet with culturally relevant curriculum in the classroom but falter with colorblind
The researcher preferred to use the data from the growth model as a measure of school progress while advancing in its goal to close achievement gaps. Data from the standardized assessment tests when analyzed by cohort do not give a clear indication of how much growth individual students have made. The data were given by year and subgroup. When the data were compared year to year, the groups of students were not the same. That can mask the revelation of how understanding where students are beginning and how much growth they have made over time. If the data were examined from only the traditional lens through cohort groups, it does not suggest individual students are making much growth. Table 4 shows how 7th grade students performed in math for the past three years.

Table 4. Standardized Test Math Results for Grade Seven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, to determine a clearer picture of how much growth students were making over time, the researcher relied on the growth model data.

**Data Collection**

In this study, three types of data collection techniques were used. They were observations, interviews, and focus groups. Each methodology is discussed in this chapter.
Observations

Good observers are empathetic, detached, and able to understand the emotions and behaviors of the participants while recording their perspectives objectively (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Several methods of observation were utilized based upon the level of participant awareness. The decision on which methodology to employ was important as “the awareness of observation changes the behavior of people being observed” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 252).

Covert observation can be the most difficult because the role of the researcher is to observe without the participants’ knowledge (Krathwohl, 1998). The researcher took on a role within the environment that appeared natural, reconstructed events later without taking notes during observations, and limited inquiries that were inconsistent with the observer’s role (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). However, the researcher may gain access to information that might not otherwise be available to them or observe behavior and conversations that only an “insider” would be privileged to experience (Janesick, 1998).

Concealed observation utilizes some type of hidden location where the observer cannot be seen (Merriam, 1988). Out of professional courtesy however, teachers and administrators need to be informed of when they are being observed or recorded (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Few administrators would approve of anything less (Tillman, 2002).

During unconcealed participant observation the researcher is both active participant and researcher (Janesick, 1998). This approach allowed the researcher to understand innately how it feels to be placed in the particular situations (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Note taking may still be done covertly depending upon the level of participation in which the researcher is engaged (Merriam, 1988).
During unconcealed participant observation, the researcher is both active participant and researcher (Janesick, 1998). This approach allowed the researcher to understand innately how it feels to be placed in the particular situations (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Note taking may still be done covertly depending upon the level of participation in which the researcher is engaged (Merriam, 1988). The final observation approach was nonparticipant observation. This may be the most obtrusive of the roles, however over time participants tend to exhibit more natural behavior (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

The researcher selected the role of observer as participant. This means that the activities were known to the group and were publicly sponsored by the people being studied. The researcher’s participation, if any, in the group’s activities was secondary to the role of gathering information (Merriam, 1988). In order to document all components in the culturally responsive framework, the researcher observed the activities in a variety of school contexts. During meetings, the researcher took a seat in the back of the room in order to not been seen as a participant. The goal was to diminish the impact of the researcher’s presence for the participants and their behaviors. This ensured that the researcher captured authentic discussions and processes. Observations were recorded by using a dictation device and the form shown in Appendix C.

An observation tool was developed to aid in gathering data that focused on the established criteria. The Mickens Culturally Responsive Practices Observation Tool (MCROT) has six sections. The design of the collection form was based on Merriam’s (1988) checklist of elements that are likely to be present in observations. In addition, the first section is based upon the conceptual framework of culturally responsive practices for
schools. The researcher looked for evidences of culturally responsive pedagogy, home and family connections, student management, leadership, learning environment, and belief systems. These were found in common areas as well as in classrooms (Howley et al., 2009; Saifer & Barton, 2007; White-Hood, 2007).

The second section records the participants’ involvement in the observation. Although the race or ethnicity of participants is important when implementing equity work (Andrews, 2007; Cooper, 2009), ethnicity was not disclosed. If they volunteered to reveal it during the discussions, it was included in the formal transcripts. It was important to the researcher that all participants feel comfortable from the moment they engaged in the study. In several instances the race of individuals was not readily apparent. At that point, the researcher asked them explicitly about their ethnicity.

The third section of the MCROT examined specific activities or interventions observed and served to capture the fact that this work was explorative and informative. While culturally responsive practices were evidenced in literature that create an inclusive and equitable environment, the researcher was open to the discovery of new ideas or nuances during the course of this study that have not been discussed.

The fourth section addressed how the activities or interventions observed were typically seen. Case studies are not recommended to note the frequency of events but rather to provide a snapshot of an event in time (Merriam, 1988). Therefore, noting whether or not the activities occurred with regularity helped determine their influence as an institutionalized intervention.

Section five of the MCROT notes nonverbal communication patterns observed in the environment. Nonverbal communication can send more powerful messages than
verbal communication especially when nonmembers of a group interact with members of another group (Dovidio, 2009; Rosette, 2008). Members of the same groups tend to pick up nonverbal communication messages of members not of the same group more easily. Observing the nonverbal communication signals allowed the researcher to pay attention to espoused beliefs and underlying beliefs observed through nonverbal communications.

Section six provided a space for the researcher to note personal thoughts or feelings outside of the actual account of events. In addition to the narrative account, Merriam,(1988) recommended a section for introspection that contained reflections and reactions to events. Some researchers collect these as a separate researcher journal, but this researcher kept them nearby rather than as separate documents.

Observations occurred in the formal and informal areas of the school environment such as the cafeteria, hallways, playground, gym, classrooms, team meetings, staff meetings, front office, site leadership team meetings, and the dean’s office. Observations in the common areas provided insight into elements three to six of the culturally responsive practices framework. This was culturally responsive student management, learning environment, and leadership and belief systems. It was important to see how students and staff interacted when there was no formalized regiment for learning. In these areas, one observed elements such as the sophistication of social skills of the participants, the degree to which various cultures mingled, culturally sensitive comments, remarks, or behaviors, evidence of caring behaviors, and messages that reflected the belief systems of the school.
The observations gave valuable insight on such information as the integration of culture into the curriculum, student engagement during the instructional process, and how parents were considered during decisions that affected children.

**Interviews**

The second method of data collection was interviews. According to Krathwohl (1998), interviews are useful when determining how individuals perceive something for in-depth probing and exploring of a situation. Additionally, interviews are structured to suit the interviewer’s purpose (Tillman, 2002). Unstructured interviews do not follow a precise form (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The interviewer formulated questions as they arose and engaged in impromptu discussions (Janesick, 1998). Partially structured interviews involve pre-formulated questions but the order in which they are asked is up to the interviewer (Krathwohl, 1998). Semi-structured interviews have formal open-ended questions and the interviewer noted the essence of the response (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Structured interviews have predetermined questions and the responses were coded (Merriam, 1988). In totally structured interviews, the questions, order, and coding have been predetermined along with coded responses (Stake, 1978). The researcher selected the use of semi-structured interviews because of the necessity for the structure of formalized questions based on the conceptual framework. The research needed flexibility to follow the conversational directions in which the dialogues might lead. Close attention was needed for both nonverbal and verbal communications displayed during the interviews rather than dictating responses.

The researcher approached the task understanding that one of the difficulties in interviewing lay in analyzing and summarizing the findings (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).
The interviewer can inadvertently influence responses if the participant wants to please them (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The researcher was cognizant of this and endeavored to modify demeanor if necessary so the respondents were not inhibited. Interviews occurred with seven individuals, including the principal and several staff members, who self-selected to be interviewed alone rather than as a focus group. It gave the researcher an opportunity to go more in-depth with questioning.

Focus Groups

The focus group is a “specialized interview that is usually used to learn how a group intended to be representative of a target population reacts to something presented to them” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 295). The focus groups ranged between two to five participants and were relatively homogenous. The researcher was mindful that the difficulty with this type of data collection lied in scheduling time when all participants could meet. This ensured there was the proper mix of people present. The nature of a focus group might have inhibited some of the responses of participants as some might have felt less comfortable sharing views that were in conflict with the organization’s norms or beliefs (Krathwohl, 1998).

In order to maintain the integrity of the process, a set of steps was assigned. First, interviews were completed during the school day so as not to interfere with staff personal time. They were limited to no more than what could be discussed during the course of one class period or 50 minutes. Data from the interviews were collected via hand notes and a tape recorder. Nonverbal communication was captured. Since the topics were related to culture and might be viewed as sensitive to some members of the community, the researcher wanted to observe the behavioral responses as well. It was offered to
confer with people individually or interview them singularly if they would feel more
comfortable doing so. Some participants accepted this option. This technique is highly
recommended by Janesick (1998). They suggested the interviewer relax, listen, focus,
and allow the respondents to tell their story. More targeted information could then be
accessed individually to fill in gaps.

Focus groups were selected as a data collection approach due to time constraints
of faculty in a school (Clark & Linn, 2008). This case study examined a number of
various groups and interests within a school. In order to get the best cross section of
representation of the school group, the researcher included as many stakeholders as
possible. According to Krathwohl (1988), this type of purposive sampling provides
researchers with information and perspectives that inform a researcher while providing
them with a wide range of information to help probe content. Focus groups were
conducted with the administrators and teachers. See Appendix D for a copy of the
interview form, the Culturally Responsive Interview Protocol (CRIP). The protocol
included the recommendations of Taylor and Bogdan (1984), who advise at the outset of
every interview that the interviewer reveal the intentions, discuss the protection of
respondents, discuss final say of study’s contents, give payments, if any, and give
logistical information needed for the interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Question one on the CRIP directly links to the first tenet of the framework,
cultural responsive pedagogy. Research demonstrates that traditional curriculum fails to
meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Taylor & Whittaker,
2003). Teachers of diverse students need to integrate the lessons with elements of their
culture and understand how these factors effect one’s learning experiences (Darling-
Hammond, 1997). This question examined the ways in which this occurred in the classroom.

Question two asked about parent and family involvement. Culturally responsive schools created innovative and nontraditional ways to increase family and parental engagement (Auerbach, 2009; Horsford, 2010). This question provided insight into what strategies were in place that addressed this component of the framework.

Minority students are historically disciplined and suspended at higher rates than their White counterparts (Marshall, 2009; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbell, 2008). Question three asks respondents to reflect on how culture affects the disciplinary or student management systems in the school.

Leadership is a critical element of every school. Leadership sets the tone for the school culture, and supports and reinforces the ideals and beliefs of the organization (Andrews, 2007; Auerbach, 2009). Question four targets the leadership behaviors observed and/or lived by the participants.

Students and staff have to confront the enemies of equity, bias, prejudice, privilege, and class. In culturally responsive communities, issues such as race or class are not ignored and procedures and policies are examined to ensure they do not interfere with the expectations held for every student (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Cooper, 2009). Additionally, students learn how to overcome stereotypes and self-destructive patterns (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Question five and six asks how these issues are confronted in the school, first by the teachers and staff and second, with students.

The values and beliefs of an organization guide its vision, mission, goals, and practices (Howley et al., 2009; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b). Question seven and
question eight query respondents on the espoused and lived beliefs of the organization. Question nine on the CRIP gave the researcher the opportunity to capture the intimate stories people have experienced in the environment related to culturally responsive practices. If people have had paradigm shifts in their thinking as a result of working in these environments, this question helped the researcher learn more about them.

Question 10 further probed how participants have acquired their beliefs about culture. Some research suggests that one hires people with the right belief systems and conflicting research suggest it can be taught to teachers and staff (Hart, 2002; Ukpokodu, 2004). Responses to this question gave greater insight on how teachers have learned their beliefs. Question 11 linked back to the achievement outcomes for students and staff beliefs about the importance of culturally responsive practices. Finally, question 12 checked in with the respondents and led the group back full circle to a reiteration of the goals of the study and their importance in contributing to the results.

**Access and Entry to the Site and Agreements with Participants**

The site visit occurred over the course of five school days. On the first day, the principal introduced the researcher to the administrative team and held a leadership team meeting and a parent meeting at night. The day began at 7:45 in the morning and ended after the parent meeting at 9:00 p.m. Observations were made during most of the day and interviews were conducted as participants allowed. During the leadership team meeting the researcher conducted a short presentation. The goal of the session was to build trust and credibility as the field researcher. According to Janesick (1998), failure to establish trust in the beginning of the project could result in skewed results. Participants feel far more comfortable sharing information and welcoming one into the culture of the school if
trust has been established early. Following the meeting the researcher became acquainted with the facilities. This ensured there would be no problem finding the locations of people, rooms, or services. Figure 1 shows what the researcher accomplished each day during her case study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Front Office</td>
<td>Deans’ Focus Group</td>
<td>Presentation at Leadership Team Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dean/Counseling Offices</td>
<td>Administrator &amp; Counselor</td>
<td>African American Parents Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classrooms</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Parent Meeting</td>
<td>Assistant Principal Interview</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Cafeteria</td>
<td>Parent Interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hallways</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Classrooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>Parent Interview</td>
<td>Presentation at Staff Meeting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Playground</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Classrooms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Staff Meeting</td>
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<td>Four</td>
<td>Math Team Meeting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting</td>
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<td>Elective Classes</td>
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<td>Hallways</td>
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<tr>
<td>Five</td>
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<td>Principal Interview</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Focus Groups</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Collections of Data
Data Analysis

At the end of each day, notes were reviewed from the MCROT, the observation log and the CRIP interview protocol tools. Field notes and logs had descriptions of the context of events, conversations, and interactions. The researcher especially worked to capture the exact language of individuals to reflect their emotions and how they described their environment, and behavior. The MCROT was used primarily during observations. Sometimes during the focus groups and interviews, a recording device was used to intentionally focus energies on listening rather than writing.

There are certain habits that should be maintained during the process of analysis. Stake (1978) recommended taking notes during observations. It was recommended that the researcher not discuss the observation with anyone until it is was recorded (Stake, 1978). Accordingly, the researcher kept the observation private by giving a broad description of reflection to the principal at the end of the observation week. The researcher promised to return and share the findings at a later date. It was important to find a private place in the environment to do the work of recording and reviewing notes (Schwandt, 1993). Sufficient time was rendered for recording and reviewing. Finally, Bogdewic (1997) recommended to refrain from editing while writing (Merriam, 1988). The researcher recorded exact conversations and language without editing in an effort to capture the moment, the emotions, and the way the participants intended their words to be heard.

Constant Comparative Coding Analysis Process

The literature review revealed several areas of school practice that culturally responsive practices could enhance. Data were coded into these six areas and one
additional area that began to emerge as a significant strategic approach. Each of these tenets had defining properties as outlined in the literature review. Coding the responses by defined criteria helped to explore the evidence of the culturally responsive criteria while remaining open to the emergence of new criteria and strategies.

At the outset of the study, the researcher believed culturally responsive practices were integral to helping schools increase achievement for students of color. Furthermore, she asserted that the gap could not be closed without the presence of culturally responsive practices. Schools that are closing a math or reading gap are likely implementing them either deliberately or unintentionally. During the study, each item in the observation and interview notes was coded in terms of the conceptual framework element it addressed (Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2009). If new indicators appeared repeatedly, the concept was said to be saturated and elements of the conceptual framework and its corresponding definitions were modified as well (Krathwohl, 1998). During the categorizing and coding process, a set of categories was developed that reconstructed the data collected. The interview, focus group data, and observation data then added to and tested both the elements and definitions from the conceptual framework (Merriam, 1988).

During the analysis of the data, interactions among participants were analyzed. Examination began with listening to their words and observing actions that reflected respectful attributes of CRP. Inferences were made from the implementation of strategies defined in the conceptual framework. The researcher made use of “theoretical sensitivity,” which facilitated the identification and interrelation of interactions,
behaviors and strategies related to culturally responsive practices that fostered
achievement (Schwandt, 1993, p. 9).

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in research is essentially the degree of confidence one has that
the outcomes that are reported are honest representations of the data. According to
Lincoln and Guba (1985), several factors present in this study, contribute to the
credibility and trustworthiness of the process. First, there were multiple methods of data
collection. Data were collected from focus groups, interviews, and observations. This
combination increased understanding of what the researcher was seeing and experiencing
in the field and helped to establish and triangulate patterns that emerged (Lincoln &
Guba, 1985). The audit trail includes the interview transcripts and field observation notes
which provide the foundation for others to walk through the researcher’s work and
replicate the study if they so choose (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Second, the dissertation committee members are an integral part of the feedback
loop and provided invaluable insight into the process and potential areas of bias. A third
process to preserve trustworthiness was member checks, which means that they checked
in with participants to see if the data had been accurately described. This occurred
periodically throughout the focus groups and interviews as well as during a brief
summary at the end of each session. The researcher built adequate time into the field visit
for checking for understanding and clarification.

School environments that foster equitable learning and strive to increase the
achievement of all students in their schools is an exciting field for the researcher. She
understands the long history of disparate academic and economic conditions that have to
be overcome to do so. However, given that challenge, it is time to explore a narrower field of identified interventions that successful schools are using. Improving schools and closing an achievement gap are not the same thing (Anderson et al., 2007; Hart, 2002; Haycock, 2006; Kopkowski, 2006; Kozol, 1995; Manthey, 2007; Murphy, 2009). Closing an achievement gap is about targeting historically underserved populations with interventions. These interventions address and overcome dehumanizing conditions in the dominant culture that threaten their emotional, psychological, physical, and academic well-being. Many believe this can be accomplished through increasing the efficacy of the instructional and curricular program. This study examined the culturally responsive interventions in place at a school making significant progress in narrowing an achievement gap.
CHAPTER
IV. FINDINGS

This chapter examined the input of faculty, staff, and parents at Melody Middle School where culturally responsive practices were successfully integrated at the school. The findings of this study were presented using three major areas of data collection -- observation, focus groups, and interviews. First, there is an examination of the findings from the observations. Next, a review of the findings from the focus groups, and finally there is a discussion of the findings from the interviews. Additionally, responses to the three research questions that guided the study will follow. The research questions were:

1. Are culturally responsive strategies employed in a school that is closing an achievement gap? If so, which strategies are utilized?

2. How do teachers and school leaders in the school perceive the importance of culturally responsive practices in contributing to closing an achievement gap?

3. What are the belief systems of stakeholders in this school and how did they acquire them?

Observations

Melody Middle School is located in an urban suburb of a major metropolitan city in the western part of the United States. Approximately 40% of the students are of Hispanic origin, 35% are Black, 20% are White, and 5% avow American Indian, Asian American, Multi-racial or other ethnic groups.
Hallways and Front Office

The unique cultures of all the students and families represented at Melody Middle School are a point of celebration from the moment one walks through the doors. A wall-sized map greets visitors with markers demonstrating the various parts of the world from which students draw their heritage. Eighty different flags line the hallway representing present and past cultures in the building. Posted along the hallways are large poster-sized pictures of real students, families, and community members.

Bulletin boards on hallway walls depict messages of encouragement, positive expectations, and organizing tips for students. One bulletin board reads, “I’m Proud to be at Melody” with colorful pictures of students. Another reads, “What I like most about Melody is . . .” followed by a list of attributes compiled by various students. “We’ve got ways to keep you organized” is signage indicating the location of the school store.

“Welcome Back” was heard boldly via the intercom the first morning the researcher was on campus. A reminder for students to proudly wear Melody student identification tags to ensure their safety during the school day followed the greeting. Everyone was greeted upon arrival to the Melody front office which was decorated with lively student artwork. The front office houses three administrative staff who greeted visitors in Spanish or English. Every visitor observed was greeted warmly and asked what was necessary to be comfortable while they waited.

As students passed between classes, teachers were present in the hallways observing. There was some interaction between students and teachers in the hallways. When the tardy bell rang, most teachers rather quietly moved to close their doors and begin class. Students who were in the hallways after the tardy bell hustled to class. In the
seventh grade hallway, however, there were a couple of teachers that kept the students moving quickly with loud but respectful verbal prompts.

**Lunch Recess**

Students eat and play together in multicultural groups at Melody. The researcher listened for positive feedback and reinforcements from adults in the cafeteria and playground. While positive messages were heard during the seventh and eighth grade lunches, the sixth grade class received little or no positive messages during this observation. Approximately 200 students engaged peacefully in tag football, Frisbee, soccer, basketball, or gatherings in small groups. One supervisor perused the large field on a segway. Playground motorized segways are used by playground and hallway monitors to transport around the campus quickly.

The researcher made observation on the kinds of activities in which students participated. More minority children participated in group games than White children did. Completely absent from the playful exchanges was the presence of cursing or swearing. When recess ended, the supervisor blew a whistle to indicate the transition. Most students abandoned their activities and exited the field quietly. Inside the building some students chose to visit a computer laboratory where they could play electronic games or visit appropriate websites. A licensed teacher monitored these activities during the lunch recesses.

Detention for students who failed to complete their homework was held during lunch in some grade-level classrooms. In a room of 21 students a natural progression of rewards and consequences was posted while two teachers monitored students working silently on various types of assignments. There was a relatively equal racial distribution
of students with eight Black students, six White students, and seven Latino students. No talking was allowed during detention except for the voice of the teacher. One teacher publicly chastised a student in a tone that all could hear: “It is halfway through the quarter and I have nothing . . . nothing . . . . And you think you are going to go outside?”

**Dean’s Office**

Three deans shared responsibility for supporting teachers with student management. As licensed administrators they shared responsibility with the assistant principals for supervising teaching staff. Approximately one hour was spent in each of their offices observing students and the flow of processes within this environment. In the first office four students were waiting when the researcher arrived. Three students arrived during her visit and two students were there when the researcher left. At the next office, two students were there as the researcher arrived, two students arrived during the visit, and two remained. In the third office, there were no students waiting, but one student was in the dean’s office for approximately 30 minutes.

While only one office had positive reinforcing messages on the walls, students in all three offices were greeted warmly as they arrived. A secretary immediately asked for their hallway pass from the referring teacher and inquired as to the reason for the visit. The reasons given are noted in Table 5.
Table 5. Reasons Students Were Referred to the Office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I videotaped this guy talking smack about someone on my phone. Security took my phone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Cause I am sagging.” (Pants are below the waist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My IPOD got taken. My mom won’t come get it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I didn’t go to SSR.” (Silent sustained reading)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You can’t see my shorts. My shirt covers it but they see my pants and they start screaming at me for no reason!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it took each dean anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes to process each student through their office including a closed door consultation, the secretary handled some infractions immediately. For example, when one student was referred for pants below his waist she asked him to raise his shirt so she could see his waistline. With a quick glance, she promptly replied, “Okay, get ‘em up,” and handed him some safety pins. Without argument, the student pinned his pants waistline and was handed a pass to return to class. Outer office interactions between the deans and the students appeared positive and friendly.

**Deans Meeting**

The agenda at the deans meeting centered on the status of Black males in the building. The deans pondered what might be done to support Black males in the school. Several Black male students were aspiring to be professional athletes and were neglecting their academic studies in lieu of outside involvement in sports. Suggestions were made as to possible mentors or speakers that would influence the students to make school their first focus. It was mutually decided to enlist the assistance of the feeder high school
football coach. He was highly regarded in the community and the students would soon be endeavoring to impress him. He could enlighten the students with an understanding that professional athletics was not an easy profession to enter or sustain. He was known to encourage his own team athletes to be academic athletes as well. The meeting ended on a positive note with assignments for contacting the coach, the students, and their parents. What was not heard was an actionable plan for implementation of culturally responsive student management behaviors, such as a system of restorative justice or helping staff members understand the cultural mores of student behavior.

**Leadership Team Meeting**

The principal holds a leadership team meeting once a week for the administrative team leaders. The team was composed of 11 staff members including two counselors, one testing coordinator, two instructional coaches, two assistant principals, three deans, and an administrative manager that oversees all classified staff. Four staff members were racial minorities and the seven remaining team members were White.

The main topic of discussion was the upcoming nonrenewal of certain teacher contracts. As each staff member was identified, the principal lead the discussion by asking the team to focus on the staff member’s strengths before discussing apparent weaknesses in their instructional and professional skills. Together the team devised a plan for supporting the teacher through the end of the school year.

This discussion was followed by a video in which a law professor discussed the issue of Black male incarceration. The lecturer proposed a theory of conspiracy to insidiously label more Blacks as felons as a means to replace the Jim Crow system of discrimination while perpetuating a disempowered underclass. The leadership team broke
into small groups to discuss the video before the principal led the whole team in a
discussion. Some salient comments from this discussion are noted in Table 6.

Table 6. Administrative Team Discussion on Black Male Incarceration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrators’ Discussion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“There is lots of money made on prisons. It puts a lot of White people to work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The system lacks fairness. It responds one way if you are Black and another way if you are White.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When she (lecturer) is talking about embracing the humanness of criminals? I can’t see it if they have done a serious crime like rape or molestation!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The School district policy is 10 days of suspension if caught with drugs. It is only 3 days if you take a $90 class and parents attend 3 days of classes. Unfortunately poor kids usually end up missing 10 days so our school system is unfair too!”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The discussion was lively and inclusive as each member shared thoughts on Black male incarceration and the impact on the students at Melody. After two hours, the meeting ended on a positive note as two members celebrated their birthdays. The principal had baked each member his or her favorite treat. One treat was a cultural favorite that the principal and other leadership team members had never tried before.

**Staff Meeting**

At the staff meeting, the cafeteria tables were brightly decorated with African fabric. Cold soft drinks and candy adorned each table. The meeting began with what the principal termed housekeeping. She openly discussed the non-renewal of contracts that would take place the next day. “Every year we have some nonrenewals. Maybe you are
just not a good fit. We are going to have some of that. You will know by tomorrow if you are going to be impacted by these changes.” The staff did not react to this announcement. She moved the meeting along to the next agenda item, which focused on the retirement of several staff members.

The entire staff of over 100 members gave a standing ovation to the retiring teachers, their friends, and their mentors. One retiree had nieces and nephews from another state who arrived to surprise the retiree at the invitation of the principal. Next, staff members were invited to share memories of their experiences with the retirees. Many of the teachers expressed how they loved and would miss each retiree.

**Table 7. Excerpts from Staff Meeting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Meeting Discussion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher: Mike (retiree) was the first one at my home when my husband died. I will never forget it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retiree: Everybody in this room cares about each other so much. I want everyone to know how much I love you. You guys are like my second family. I am really going to miss you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal: When my granny died, I was all the way in (another state), a car pulls up and out walks Mike and four other teachers. They walk up to me and say, “Hi, we thought you might need your counselors.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An exchange of “golden apples” followed the retiree recognition. Each month three teachers were given an “apple” by one of their peers. It was given for demonstrations of exceptional service or commitment to students and/or extraordinary support to staff. The person who received it the previous month stood, recognized another individual, and passed it on to one of his or her peers. The staff seemed to look forward to this part of the meeting. As the meeting neared an end, the principal introduced the
researcher to the staff and had her stand so they would recognize her. She had the researcher discuss her study and the intended outcomes. All staff were invited to participate and notified of the focus group locations and times.

**African American Parent Meeting**

Parent leadership groups at Melody are organized by race. There is a White parent group, a Hispanic parent leadership group, an African American Parent Leadership group as well as the traditional venues for parent involvement such as PTO and school accountability. Anyone could attend any of these meetings. Several White parents attended the African American parent meeting and held key active participatory roles in leading the group.

The principal explained that she intentionally divided the groups by race to accommodate the varied needs of each of the stakeholders. The Black parents were interested in topics related to educational equity, disciplinary procedures, and the education of Black males. Hispanic parents had greater interests in instruction for second language learners, immigration policies, and understanding the American educational system. White parents shared traditional interests in fund-raising for field trips and organizing events such as carnivals and fashion shows. When the groups were combined, it was difficult to get all the voices in the room heard equitably. Inevitably, whichever group had the dominant presence would dominate the will of the group and frustrate others.

The solution was to divide the parent leadership groups so that those with common interests based on their cultural background could discuss and plan for topics that were important to them. Consequently, each group organizes their own major school
event. The Black and Hispanic parents each have a major conference for the community which invites notable key speakers and entertainers to address topics of interest to their community. The White parents have an annual carnival, holiday fair, and Santa’s Workshop.

The researcher attended the African American parent meeting. Out of the 20 people in attendance five of them were White. One White parent was married to a Black man and had biracial children. Another White member was a school district liaison. Two more White members were from the district board of education. Another White member was a teacher from the feeder high school. He expressed his personal commitment in the success of his potential new transfers.

During the meeting, the parents debriefed a recent conference they had organized. Led by the principal, the participants listed the positive outcomes as well as challenges incurred during the planning and implementation of the event. It was decided by the will of the group that in order to attract more student leaders the conference needed student speakers. They agreed that during the next year the conference would take a more child-centered focus. These annual conferences highlight the accomplishments of people of color, and several parents conveyed appreciation for their ability to personally meet, recognize, and highlight successful African American role models for their children.

Following the debriefing of the conference, a video was shown that discussed a national conspiracy to increase the number of African American felons. The purpose of the conspiracy was a means to maintain a system of racial inequity. The leadership team had been shown the video earlier in the day. A whole-group discussion followed. Parents were pleased and excited by the topic which had affected almost every African American
family represented. One participant drew a correlation between the alleged conspiracy and achievement gaps. He remarked that he had learned about the achievement gap through these parent meetings and was not knowledgeable about these issues until the principal brought it to the forefront of their discussions.

When asked how he felt as a Black man about a White individual leading that discussion, he affirmed his confidence in the principal and voiced appreciation for her transparency. Another parent spoke with vibrancy and passion about the importance of maintaining a sense of urgency around equity in schools. The researcher heard the parents speak with a sense of empowerment. The meeting lasted two hours and ended with parents setting the date and agenda for the first meeting of the next school year.

**Math Content Team Meeting**

Grade-level teachers meet by content area at least once a week to review data. Led by an assistant principal, the teachers reviewed the most recent student math scores from formative assessments. During the 40-minute meeting, much of the conversation focused on specific students and their demonstrations of or lack of learning. The teachers discussed what areas needed to be taught or remediated for each of the students to be able to access the next curricular focus. Reference was made to the importance of teaching specific content prior to the admission of the state tests.

When the conversation transitioned to discussions on strategies that individual teachers had utilized to achieve increased results, no specific instructional approaches were shared at that time. The assistant principal posed questions for reflection. “Who would you say has made growth? Who are your students of color?” When pressed for more information, one of the teachers explained the strategies she was using to increase
student performance. The teacher responded, “My growth is fine, but it is not what I would have expected.” The staff continued to review data and explore reasons for the achievement gap. The researcher listened for the articulation of specific culturally responsive strategies to employ with students in the classroom, but the issue of specific strategies was dropped with that response.

During the course of the week approximately 25 classrooms in the school were observed. The classroom visits lasted between 10 to 15 minutes. In several classrooms, students approached the researcher and directed her to an empty seat. They shook her hand, introduced themselves by name, and welcomed her for coming.

All teachers were expected to know each of their students individually and have some knowledge about their backgrounds. Many teachers found creative ways to acknowledge and recognize students, such as posting students’ pictures of themselves and their families on some classroom boards. In a middle school, one might not expect to see elementary-level behaviors, however, teachers hugged students as they left the classrooms, students and teachers waved goodbye at the end of the day, and students asked teachers about the welfare of members of the teachers’ families. Some teachers had bulletin boards in the classrooms that discussed their personal cultural heritage along with pictures of their families and posters from their colleges.

In some classrooms, there was a verbal volley of words in which students joked playfully with teachers and teachers returned the comments with equally playful remarks. Several acts of affirmation were witnessed. A teacher cheered “You can do it!,” while another teacher clapped as a form of student recognition. Some educators posted academic messages on posters that touted the expectation that all students could attend
the college of their choice. One bulletin board shouted, “Why We Love You” and held numerous handwritten notes from the teacher to students.

During the first period of the day, students were enrolled in special classes intended to challenge advanced learners, remediate struggling learners, and enrich all learners. Some students were enrolled in advanced math or science classes, for example. Others received remediation in basic skills. Some took special interest classes in foreign language, dance, or music. Students who performed at proficient or above on core content area exams had the option of selecting the classes they would like to take. Students who performed below proficiency were placed in classes where they received specialized help in reading or math. In order to explore the range of classes provided, the researcher visited several classes at various grade levels. In one class, the teacher was discussing a lab they had performed the day before. Students had dissected frogs and were planning their next forensic task. In another class the researcher visited, students took advanced algebra while in another class students learned dictionary skills.

Thirty-six various instructional strategies were noted in classrooms. They covered a broad spectrum of instructional approaches. For example, math vocabulary word walls were observed in eight classrooms. Similar word walls were sought in language arts classrooms, although few were found. A display of vocabulary words was observed in only three classrooms.

Instructional strategies that used nonlinguistic representation, such as strategies that utilize sound, rhythm, movement, and visual models or representations of concepts, were observed in seven classrooms. One math teacher showed students how to make a right angle with their hands and had each student held up their hands to demonstrate this
concept. In a science room, there were clay models of a biological structure. In a social studies classroom, there were geographic models as well. Various graph models were posted from a recent staff development session. A language arts teacher promised to record students as they gave oral speeches so they could see themselves the way others saw them. Manipulatives were noted in a classroom where students used individual chalkboards to show how they were arriving at mathematical responses.

Writing steps, strategies, and cooperative group work were seen five times. Questioning strategies were evidenced in which the teacher challenged students at high levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy stating, “Can you connect the Knowledge game to other situations?” Teachers circulating the room were observed four times, while teachers instructing from their desks was seen three times. Strategies observed three or less times included math concepts and strategies, varying wait times, oral presentations, student-to-student interaction, posted objectives, predictions of text, and analysis of text. In terms of technology, one teacher made use of his SMART board during instruction and students utilized the technology lab before school, during lunch, and after school. There is a certified teacher available at all times in the computer lab.

Checking for understanding, journals, rubrics, and thinking maps were seen once. One teacher had students pull out their two-column notes and demonstrate how to modify their notes using an overhead projector.

Group reading was observed twice with one instance occurring during gym class. It seemed novel to see students reading in physical education, but they sat quietly in a group reading the directions for a game. Differentiated instruction was provided in a classroom where students were given several choices for how to demonstrate their
learning, whom they chose to work with, and how they would be graded. One class assignment had students interning at various jobs in the community and capturing their experiences on a poster. The teacher made explicit connections to college and career opportunities. The researcher saw cooperative learning strategies implemented twice with fidelity as the teacher gave clear instructions on the group roles and the evaluation of their work together.

The integration of ethnic culture was observed twice during the week. During one observation, a social studies teacher was discussing the death of Osama bin Laden. The teacher elaborated on Middle Eastern culture and asked students to consider how the individuals in Pakistan might view Bin Laden’s death differently than those in the United States. In another classroom students read silently while listening to a taped recording of a book with ethnically diverse characters that held distinct cultural dialects.

It was surprising how seldom the researcher observed classroom rules posted or teachers referencing background knowledge. Other strategies seldom seen were posted reading strategies, extended learning opportunities, integration of culture into the curriculum, and the use of metacognitive foreplay. For the frequency of all instructional strategies observed, see Table 8.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Number of Times the Strategy is Observed</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Analysis of text</td>
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Table 8 (Cont.)

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<th>Manipulatives</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reading Strategies Posted</td>
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<td>Integration of Culture into Curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
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</table>

Some strategies identified did not fall into the category of culturally responsive instructional practices, but they contributed to a positive learning environment as in the display of classroom rules or posting student work.

As interesting to note as the strategies observed were the strategies the researcher did not see. In one classroom, two students sat facing a wall exclusive of the class while other members of the class walked around the room discussing class projects. When the researcher asked why the students were not participating, the students stated that they had neglected to complete their project therefore could not participate in the class. They looked genuinely disappointed to be excluded. The researcher wondered what might have happened that prevented them from completing their project. She also thought about how they could benefit more fully from this instructional rather than sitting and facing a wall. Later in the week, three students were observed working in the hallway. When the researcher asked why, they replied that the regular classroom was too noisy to work and the other student told me he had no idea. The teacher simply asked him to read outside in the hallway when he entered the room.
Summary of Observations

Issues of race and equity were dominant in the culture at Melody Middle School. Various cultures were recognized as evidenced in the hallways and classrooms with pictures of diverse students and families. Lunch tables and recess play were racially integrated and students in the dean’s office were representative of the student population. Race, culture, privilege, and equity were openly discussed along with other traditionally sensitive matters, such as the termination of teacher contracts. Both parents and teachers seemed to appreciate the open dialogues that occur and were empowered to be engaged in the schoolwork at high levels. Classroom walls reflected the diversity of students, although there was little evidence in the observations to suggest the integration of student cultures into the curriculum.

Interviews

Six categories of school practices were identified in Chapter II that foster a culturally responsive school environment. These practices acknowledge students’ and families’ cultural differences and authentically adapt the school environment to accommodate, support, and respect difference. The practices challenge the traditional notion that all students assimilate into a hegemonic culture that dictates the norms and values for everyone. Rather, the school conforms to create a heterogeneous set of policies, practices, and procedures that both respect and celebrate the cultural identities of its student population. As outlined in Chapter II, the culturally responsive categories were leadership, parent and family connections, pedagogy, learning environment, student management, and belief systems.
Data were collected in interviews and focus groups to determine if the school implemented culturally responsive practices in these six areas. Transcripts from the interviews and focus group participants were coded line by line and placed into one of the six areas identified. An additional theme of cultural competency emerged from the interview data.

The researcher originally intended to interview only the principal separately from staff, but during the course of the week the researcher availed herself of opportunities to interview individuals as they made themselves available or voluntarily approached her with intent to discuss the study. The researcher recruited classified personnel such as secretaries, cafeteria workers, lunch monitors, and paraprofessionals to participate, but they declined the invitation stating that they were busy and could not afford the time to be involved in the study.

There were seven interview participants: an assistant principal, two science teachers, one language arts teacher, two parents, and the school principal. Interview participants remained separate from focus groups participants. The interviews were conducted in teachers’ classrooms or offices depending upon where the participants conducted the major part of their work. Before each session, participants read a statement from the release that articulated the purpose of the study and the parameters of their participation. They were reminded that their participation was voluntary and they could leave or stop the interview at will. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. For the interview protocol see Appendix A.
Culturally Responsive Leadership

Question number four in the interview protocol addressed leadership in the building and asked participants to name the kinds of things building leaders do that exhibit cultural responsiveness. The question clarified that leaders could be formal or informal and did not need to have a title.

It was interesting to note the kinds of activities the teaching staff identified as culturally responsive practices on the part of leadership. One science teacher identified “being approachable” as evidence of culturally responsive practices. Another science teacher identified “showing love.” The language arts teacher spoke about spending time with students and staying late to accommodate them. One parent described leadership actions as being tolerant of all cultures and allowing students to celebrate their various ethnic backgrounds. The assistant principal discussed his role in the coordination of student leadership groups for students of color. The principal did not discuss the role directly but indicated some of the interventions she worked to sustain. These included the notion that teachers become intimately acquainted with all of their students and their families.

It was interesting to note the interview responses all spoke to the leaders’ ability to foster relationships and create an inclusive environment. The parents in particular credited the principal’s leadership for setting the tone for culturally responsive practices in the school. One grandparent stated,

If it wasn’t for her [the principal’s] leadership none of this would be happening. . . . She is the one who speaks about White privilege and has conferences where teachers sit at the table and talk about how their lives
are affected by race so the teachers can better understand White privilege and what minorities have to go through.

Administrative team members play a critical role in supporting culturally responsive practices in the school. The assistant principal, for example, is responsible for hiring. He screens applicants by questioning them about their understanding of racial dynamics in schools and unapologetically seeks teacher candidates that have experience working with diverse populations. Each applicant is queried about their perspectives on equity. The assistant principal discussed the importance of race and its effect on education. He said,

One of the big screener questions we have for applicants is what’s your understanding of race and its effect on education? And depending on how applicants answer, that question will depend on if they even get their foot in the door for an interview.

Student leadership in culturally responsive practices was documented through the interviews. The interview participants discussed the numerous student leadership groups on campus for Hispanic girls, Black boys, biracial students, International students, and White students. The student leadership groups are divided by race because each group has unique needs that the leadership team feels are best dealt with in isolation. Each group is supported by an administrative lead, meets regularly to discuss their unique concerns, and proposes plans that address them. For example, the Hispanic girls volunteer at a local hospital providing services to the families of pediatric patients.

Targeting Hispanic girls for leadership strategically supports the traditional culture of a strong Hispanic matriarch. As the assistant principal explained, “When you
educate a Hispanic male, you educate one person. When you educate a Hispanic female, you educate the whole family. In the Hispanic culture the female is just the rock. So we target our Hispanic females to build their leadership capacity.”

The Black males follow a curriculum on manhood and community leadership. Issues of race, culture, and equity are discussed in these student groups. The student groups challenge assumptions and biases with their peers. Approximately 20 males are enrolled in the group.

The most recent student leadership group to form was one for White students. Seeing the other groups active in the school, the White students approached the principal and requested their own group. An assistant principal shared a story from their first meeting. She said,

The comment from a little girl I’ll never forget was, ‘Yeah, we’re so excited and everything. What can we do to help all the other groups?’ And (the principal) was like, ‘Why would you think the other groups need your help? What if the question was how can the other groups help you?’ And that just, you know, turned that perspective on that group completely; 180 degrees … because again, they were thinking here’s the White privilege…, now we’ve got a group. Let’s go help everyone else be like us.

Three out of seven respondents named the principal’s leadership as the greatest contributor to closing the gap. Some of the responses were as follows:

Parent: If you don’t have that leadership, it can’t get done. We have friends that have kids at other schools and they say, “We wish we had that
kind of leadership at our schools because we just don’t have that kind of cultural awareness at our school.”

Assistant Principal: It’s a complex answer, but I think I attribute it most to great leadership. We’ve had good leadership specifically from the principal. We have a principal that believes in this work …whether it’s creating 90 minutes of math every single day for our sixth and seventh graders to adding instructional pieces to having these unbelievable forums for our parents to talk and be engaged with the school, or to hiring more staff of color to bring in those different perspectives. You know there are a lot of things that create this equation of lowering this achievement gap, but it again it all ends at the principal.

Teacher: Leadership. I guarantee it. She is going to make sure kids are getting there no matter what happens in your life. She wants to make sure she can walk out those doors and feel like ‘I did it for every child.’

Interview respondents felt the leadership of culturally responsive practices was more integral to narrowing an achievement gap than individual practices. Overall, the interview respondents indicated that the leadership at the school exhibited a variety of behaviors that were consistent with culturally responsive practices and some that were consistent with simply effective leadership practices.

**Respectful Home and Family Connections**

Question number two on the interview protocol asked participants to identify culturally responsive ways in which parents and community members connected to the school. Interview respondents named a number of activities. There is a large community
event that is held at the beginning of the school year that introduces parents to the school and other community organizations that support the school. A teacher stated,

We have this community gathering in the beginning of the year, kind of like a huge pot luck and we have a garage sale going. There’s food, there are teachers, and there’s organizations being represented, and I think that’s just a real positive stroke. [This tells] parents this is a good place, not only for your kids, but also for you to come visit.

Interview participants identified several leadership groups for parents at the school. There is a unique racial configuration of parent leadership groups. There is a Black parent group, which organizes a Black community conference and an open house event for parents to visit the school during the day and provide feedback to staff on their observations. Other parent activities include the PTCO running a carnival and holiday fair; the Hispanic parent group organizing a community conference and raises money for notable Hispanic guest speakers; and an accountability parent team who reviews school documents, budgets, and academic data. A newly formed White parent group is still working on their project for the school year. The assistant principal explained how each parent group brought a unique perspective and passion for particular issues that was difficult to foster within a mixed-race group.

During the interview with the principal, she was asked how she was able to create a sense of urgency about equity work with parents of all the groups. She responded that it was important to keep the conversations going, regardless of how difficult they might be.

Parents contribute to the ongoing conversations in several important ways. They give feedback to teachers and advise teachers on culturally responsive practices for
families of color. Parents further participate and volunteer in classrooms and hallways. For example, parents visit the school at least once during the year to observe classrooms and hallways and take note of student and teacher interactions. At the end of the day, they meet with the staff to discuss their observations and perceptions.

Minority parents also attend a staff meeting once a year in which they sit side by side with teachers to guide them on how best to establish and build relationships with their families and their students. Many teachers have never worked with families of color before working at the school. Some teachers arrive at Melody with preconceived and prejudicial notions of what families of color are like. The parent interviewees proudly expressed their contribution to helping teachers understand their culture. The language of empowerment was evident in their voices as noted in the responses below.

Grandparent: Several teachers said they had never known Black people growing up so there was a big cultural difference for many of the staff. And just having to come to Melody and have Black students and meet Black parents, well, they didn’t know quite how to deal with it. They didn’t want to deal with the angry Black man or the angry Black woman…Some of them were afraid to call parents at home because they didn’t know what type of reactions they might get.

Parent: I know one conversation I had with one teacher. She was a very young teacher, and she said “Is it true that Black parents don’t care about education? It’s not their main concern?” And I said, “Are you asking me the answer for all Black parents or are you asking me as a Black parent?
Because I think that’s where you need to start that question. You can’t think that I’m going to answer for all Black parents.”

Parent: I have all the right to say whatever I want regarding our school … if I feel you are impeding my child’s learning … that is not fair in the classroom.

Grandparent: I wasn’t sure if I wanted to volunteer again this year cause I am getting up there in age and it can get tiring because you know I walk the halls and everything. But then, I see what good this is doing and I say, “I have to be a part of it!”

Organizing the leadership of parents in a way that recognizes their cultural strengths provides them with a forum for discussing concerns that are of interest to them and mobilizes the parent population in a way that makes them feel valued and important.

**Responsive Pedagogy, Relevant Curriculum, and Receptive Assessment**

The first question in the interview protocol asked participants to reflect on the institutionalized ways in which students’ background culture was considered or integrated into the instructional, curricular, and assessment program. The interview participants identified numerous strategies. The principal and the assistant principal identified cooperative group work as an integral strategy for teachers. The principal identified teachers’ training in cultural competency as an important practice. A science teacher, the language arts teacher, and the assistant principal pointed to ongoing analysis of data as important practices for classroom teachers at Melody. A science teacher and one of the parents spoke of how teachers regularly differentiated instruction for students. A science teacher discussed students conducting research projects. The assistant principal
discussed the action research that is conducted by teachers during their second year of teaching at Melody. They utilize a framework for culturally responsive teaching. He described it as follows,

It’s really challenging for teachers to look at culturally responsive teaching. How do we know if it’s culturally responsive or not? So they use a framework of actual research which I think is just a perfect fit because you can identify the problem. It’s easy for us to identify achievement gaps in something. Nevertheless, we have to put something in place to try to eliminate or reduce that gap. And then you monitor the results. I mean, it’s that simple in the equation. The action research projects are a little more complex, but in a nutshell, that’s what it is.

One of the science teachers articulated goal setting, and after that discussion the science teachers began using journals to record their progress. A science teacher, the language arts teacher, and the assistant principal confirmed that cultural knowledge was actively integrated into the curriculum. One of the science teachers discussed the regular use of technology in her classroom. All of the staff interviewed concurred on the regular evaluation of instruction at Melody. One of the science teachers pointed out her regular practice of teaching students about note taking and introducing key vocabulary as regular practice in her room.

There were three areas of instructional practices that at least three of the seven interviewees confirmed as regular practice in the school. They were analyzing data, integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum, and the evaluation of instruction. The staff at Melody regularly disaggregates student assessments by racial ethnicity to
determine the extent to which subgroups progress. When academic performance gaps are identified, the staff discusses the rationale for the gap and structures specific interventions to close the gaps. One teacher stated,

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We see there is an achievement gap. At the last science meeting, I had the data on the computer. It was painful. It was open and honest, but it showed all five science 8th grade teachers. It showed how each of us did with African American students and with our Latino students, who was most effective in closing the achievement gap for which race, and why they did that. So now the questions are coming out -- “We know this teacher does great at this. What can we learn from them and what are they doing?”
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This teacher indicated that her data showed the greatest improvement with her Latino students. When pressed for specific strategies she employed with her students, she shrugged her shoulders and explained that she had not done anything different for that subgroup than any of her other students. She further stated that she had no plausible explanation for why their performance was better. That had to be difficult to accept given that analysis of student data had been an important focus of professional development for all staff at Melody. She iterated later in the interview, “The best teaching is not just doing the right thing, but knowing why you are doing the right thing.” That was an important statement to make but puzzling given that she was not sure how to do that herself. The researcher wondered if that task rested with either of the two instructional coaches. Later, the principal shed some light on how teachers help connect data with practice. She said,
When the data is put out like that and they see it, we’re transparent. I can tell you exactly which of my teachers in this building work best with kids of color. And I expect everyone to be figuring out how they are doing it.

Integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum was identified as a classroom strategy at Melody. Three of the seven interview respondents discussed this approach. One teacher noted that she looked at the values of various cultures represented in her class and tried to integrate culture into the curriculum. The assistant principal discussed the importance of showing students the “wealth of other contributors and leaders in our history…that our kids can relate to.” One of the science teachers further articulated the importance of knowing her students before designing instructional strategies she employed in delivering the lesson. No one articulated in detail a uniform process used for integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum or specific resources utilized for this purpose. However, based upon the responses, it was clear that it occurred at some level within the school. The assistant principal discussed a framework called C.A.R.E., but none of the interview participants referred to it during our discussions. Another teacher gave some examples of how she integrates cultural knowledge in her classroom. She said,

When we are doing poetry, I have kids bring in poems from their heritage and explain why they chose them and realize there are poets from all over the world from all different ethnicities. Also we were doing Anne Frank in my intensive reading and each one of us talked about how we celebrate and celebrations that are important to our faiths. So some Muslim kids got to talk, and we didn’t have any Jewish kids in that particular class, but I had interjected that and we talked about it.
All of the interview respondents, with the exception of the parents, identified the evaluation of instruction as a critical practice in the school. It was an intriguing response given that instructional evaluation is not something that has generally been defined as an instructional, curricular, or assessment strategy in which students’ background culture is considered. Evaluative feedback at Melody has a unique perspective. Staff members at Melody receive feedback on classroom practices that may not have surfaced for them at a cognitive level. Parents, peers, and administrators observe in classrooms to determine if some students are called on more often than others or treated differently than others. A language arts teacher stated,

We’ve been monitored sometimes in our classrooms. They come in to see how we are treating kids of color. It’s just been a lot of learning [and] a learning curve for the old people who are not used to thinking about it. That’s the only way to express it.

One science teacher revealed that when she first arrived at the school three years ago there had been a “closed door” approach to teaching, but in recent years, they had created an open door policy in which all stakeholders were welcome to come into classrooms at any time and observe instruction. They were receiving significantly more feedback on their practices as a result and not just from the administrators but from parents as well. This practice was distinguishing from traditional classroom evaluation system approaches.

The researcher heard several instructional and curricular approaches that were culturally responsive during the interviews but what was equally telling was what the researcher did not hear. The researcher did not hear differentiated approaches for students
to demonstrate their learning. Methods of culturally responsive assessments were explicitly vapid from the interviews. Additionally, despite the growing number of Hispanic families and students that speak more than one language, the researcher did not hear a uniformed and institutionalized approach to vocabulary development or building background knowledge. For a synthesis of instructional strategies identified, see Table 9.
### Table 9. Instructional Strategies Identified in Interviews

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Culturally Responsive Learning Environment

No questions on the interview protocol directly addressed the learning environment, but research participants frequently referenced the environment when discussing other topics. From these discussions, the researcher learned the environment had changed over time. Melody Middle School used to be a school with a largely White middle class population when one teacher began her career there in 1985. She said,

If you looked in the cafeteria, all the Black kids were sitting here, Hispanics over there, Whites in another area, and then Muslims. Now when I look, they are all together; they are all mixed. The kids aren’t as divided. I do notice that the Asian kids sometimes do a little more clustering together than the other races but it’s very, very intermingled which I don’t know how that’s happening because I know it wasn’t years ago.

There was no agreement on how the change in the racial demographics rendered a harmonious school in its interactions amongst races. The researcher questioned another teacher that had been at the school 36 years. He made observations about changes in the school population over the years but held a different perspective. He did not necessarily believe the students were as integrated in their interactions as one might believe. He said,

Even now, it’s still that way. The cultural kids sit together, the ethnic kids sit together, and the race kids sit together. In our school right now, we still have that one situation where kids of colors can talk together in one vernacular. Nevertheless, it’s unacceptable for other kids to use that vocabulary towards them.
Another grandparent recalled the school 20 years before. At that time it was not an emotionally safe place for children. Students of color who excelled in their studies were bullied or harassed. She contrasted the learning environment 20 years before with the current learning environment. She said,

Kids were teased before because Black kids who excelled in classes were called names, singled out, and ostracized by their peers who were not on the same page or, on the same level in terms of development, growth and learning. They changed that so that kids felt that it was safe to speak up.

They addressed bullying. They really don’t have a bullying issue there.

And also the fact that it was cool to be smart and to strive to be on the National Junior Honor Society.

The staff and parents at Melody agreed that they appreciated the current learning environment at school. Professional conversations around the school are open and honest. Communication is encouraged amongst the staff and between the students. Three of the seven interview respondents stated their appreciation for the openness of conversations at the school. It is one of the reasons they enjoy being on staff at the school. One respondent equated the environment as being peaceful. He said,

I was congratulated at my last school when I first yelled at a kid. The office said, “Good job, you’re finally getting it.” And I cry every time I think about it. That’s how my teaching experience started. I thought I was supposed to yell at the kids. And when I came here and saw the love . . . it’s peaceful. It’s good. So… you made me cry. I wasn’t supposed to cry.

I think this is really a safe environment and I think that everybody in the
building feels like we have the opportunity to share. We share the positives as well as the negatives, but we try to dwell on the positives in a really nice way and I think that starts from the top, of course. We just follow the role models that are given to us, but I believe there’s just so much expertise in this building. Oh my goodness! That’s one of the reasons I enjoy being here.

During the interviews, the researcher learned that adults work hard to know their students and endeavor to connect with them. One parent articulated that the students feel cared for by members of the staff. Members of the staff enjoy the camaraderie of their teammates and rely on them for professional support and mentoring. That support is vital to an environment in which everyone works hard. Three of the seven respondents spoke to the fact that hard work is part of the culture at the school. Teachers work late into the day and on weekends teaching students, correcting papers, and designing lessons.

Based on the responses from the interviews, the learning environment evolved from a largely White, hegemonic, closed system into an ethnically diverse, thriving, and open environment. It is demanding but supportive. It is culturally pluralistic and accepting. It creates a space where teachers want to work and parents desire to be involved.

**Culturally Responsive Student Management**

Question number 3 on the interview protocol addressed student management and how a student’s culture was considered when it came to disciplinary actions. Little tangible data was collected from participants on this topic. This appeared to be the most difficult question in the protocol for most participants to answer as most of the
respondents gave pregnant pause before providing a short, broad response, deferring to another topic, or stating outright that it was not occurring. Some of the responses were as follows:

Language Arts Teacher: Good question, I don’t know if I can answer it.

Science Teacher #1: Make sure that there are open and courageous conversations [about] trends that we notice.

Science Teacher #2: I think that [there are] expectations that we’re going to deal with children in an equal and equitable manner.

Assistant Principal: Oh, great question. Um, you know, this is a tough one. This is something we are really struggling with. There is still a predictable achievement gap. You have African American students that are, um, being disciplined at a higher rate than our Hispanic and White students are.

Grandparent: Invite parents to come and sit in on a class.

When pressed for specificity, the interview participants could not delineate concrete ways in which a student’s culture was considered in managing student behavior.

Belief Systems

Operationalizing culturally responsive practices and integrating them into a system is a process that is never quite completed given the evolving nature of educational systems and the mobility of staff. What is enduring, however, are the beliefs that undergird the policies, procedures, and practices of a school. Discrete beliefs about children, schooling, and culture were verbalized during the interviews. Questions seven, eight, and nine of the protocol addressed beliefs. The questions asked participants to
discuss the espoused beliefs of the school, discuss any events at Melody that had shifted their personal beliefs about the influence of culture on educational practices, and identify how and when the staff discusses beliefs. Based on the discussions, the interview participants shared a number of common beliefs.

They believed that talking about race was important and one’s culture was an important influence in the design of effective schooling practices. Talking about race and culture is not optional. Study participants disclosed that they regularly discuss race, culture, bias, and White privilege during formal trainings led by a consultant on staff development days. A small core group of staff receives training from a specialist from district officials in this area. At times they assume responsibility for navigating these discussions. Several study participants voiced their opinion on topics of race and culture as follows:

Assistant Principal: We need to make race discussable because the data is telling us it is important. Our prisons are full of Black and brown people and this is not right. We have to discuss what is happening to our Black and Brown children in schools and why. And we have to discuss it now.

Grandparent: When my granddaughter started going here, I started seeing how caring everyone was and now I am convinced that culture does make quite a difference in the learning process. Since these teachers have been made aware of cultural differences they teach the children differently.

Parent: I’ve always believed that culture is very important when it comes to education. I just know that my kids have to learn how to work with other cultures and other people because in the real world when they get
out there they are going to interact with other people [and] with various
cultures from India to China to Asian to Hispanic to White as well as to
Arabic.

Five out of the seven interviewees noted that a common belief shared amongst
staff is that all students can learn and teachers are capable of helping them do well. They
need to exhaust all resources in the service of helping students learn.

Events That Shaped Their Beliefs

The interview participants recalled a few activities that occurred at Melody which
shifted their thinking about the importance of culture in educational practice. A few years
earlier a fellow staff member had the staff form a circle based upon their race-related
experiences. Although no one could recall the exact question, they could recall that some
of the questions referred to their ability to obtain make-up in their skin tone easily or find
a Band-Aid that matched their flesh tone. One participant noted that it surprised her how
many people of color were at one section of the circle and how much she had never
considered how society normed the needs of White people. A language arts teacher
stated,

But we have learned and been trained to look at kids’ color and appreciate
the diversity of the backgrounds of our kids. But that is a big shift for old
people. Especially old people who thought they had no prejudice, you
know what I mean? And to recognize it’s there even though we didn’t
know it.

During one training, participants were asked to bring a list of all their students and
then write down the ethnicities of the students next to their name. This activity helped
one teacher shift from her colorblind mentality to one that she recognized race on a conscious level. Another participant explained that her shift in thinking came during an evaluation conference with her Black supervisor at Melody. She spoke about how she had been upset when some of her Black female students were smacking their lips when she made requests and how she felt highly offended by this gesture. The supervisor explained that while the gesture might sometimes be considered disrespectful, it was not necessarily the case and each case had to be handled in context. For this White teacher, she realized this might be the first time she really needed to understand another culture. She was making assumptions about her students based on her own cultural norms. Up to this point, she had assumed all kids were the same and after this point she conceded that maybe they were not.

Each evolution of cultural competency for the interview participants’ occurred in a slightly different manner. For one teacher, he saw the shift in the student population, and he realized as the demographics changed he was becoming a less effective as a teacher. It was a situation he never dreamed he would be in. He stated, “Well I think as we changed and became more of a school of color I think my realization was that I had to change and alter who I was to impact them in a more positive manner.”

The shift came for the principal over a three-to-four year period in which she worked with an outside consultant that constantly challenged her about her personal beliefs and how they manifested themselves in the school environment. The principal admits it was a difficult process and often she would challenge the consultant with his assumptions as well accusing him of holding narrow biases.
Even though some sessions made her feel like a target, the principal said she left each session with increasing ideas for rumination. The catalyst came with a conversation in which she extolled to the consultant her love for her students and he threw the results of her latest academic assessment on the table, which showed a despairing gap between the performance of her White students and students of color. She recalled the consultant stating, “You don’t love them enough.” He challenged her further and said, “Because if you did, you would not tolerate this happening. Students of color are not doing well in this school and you have the power to change it.”

Interviewees were probed about how they utilized their influence to shift the thinking of their peers. One participant admitted that while she felt conversations about race and bias were important, she found them difficult to navigate without people feeling insulted or hurt and generally avoided them with anyone outside of the school community. The assistant principal stated he began with a standard professional approach. He said,

I think the biggest thing for me philosophically will always be to start with the data and demonstrate the need for the conversation even to begin. We know there are injustices in the system … but they have a hard time making that connection right back to their own personal instructional patterns. For teachers and for other administrators or whoever your audience may be you’ve got to make the data relevant to them.

The principal had a different approach. She said,

The first year I didn’t do anything even with the staff. I was just grappling with my own Whiteness trying to understand race, trying to move away
from being colorblind. I was reading like crazy; trying to study; put myself around people that would then become more open and honest.

Eventually the principal moved toward having the conversation with her leadership team and then having it with her staff. She reasoned that if the school began to demonstrate increased academic results, the conversation would be easier to have with her peers. However, in the absence of academic gains, her influence and voice would be ignored and fall on deaf ears.

For some participants their personal beliefs shifted far earlier than their experiences at Melody. Several interviewees discussed their early experiences at home or in their career that greatly influenced their racial beliefs. One science teacher stated, Growing up in the mountains, even though we were isolated, my parents taught in Grenada for three years and my mom always traveled. She was in the British military and so she grew up in Singapore. We always had different ethnic foods and were very [embracing] So I was kind of in the Michael Jackson theme of “We are the world,” “We are family,” and “Kum Ba Yah.”

**Shared Beliefs**

Staff discussed their beliefs during the formal trainings on culture, race, bias, and White privilege. One participant recalled that in the first three years of new staff training personal beliefs surfaced frequently. She articulated an activity in which each staff had to interview another staff member of a different race. The information from this activity was further used to inform the circle activity discussed by a previous interviewee.
While some participants established a clear relationship between the conversations on race and privilege and its connection to personal beliefs, at least one respondent did not. He could not recall one instance in which the staff had discussed personal beliefs.

**Culturally Competency**

A new category surfaced during the course of the interviews. The researcher recognized the new theme from the literature review, but reasoned that it would be subsumed in the category of belief systems. It was not. Culturally competency, defined by Lindsey, Robins and Terrell (2003) as knowing the set of appropriate behaviors and attitudes that enable one to work effectively in cross-cultural settings, was distinctly different from beliefs. Staff and parents articulated their beliefs. One belief was that talking about race and culture was important in educational settings. However, the knowledge it took to do so in an effective, coherent, and progressively skillful level was another matter altogether. Thus, a finding from the interviews is that levels of culturally competency are in place in the school closing the achievement gap.

According to by Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003), cultural competency is developed along a continuum that includes cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence, cultural competency, and cultural proficiency. The interview participants demonstrated competency anywhere between cultural incapacity and cultural proficiency.

All Melody staff progressed through no less than three years of training on cultural competency delivered by the principal, assistant principals, and an external consultant. The curriculum included probing their personal biases and prejudices,
understanding how their personal experiences influenced their perspective, exploring their own culture and subcultures, and learning about culturally responsive instructional practice in relation to issues of equity, bias, and privilege.

Talking about race and culture at Melody occurs on a daily basis in one venue or another. The interview participants understand talking about race is not an easy issue to discuss. It is an acquired skill and a potential emotional mine field to navigate. The discussants discussed their reluctance to be labeled and their fear of hurting other people’s feelings. The struggle to do so is apparent in the discussions. The assistant principal stated,

It gets fatiguing from time to time. There’s always that piece when I start being worried if am I going to be seen as the fiery Latino. When you are talking about a system that’s 90% White and telling them to think about race and equity, there’s going to be some hurt feelings because no one thinks they are racist and no one wants to be told they are racist. When the term White privilege is used, we talked about the defensiveness that’s brought up.

The transformation to cultural proficiency is a progressive process that occurs at varied intervals of time. During the interviews, ideas were heard which reflected the various stages of cultural proficiency. They were analyzed accordingly. Table 10 presents sample statements from the interviews which gave insight into the cultural competency development of the participants.
Table 10. Analysis of Study Participants’ Stages of Cultural Proficiency

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<th>Stages of Cultural Proficiency</th>
<th>Supporting Statements from Interviewees</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Destructiveness:</strong> Individual or groups refuse to acknowledge the presence or importance of cultural differences in the teaching or learning process. Any perceived or real differences from the dominant mainstream culture are punished or suppressed</td>
<td>There were no statements made to support this perspective.</td>
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<td><strong>Cultural Incapacity:</strong> Cultural differences are neither punished nor supported. The individual or organization chooses to ignore differences. There is no attention, time, teaching, or resources devoted to understanding and supporting cultural differences.</td>
<td>I’m tired of being blamed for the whole White society and what they’ve done, okay? I don’t feel like them, but I’m being blamed for it. Sometimes, I think that comes out with people. I love my kids. I don’t think I’m prejudiced, although I know everybody is, but you think you’re not and so why do I have to keep learning about this over and over again?</td>
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<td><strong>Cultural Blindness:</strong> Individual or organization actively proffers the idea that cultural differences are inconsequential and of no importance. Cultural differences may be noted, but being color blind (and culture blind) is the desired state. No resources, attention, or time are devoted to understanding cultural differences.</td>
<td>Well I don’t care, that’s how I am, because I don’t see color. I see my kids. You can yell at me and I don’t care. But I don’t care what color a kid is. Because I remember one of my White colleagues, a White man, was saying man, I’m tired of getting beaten up about this, you know? There were times when I would say let’s talk about something else for a while. So, it wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to talk about it all the time.</td>
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<td>Cultural Pre-Competence: Teachers, learners, and organizations recognize and respond to cultural differences and attempt to redress non-liberating structures, teaching practices, and inequities. Individuals and organizations recognize the need for cultural competency and this serves as a first step in extirpating some of the debilitating practices that limit the educational progress of diverse learners</td>
<td>We were used to “Let’s teach all the kids and not look at the race.” And that’s definitely changed. We’ve learned when we grew up you didn’t look at color. Everybody was the same and that’s the way I was taught. Now we do. And we look at the values from each culture and really try to appreciate it. This is where I am. I think I treat my kids the same, and I don’t know if that’s always right, but I think I do that. I have the same expectations for all of my kids. That was the colorblind perspective that we were raised like that. I know my parents raised me that way and now it’s not cool and it’s not right. I think that every person in this building is working hard for every child no matter who they are. [They are] trying to get them to understand again that school is important.</td>
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<td>Cultural Competence: Organizations and individuals learn to value cultural differences and attempt to find ways to celebrate, encourage, and respond to differences within and among themselves. Teachers and students explore issues or equity, cultural history and knowledge, social justice, and privilege and power relations in our society.</td>
<td>I’m so excited, because the next generation of kids truly are mostly biracial and integrated with different cultures. I love that we have informational seminars for teachers to also get a better understanding of different cultures. The multicultural center has classes on the Islamic faith and how to work with Muslim children, and it’s just an enriching time to understand more about a culture that we might not have grown up with. [It’s] very eye opening. I tell kids constantly the chances of me going to the part of the world where you’re from aren’t very good so you have to bring world to me. You have to bring it to me through food; you have to bring it to me through your culture; you have to bring it to me through your stories.</td>
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Cultural Proficiency: Individuals move beyond accepting, appreciating, and accommodating cultural difference and begin actively to educate less informed individuals about cultural differences. Individuals seek out knowledge about diverse cultures, develop skills to interact in diverse environments, and become allies with and feel comfortable interacting with others in multicultural settings.

I teach human body especially so it gives me an opportunity to talk about culture and ethnicity all the time especially when we get to human sexuality. I mean it’s so ethnic and so cultural. I think it’s important that when we talk about blood cells that we address the issue for example that African Americans are more prone to sickle cell anemia. Then we explain because they have no clue what sickle cell anemia really is so it gives me an opportunity to visit with them about what I’m teaching and at the same time teach them about themselves.

I just had that pretty courageous conversation with one of our teachers last week about this whole idea. I challenged that point of White girls being a able to handle something better. White girls can be just as defiant as any other student. They are not genetically inclined to be less defiant. Ask any White mother out there that’s raising a teenager and they’ll tell you they can be pretty defiant.

The principal has had several meetings where the parents can come in, sit down, and talk with staff. They can talk about race and race relations. So they can get a better understanding of what a minority student’s life is like.

The statements reflected varying levels of cultural competency. Several of them demonstrated proficiency by helping others understand the importance of culture on the teaching and learning process. The findings are clear, however, that cultivating cultural competency was definitely a practice in the school. Staff was continuing to grow and develop along the continuum of cultural proficiency.
Summary of Interview Findings

Melody Middle School evidenced six fundamental categories of culturally responsive school practices: Culturally responsive pedagogy, cultural competency development, culturally responsive learning environment, culturally responsive belief systems, culturally responsive home and family connection, and culturally responsive leadership. Culturally responsive student management was not evidenced in the interviews. Cultural competency emerged as a practice that was essential in being able to implement all of the other practices.

The interview participants held several common beliefs. They believe discussing race and culture is important in the school setting and that all students can learn if teachers are working hard to help them. Professional development opportunities were largely responsible for shifting the staff’s cultural competency levels and provided the forum for most conversations about race, culture, privilege, and bias.

Finally, three of the seven interview participants attributed principal leadership to their ability to increase the academic performance for students of color. No one in the interviews connected the implementation of culturally responsive practices to this outcome.

Focus Groups

Five focus group interviews were conducted with 17 staff members. These groups differed from interview participants. Group size ranged between two to five participants. Participants included four administrators, one counselor, and 12 teachers. The focus groups were conducted in 50-minute sessions during a teacher workday.
There were approximately 65 pages of transcribed data. Focus group data were coded into the six categories of culturally responsive practices, which included culturally responsive leadership, learning environment, pedagogy, student management, home/family connections, and shared beliefs. After a review of the data, another category emerged. Cultural competency was identified as a regular practice in the school and was included as a category in the analysis of data.

A range of participants’ opinions was shared during the discussions that reflected various levels of cultural competency. The following is a synopsis of the focus group discussions by category with supporting excerpts from participants and an analysis that reflects participants’ varied levels of cultural competency.

**Culturally Responsive Leadership**

The focus group participants named a number of various actions taken by leaders in the building that they considered culturally responsive. Three participants noted celebrating diversity. An example given by one participant was the grade-level team that holds cultural tasting parties for the students in their cohort. Students brought foods representative of their culture to school and peers sampled a variety of diverse cuisine. Diversity was celebrated when school leaders in the building publicly recognized students of all racial groups for their academic accomplishments by school leaders in the building.

The courage and willingness to discuss race and diversity was named by three participants as an important leadership action that demonstrated cultural responsiveness. Discussions that focus on race and equity are navigated in a variety of settings around the school. They are often facilitated by building leaders but sometimes by teachers as well.
Several participants felt it was especially helpful when minority teachers shared their personal experiences with their fellow staff. They felt it lent a unique perspective to topics they rarely considered. These perspectives were reflected in the two quotes below.

Teacher 1: I’ve been so impressed with the teachers of color in this building and their willingness to bring the White folks in and share their perspective with us. At parent conferences, I had parents that showed up at the wrong time or date. I thought they’d never do that to their doctor or lawyer so they don’t respect us. And she’s (Black colleague) is just like “Hey, not everybody’s White, honey. They may have taken three RTD buses to get to us.” So, having people of color in the building to educate us is huge. It’s just huge.

Math Teacher 1: One teacher got up at a regularly scheduled faculty meeting right before parent-teacher conferences with another teacher and said, “Those of you who are unfamiliar with your African American students’ families and you just really aren’t sure how to deal with them, talk to them like they are people. They care about their kids. If you come at me and make me know that you care about my kid first, then I’m going to work with you.” And simple things like that. Now how and why those two women get up at that faculty meeting, well it wasn’t an accident. It was leadership.

Along with the ability of staff to discuss race and culture openly, participants referred to the extensive amount of training provided in cultural competency as a leadership action that was culturally responsive. Staff was required to take at least three
years of intensive training in cultural competency as part of the induction process at Melody. In addition to this training, issues of race, culture, equity, bias, and White privilege were openly discussed at staff meetings, grade-level meetings, and presented at parent conferences.

Participants spoke about the various student leadership groups and the building leaders’ insight in creating a forum for student voice. Among the identified groups were the Brotherhood group for African American males, the Sisterhood group for African American girls, the Hispanic Girls group that volunteered at the hospital, and a newly formed sorority called Melody Girls Rock for African American Girls with a GPA of 3.0 or above.

Numerous participants identified the principal and her leadership actions as being culturally responsive. Most focus group participants articulated with clarity the principal’s expectations and vision for the school. In addition, they understood their mission in helping her achieve it. Even when participants did not identify what they wanted to see in the school or things they felt were important, they would point to the principal discussing what she felt was important or what she wanted to see in the school. Several participants described the leadership in the building as “top down.” Some of the responses were as follows:

Special Education Teacher 1: It’s very much top down…leadership is doing what they need to do, to say “Hey look, we’re not going to put up with this mess.”

Math Teacher 2: A huge part of the culture is top down.
Special Education Teacher 2: Bringing the new teachers in and getting them on board with the way we do things here; that certainly is from the top down.

Teacher 2: Race considerations are from top down.

While the formal leaders in the building framed their work around leading the charge for equity and culturally responsive practices, most teachers did not. In focus groups the administrators did not refer to teachers as leaders in the initiative for equity and culturally responsive practices either. One teacher, however, identified the school staff as leaders but plainly delineated the context in which that occurred. She said,

Teacher 2: My thought is that we’re all leaders; leaders within our classrooms. When these opportunities come to engage in conversations about race or culture, whether it’s incredibly uncomfortable, that’s irrelevant.

Dean 1: There has to be a leader who is willing to lead the charge. And clearly [the principal has] led the charge, and we’re the warriors behind her.

The warriors behind the principal were clearly the members of the administrative team which reflected the diversity in the building. The teachers supported and respected their leadership, and the principal made it clear that she intentionally recruited people of color for positions of leadership. One teacher articulated how he felt about the growing cadre of diverse staff. He said,
We are seeing more and more administrators of color take on value here, and that is the way it should be -- a balance of power. We don’t need a bunch of me (White males) in positions of power here.

It was evident that leadership occurred in the building at all levels, but the administrative levels were acknowledged more readily than others.

**Respectful Home And Family Connections**

Nine of the 12 focus group participants discussed the role of the various parent leadership groups in connecting parents to the school. Organized by race, the groups included an African American parent group, a Hispanic Parent leadership group, and a White parent leadership group along with the traditional PTO and Accountability Team committees. One of the deans discussed the reason for the separation by race. He said,

What we found is that when these groups were in a mixed setting, they weren’t getting to the bottom of the issues. So, African Americans weren’t talking about what their real issues were in a room full of White people. So she [the principal] realized that she had to isolate them in order to get to the bottom of it, and we also realized that in the African American Group their focus is much different than the Hispanic Group. The Hispanic families have issues with language and immigration. Some of their main concerns [were] how their kids were going to get funding to go to college. The African American parents want to know what we are doing about these Black boys. Or what are some of the discipline issues looking like. [These are] very different focuses. Each leadership group takes on a different task or event for which they take responsibility. For instance, two
of the groups organize community conferences, and one group is responsible for organizing an annual carnival.

Opportunities for teachers to connect with Melody parents are frequent and varied. Events happen at different times of the day and in various venues. One teacher discussed meeting her parents at the neighborhood McDonalds restaurant to hold parent conferences if it was more convenient or comfortable for parents after hours. There are family potlucks, barbecues, the annual carnival, parent nights, and volunteering in classrooms. Parents sometimes cook food for school events. Hispanic parents have an arrangement where they can work on school computers after school dismisses. The parent community is tapped for nontraditional roles such as mentoring students, informing teachers about their culture, or helping other parents understand the norms of good schooling. Parents can conduct tutorials and study halls at the school. Focus group participants discussed their method of “reaching out” versus “pulling in” parents to the school. The responses were as follows:

Counselor: I think the biggest thing that I’ve learned through this work is that a lot of times it’s up to us to sort of reach out to the communities and not just always expect them to come to us. I think we’re still sort of in that place where we have to reframe an old view of how school works which is if they want something the parents will come to us. Or if they care, they’d be willing to come to conferences, or they would show up. Realizing that a lot of times you are far more empowered seeking out and going into the community and providing opportunities to connect with parents out in the community and within their comfort zone.
Dean 3: We’ve reached out to family members who have helped educate all of us…They’ve actually been mentors [and] community liaisons that help with situations if there is something that maybe we just really aren’t able to ourselves understand.

Staff learns how to work with various kinds of parents during focused professional development on the topic. Black teachers, for example, talk with White teachers about how to best approach and work with Black families. The administrators volunteer to sit with teachers while they phone parents and support them when they call. White teachers are appreciative of this type of training and admittedly timid about speaking with minority parents for the first time. During the focus groups, teachers candidly discussed their initial fears of working with minority students and parents. Some of the responses were as follows:

Math Teacher 3: My first year at Melody was a complete culture shock.

Special Education Teacher 3: Can I say some of the fears I’ve felt communicating with parents of different races? I don’t have children so I fear somehow that I don’t have anything to share with them almost.

Teacher 3: Getting more parents involved, especially some of the Spanish speaking parents, I think it was intimidating…just because of the language and all of that.

Teacher 4: We’ve got a lot of people in the building that this may be the first time that we ever sat across the table from a Black mother. I was afraid.

Researcher: You just expected her to be angry?
Teacher 4: Oh yeah, absolutely. I figured that there would be this hostility. This one of my least favorite expressions ever, reverse racism…Whether it bubbled up to the surface or just stayed hidden, [I feared] that there would be this tension that was all centered around race and that I’m not going to be able to get past that. Here I am, this White guy that’s telling this woman that her son is being a punk in my class.

Assistant Principal: They (teachers) were much more comfortable calling the White parents and being more proactive in the past with them than they were with the students of color.

Despite their fears, communicating with all parents appeared to be a priority at Melody. Teachers keep phone logs of parent calls as part of the data the school utilizes to analyze effectiveness with parent communication and involvement. Teachers are encouraged to call parents both when they have concerns and when they have positive news to share. School communications are written in English and Spanish. Translators support verbal communications during meetings and parent conferences. “Knowing students and families” was a mantra heard numerous times from focus group participants. For example, in an effort to better understand their population, staff visited religious organizations in the community to acquaint themselves with the culture.

In general, the culturally responsive home and community practices discussed during focus groups included a number of different practices. Parent leadership teams are organized by race. Teachers reach out to parents in a variety of venues and learn how to do so effectively through organized professional development. Teachers communicate
with parents frequently and understand the various cultures of their parents when designing programs that support and accommodate the cultures represented at the school.

**Responsive Pedagogy**

While the protocol question posed to focus group participants asked them to reflect on institutionalized practices that integrated culture into teaching practices, few staff members identified specific pedagogical practices. For example, respondents identified the following activities as teaching practices: cultural tasting parties, teacher evaluation, photos of kids on the walls, a map of students’ origin, flags in the corridors, student leadership groups, diverse teaching staff, interview techniques, and cultural competency training for staff. Other strategies mentioned included techniques such as homework, meaningful work, daily assessments, action research, and data analysis.

Analyzing data is an area in which at least five participants acknowledged that it occurred as part of their classroom practice. Teachers disaggregate data based on race and have regular grade-level discussions on the progress of students. Teachers linked this practice more highly than others as the instructional strategy that supported their ability to close the achievement gap in math. Several teachers discussed the importance of data. Some of the responses were as follows:

Math Teacher 1: A lot of it (data) is broken down by grade level. Here’s how your Black kids did, your Hispanic kids did, your White kids, and your Asian kids.

Teacher 3: We are very explicit with telling our teachers their testing numbers, their data, and breaking it down with Black, Brown, and White.

To make very clear to those teachers who is doing well and who is not
doing well. And then it is discussed, “Why is this happening? What is this person using that you are not using?”

Special Education Teacher 1: I think that there is a real conscious decision and conscious look at the way we’re teaching; what we’re teaching.

Classroom walk-throughs were mentioned as a practice that occurred systemically, although the participants did not expound on the value of the feedback received. Some of the responses were as follows:

Math Teacher 2: Probably about once a month, our administrators walk around the building and do short observations of a large number of students and figure out what is going on in the classrooms.

Special Education Teacher 2: We have a lot of people observing. They’ll come through and they might check to see am I letting one of my Black boys get away with more than I would with some of my White kids. And they call you on it if there is something like that. They are looking to see how we treat our kids in the classroom and how they react to us.

One participant identified integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum as regular classroom practice. The staff uses the district-approved curriculum, and some staff members enhance it by integrating cultural content as part of their regular planning. One administrator spoke to the following point as important. She said,

Is the core curriculum that you are looking at filtered through cultural relevancy so that you are reaching those students? Because if you can’t reach them, you can’t teach them. So, how did you reconstruct or how did you deconstruct and re-evaluate that piece you are teaching? You are not
just teaching about grammar but about grammar and context…grammar through cultural relevancy.

Other strategies mentioned two or less times included cooperative group work or group think, knowing students’ background or cultural competency, flash cards, integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum, readers’ theater, rap, critical thinking, self and identity development, and college and career ready linkages in the curriculum. One participant did note they engaged in culturally responsive teaching but did not specify a particular strategy utilized to do so. Table 11 shows the various teaching practices identified by the focus group participants.
### Table 11. Teaching Strategies Identified by Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Strategies</th>
<th>Counselor and Assistant Principal (2)</th>
<th>Math Teachers (4)</th>
<th>Special Education Teacher (3)</th>
<th>8th Grade (5)</th>
<th>Deans (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think/Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing Data</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Action Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flash Cards</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily Assessments</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Competency</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrate Cultural Knowledge in Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readers Theater</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rap</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self and Identity Development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>College and Career Ready Linkages</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The researcher expected to hear some uniform strategies across grade levels or content areas. The number of vague, nebulous, and unrelated responses the researcher received to a focused question about teaching practices was surprising. Some of the examples were as follows:

Math Teacher 3: As a new teacher, we attend a meeting once a month and dish about race and gender and how we could make our students successful. As a matter of fact, [during] the last assignment we had to do some work with our students, and I think that was just a wonderful thing.

Special Education Teacher 3: I think that there is a real conscious decision and conscious look at the way we’re teaching, what we’re teaching, and various kids in the curriculum. I think it’s part of the building here.

Homework, analyzing data, and cultural competency were the three areas under teaching practices that were identified more than once by focus group participants. It is worth noting that analyzing data was the only area of teaching practices that was confirmed through all three data collection methods; observations, interviews, and focus groups.

To summarize this area of responsive teaching practices there were several practices identified in the school with varying degrees of use across the school. No assessment was made of the quality of delivery but rather confirmed that they are used in the building. The most frequent practices referenced by focus group participants were homework, cultural competency, and analyzing data.

**Culturally Responsive Learning Environment**

No questions in the protocol directly asked participants about the learning environment. Data regarding the learning environment were gleaned from statements...
made during the course of the discussions. The first focus group described the environment at Melody as student centered. They felt that the teachers demonstrated a strong sense of caring for the students and students equally connected with at least one adult. Additionally, they discussed the various kinds of celebrations at the school such as the cultural tasting party, student writing awards, and the impromptu acknowledgements in the hallway by the principal.

The second focus group spoke to the importance of relationship building at Melody. They stressed the fact that the relationships they held at Melody extended outside of the professional environment. Both the teachers and students felt it was a space that was comfortable and welcoming. The following quotes are representative of the teacher comments about the environment.

Teacher 1: This is a place that will nurture and take care of you. We do wrap our arms around any population.

Math Teacher 4: This building makes all races feel comfortable, feel like they belong, [and] feel like they should be here. Even though I’m White, I make the kids feel welcome. I say, “Hey, you’re my students. You belong here.”

There was a core value at Melody which was integrated into the culture and environment of the school. It was an expectation that staff members resolved conflict by confronting individuals personally. Staff members are taught the skills of navigating conflict and utilizing statements that de-escalate conflict and increase engagement and cooperation. If a conflict cannot be resolved through personal confrontation, the participants involve the next level of staff who is usually a grade-level team leader. It
takes several layers of staff before the issue reaches the principal and usually the conflict is resolved before then. This defined protocol of managing conflict contributed to an environment that understood conflict was a necessary product of change and proactively provided a uniform process for managing it.

The third focus group discussed the visual environment. They pointed to the posters, which articulated behavioral expectations, the student artwork, and the pictures of students in the hallways. The group stated that teachers in the school want to be there, and noted that there is a ready list of teachers who stand eager to join the staff. Furthermore, they noted the expectation that everyone in the school feels valued. One administrator discussed the leadership’s expectations for the learning environment as follows:

Everywhere they go in their classrooms and everywhere [in the school] they see themselves valued. We really want the kids to see value in themselves and find purpose in getting an education. So we try to model that I nonverbally [and] everywhere they look. We expect the staff all the way down to the lunch ladies to the security guards…everyone to treat the kids respectfully [and] with kindness.

The fourth focus group reiterated the expectation that members of the school community felt valued. According to members of this group it often happened through celebrations. They expressed appreciation for the ability of staff to take additional professional development courses that increased their salary and saw it as a definite benefit to working at the school. They underscored the importance of relationships and the ability to show people that they care. The group acknowledged a support system for
staff that included mentor teachers and collegiality amongst staff. Several members of this group shared the following comments about how they felt loved at school.

Administrator: The whole school approach is where people feel individualized, that they are unique, that they can contribute to something, [and] that they are also part of the big picture.

Special Education Teacher 1: The basic thing I’ve seen is love [and] that they care.

Teacher 2: When I came here and saw the love --- it’s peaceful.

Math Teacher 4: I was really a bumpkin and I think it’s that love that people take the time to explain their culture; it really helped.

The fifth focus group mentioned the visual appearance of school by pointing to the pictures of students and families in the hallways, the flags, and the map in the entryway. Several participants in this group made reference to the fact that they feel the environment is caring. They said,

Teacher 1: I don’t believe that the fact that we care is unique to Melody.

Teacher 2: I think teachers in this building are being equipped to wield that caring in more poignant ways.

Teacher 3: When they see us reaching out for them, it’s a big thing for them to say, they care. So when they see us doing that they kind of can see that you care. It really matters.

Teacher 4: When I came here last year for my interview, when I left my face hurt from smiling because the energy in this building is so pervasively positive.
This group described the environment as being student centered and related the fact that the staff was a group of hard-working professionals. The learning environment described by the focus groups presented several areas of intersecting data. Respondents saw a student-centered environment that was caring, a place where people are celebrated and valued, a setting where relationships are fostered amongst all stakeholders, and a space that is visually appealing with positive messages reinforced throughout the campus.

**Culturally Responsive Student Management**

The focus group discussions on student management were not much different than the interview discussions on this topic. Many respondents gave pause admitting that culture was not considered in the area of student management with consistency. Some noted their intention to address the area more fully in the future while others simply shrugged off the question as unimportant. Some of the responses were as follows:

Teacher 1: I don’t consider [discipline] at all, honestly. I know that our school has been taking a look at those numbers.

Teacher 2: We have that new committee the deans are doing, what’s it called?

Teacher 3: I’m not one to speak. You probably know more about it. But to me it’s just disciplining with the idea of the kids’ culture in mind. I’ve not been to a meeting, but they look at different ways of handling something instead of looking at it like that’s the wrong way to do it. We have to kind of look at that before we discipline kids on things. Our suspension numbers, our discipline numbers are still high for our Black male students, but that’s something we are constantly working on.
Dean: There is still a behavior discipline gap as we refer to it. What we’ve also found is that among our African American students there is a lot higher number of physical incidents. So [we are] really trying to work with that because our policies are very Black and White when it comes to physical confrontations. So even next year looking at how we’re doing with our kids on how not to always get physical so quickly.

Several participants responded to my question on culturally responsive student management with questions of their own. They pondered their management actions aloud wondering if they were engaging in interventions that were being effective and reflecting on their current processes. Several participants responded as if they were searching for answers rather than ready with proven strategies. They said,

Dean 1: How do we change classroom behavior mindsets so that a young Black male who is being destructive in class isn’t the first one kicked out the door when the White kid next to him is being equally destructive but he gets to sit there and just settle down Johnny.

Dean 2: I’d say over the last five years the shift has been, “How do we keep the student in the classroom and not out of the building?”

Teacher: Well, a lot of it is like, “Who do you get on? Who do you discipline harder? Are you disciplining one race harder than the other?” A lot of it I don’t think you personally would know unless someone actually pointed it out to you.

Not all focus group participants were unsure of effective strategies in place. There were some concrete strategies mentioned by at least one individual in each of the focus
groups. These included building relationships with students, an expectation ladder for reinforcing individual classroom behaviors, and a discipline equity group that examined discipline data. In addition, there was a book study on equitable discipline for students, the elimination of the in school suspension room, and a two-week student course on appropriate behavior taught at the beginning of the school year. Professional development for teachers about cultural differences was mentioned, and there appears to be an overall goal to keep students in the classroom. It is worth noting that of the nine strategies discussed on culturally responsive student management, eight of them were derived from the Dean’s focus group. Four of the nine strategies were discussed in other focus groups.

It seems if there is one area in the framework where the Melody staff remains challenged it is the ability to master an effective process and procedure for integrating their knowledge of culture into student behavior interactions. Several staff noted their lack of ability to connect their training in cultural competency with student management practices. They said,

Teacher: This year there was a problem with a couple of groups with different ethnicities that were fighting back and forth. They pulled [them] all in to talk to them as a small group. So I know that administratively they are aware that although we are all one big happy family getting along supposedly…that isn’t always necessarily true of the students.

Dean: The data is never isolated. It’s interwoven with the cultural relevancy of whatever we’re doing and the expectations and how do we impact that referral system so we keep the students of color in the
classroom and therefore continue to close the achievement gap? Because if they’re not learning, we’re not closing anything.

As staff navigates through their own levels of cultural competency, they are beginning to question and reflect on their contributing actions and thoughtfully consider their role in the student management process. Within these reflections, three strategies were identified by more than one focus group. Those were relationship building, the discipline equity group, and the use of data. It was interesting to note that the use of data was a top area of practice in the responsive teaching category through all three methods of data collection for this study -- observations, interviews, and the focus groups. Culturally responsive student management was a minimal practice in the school in those three areas.

**Collective Beliefs**

Some of my most interesting exchanges occurred when discussing belief systems with focus group participants. One such exchange occurred when participants were asked how they as “culturally competent” White people helped other White people understand the importance of race or culture in educational practice. Focus group participants responded initially by deflecting the principal’s views. The researcher probed further by asking them to focus on themselves and what they personally do to build understanding of this concept. One participant’s answer was surprising. He said, “I don’t think I help anyone. We wouldn’t really have a way of knowing if they (other people) think differently.”

The researcher asked participants if they knew anyone who was indifferent to this issue or perceived themselves as color blind in their approach to working with students.
“No,” they responded. They didn’t know anyone who might feel that way. The researcher found that response curious. When this same question was posed to another focus group, a participant fired back immediately, “That’s a question for the principal.” “Why?,” probed the researcher. The respondent briefly expounded that in her 21 years on staff at the school the student population shifted dramatically and the principal wanted to have the best school ever.

During this discussion, the group reflected on the moment they decided that race was an important issue to discuss. One answer was insightful.

Teacher: I can’t avoid it. It will be addressed. It is addressed at leadership.

It’s constantly addressed. I couldn’t avoid it. I have to deal with it because it’s everywhere. It’s here. So I don’t have a choice except to leave the building.

The participant sat back and folded her arms across her. It was becoming clear that some members of the staff harbored beliefs that were contradictory to the espoused beliefs of the school community.

Talking about race appeared to be an important collective belief at Melody. One participant felt that it was so important that she recommended a section of every staff meeting be devoted to this purpose. Most respondents felt discussing race was an integral part of understanding their student population and neglecting to do so would interfere with their ability to deliver a fair educational process. But while they articulated their belief in discussing race, participants noted their difficulty in doing so. They said,

Teacher: People don’t want to talk about race. You are afraid to talk about it especially in groups of mixed races. Having taught recently in a school
where most of the faculty, regardless of race, didn’t really want to talk about race. We all agreed somewhat silently that our own achievement gap between students of color and White students was simply a matter of those kids from those families of that culture that just don’t value education. So there’s our place to hang that. We don’t have to own that problem. Here [at Melody] we have to own that problem because it’s our job to teach kids. So it’s not a matter of we get to use that as an excuse that students of this race or students of that culture or background doesn’t value education. That’s not acceptable.

Administrator: When we started having conversations and reading this book in our faculty meetings I was like, “What do you mean Whiteness?” I didn’t want to hear about Whiteness. I didn’t want to talk about Whiteness. No, that makes me feel bad. I mean when I think about that I might have treated you bad because of the color of your skin and I didn’t know that I treated you bad. I just remember my team [included] a Hispanic male, an Indian Lady, and then myself, a White person, and I’m thinking, “I can’t read this, I feel too guilty.” I don’t even know why I’m feeling this but my team was saying, “You’ve got to read it so we can talk about it.” And then having that conversation around Whiteness. I read the first page and then I stopped.

Teacher: I started having to be open to start to see and maybe start to hear and maybe to think about things I would have never thought about before.
Still even at that point, I don’t know that I was able to really talk about it other than here at our school.

Dean: We have some teachers who are still not comfortable with cultural relevance, who are still not clear about what the achievement gap really means, and [who] are not quite sure what White privilege meant or means and how we look at the fact that being colorblind is not acceptable; being color conscious is. And how do you infuse culture as a White teacher or as a teacher not of color? How do you infuse that and really strengthen your class?

It was interesting that even though discussing race was difficult for the focus group members they still felt it was important enough to wrestle through the difficulty to mutual understanding. There was a sense of urgency underlying the staff members’ beliefs about discussing race which suggested this was not an issue that could be left for another day. Along with this sense of urgency, there was a belief that discussions on race, culture, and equity are not just for some members of the school and not others. Discussing these issues was not optional and several participants concurred that not only was it inclusive, it was mandatory. Learning about culture, race, privilege, and equity was an ongoing process in which all staff members were both educators and learners. With consistency, the staff acknowledged that although it was an arduous and sometimes painful process, they had learned to challenge common assumptions and personal bias. They recognized that their experiences color the lens through which they see the world and at times, it might be skewed.
The beliefs evidenced in the interviews suggest that staff have embodied the mantra of “all children can learn” which ushered in the NCLB era of reform. A strong sense of personal responsibility was reflected in the language teachers used when describing their role in the education of students. They said,

Teacher 1: We won’t let a kid fail. And if one is, we’ll find a way to get them. It is not acceptable.

Teacher 2: You can’t allow that to be an acceptable excuse for allowing kids to fail. There is no excuse.

The special education focus group placed a slightly different twist on this belief. One teacher stated, “There are some kids who are going to always struggle.”

The other focus groups discussed the importance of believing in the potential of every child and shared the belief that their role in helping students was critical to the learning process. Closely related to this belief was the belief that students are of utmost importance at Melody. The staff believes all outcomes should be directly related to some level of improved status for children. Children are the focus of all work and the recipients of their efforts. They describe children as their “inspiration” and prioritize their work according to student centered outcomes. One administrator described the staff’s collective beliefs on the school’s purpose as follows:

What we are working towards is not just having kids stick around because the law says they have to but because they want to be a part of this place and they have a passion to learn and they are empowered to take ownership over their education. I really see that that’s our big goal is to empower these students to really see the amazing abilities that they have
and have them to re-engage in this idea of learning and education which they for various reasons have built up a wall against the system. So it’s about breaking those [walls] down and helping them connect again to education and know how powerful that can be.

During the focus groups, the researcher questioned staff to determine how they gained their beliefs about culture and if experiences at the school shifted their beliefs. The researcher wanted to know what kind of impact the school was having on staff and parents that mediated beliefs they may have held prior to joining the school community. While some staff brought personal experiences of interactions with minorities, most staff and parents attributed their current beliefs to professional development experiences provided at the school. Some of the staff shared the following comments about how they acquired their personal beliefs.

Teacher 1: My boyfriend is Black. So I see more of it [racism], but not everything, and I’ll never know what it’s like to walk in my son’s shoes. I’ll never know what it’s going to be like for him. Am I fearful for him? No, not at all. I think it’s going to be a neat experience.

Teacher 2: My dad’s best man in his wedding was Black, so I’ve been raised with every culture in my life, and so for me I see a small glimpse of it [racism], and it angers me to the point where I can’t stand it.

Teacher 3: I had absolutely no intention when I became a teacher of ever teaching in a system I grew up in. I couldn’t do it. I needed the difference. I valued the students for what each of them brought to the table. I didn’t
want to sit there and teach another 35 of me. So, my shift came really from how I was educated to what I wanted to be as a teacher.

A wide range of other beliefs emerged from the focus group discussions. They included a belief in the importance of data, partnerships with the community, having every child access postsecondary education, and attracting diverse staff populations as an important priority and closing the achievement gap as a vital goal.

The staff at Melody Middle holds fundamental beliefs about the importance of children that are wrapped in an abiding respect for their culture. These beliefs frame the importance of the discussions that occur around race, culture, and equity on a daily basis and lent a laser focus on the ever-looming achievement gap. There were two major common beliefs established through the focus groups. First, the importance of discussing race and second, the belief that all students can learn with the teacher’s role supporting them in this effort. Both of these beliefs were confirmed through the interview data.

Cultural Competency

Cultural competency emerged as a school practice during the focus group discussions. The staff at Melody embraced the idea they are better educators because they understand the history and dynamics of race, equity, and culture within school environments. Race, equity, and culture were spoken of with candor and frequency and were thought to be as essential a conversation in improving their skills as any other vital instructional practice.

Many of the focus group participants were cognizant of White privilege in a way this researcher had not witnessed in most educational settings. The staff participated in book studies about race including *Courageous Conversations* (Singleton, 2006) that
outlined protocols for talking about race. The staff engaged in a variety of activities which examined issues of race. When asked to expound on their understanding of how culture, if at all, impacts student learning, these were some responses the researcher received:

Teacher 1: It’s the awareness of everything in our lives like hair products, even simple things like a Band-Aids, and pantyhose for girls, are made with White people in mind. These are just little things that teachers who are White aren’t aware of.

Teacher 2: We are reading this really great book, *Just Like Me*, written by the mayor’s wife about traveling, following, and sending girls through the public school system. Two are documented; two are undocumented. When you get to the end of high school, what’s your motivation when you can’t get into college? Who do you partnership with to get a college education? Who do we partnership with as a community to show a young Black male or any student of color that there [are] opportunities out there as a businessman or businesswoman?

Students participate in some level of cultural competency activities although not to the degree as the staff. The student leadership groups are organized by race and during these meetings students learn leadership skills for cross-cultural settings. Student field trips are screened for cultural relevancy before they are approved. All students see positive images and minority role models. These images are presented during various events scheduled during the year. They are modeled by teachers and leaders as well as
posted in the hallways. A dean described how they craft the experiences for students of color.

Dean: One of the best things we do is we surround our students with examples of positive, culture every single chance that we get. So we surround them with positive Blackness, positive Whiteness, [and] positive brownness to try to tell a counter story to what they are getting when they leave here.

So strong was the conviction that cultural competency was an important practice in the school that many focus group participants attributed their success with the achievement gap to ongoing conversations about culture. These conversations, in turn, helped them focus on the work and provided a common framework for school improvement decisions. They believed it was this element of discussing race and culture that made their educational program stronger. One teacher lamented that she wished they had more time to review the curriculum to determine places in the curriculum where discussing race and privilege was a natural fit for discussions amongst students. She felt that teachers were sometimes too pressured to cover the curriculum to take the time to excavate those opportunities more fully.

Comments heard during the focus groups reflect the various stages of cultural proficiency outlined by Lindsey, Robbins, and Terrell (2003). A synthesis of their statements was analyzed according to the cultural competency continuum in Table 12.
## Table 12. Supporting Statements of Cultural Proficiency Stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of Cultural Proficiency</th>
<th>Supporting Statements Heard from Focus Group Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Destructiveness</strong>: Individual or groups refuse to acknowledge the presence or importance of cultural differences in the teaching/learning process. Any perceived or real differences from the dominant mainstream culture are punished or suppressed</td>
<td>There were no statements made to support this perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Incapacity</strong>: Cultural differences are neither punished nor supported. The individual or organization chooses to ignore differences. There is no attention, time, teaching, or resources devoted to understanding and supporting cultural differences.</td>
<td>There were no statements made to support this perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Blindness</strong>: Individual or organization actively proffers the idea that cultural differences are inconsequential and of no importance. Cultural differences may be noted, but being color blind (and culture blind) is the desired state. No resources, attention, or time are devoted to understanding cultural differences.</td>
<td>There were no statements made to support this perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Pre-Competence</strong>: Teachers, learners, and organizations recognize and respond to cultural differences and attempt to redress non-liberating structures, teaching practices, and inequities. Individuals and organizations recognize the need for cultural competency and this serves as a first step in extirpating some of the debilitating practices that limit the educational progress of diverse learners.</td>
<td>Three focus group participants discussed the importance of culture in designing interventions to close the achievement gap. Respecting a person’s culture was defined as an act of respect and learning about different cultures as an ongoing process.</td>
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Table 12 (Cont.)

**Cultural Competence:** Organizations and individuals learn to value cultural differences and attempt to find ways to celebrate, encourage, and respond to differences within and among themselves. Teachers and students explore issues or equity, cultural history and knowledge, social justice, privilege, and power relations in our society.

Two focus group participants articulated that although they were White, they did not see their views as predominant. They sought ways to celebrate and encourage difference. Knowing the cultural histories of their students was material for their practice.

**Cultural Proficiency:** Individuals move beyond accepting, appreciating, and accommodating cultural difference and actively begin to educate less informed individuals about cultural differences. Individuals seek out knowledge about diverse cultures, develop skills to interact in diverse environments, and become allies with and feel comfortable interacting with others in multicultural settings.

One participant described how she had become proficient in various cultural norms. She had no fear in discussing issues of race and her communication on the topic was transparent. She was now prepared to help others learn how to do so.

It was no coincidence that during the focus groups, the researcher did not hear evidence of statements which reflected cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, or cultural blindness. The school leadership has carefully navigated staff members through a curriculum of cultural competency and related discussions that provide the foundation for the culturally responsive practices identified in the other six categories.

**Research Questions**

Four research questions provided direction for both the design and analysis of data collected in this study. The following section summarizes the responses for each question based on the study findings.
Research Question 1: Are culturally responsive strategies employed in a school that is closing achievement gaps? Research Question 2: If so, which strategies are utilized? To respond to these questions, the researcher reviewed the characteristics of culturally responsive practices in each of the categories that were derived from the literature review. Several characteristics were evidenced during the study and specific strategies documented through observations, interviews, and the focus groups.

Melody Middle School had culturally responsive practices in place. The leaders openly celebrated diversity and created a welcoming environment by posting culturally diverse pictures in the hallways and classrooms. Leaders publicly mapped the ethnic background of students and lined the hallways with flags from the various cultures represented. The website touted diversity as their strength. Leadership assisted and supported staff in confronting barriers of achievement for students of color.

Staff discussed academic obstacles in meetings and disaggregated student data by racial subgroup. Enrichment and remediation topics challenged advanced students and reinforced skills for struggling students.

Active cultural informants were positioned in all stakeholder groups. Student leadership groups provided cultural perspectives to staff that supervised the groups. Parent leadership groups informed teachers and staff of cultural nuances and lent their perspective on observations in the classroom and around the school. Teachers of diverse background were strategically hired.

Leadership rallied staff around a moral purpose of equitable services and treatment for all children. The principal framed the initiative for the staff and parents around a higher purpose. Administrators talked about their roles as “warriors.” They saw
themselves as leading the charge in a war against the maintenance of social class privileges that have claimed the livelihood of millions of minority children.

The Melody leadership team sought to eliminate bias and latent prejudices with the intentional development of cultural competency skills. Staff watched videos, conducted book studies, utilized outside consultants, and discussed race in a variety of contexts. Table 13 shows the culturally responsive leadership practices that were documented at Melody Middle School.

Table 13. Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Leadership from the Literature Review</th>
<th>Seen in Observations</th>
<th>Interview Conversations</th>
<th>Focus Group Discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate diversity in a warm and welcoming environment.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist and support teachers in confronting barriers to achievement for students of color.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain a network of cultural informants.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge the status quo and enforce high expectations for all students.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilize staff around a higher moral purpose.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek to eliminate bias and preconceived assumptions about people of color.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on the strategies documented through observations, interviews, and focus groups, Melody Middle School demonstrated all characteristics of culturally responsive leadership.

Culturally respectful home and family connections were evidenced at Melody. Parents at Melody learned how to develop biculturally. They were privy to the same type of discussions on race, equity, bias, and privilege in their meetings as staff. The Hispanic and Black parents organized their own community conferences. Messages that communicated norms and values of various cultures in the community were observed around the school. Acceptable behaviors and expectations were taught during the two-week session given at the beginning of each school year.

Hispanic parents used Melody as a community resource and were involved in the school. Parents used the computers after school to access information about their children. Parents walked the hallways as monitors. They conducted walk-throughs of classrooms and gave feedback to teachers. They organized events such as major community conferences, carnivals, and holiday fairs. They attended field trips and coordinate fundraisers. They reviewed achievement data by subgroups and monitored overall student progress. Parent schedules were accommodated by teachers meeting with them early, late, or at local restaurants if requested. Table 14 summarizes the culturally responsive practices seen in the area of parent and home connections.
Table 14. Culturally Responsive Parent/Home Connections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Parent/Home Connections</th>
<th>Seen in Observations</th>
<th>Discussed in Interviews</th>
<th>Discussed in Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents and students learn how to develop biculturally.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School helps parents and students learn how to navigate and advocate in educational systems.</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents are involved in the school in ways they feel are important and accommodates their lifestyles and cultures.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the strategies documented through observations, interviews, and focus groups, Melody Middle School demonstrated characteristics of culturally respectful home and family connections.

Responsive pedagogy was documented in classrooms. Both oral language and vocabulary development strategies were used in three classrooms. Students orally demonstrate their learning. There were word walls and vocabulary lists. Varied wait times allowed students with limited vocabulary to think carefully before they responded to questions. Active engagement strategies such as cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, student research projects, technology integration, and academic competitions were noted. Rigorous thinking, reasoning, and evaluative skills were evidenced. Cultural
knowledge is integrated into the curriculum during observations. Table 15 summarizes the culturally responsive practices seen in the area of teaching.

**Table 15. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Responsive Teaching</th>
<th>Seen in Observations</th>
<th>Discussed in Interviews</th>
<th>Discussed in Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Builds the background knowledge of students.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaches and reinforces oral language development for English language learners and students with limited vocabulary development.</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides active engagement.</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examines multicultural perspectives and is enhanced with cultural knowledge.</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges students with rigorous thinking, reasoning, and evaluative skills</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the strategies documented through observations, interviews, and focus groups, Melody Middle School demonstrated characteristics of culturally responsive teaching.

The learning environment at Melody was culturally responsive. People felt cared for. The staff openly shared expressions of love and caring toward each other. There was a culture of achievement with student writing awards and impromptu acknowledgements for academic accomplishments in the hallway. Messages in the hallways and classrooms
supported high expectations. Table 16 summarizes the culturally responsive practices noted in the learning environment.

**Table 16. Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Learning Environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Learning Environment</th>
<th>Seen During Observations</th>
<th>Discussed in Interviews</th>
<th>Discussed in Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates caring.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote achievement and communicate high expectations for all students.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrates diversity in a warm and welcoming environment.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the strategies documented through observations, interviews, and focus groups, Melody Middle School demonstrated characteristics of a culturally responsive learning environment.

Culturally responsive student management is sparse at Melody. There was a social skills curriculum that was taught during the first two weeks of school. There were three full-time deans with extensive training in cultural competency and evaluative responsibilities to reinforce core values in classrooms. There was a discipline equity committee that reviewed the data on student behavior regularly. Table 17 demonstrates the culturally responsive practices distinguished in the area of student management.
Table 17. Culturally Responsive Student Management Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Student Management</th>
<th>Seen During Observations</th>
<th>Discussed in Interviews</th>
<th>Discussed in Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff understands cultural mores of student behaviors.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are taught character and social skills.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizes structure to help students connect their actions with the impact it has on others and the community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensures fair, equitable, and respectful treatment of all students.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the strategies documented through observations, interviews, and focus groups, Melody Middle School did not fully demonstrate characteristics of culturally responsive student management.

Responsive Belief Systems

Responsive beliefs were present at Melody. Staff believe in the importance of culture in the educational process, and they demonstrated a firm belief they can make a difference in the educational experience of children. Teachers found unique ways to celebrate diversity in their classrooms. Table 18 shows the characteristics of culturally responsive belief systems at Melody Middle School.
Table 18. Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Belief Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Belief Systems</th>
<th>Seen During Observations</th>
<th>Discussed in Interviews</th>
<th>Discussed in Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff believes that culture impacts the educational process.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff believes talking about race, assumptions, and bias is important.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff believes that they bear the responsibility for helping students learn.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the strategies documented through observations, interviews, and focus groups, Melody Middle School demonstrated characteristics of culturally responsive belief systems.

**Cultural Competency**

Staff members were provided professional development designed to build their understanding of culture and race and their influence in educational systems. Topics such as equity, bias, privilege, power, prejudice, assumptions, beliefs, and the influence of racial labeling were discussed openly and frequently amongst all stakeholders. Staff move through a continuum of knowledge at their own pace until hopefully they arrive to a state in which they are comfortable discussing cultural differences, can operate effectively in multicultural settings, and support others that have not yet learned how to...
do this. Table 19 shows the characteristics of building cultural competency found at Melody Middle School through the data sources.

Table 19. Characteristics of Building Cultural Competency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Culturally Competency</th>
<th>Seen During Observations</th>
<th>Discussed in Interviews</th>
<th>Discussed in Focus Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff are provided professional development designed to build their understanding of culture and race and their influence in educational systems.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff educate less informed individuals about cultural differences.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff seek out knowledge about diverse cultures and develop skills to interact in diverse environments.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff feel comfortable interacting with others in multicultural settings.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the strategies documented through observations, interviews, and focus groups, Melody Middle School demonstrated characteristics of cultural competency.

Research Question 2: How do teachers and school leaders perceive the importance of culturally responsive practices in contributing to closing an achievement gap? Staff attributed the ability of the school to close the achievement gap to two things. One aspect was the leadership in the building and the second quality was the conversations about race that framed the way they focused on the achievement gap. The principal’s vision for closing the achievement gap and attaining academic equity for all
children was well known. Staff believed in that vision and appreciated her efforts in engaging them in the process to make it happen.

Staff attributed their success toward closing an achievement gap to ongoing conversations about race that helped them focus on the work and provide a common framework for school improvement decisions. They believe it was this element of discussing race and culture that makes their educational program stronger.

Based on the data from the focus groups and the interviews, staff did not attribute their ability to close the achievement gap to culturally responsive practices as the researcher predicted. They saw culturally responsive practices as important but the leadership of the practices mattered more importantly. The review of data based on subgroups kept their attention laser focused on student progress.

Research Question 3: What are the belief systems of teachers and school leaders in a school closing the achievement gap and how did they acquire them? Staff believed that culture affects the educational process and enhances the teaching process with cultural knowledge that is integral to increasing student performance academically. They believed that talking about race, culture, bias, equity or privilege were important ways to understand people better. Staff believed that they bore the responsibility for the quality of learning students experienced in their care.

There were some beliefs shared that were outside of the culturally responsive belief system. Two participants shared that they did not believe in the importance of discussing race and were not convinced that culture was important in the educational process. They were tired of focusing on it. They indicated there were others that shared that view. They did not name how many.
The second part of this research question probed discussants on how they acquired their beliefs. The participants laid claim to the numerous professional development opportunities provided through the district and the school that built their cultural competency and uncovered their hidden biases. Several participants shared stories of their cultural competency transformations that occurred as a result of their childhood experiences. They grew up in homes where their parents exhibited open acceptance of other cultures and encouraged them in multicultural experiences.

The two participants that shared their disbelief in the importance of culture in schooling and felt race discussions were not essential were veteran teachers with more than 20 years of experience, much of it at Melody Middle School. They based their beliefs on their past experiences and previous training in effective instruction and schooling practices.

**Summary of Findings**

This chapter reported the findings from observations, interviews, and focus groups at Melody Middle School. Melody evidenced culturally responsive practices in six fundamental areas of school practices: pedagogy, learning environment, collective beliefs, home and family connection, cultural competency and leadership. Cultural competency emerged as integral to the school program and distinct practices drawn from the research were evidenced. It proved to work hand in hand with collective beliefs rather than embedded within them.

Teachers did not attribute their success in seeing the achievement gap decrease to the culturally responsive practices rather they pointed to strong building leadership and teacher efficacy. Staff’s collective beliefs center on the importance of race discussions
and building cultural competency through professional development. They exhibited strong beliefs in collective teacher efficacy as well.
CHAPTER

V. DISCUSSION

This chapter summarizes and interprets the findings from the observations, interviews, and focus group data in the study. First, the findings are discussed followed by their relationship to the conceptual framework used in the study. A different framework is proposed based on the research findings. Furthermore, recommendations for educators are discussed followed by limitations of the study and implications for future research.

The story of Melody Middle School is a familiar one repeated in schools across America. A school in Any Town, USA, with a homogeneous student population begins to notice an intriguing trend. Students from different cultures are increasingly enrolling in the school, and the student demographics begin to shift the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic makeup of the school population. The new students bring novel ways of speaking, perhaps in another language. They bring different ways of being, different holidays observed, and different values are embraced. They are in fact, just different.

One of five scenarios occurs in the aftermath. In scenario one, the staff punishes the difference insisting students adopt the prevailing culture. In scenario two, staff ignores the differences and does not do anything. In scenario three, staff acknowledges the differences but pretends they do not see them. In scenario four, the staff acknowledges differences, celebrates the differences, and learns more about difference. For scenario five, the staff acknowledges the differences, adapts their practices to accommodate difference, and teaches others how to effectively succeed in all areas of the school and in life because of, rather than in spite of, the differences. The school choosing
the fifth option-- to acknowledge, adapt, accommodate, advocate, and celebrate -- is the school capable of increasing achievement for students of difference (Cummins, 1997; Gay, 2000; Haycock, 2006; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002b; Murrell, 2007).

The school dangling its policies and practices between punishment and “colorblind” tactics is the school in which students of difference flounder (Cooper, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner & 2007; Murrell, 2007; Tate, 1997). Schools suspended at the level of celebration and perpetual planning for social justice are schools where achievement for students of difference will likely remain stagnant. Taylor and Whittaker (2003) state, “The underachievement of diverse students has been attributed, in part, to a traditional school curriculum that has failed to meet the needs of too many students from culturally and linguistically diverse groups” (p. 26).

Melody Middle School is somewhere between four (cultural pre-competence) and five (cultural competence) in terms of its response. Melody does not punish students for difference, ignore differences, or pretend they don’t exist. They actively celebrate cultural differences with culture parties, international flags, pictures of diverse families, and a map demonstrating the variety of heritages present at the school. They have created liberating structures such as parents organizing educational conferences and students completing service-learning projects. Their teaching practices are transforming with the integration of culture into the curriculum and consistent monitoring of students by subgroups. Teachers, students, and parents explore issues of equity in staff meetings, parent meetings, professional development meetings, and teacher induction. Cultural history, power, privilege, and social justice are content for discussions at school.
At the beginning of this study, I set out to determine which culturally responsive practices were in place in a school closing the achievement gap. The results of the study confirmed the use of CRP (culturally responsive practices) in almost every category of school practice. In the next section, I will discuss what these findings mean for schools endeavoring to close an achievement gap.

**Culturally Responsive Practices at Melody Middle School**

Academic achievement gaps are the result of historically perpetuated racial and ethnic bias and beliefs about students of color. These gaps can only be narrowed or eliminated by both making insidious underlying beliefs transparent and creating interventions in schools that accommodate the influence of culture during the learning process (Dovidio, 2009). Culturally responsive practices, when implemented school wide, can mitigate historically derived socioeconomic and educational disparities by empowering, rather than repressing the voices of all stakeholders. By implementing culturally responsive practices in most areas of the school program--leadership, learning environment, home and family connections and pedagogy--Melody is creating an environment in which power and status is shared amongst all stakeholders. They have crafted liberating structures which are redefining the traditional roles of student, parent, teacher, and leader.

Melody’s approach to closing achievement gaps looks beyond the symptoms of academic failure and addresses the root causes of academic shortcomings. This is due in part to the commitment on the part of the leadership and staff to confront rather than ignore the elephant in the achievement gap room: race and the inimitable policies, practices, and assumptions which have historically privileged some while dominating
others. The first finding from this study rests in the category of culturally responsive leadership.

**Leadership.**

The importance of courageous leadership is well documented in the research (Andrews, 2007; Auerbach, 2009; Bellamy et al., 2003; Blackmore, 2009; Cooper, 2009; Davis, 2002; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Horsford, 2010; Horsford, Grossland, & Gunn, 2011; Howley et al., 2009; Jackson, 2005; Johnson, 2007; López et al., 2006; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Marzano, 2005; Orr et al., 2008; Rosette, 2008; Shelton, 1997). It also emerged as a finding in this study. Culturally responsive leadership is essential to equity schooling (López, 2006, p. 556). Interestingly enough, teachers at Melody saw the leadership in the building as more critical to their work in narrowing the achievement gap than the classroom practices they were using. At Melody, the leadership team created a space where people were free to be their cultural selves. They accomplished this in part through a number of discrete actions.

Leadership challenged and rejected racism and other forms of discrimination. They modeled affirmations of pluralism. The leadership team designed time and spaces for knowledge acquisition, reflection, and action for social change. They advocated for the democratic principles of social justice. In essence, leadership supported the staff in evolution of their ingenuous selves (Cooper, 2009). Davis (2002) notes,

The goal of culturally responsive leadership is to devise mechanisms and environments for others to experience the freedom to become their best selves. (Davis, 2002 p. 10 - 11)
This is all any one of us desires innately – the ability to be ourselves inclusive of cultural nuances and an environment that accommodates rather than restricts our ability to do so fully. Leaders at Melody worked to create a warm and welcoming environment in which an individual’s heritage was celebrated in the physical and emotional environments. The hallways and classrooms announced acceptance of difference from the moment one walked through the door. Leadership set the tone academically, behaviorally, and environmentally.

In the absence of effective leadership capable of managing a comprehensive initiative such as fostering inclusion and acceptance, many schools are floundering despite the influx of significant school improvement grant dollars. They are endeavoring to reform without addressing all of the underlying assumptions and bias that have impeded sustained progress for the past 50 years (Scott, 2011). Only talking about race and implementing strategies that consciously promote cultural acceptance will improve teachers’ unexamined beliefs about children of color that underlies their classroom behaviors toward them (Foster, 2009, Garrett, 2009, Kopkowski, 2006, Singleton, 2006).

To underscore the importance of this approach, several previous researchers have validated the gravity of this action as critical to the school improvement process. When Theoharris (2010) studied six successful principals that demonstrated success with students from varied racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, ability, and cultural backgrounds, he documented strategies they used in their schools. One of the strategies noted was the importance of addressing the issue of race. All six principals spent time with their staff discussing and learning about race. Jackson (2005) states, “There are many urban districts headed in the right direction. Few have met the twin missions of improved student
learning for all students and closing the achievement gaps (Jackson, 2005 p.202). The elimination or narrowing of the achievement gap rests with leaders’ ability to courageously confront its roots. Clearly leadership is critical in creating the appropriate environment for inclusive, diverse school communities. Parents also share a vital role as discussed in the next section.

Parent/Home Connections.

The most salient finding in this category is the revelation that self-segregation is the new liberation. The segregation of student and parent leadership groups seemed in conflict with the goals of inclusion and multiculturalism initially. It was a difficult to understand the rationale. Nieto (2004) offered an enlightening perspective:

We need to distinguish between segregation of different kinds. The segregation that is imposed by a dominant group is far different from the self-segregation demanded by a subordinated group that sees through the persistent racism hidden behind the veneer of equality in integrated settings. (p.160)

Given this insight, segregation may not be the monster it has been thought to be. When parents or students or teachers self-segregate by choice and allow other members of any race to participate by choice, it appears, from this study, it can create a comfortable environment where members get their needs met. There are, after all, historically Black colleges and universities open to any student that chooses to attend, yet its school program serves the needs of its population.

The important learning from Melody is the importance of allowing parents and families to determine how groups are formed rather than having the school impose or
enforce the membership of groups. Leadership may well establish the work that needs to occur, the goals that need to be accomplished, and the priorities to be addressed. But parents and families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, can formulate how to execute the work. With the appropriate resources, they can move the work uniquely forward. If during the process it appears that the groups are segregating by status, race, ethnicity or language, the only salient question is whether this arrangement moves the school closer or further from the established goals.

In Sonia Nieto’s (2004) continuum on multicultural education there are varying levels of implementation of a multicultural program. Implementation ranges from education to tolerance, to acceptance, to respect, to affirmation, to solidarity, and finally to critique. Melody Middle School has progressed beyond the fundamental levels of implementation of a program to more advanced levels of affirmation, solidarity, and critique based upon the research study. Clearly students, parents, and staff feel affirmed at Melody Middle School. Parents and students are developing biculturally through a well-articulated professional development program that includes conversations about race.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.**

The most significant findings in this category were three areas of instructional practices confirmed as regular practice in the school. They were analyzing data, evaluation of instruction, and integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum. I will discuss each practice separately.

The staff at Melody regularly disaggregated student assessments by racial ethnicity to determine the extent to which subgroups progress. When academic
performance gaps were identified, the staff discussed the rationale for the gap and structured specific interventions to close the achievement gaps. This type of scrutiny of instructional and assessment practices is required for closing an achievement gap because it is not the act of teaching itself that increases the achievement of students. Rather, it is the learning results demonstrated through regular academic assessments that feeds the continual management of eliminating academic gaps (Lubienski, 2007, p. 277).

The evaluation of instruction is not typically seen as an instructional strategy, however Melody’s approach to evaluating instruction is atypical. Staff members receive focused feedback on their pedagogical practices from administrators, fellow teachers, and parents. While parents may not possess the depth of knowledge of appropriate pedagogical approaches, they can clearly identify teacher behaviors that promote learning, lessons that are engaging, and expectations that are challenging. In addition, staff members receive feedback on classroom behaviors that may not surface for them at a cognitive level such as which kinds of students are called upon for response and the language and tone used with all students. This type of ongoing feedback from a variety of sources is deemed an instructional support to teachers. About half of the interview participants identified evaluation of instruction as an instructional strategy that supported their success in addressing the achievement gap.

Although, the staff spoke of integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum and instruction, there were few instances in which the researcher saw uniform practices across the school. It may speak to a more individualized, differentiated approach to teaching or it may speak to additional professional development needed in how to integrate culture more fluently. One teacher discussed her desire for additional time to
find connections in the curriculum. This should be a priority item addressed in the near future to ensure the integration of culture occurs more frequently.

**Culturally Responsive Learning Environment.**

The salient finding in this category is the importance of schools creating a “nest” where people can be nurtured and accepted. Without people feeling comfortable enough to express their emotions or structures to wrestle through their conflicts, race talk comes to a screeching halt (Nieto, 2008). Talking about race, culture, ethnicity, privilege, and prejudice is difficult (Valenzuela, 2008). Endeavoring to do so within an emotionally toxic working environment is painfully problematic. The work of transforming schools into culturally responsive havens begins with the hard work of creating an environment conducive for authentic and courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Melody Middle School tackled this challenge at the start of their work. The sense of caring for each other is a predominant presence in personal interactions at Melody Middle School which contributes to high teacher retention. Students ask teachers about their families. The principal greets parents and teachers with hugs and bakes cakes and pies for the staff. The elaborate send-off of retiring teachers was touching and emotional. It is only within this kind of caring environment one could foster the kind of trust needed to have conversations about race and build cultural competency (Pollock, 2008).

**Culturally Competency.**

Cultural competency emerged as a finding in this study although it was not part of the original framework. It surprisingly proved to be the most pervasive practice at Melody. Teachers discussed issues of race, power, privilege, and equity with relative ease in mixed race groups, and it was apparent these kinds of discussions occurred with
frequency. The discussions occurred at leadership team meetings, staff meetings, grade-level meetings, parent meetings, and in individual conversations between staff. It was not too unexpected when an analysis of staff remarks in the interviews and focus groups revealed most staff members were operating on the higher end of a continuum of cultural competency.

Few respondents expressed value in a belief of colorblindness. If this group was entirely representative of the teaching staff, it would suggest that an impressive percentage of the staff have the cultural and pedagogical skills to work with diverse students. Banks (2001) noted that individuals who adopt color- and culture-blind ideologies believe they can overcome racism by ignoring it. Moreover, color-blind and culture-blind teachers often do not possess the racial and cultural knowledge necessary to be successful with highly diverse students (J Banks et al., 2001). This was not the case at Melody. Most staff expressed values representative of cultural pre-competence, cultural competency, or cultural proficiency.

The most important finding in this category was understanding how schools can reconstruct their culture through transformational professional development. A common knowledge base such as cultural competency is acquired along a continuum and each person evolves consistent with their experiences. Melody Middle School shaped these experiences through professional development and intentional, capacity-building conversations about race (Geron, 2002; Kelly, 2008; Lindsey et al., 2003). What made this strategy particularly powerful and innovative was Melody’s ability to include every stakeholder in this process of learning. Staff members learned from an outside consultant. Teachers of color taught their peers about their culture. Administrators
supported staff in mastering conversations with parents of color by their presence during phone calls. Parents reviewed strategies for working with them with staff members. Community and parent members educated the community at large on cultural issues through annual educational conferences. Each constituent laid claim to their role in transforming the culture and advancing the cultural competency of the school community. Every stakeholder was integral in the process of learning about culture and differences.

Furthermore, cultural competency mediated beliefs staff held prior to their experiences at Melody. This level of competency guided staff along the continuum of cultural competency through thoughtful staff development opportunities. This intentional reform focus may have been the most compelling method for transforming the school and readying it for effectual achievement gap management. Increasing minority achievement and increasing staff’s cultural competency appear to be inseparable actions.

Cultural competency is an essential skill for every teacher regardless of the context in which they are operating (Kelly, 2008). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2040, White, non-Hispanics are going to account for less than half of the school-aged population. The Hispanic school-aged population is predicted to increase by 64% over the next 20 years. The proportion of the school-aged, Asian, non-Hispanic population is projected at 6.6% by 2025. School-aged African-Americans and Native American populations are predicted to remain stable (Smith, 2009).

The challenge yet lies in the ability of the school to maintain unwavering focus on integrating the knowledge of cultural competency into every aspect of school reform and transformation. The fact that most staff did not identify the integration of culturally
relevant content into the curriculum as a regular practice suggests conflicting time pressures to plan integral content, misalignment with the district approved curriculum, or lack of professional development in the area of culturally responsive resources.

With an increasingly more diverse school population, Melody presents a visionary approach for organizing school and is building the capacity of teachers to meet the future. Multicultural diverse public schools in rural America, urban cities, and small towns alike are the future. And, Melody Middle School is building the capacity of its staff to be ready.

**Culturally Responsive Student Management.**

The finding in this category is the importance of ensuring staff’s knowledge and understanding about individual differences translates to school-wide policies on student management. Complete reform should address the integration of culturally responsive practices in the area of discipline, classroom management, and incentivized motivation systems. It is not enough to empower students academically if you fail to empower them behaviorally. It is unfair to make claims of acceptance of individuals in one respect and ignore who they are in other respects. Without integrating this knowledge into student management systems, students will flounder academically (Monroe, 2005).

The staff is only beginning to implement culturally responsive student management strategies. An equity group meets regularly to evaluate discipline data but students are still sitting in the deans’ offices for minor infractions such as dress code violations. For example, students are missing precious instructional time for lack of wearing a belt. This matter could be best handled quickly within the classroom. Belts cost a small amount compared to instructional time with teachers.
It seems the knowledge on cultural competency at Melody has not married with an understanding of student behavior. African American students seldom share the cultural frameworks of their teachers, therefore the overrepresentation of Black students on measures of school discipline may be a function of cultural mismatches (Monroe, 2005). Rothstein (2008) notes every choice a teacher makes in the classroom reflects a cultural perspective. Knowledge of cultural backgrounds is essential in developing caring relationships with students and is needed to effectively interact with both students and their families.

To summarize, the culturally responsive practices in place at Melody were implemented to varying degrees. The scope of the study did not encompass measuring the quality of the implementation but merely to substantiate their existence. Yet, it is important to recognize that even merely their existence diminishes the complex interactions between race and class that so often occurs in schools in which race, ethnicity, and culture are otherwise ignored or negated.

**Teachers Shared Beliefs**

With a regular focus on race discussions, there are important shared beliefs amongst the teaching staff. Shared beliefs are critical enough that staff chooses to wrestle through difficult discussions unearthing personal assumptions and bias. In Scribner and Reyes’s (1999) framework for high performing Hispanic students, they discuss the importance of beliefs and values as part of the development of the school culture. They stress the importance of exhuming beliefs and assumptions and making expectations explicit for everyone to understand.
Melody Middle School has beliefs and values, but they do not seem to be something the staff discusses with each other. When faced with questions about individual or school beliefs, participants often deferred to the principal, articulating her values and beliefs. While it is important for the leader to clarify and live his values, it is equally important for staff to be able to do those themselves.

The teaching staff held a shared belief in the individual and collective instructional efficacy of themselves and their peers. The participants believe they can genuinely make a difference in whether students choose to learn in their classrooms. They are committed to ensuring each student’s success and they feel empowered to do so.

The teaching staff shared beliefs on the importance of discussing race and their levels of efficacy could be traced to past experiences and professional development. Some teachers had previous experiences which informed their predispositions toward race, however, most felt like the experience at Melody was transformational for them culturally. The professional development experiences enriched their knowledge base and expanded their thinking. Melody Middle School proved the importance of professional development in not only fostering professional practice in the classroom but in creating a culture and helping people shift examine beliefs.

**Culturally Responsive Practices: Research Findings Similarities and Differences**

The findings from the study at Melody Middle School are aligned to findings from other researchers in many areas. Likewise, some findings vary vastly from similar research. This section will discuss how the findings from Melody Middle School are both similar and different from other research in the area of culturally responsive practices.
Singleton and Linton (2006) underscore the importance of school leaders modeling and facilitating discussions on race, equity, privilege, and bias. They recommend leaders talk about it in staff meetings, parent meetings, student leadership meetings, leadership team meetings, and staff development. While some staff members at Melody confess they are fatigued by the content, leadership should relentlessly pursue the goal of equity by leading courageous conversations on race and pursuing the goal of a diverse staff. Accordingly, the leadership at Melody relentlessly examines issues of race, bias, and social justice, even when some staff resists their efforts. Resistance to varying degrees is to be expected as part of managing change.

Melody’s principal is a cultural agent as defined by Cooper (2009). In the midst of demographic change, cultural agents are “educators armed with the knowledge, strategies, support, and courage to make curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships culturally responsive. This partly entails educational leaders’ rejecting ideologies and practices steeped in blatantly biased or colorblind traditions to transform schools (p.696).” The Melody principal has assumed this role as she leads a cause of social justice. She exhibits a transformative leadership style as demonstrated by her process of continual self-engagement, analyzing the school, and confronting inequity regularly. Principals leading whole-school reform with culturally responsive practices require a transformational leadership style inclusive of a Herculean tenacity to act as cultural agent. After five years, the principal has gained critical mass from her followers, but the enormous task ahead of her suggests it will take much longer to achieve complete adoption of all areas of culturally responsive practices. Both the principal and her
administrative staff question how they can endure under the fatigue of the task. Distributing leadership responsibilities is one approach they have taken.

Leadership is developed on all levels at Melody. Student leadership groups are organized to learn about cultural heritage, ethnicity, and leadership development. African American males are taught the principles of manhood through the leadership of other Black males. Cummins (1997) asserts that schools transform society by empowering minority students and by transforming and empowering all stakeholders.

The staff readily attributes the positive school climate, growth in cultural competency, and student progress in academics to the leadership in the building. These characteristics are consistent with the literature for culturally responsive leadership. Although Madsen and Mabokela’s (2002) study focused on African American principals, the authors’ recommendations for leadership in diverse schools are salient. They note the importance of leaders of diverse groups of teachers and students being knowledgeable about school participants' ethnic and cultural differences to ensure an inclusive school. Three leadership actions are recommended when leading diverse schools: image management, relationship development, and team coordination and deployment. Leadership is a process of social influence whereby the leader influences others to work toward a collective goal. The perceptions of the leader and the followers depend in part on the credibility of the leader so the leader manages their image. The principal at Melody understands her students, parents, and community. She knows the cultural nuances and works to connect stakeholders through the attainment of collective goals. She is always connecting stakeholders. She discussed the parent meeting at the staff meeting. She planned the parent meeting at the leadership team meeting. She worked
tirelessly to foster relationships and connect and deploy members of her team for managing school goals. These connecting behaviors serve to manage her image, leverage her credibility, and create a culturally responsive learning environment.

In Maddahian and Bird’s (2004), framework for culturally relevant and responsible education, the domain of equitable and relevant educational opportunities and resources denotes the characteristics of culturally relevant environments. It has many of the same characteristics as those evidenced at Melody. One characteristic is the school environment, classroom materials, and décor reflect the diversity in the school. Another trait is authentic content from a variety of cultures is available. A third characteristic is that there are advanced classes and resources for students. The fourth trait is ongoing, onsite professional development for staff in culturally responsive practices. While the researcher did not see an abundance of authentic content from various cultures, there was evidence that the culture was being integrated into lessons in a few classes observed.

What remains most impressive about the learning environment at Melody is the openness with which staff discusses and talks about race in mixed-race groups. This ability to build cultural competency together as a school community is commendable. It created an environment of relative transparency that allowed teachers to take risks in their classroom practices.

Belifore (2005) discussed a pedagogy of risk taking needed for poor urban schools endeavoring to close achievement gaps. He notes good teaching and accountability resulted in increases in reading. Raised teacher expectations, assessment-driven, small-class grouping, and active student learning enhanced with cultural knowledge provide a classroom environment that is both supportive and challenging.
There were scattered instances of the curriculum being enhanced with cultural meaning at Melody. With a predominance of literature on culturally responsive pedagogy reinforcing the importance and distinction of integrating culturally relevant curriculum, the observations with this practices should have been more pronounced. Instead, there were few actual sightings of this occurring. This suggests while Melody Middle may have culturally responsive pedagogy in some classes, it is not pervasive.

Other evidence provided additional support. There were few instructional strategies being implemented school wide. At the math meeting, the discussion on effective strategies was tabled until later. It is not unusual for teachers to struggle with translating data from student assessment results into appropriate strategies to address them, however, in a culturally responsive school these discussions should occur frequently. The consistent focus on effective instructional practices is one way schools organize for social justice.

Cooper (2009) provides several examples of how schools might look when organized for social justice. He recommended for school leaders to collaborate with staff to co-create family literacy programs, provide input on substantive reform initiatives, and include professional learning communities guided by a critical multicultural curriculum. He further stated that organization for social justice includes forging partnerships with the schools contributing time and monetary resources which help to support mentoring programs for children from low-income families (Cooper, 2009). Some of these activities are occurring at Melody. Parents help write the annual school improvement plan. They are included in professional discussions about race, equity, and privilege, and some are
facilitated by the parents themselves. Parents at Melody are empowered by the school leaders, which is an important practice in a culturally responsive school.

Cooper (2009) notes that leaders for social justice use their positional power to empower various stakeholders, including marginalized students and families. Through collaborative efforts, they develop inclusive governing structures and communities. Tillman further clarifies that such parent leadership is activist oriented and morally transformative (Tillman, 2002).

The parents clearly see the leadership at Melody as transformative. They are mobilized to fight for social justice by talking to teachers about how to work with families of color, how to organize community events with topics of interest to parents of color, and how to facilitate active discussion on social and political inequity.

Parents volunteer to walk the halls, attend field trips, or organize fundraisers. They also peruse classrooms to observe how students are being treated or to evaluate levels of student engagement. Parents are empowered in ways this researcher has seldom seen. This dynamic changes the power relationships between teachers and parents at Melody. All stakeholders share power for achievement of results.

Cummins (1997) emphasizes the importance of eliminating power imbalances when working with minority students and parents. When one looks at the achievement gap from an international perspective, it becomes apparent that power and status relations between minority and majority groups exert a major influence on school performance. He further states that the major reason why previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful is the relationships between teachers, students, schools, and communities have remained essentially unchanged (Cummins, 1997). He further argues
that educators need to re-examine their relationships with minority parents and communities and redesign new ways of working together.

According to Lisa Delpit (1997), power relationships are so critical they constitute a means of transforming schools. She described unspoken rules and traditions that can result in alienation and miscommunication. Those with the greatest power are frequently least aware of its existence while those with less power are often most aware they do not have it.

The nontraditional approach to involving parents in organizing the work of schools, such as educational conferences for the community, is further supported by Auerbach (2009). In his qualitative study of four culturally responsive school leaders, the administrators' organized an annual conference with elected officials, "house meetings" in classrooms, and home visits. School leaders actively pursued family engagement as part of a broader moral commitment to social justice and educational equity. They shaped parent-related activities to the needs of their particular communities (Auerbach, 2009). This was similar to the African American parents at Melody who were intensely focused on preventing the failure of Black males at the school. They had good reason to be concerned.

Melody was lacking in its approach to culturally responsive student management and the finding in this category suggested that without ongoing professional development and critique of its disciplinary policies in this area, some students would not experience academic success. To be culturally responsive in this practice Melody teachers should exercise a sociocultural consciousness to their practices in discipline (Ford & Kea, 2009). They should be able to discuss the distinction between behavior which is culturally based
and behavior which is meant to be disruptive. Behavior as simple as challenging ideas can be thought to be confrontational or verbally acute depending upon a person’s cultural perceptions.

School data from Melody demonstrated discipline referrals for African American males are higher than other subgroups, not unlike many secondary schools with diverse populations. Murrell (2007) states, “Black and Latino students, who constitute the majority of students in virtually every urban school system, are disproportionately expelled, suspended, adjudicated as criminals in zero-tolerance expulsions, and relegated to special education programs (p.4).” Moreover, in an analysis of school disciplinary data, Skiba, (2001) reported a differential pattern of treatment, originating at the classroom level, whereas African American students were referred to the office for infractions more subjective in interpretation (Skiba & Noam, 2001).

Melody was merely following a pattern of discriminate judgment evidenced nationally (Monroe, 2005). Likewise known as the discipline gap, racial and ethnic disparities are present in virtually every major school system across the United States. The overrepresentation of Black students on measures of school discipline are due, in part, to cultural mismatches in the classroom (Monroe, 2005).

Teachers at Melody need to devote the same kind of commitment and skills to understanding student behavior as they have to understanding student language and other markers of cultural competency. As agents of change in the battle for social justice, their weapons must bear the ability to attack inequity in disciplinary practices or all other efforts in the classroom are futile. There is still much work to do in this area at Melody.
In summation, the findings from the study at Melody Middle School embody more similarities than differences to other research in culturally responsive practices (Banks & Banks, 2001; Fiedler et al., 2008; Howley et al., 2009; Johnson, 2007; Maddahian & Bird, 2004; White-Hood, 2007; Andrews, 2007, p.555). There were no divergent findings or outliers that lay outside of the body of research on culturally responsive practices. How this study contributes to the work on culturally responsive practices in schools is the unique finding of effective segregation practices in a successful school, the findings of discrete characteristics of culturally responsive practices in most aspects of schooling, and a conceptual framework that demonstrates the relationships between the concepts.

**The Conceptual Framework**

The first conceptual framework proposed in Chapter II became inconsistent with the emerging findings of the study revealed in Chapter IV. One of the difficulties with the first conceptual framework became its linear design which suggested the culturally responsive categories of practice were prioritized. To the contrary, all of the categories are equally important (Balcazar et al., 2009; Boyd & Correa, 2005; Cooper, 2009) and a new framework was needed to exhibit this.

The second inconsistency in the original framework was in the area of shared beliefs. Beliefs are important in a school. They are ever present and influence every educational decision, however, it was not a definitive category of school practice such as the other concepts represented in the framework. The framework itself was embedded in a set of established beliefs about all children, but beliefs are ever evolving on a continuum of emotional readiness that seemed inconsistent with the concrete,
manageable skills, and behaviors that could be developed in categories like leadership and student management. In addition, the original framework also needed adaptation to represent the new knowledge gained as a result of the study. It is presented again in its original form in Table 20.

**Table 20. Culturally Responsive School Practices Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culturally Responsive School Practices Framework</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Culturally Responsive Leadership</td>
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<td>2. Respectful Home/Family Connection</td>
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<td>3. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy</td>
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<td>4. Culturally Responsive Learning Environment</td>
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<td>5. Culturally Responsive Student Management</td>
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<td>6. Responsive Shared Beliefs</td>
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Nieto (2004) defined culturally responsive practices as more than a single set of strategies but rather as an approach to school reform. I needed a new way to conceptualize the relationships between the practices that was non-linear and interactive. Therefore, I was compelled to modify the framework accordingly. The original framework failed to explain the relationship of the practices to an ultimate goal of increased student achievement. That imperfection in its design plagued me.

Increased student achievement has to be the goal of any school reform effort or any practice introduced in schools. Otherwise, it is a futile waste of time. The relationships between the practices and an achievement outcome became clear during the course of the study. While student achievement is the goal of most schools, many school
leaders fail to sustain increased levels of achievement for students of color over time. Their approach to increasing achievement resembles the implementation of a laundry list of effective practices similar to the first conceptual framework introduced in this study. What is now clear to me as a result of this study is that the success for students of color is not due merely to the implementation or existence of culturally responsive practices in schools. Success for students of color results when all practices in the school are fostered through professional development that shapes the shared beliefs of stakeholders and manifests itself in culturally responsive behaviors.

In the new framework, culturally responsive counseling is added as an essential practice particularly in high schools. I did not consider it before because it does not appear to play a critical role in the middle school studied. But if I were to generalize the findings of this study to other academic levels such as high school, culturally responsive practices in the area of counseling would be important to address. There is a growing body of work that supports the importance of school counselors being culturally proficient and skilled in supporting diverse student populations (Bemak et al., 2005; Day-Vines et al., 2003; Lee & Goodnough, 2007). The new vision of school counseling includes a commitment of social justice and educational equity for all students. Therefore, a counseling program should support the work in all other areas of the school (Lee & Goodnough, 2007). In a culturally responsive school, the counseling program would support the practices instituted in all of the other categories of school practices. For these reasons, the new framework is inclusive of some concept of culturally responsive school counseling. The specific characteristics would need to be identified in another study or review of the literature.
In addition, professional development was added to the framework as a filter through which culturally responsive practices are employed. First, the majority of study participants at Melody indicated their beliefs about race and equity shifted as a result of staff development provided at the school. Secondly, Ladson-Billings (1994) also included professional development in her framework for culturally responsive practices. Finally, professional development is a wholly manageable tool for school leaders to administrate.

At Melody Middle School, teachers embraced behaviors related to cultural responsiveness and competency as a result of professional development. The new framework design reflects this finding and places the culturally responsive categories within the context of continual school improvement. It now denotes how learning in schools follows a path that begins with professional development for teachers and results in learning for students and parents.

For example, consider a school endeavoring to create reform to increase success of all students and close an achievement gap. As demonstrated in the new conceptual framework, the reforms are introduced through some manner of professional development. If the professional development is enhanced with culturally competent content, teachers and staff are challenged to reject racism and affirm pluralism in their school practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Murrell, 2007; Pollock, 2008). If cultural content permeates the curriculum, rigorous instructional strategies value the culture and language of diverse students, and educational practices honor the heritage and experiences of students, student learning will increase.

If the learning environment celebrates the diversity in the school and students are groomed to challenge injustice, students are validated and grow in their confidence to
achieve academically. Within this “nest” learning is nurtured. The students will meet with practices, policies, and procedures which affirm and acknowledge them as individuals as a result of reforms enhanced by culturally responsive content. Students will encounter attitudes, beliefs, or assumptions from staff and peers affirming their equality in relation to others when the professional development model embeds this content in school improvement reforms. When students receive messages of affirmation and validation of their authentic selves, they flourish with their dignity and resiliency firmly intact and are poised to complete their academic goals.


The new conceptual framework for culturally responsive practices is based on several key findings that emerged from the study at Melody. To recapitulate these findings, they are as follows:

1. Culturally responsive leadership is essential to equity schooling;
2. Self-segregation may be the new liberation;
3. Discussions of race and culture must occur within a nest of caring and respect,
4. Increasing minority achievement and increasing staff’s cultural competency are inseparable actions,
5. Schools can reconstruct their culture through transformational professional development,
6. Analyzing data, evaluation of instruction, and integrating cultural knowledge into the curriculum are regular instructional practices in a school closing an achievement gap, and
negation in the learning environment. This consistent affirmation of their identity, conformity to meet their needs, and relevance in the school results in increased and sustained academic achievement for students of color.

Using this new model helps explain the findings at Melody Middle School. Melody Middle has sound practices in all areas of the school program and high-quality professional development focused on cultural competency. Professional development in cultural competency, however, is not connecting with school management. Perhaps there has not been adequate professional development in this area. The researcher can only speculate as to the reasons, but the outcome was evident in the study. Students are nurtured in school culture conditions reflective of culturally responsive in pedagogy, learning environment, leadership, and home and family connections. For many students, these conditions create a space where they can focus on achievement. However, some students are challenged when they navigate in the area of student management. Some students meet with practices, policies, and procedures negating or ignoring who they are as individuals. This dynamic may be preventing some students from accelerating academically.

This may appear to be too simplistic an explanation for increasing the achievement of all students including students of color. The reasons for students’ failure or underachievement are seemingly complex, varied, and diverse. For example, Basch (2011) reported approximately 4.6 million, (8.4%), of American youth between the ages of 6 to 17 are diagnosed with ADHD. Students with diagnosed ADHD are 2.7 times as likely to drop out. There are many children who are below the clinical diagnostic threshold for ADHD but who exhibit similar signs and symptoms which interfere with
learning. He recommends schools working to close achievement gaps make this population of students a focused target for interventions (Basch, 2011). Using the proposed framework, students with diagnosed ADHD would be nurtured in school culture conditions that are inclusive of culturally responsive counseling and culturally responsive pedagogy that is inclusive of special education services. The additional lens of cultural competency in all areas of the school program could mitigate over-identification of minority students into special education. This would decrease the frequency of students identified for ADHD medication and provide engaging and relevant instructional strategies. The framework may not be a panacea for all that ails schools, however, it holds promise as a reform model for schools growing increasingly diverse.

**Recommendations to Educators**

This study examined the prevalence of culturally responsive practices in a school closing achievement gaps. It scrutinized which practices were in place throughout the school. The findings indicated strategies were in place in almost every area of the school program. Their existence was not incidental. These practices helped to mitigate some of the historical, social, and economic influences underserved students have been plagued with in the past. There are five recommendations to educators endeavoring to close achievement gaps.

The first recommendation is to begin any initiative, but particularly one that relates to increasing cultural competency by building a “nest” of caring and respect where safe conversations can occur. The achievement gap in all of its complexity cannot be overcome without addressing its historical, social, political, and economic influence. These type of conversations mean the critical parties need to talk about race. It is not an
easy conversation to have even in a homogenous group. Bishop (2007) found when the Sacramento City School District sought to implement culturally responsive practices, it took over two years to devise a comprehensive plan. There had been many previous efforts but when the conversations became controversial, they would simply abandon them. “The thought of race being a determining factor for success in school was too much for some to take. We would start the conversation, stop when it got too controversial, wait for a year, and then start the conversation again” (p.11). Finally, after identifying the research with community members, reading the research, and meeting in small groups for two years they were able to devise a comprehensive plan they could recommend to the board of education. Critical conversations such as the one held in Sacramento Schools are best held in a safe environment where people are comfortable taking risks and exposing their values.

The second recommendation to educators is for schools to make a commitment to talk about race and build the cultural competency of staff. Stay the course once discussions have begun. Schools need to convene a task force of all stakeholders to review the data on achievement of students. They need to get ideas from stakeholders and begin to organize the ideas into an action plan. They need to find and locate trainers supportive of learning at all levels, especially the members of the task force. School and district leaders should take the action plan and formulate a strategic plan, interview successful teachers about strategies they are using to increase achievement with minority students, and incorporate their strategies into the strategic plan. Nevertheless, even when discussions become difficult, stifling, or confrontational, stay the course. Operationalize the conversations on race through the work of analyzing student data, integrating cultural
knowledge into the curricula, and evaluating classroom practices with input from all stakeholders. On the other side of a courageous conversation is growth in cultural competency, self-empowerment, and better outcomes for students.

The third recommendation is to match schools with diverse school populations to transformative leaders prepared to lead the cause of social justice. According to Cooper (2009), these leaders can take each of the areas of the school program and infuse them with culturally responsive practices. Transformative leaders engage in a process of self-reflection, systematically analyze schools, and confront inequities regarding, race, class, gender, language, ability and sexual orientation (Brown, 2007; Cooper, 2009; Theoharis, 2009). We simply can no longer afford to place leaders in schools who assume benign neglect in the care of children’s cultures and identities. Leaders clinging to the apathy of racial blindness have no place in diverse schools and no doubt do children more harm by refusing to acknowledge the traits they should be celebrating during the development of their identities (Cohen, 2008; Madsen, 2002; Milner, 2006; Tatum, 1997; Trusty, 2008).

Transformative leaders may not be easy to find or recruit. Pipelines of applicants from participants steeped in the professional development on cultural competency need to be developed. Through these pipelines you are likely to find people of passion, commitment, and cultural knowledge. These traits paired with solid leadership skills provide the basis for a great school leader.

The fourth recommendation is for schools that are experiencing changing demographics is to let go of the past and move positively toward a new imagined future. Too many schools cling to the way things used to be, hoping things will go back to the way they were. They look for a leader who will whip children back into shape. Often
staff members seek a principal that will ignore difference, proclaim monarchic rule, and demand blind obeisance to staff without accountability. This approach is certain to fail. It is akin to flying a kite in a thunderstorm because you always fly kites on Fridays or wearing sandals in a snowstorm because it wasn’t supposed to snow. When the winds of demographic change blow through a school, adapt, and change the practices to accommodate the weather. Develop a plan to learn about the new students, understand their culture, and engage the community. Help school staff transition from the past into the future with professional development that challenges their assumptions, unearths their beliefs, and equips them with the skills to meet the needs of the demography of students. Ensure that the professional development offered is transformational in its approach to help guide beliefs in the direction of cultural competency required to institute real change.

The fifth recommendation is for site and district administrators to work together to “buffer” the school and the staff from competing interests. Buffering is not a new idea. It was proposed by Marzano, McNulty, and Waters (2005) in their meta-analysis of studies on the correlational relationship between student achievement and principal behaviors. Focus was named as an important characteristic needed to buffer the staff from competing goals (Marzano, 2005). Leaders who are savvy and discriminating enough to focus on the issues of importance while weeding out potential distracting influences have a definite boldness needed in schools. Culturally responsive practices require complete focus to implement successfully school wide. Without the commitment of both the district and school personnel to wrestle through the implementation with unwavering focus, it may flounder in the early stages of execution indefinitely. Otherwise, given the
pressures from accountability mandates, it would be easy for a focus on culturally responsive practices to get lost in a mire of other issues of seemingly equal import.

**Limitations of the Study**

The researcher would have found it helpful to have another set of eyes and ears during the observations of the school. It was difficult to catch every nuance and behavior particularly in common areas, such as the playground, cafeteria, and hallways. This study could be replicated with two or more researchers to compare notes and observation data.

In addition, this study occurred in only one school. It would have been beneficial to cross-examine data from two or more schools. A multi-site case study would have provided validation of the conceptual framework and further insight on the finding surrounding self-segregation practices.

The classified staff was not interested in participating in the research despite the researcher’s pleas. Their voice in schools is important, and it left a void in the data collection. In an inclusive school, the voices of secretaries, cafeteria workers, and janitors were sorely missed as they lend a critical perspective.

**Implications for Future Research**

The study of whole-school reform with culturally responsive practices has significant implications. Academic achievement of culturally diverse students improves in schools where teachers ensure that the environment and instruction is inclusive of the students. Moreover, there are power relationships in schools with unspoken rules and traditions resulting in the alienation and dehumanization of pupils, and those with the power are less likely to recognize it (Delpit, 1997; Tate, 1997; Tillman, 2002; Watkins, 2001).
Future research should explore the successful implementation of culturally responsive practices as a whole school reform and causal relationships between specific interventions and increased student achievement. There needs to be alignment of the school improvement grant reform models to a culturally responsive school reform model given the significant number of schools with minority dominant populations identified as chronically low performing.

It would also be interesting to include the voices of children in the study to determine their perceptions of the culturally responsive interventions school wide. At Melody, there were various student leadership groups segregated by race. The efficacy of segregated student leadership groups is an important finding deserving of further inquiry.

Likewise, the parent groups are segregated by race. The efficacy of segregated parent leadership groups in a diverse school is an important finding worthy of further inquiry. In a school where social justice is an important theme in all practices, the voices of each group of parents and how the leadership includes them and inducts them into the culture of the school would be fascinating. Interviews with racially self-segregated groups of stakeholders given the same set of questions regarding cultural competency would be insightful. It might be interesting to see how White parents perceived initiatives on closing an achievement gap, particularly if the school is predominately White. Also, parents’ perceptions and personal levels of cultural competency in schools with varied amounts of diversity would also lend itself to further understanding.

Finally, the study was conducted at a middle school. Further studies examining the whole-school practices at the elementary or high school level would be important. The dynamics in a high school, in particular, are very different from those at either an
elementary or middle school. Beliefs and practices are far more entrenched. It would be interesting to examine which characteristics of culturally responsive practices were present in a high school closing achievement gaps and, furthermore, how they were enacted. It would be equally fascinating to determine how staff in the school tested on a continuum of cultural competency.

**Summary**

What does it take to close an achievement gap? Can a new reading program or math book work? Could introducing a character education curriculum be the tipping point? This study has contributed to the body of literature suggesting the achievement gap is the result of a long history of marginalization and socioeconomic oppression directed at groups of people.

African American people were initially denied educational rights. When rights were granted, they were substandard to schools provided for Whites. This history continued for many years along with other methods of economic repression. Legislation was needed to help correct the inequities but could not eliminate them.

Race and racial ideologies are present in every institution in America including schools. All efforts to transform schools or correct disparities need to address the underlying causes for their existence. Neill (2008) noted, “if the federal government was serious about leaving no child behind, it would address low wages and unemployment; lack of good housing, medical care, and nutrition; community instability; and segregation by race and class.” (p.27)

Culturally responsive practices help mitigate some of the historical devices educational institutions have used to dominate some groups and privilege others. When
implemented through a lens of social justice, they serve to empower and emancipate all stakeholders. These are not just practices for the classroom, however. They are deftly needed in every area of the school program and indispensable for whole-school reform.
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APPENDIX A

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (CRIP)

Focus Group: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

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<td>Females:</td>
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Welcome. My name is Vernita Mickens. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado. As part of my work, I am conducting a study on strategies utilized in a school that is closing achievement gaps between White and minority children. I will be observing around the school and talking to staff and parent families. As a result of the study, I hope to know more about the best kind of strategies to implement when you are closing achievement gaps. After I analyze my data, I promise to come back and share with you what I find, if you are interested. Thank you in advance for your time. Your input and perceptions are critical to this study. I will be respectful of your time. It should not last more than one hour or school period. Before we begin, I have some norms for our discussion. The norms are as follows:

- Anonymity will be respected. Please do so for the other participants.
- Respect opinions of others, without judgment.
• Speak your truth and let others speak theirs. Please do not interrupt.

• There are no hierarchies of power here. All voices are equally valued.

Any questions before we begin?

**Question 1:** In what institutionalized ways are students’ background culture considered or integrated into the instructional, curricular, and assessment program?

**Question 2:** In what formalized ways are family and parent involvement opportunities structured to accommodate the diversity of cultures and ways in which parents can contribute their time?

**Questions 3:** How are students’ culture considered in the student management plan?

**Question 4:** What kinds of things do leaders in this building do that exhibit culturally responsivity? (Leaders can be formal or informal and need not have a title.)

**Question 5:** How and when does the staff talk and learn about race, privilege, culture, bias, or equity?

**Question 6:** How and when do students talk and learn about race, privilege, culture, bias and equity?

**Questions 7:** What are the espoused beliefs of the school community? (The ones they communicate publicly and in writing)

**Question 8:** What are the “lived” beliefs of the community? (The ones communicated informally and verbally or nonverbally)
Question 9: Talk about the kinds of experiences you have had since becoming a staff member at this school that shifted your personal beliefs about the influence of culture on educational practices.

Question 10: How and when does the staff talk about beliefs?

Question 11: In what way, if any, do culturally responsive practices support your closing achievement gaps?

Question 12: What didn’t I ask that you wish I had? Is there anything else you think I should know?

Closure: Thank you again for your time and honesty. I will share my cell phone number with you if you would like to call me later to discuss anything individually or ask questions. Remember, I will give a brief overview of observations by end of this site visit. I will be happy to return with the results at the end of the study if you are interested. As promised, I will maintain your anonymity and the norms we discussed today. I am happy to stay here for 10 more minutes to answer any further questions if you would like or to discuss anything related to closing achievement gaps.
APPENDIX B

MICKENS CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE OBSERVATION TOOL

Location: ________________________________
Time ________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation Elements</th>
<th>Observations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What elements of culturally responsive practices are evidenced in the environment?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Who are the participants? (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>What culturally responsive activities or interventions are occurring?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How typical is the situation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What nonverbal communication suggests culturally responsive practices?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What does not happen that actually should?</td>
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