“BRIDGES OF EMPATHY”: EXPLORING CONTROVERSY THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

by

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Abstract

This research project investigates how educators with intermediate teaching experience understand culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), and how this reflects in their practice. Data derived from three semi-structured interviews with educators with a demonstrated commitment to CRP. Four themes arose from the data with respect to participants’ application of CRP: 1) interpreting CRP as comprehensive and multifaceted, 2) making student experience meaningful and relevant, 3) CRP as constrained by opposition from learning community and limitations to exploring social justice issues, and 4) navigating constraints through a fostering of authenticity. All themes align with preexisting literature with the exception of the last subtheme in Theme 4 where I explore my participants’ uniquely individual entry points to exploring social justice issues as a way to navigate the limitations of class discussion.

*Keywords*: culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy, literacy education, cultural theory.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is a broad concept mentioned throughout Ministry documents and teacher education programs. CRP (also known as culturally relevant pedagogy among many other iterations) has its roots in social justice, equity and multicultural education. According to Gay (2010), the phrase ‘culturally relevant pedagogy’ was popularized by Gloria Ladson-Billings, who defined it as a pedagogical approach that was characterized by high academic expectations and cultural empowerment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). We can certainly surmise innumerable fallouts when students are deprived of both.

As I have largely experienced the detrimental effects of pedagogical practices that ignore the subject of culture throughout my education, my research takes the position that this is indeed an issue and an imperative consideration for teachers.

In my experience of the teacher education program at a preeminent Ontario institution, I have been exposed to a multitude of resources regarding CRP. For many, CRP is considered paramount to establishing democratic spaces for learning, and teachers are regularly encouraged to adopt a wide range of culturally responsive tactics within the classroom. For example, both TRIBES training and teacher education courses in general promote fostering a climate of respect through such strategies as encouraging students to listen attentively, to respect their peers, as well as reprimanding ‘put-downs’ or dismissive attitudes (Gibbs, 2006). Yet there are several risks we may encounter as proponents of CRP, where a student’s unique and individual experience is inadvertently
overgeneralized, demarcated or stereotyped. To illustrate the complexities of just one facet of CRP by way of hypothesis, consider the following scenario.

In hopes of fostering an inclusive environment, a well-intentioned teacher invites one student to share his culturally bound opinion on a specific topic in class discussion. From what the teacher can tell, the rest of the class has listened attentively to the student’s narrative insofar as his peers have chose to remain quiet, without interruption. The teacher then offers a contrasting opinion based on her own cultural background and experience. Feeling consolidated, she transitions into another topic.

What has gone wrong here? To the teacher herself and to the potential onlooker, absolutely nothing. On a superficial level, no one was offended, no one hurt. Still, much has gone unspoken. Had the teacher called on the student simply because he was of a particular culture and as such possessed the authority to provide a cultural context to the discussion? If this was the case, what did the other students take away from his account in their moment of silence? Can we claim that how the teacher chose to interpret the students’ silence as a kind of understanding, empathic or otherwise, is accurate? These details are unclear and the assumptions in play are abundant.

By calling on this student, his personal narrative is in danger of being singularized as a portrayal or cultural model. The student’s account effectively shifts out from the subjective sphere of interpretation into the objective, and is regarded not as one individual’s opinion, but instead a representation of a generalized experience. Note how in this scenario the teacher neither contextualized nor situated the discussion beforehand. Also note the lack of a follow-up to the student’s response, where instead the teacher offers what she legitimately has the authority to speak on: her own experience. There is
ample room here for students to merely sit with the differences raised and apply a binary kind of logic at best, as sameness and difference, norm and not-norm. Although we can say that the teacher has certainly gone through all the motions designated to fostering an inclusive environment, it remains doubtful that any meaningful dialogue around the student’s cultural experience has truly occurred.

This is only a particular example of a particular facet of CRP where it becomes apparent that, even before I began my investigation, what is more significant to CRP is the way in which is integrated rather than its features.

In this project I interviewed three literacy educators in hopes to articulate such complexities and constraints to CRP. The aim of this project is not to say that the attributes of CRP promote a parochial and hegemonic distribution of power, but rather that in its circumstances—our means of inclusion, to whom and for what reason we extend our empathy towards—assembles the terrain of dialogue where critically conscious educators, teachers and students either subvert or sustain these systems.

1.1 Research Problem

Though there is ample enthusiasm and resolve among educators to pursue a culturally responsive pedagogy, for those who are other, minority or labeled, the effort may result in adverse effects. As illustrated by the hypothetical situation above, these effects fall along a lengthy continuum of subjugation, manifested in part as an overgeneralization of individual experience. Specifically in the context of the literacy classroom, students and teachers alike may feel inhibited from engaging difficult culturally loaded topics or become complacent about cultural dialogue entirely. What I mean by cultural dialogue extends beyond a vocal acknowledgement of cultural
differences, but “across” these differences, to pursue insightful and meaningful
discussions about the dynamic relationships regarding power, race, gender and class
(Jones 1999, p. 1). Here I should clarify that throughout this project I refer to culture and
its various grammatical forms comprehensively as it relates to race and ethnicity
certainly, and also sexual orientation, status and ability, but largely to the values and
beliefs these produce in the construction of identity at large. As Brown-Jeffey and Cooper
(2011) explained:

…if culture is defined as the ways in which persons perceive, believe, relate to,
and evaluate the world around them then how people see themselves can be
viewed through these same lenses. Language, behavioral expressions,
interpretations of actions, and societal expectations are all culturally borne and
implemented. Culture includes ethnicity and race, as well as gender, class,
language, region, religion, exceptionality, and other diversities that help to define
individuals. (p. 72)

On this account I foresee three problems with respect to the interpretation and application
of CRP, which I outline below.

1.1.1 The problem of inclusivity

First consider the language at play when we use the phrase inclusive education.
Who includes whom? The verb ‘include’ implies a relationship between an unspecified
subject and object, namely a dominant group for whom a participatory status of education
is a given and a subordinate group whose participation is allowed. The ethos of inclusive
education entrusts teachers to lessen this gap, working against this power dynamic. It is
crucial that the inclusion of culture does not amount to such playground antics as
grudgingly selecting the last child to join the team out of pity or necessity. The problem, or rather more accurately, the paradox of inclusive education is that to truly include would be to ensure none be excluded in the first place. The ensuing project not only acknowledges this logic but also hopes to investigate how to ensure that modes of exclusion do not occur when implementing culturally responsive strategies of inclusivity.

1.1.2 The problem of empathy

One means of CRP is to foster a level of understanding and empathy among students and teachers. Similarly, as above, it follows that there are definitive risks in how teachers convey empathy. I emphasize again that these risks result from the way in which teachers empathize, in the endeavour to administer empathy as a means, whether motivated for strategic reasons (perhaps to engage better with a quiet or unmotivated student) or by necessity (everyone expects teachers to be empathetic). Boler (1997) termed this as a “passive” form of empathy or a “consumptive mode of identification with the other,” where the students risk empathizing with other cultures in an ultimately self-indulgent way (p. 253). There is another paradox here, namely that, as an ideal, full-fledged empathy would require one to not only proverbially wear the other’s shoes, but also their skin, their flesh and bones, to reverse time and have been borne by the same parents, suffered and loved the same things, lived the same circumstances. Given this impossibility, the terrain wherein the capacity of empathy occurs is precisely in this gap of unknowing, where one consciousness ends and another begins. The ensuing research hopes to examine how teachers circumvent this problem of empathy within this gap, in the space where cultures meet through dialogue and interaction.
1.1.3 The problem of negotiating discussions about culture

Considering that the research focuses on dialogue around culture in the literacy classroom, it is imperative to keep in mind that literacy, as a function of language, is impossible to separate from the socio-historical developments of culture and its practices (Brockmeier, Olson and Wang, 2002). One cannot speak of the production of language without simultaneously speaking on the production of culture. By extension we must approach our study of cultural dialogue knowing that even those individuals who come from non-dominant cultures are “embedded in multiple worlds including the dominant culture and therefore embody a complex, unconscious, and often conflicting mix of dominant and non-dominant cultural themes” (Sperry, 2013, p. 83). Consequently, the research hopes to pay particular attention to examining the methods of talking about culture in a way that acknowledges students’ associations with both dominant and non-dominant cultural themes.

1.2 Research Intent & Educational Significance

In light of the aforementioned issues, the purpose of my research is to examine how teachers in Ontario effectively implement CRP in a way that warrants students autonomy in their participation in cultural dialogue. Here I draw associations between Boler’s (1997) “semiotics of empathy” and Jones’ (1999) “dialogical model” of pedagogy, both of which suggest a learning environment that merges culture, identity/identification and classroom (p. 261; p. 5). The educational significance of this research should be particularly relevant in Canada insofar as the classroom functions as a place wherein a diverse range of learners and their respective cultural values dynamically interact. I can only hope that this research is able to articulate the complications of
discussing culturally sensitive subjects in an intermediate-level class and serve as a precursory step towards subsequent considerations into what is necessary or absent regarding CRP by and large. The research points towards many corollary inquiries. An investigation into cross-curricular applications of CRP, across a range of grade levels, is an obvious one. Future research should also account for students’ impressions on the effects of culturally responsive practices.

1.3 Guiding Inquiry and Supplementary Questions

The guiding line of inquiry in this research is to investigate first how a small sample of educators with a demonstrated commitment to CRP understand what it means to engage in culturally responsive practice and secondly, how this is reflected in their literacy classrooms. Subsequent questions fall along the following lines of inquiry:

1. What does culturally responsive literacy look like?
2. How do teachers incorporate culturally specific literature?
3. What educational goals do they have in mind for students through CRP? And how are these goals being supported and met?
4. What sort of barriers, constraints or resistances are there to CRP, and how might these be negotiated?

1.4 Author’s Position

To situate my motivation behind this research, I should speak momentarily on my own position. Although I am a natural-born Canadian citizen, English was not my first language given that my parents made the conscious decision to speak Korean exclusively around the house throughout my formative years. Enrolling me in preschool was their attempt at exposing me to the English language. In these early days, the incapacity to
convey what I thought and felt was ground zero and the impetus for my compulsion to read, so as to never feel stuck or trapped in what I was thinking or feeling.

Learning quickly, I moved around quite alertly, speaking the language of my peers but never without feeling that I had merely been sanctioned to speak it, or that I did not belong, or that language itself did not belong to me. In short I developed an imposter syndrome at a frighteningly young age. The syndrome, for those unfamiliar, is a psychological phenomenon often attributed to feelings of fraudulence, an inability to accept compliments for one’s successes, the belief that these successes are attributed not to diligence and merit but chance, coincidence or deception, and the avoidance of displaying confidence. Having never learned how to write in my original language however, English was still my primary means of communication, the only language that could bridge the inside with the out, one consciousness to another.

As a result, I felt othered in a way that was distinctly different from those around me. I was predominantly raised in white suburban communities where I was among a few minorities, partly black and partly Asian, the latter of whom were mostly first generation and non-English speaking. In classrooms I was often deemed too quiet in reaction to my introspective and reserved behaviour. It was not an uncommon and uncomfortable experience where I would be speaking, not on my own behalf, but at someone’s request or authority. In an effort to inspire involvement on my part, former teachers of mine would redirect a topic or theme in their lesson to ask, “is this like what they do in Korea?” or those who knew me less and were more assumptive, “what was this like in your country?” These presumptions withdrew me further away from my education and all it encompassed: my classmates, the teachers, the content, personal ambition, et cetera.
I believe it is of utmost importance that teachers today are aware of the risks of an uncritically tacit application of CRP. Through a perspective that views the classroom as a culturally dynamic environment, I hope to explore how teachers negotiate culture in the literacy classroom, while still preserving individual autonomy and the freedom to speak without fear of misinterpretation or being compartmentalized to a singularity.

1.5 Preview of Research

This project embarked on a qualitative research study through a centralized sampling of interviews with three educators with a demonstrated commitment to CRP. Precedence was given to teachers who have former experience in teaching a wide range of cultural content to a culturally diverse classroom. In chapter two I review literature across three themes, 1) the available frameworks of CRP, 2) strategies to engaging cultural dialogue in literacy classrooms, and 3) what it means to have an empathetic pedagogical approach. In chapter three I expand on the intent of the research. In chapter four I refer to an account of my findings, and in chapter five I contextualize these discoveries and expand on their significance to the literature and what applications these may entail upon the responsibilities of a starting teacher.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

What follows in this next chapter is a review of literature, which serves to substantialize existing research on the application of CRP in schools. Particular attention is paid to the methods demonstrated by intermediate literacy teachers. It would seem appropriate to begin by providing a range of approaches to CRP.

The chapter then moves to provide an evaluative overview of Ministry of Education documents for teachers, including those aligning with Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. These are compared, contrasted, deconstructed, and furthermore contextualized so as to mark a referential point for what has or has not been accomplished in composing an adaptable framework of implementing cultural dialogue and empathy in classrooms. Interviews with three educators who have taught intermediate Language serve to further substantialize these models.

Thirdly, consideration is given to literature pertaining to conceptualizing empathy and its various pedagogical risks. In particular, assessing how despite altruistic intentions an empathic or inclusive approach to teaching may be misconstrued as obligatory, and hence coercive in its application. Here I focus on the concerns of how and why this phenomenon occurs by analyzing contemporary curriculum material and drawing connections to what Boler (1997) calls a “passive empathy” which involves identifying with another’s experience and thus “consum[ing] it as sameness” (1997, pp. 261; 258)

2.1 Approaches to Inclusive Education

Warren (2013) suggested that inclusivity be regarded as a disposition to be modeled and fostered by teachers. These dispositions, Warren (2013) argued, “transcend
content knowledge, philosophies, or attitudes about teaching” (p. 2). In light of what he found to be an insufficient quantity of instructional frameworks on adopting empathic dispositions to social relationships in schools, he proposed to take an “empirical investigation” of pragmatically applying empathy (Warren, 2013, p. 2). Based on evidence gathered from classroom observations and from a series of interviews conducted with four White, female high school teachers, he devised a two-phase model:

**Phase 1:** Taking perspective and demonstrating empathic concern.

**Phase 2:** Negotiating new knowledge with and among students based on their feedback.

How this model works is recursive (Warren, 2013). Teachers need to take perspective on where their students stand by gauging through active engagements. Furthermore, there needs to exist on a level of respect a mutual accord between the two. Accordingly, taking into account the students’ feedback—by “listening and responding to students”—the teacher repositions her approach and reincorporates her newly acquired knowledge into her empathic engagements (Warren, 2013, p. 20). Emphasis was given to make the point that these two phases are not “mutually exclusive,” and can occur in the enactment of empathy’s application (Warren, 2013, p. 19).

While Warren stressed an empathic disposition as nonpareil to knowledgeability and philosophy with respect to inclusivity, Slee (2010) projected an interesting contrast:

Inclusive teacher education is not a special education for teachers in regular schools. It demands a critical thinking about identity and difference, about privilege and disadvantage, about inclusion and exclusion that is not achieved by either the ‘regular’ or ‘special’ teacher education programs. (Slee, 2010, p. 19)
For Slee (2010), urgency resides with complicating our knowledgeability; what teachers know or presume we know certainly goes beyond content, but moreover requires further extension across the “rhetoric of reflexiveness” towards critical thinking, in other words, identifying our own complicity in the “insidious ways in which exclusion is established through and in schooling” (p. 19). Research from Đigić, Dosković, Stojiljković, and Todorović (2014) corroborated this reflexivity, concluding that “self-concept,” or a holistic perception and evaluation of one’s socio-global and physical-psychological experiences is integral to improving teachers’ empathic capacities (pp. 875-876). What Forlin (2010) advocated broadens out from this urging by suggesting a whole school approach in teacher education programs to wit, which allows for the questioning and articulation of these demands across all fields of discipline. In terms of the practical applications of critical thinking, Banks (1991, 1996) and Cochran-Smith (1997) argued that culturally responsive teachers “help students interrogate the curriculum critically by having them address inaccuracies, omissions, and distortions in the text” by broadening it to include multiple perspectives (as cited in Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 29).

On these grounds, we can progress in the research with an understanding that unifies these approaches, one that comprises of both teacher disposition and personal philosophy.

2.2 Responding to Culture in Language Classrooms

When we consider the resources available to intermediate teachers in Ontario we see a mutual sense of urgency to establishing inclusive environments in schools. The Ministry of Education (MofE) especially has published a plethora of literature towards this vision. These resources offer diverse strategies, rubrics and reproducible material
The resources rely on a steady stream of research showing the many benefits of fostering inclusivity and empathy, for example: students’ capacity to identify with teachers, the school and the overall community lead to better performance in all aspects of academic, extracurricular and domestic life (Blum, McNeeley, & Rinehart, 2002; Schargel, Thacker, & Bell, 2007). Yet throughout these documents, there is a distinct lack of research investigating the nuanced and individually specific application of these resources.

In 2011, the Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario (ETFO) published a package called Social Justice Begins With Me. In particular the package suggests the incorporation of children’s literature as a practical means of entry to developing equity awareness (ETFO, 2011). The use of literature to explore social justice issues and equity, specifically in the form of fiction, poetry and drama, is prevalent throughout the research. Valdes (1986) calls for teachers to “make sure the values that underlie the behavior of characters and points of view of the authors” (p. 139), while Collie and Slater (1987), recommend strategies that focus on maintaining high interest levels, accommodating learning styles and instigating prior knowledge. We can certainly acknowledge that literature provides a valuable avenue that fosters student engagement around topics of equity.

Additionally, the ETFO package provides a series of principles, of which I highlight one in particular, that teachers “understand that equity and inclusive education principles apply to every student and not just to a certain group of students” (ETFO, 2011, p. 7). This is partly addressed in research conducted by McCready, Montemurro
and Rivière (2011), whose findings indicate the significance of preserving individuality among students from different cultural backgrounds. Beyond individuality, they also note the effectiveness of strategies that preserve student cultural autonomy, e.g. “asking students to serve as guides to their own cultural backgrounds and identifications” when engaging in cultural dialogue (p. 98). However, with certain strategies, this autonomy is at risk of being denied. Based on interviews with novice teachers, Beck and Kosnik (2009) suggested multiple strategies, which echo the philosophy outlined in Ministry of Education documents, among which include building community/teacher-student relationships, and incorporating the study of cultures. They write that “it is essential both to increase respect and ... [give] a basis for seeing similarities and differences among groups” (p. 99). Once again, exposing students to cultural variety is certainly significant in de-stigmatizing and de-mythologizing cultural difference, however if cultural exposure is left without pursuing further insight and discussion, there is the risk of a prescriptive, consumptive mode of cultural dialogue. Consider one interviewee’s comment from Beck and Kosnik’s (2009) study:

This class likes [to learn] about different cultures, they’re very interested in Chinese culture, African culture, and so on, so I bring those things in. For example, at Christmas time we talked a lot about Kwanzaa, and although nobody in the class celebrates Kwanzaa we talked about it anyway. Actually ... holiday time in December is a nice time to talk a lot about the festivals of different cultures, and the students really like it. (p. 99)

Unfortunately there is no further context provided as to the nature of the dialogue around the various cultural festivals, and granted we must avoid pigeonholing the interviewee to
this single quote. Still, it does seem significant that the manner in which these students engaged cultural dialogue (beyond ‘just liking it’) is left entirely undiscussed in the research.

Similarly, McVeigh and Wintergerst (2011) suggested incorporating religious holidays, traditions and festivals into curriculum content, insofar as investigating the cultural reasons behind a holiday to “provide valuable insights into the way that a group of people think about themselves” (p. 139). However, without contextualizing the way in which these suggestions are carried out, the incorporation of cultural content could risk ignoring the individualized approach suggested by McCready, Montemurro and Rivière (2011).

Returning to the idea of exposing students to a variety of cultural themes, ETFO’s document also suggested monthly motifs to frame lessons around, lessons that recognize and celebrate diversity, among them including self-esteem, peace, building supportive communities and sharing cultural narratives. I draw attention specifically to October’s theme of Sharing Our Lives, as this is pertains directly to cultural dialogue. The teacher prompts under this category are transcribed here:

“How are our lives different? How are they the same? Start simply, for example, with our number of siblings, the city/town/community we live in, or our position in the family as the oldest/youngest/middle child. Then move deeper - perhaps to what cultures we are from, or what religions or beliefs we follow (or don’t!). What do we think of as normal in our lives that might be different from someone else’s? How could we learn about each other’s lives this year?”

(ETFO 2011, pp. 42)
Again what appears to be missing in the literature are the steps beyond identifying cultural sameness/difference to critically evaluate this mode of identification itself. How do intermediate language teachers initiate their students to engage deeper with cultural dialogue, to evaluate the language we use to speak around culture? It is under full acknowledgment of these contentions that I frame my interviews with research participants.

2.3 The Role of Empathy in the Inclusive Classroom

Throughout teacher education programs is a prevalent entreatment to practice empathy as teacher candidates are immersed in literature, which overstate the adoption of tolerant, permissive and inquiring attitudes towards students’ culturally and cognitively diverse opinions. There is a significant body of research that stresses the benefits of building empathic student-teacher relationships. Rossler’s (1988) research corroborated the idea that experience and prior training in human relations bolster both teacher and student response to empathy, while Boyer’s (2010) research draws attention to the value of symbiotic inter-/intrapersonal relationships. On a larger scale, we find general applications of empathy as per Warren’s (2013) representational two-phase model.

Despite our most admirable intents to create inclusive and secure environments where students feel safe to speak, there is a possible risk that their opinions are seen as originating out of a dominantly Western-oriented narrative. One way this occurs is in the proliferation of a distinctly nationalist curriculum (Stanley, 1998). According to Schick and St. Denis (2005), national narratives that ignore colonial histories and both blatant and invisible racism only reproduce racial privileges. This kind of curriculum is taught
from a Eurocentric narrative lens within which “groups of people enter…only when the people of the group become significant in terms of the nation” (Stanley, 1998, p. 48).

The context-less, misguided reading of cultural narratives is investigated at length in Boler’s essay, “The Risks of Empathy.” In particular, Boler (1997) described how while teaching Art Spiegelman’s MAUS to undergraduate students, she came to realize that students were relating to the text in a way that not only othered the experience of Holocaust survivors but quantified the event to an innocuous, reductive and digestible abridgment. A disturbing image to be sure, which when employed allowed students in their authoritative position as reader/consumer to judge, and furthermore, infer from the suffering of another an identifiable knowing of what it is like to have suffered (Boler, 1997). This amounts to what she termed as “passive empathy” (Boler, 1997, p. 261). The failing of passive empathy is that by identifying with the other’s experience, we are satiated, relieved of responsibility in our acknowledgement of the other’s horrors/sufferings insofar as we remain horrified by the events but not having suffered the events ourselves. The agent of empathy in this respect is “a fear for oneself,” that the injustices endured by another “could happen to me” (Boler, 1997, p. 257). Here the primary motivator of empathy is one of self-concern, far removed from altruism.

Boler (1997) advocated a distinct shift from this localization of self-concern to recognize power relations and localizing empathy semiotically that is by “defin[ing] the interaction between reader and text and the conflicts presented within a text” (p. 262). What steps must be taken by teachers to ensure that diverse cultural narratives are upheld in a way that draws attention to this interaction, between the roles of those who are speaking them and those who listen? How is this reflected in the resources available to
intermediate Language teachers and how do teachers themselves perceive the concept of empathy? Research has shown that teachers often perceive themselves as more empathetic than their students do (Rossler, 1988; Freese & West, 1972). Based on their findings, Freese and West (1972) posited that students tend not to relate to teachers on the basis of age, sex, experience and grades, but rather “how the teacher interacts” with them (p. 529). To reiterate, the emphasis on why student-teacher interaction is important and beneficial is certainly present, but what appears to be missing is precisely how this interaction is manifest.

Furthermore, Felman and Laub (1992) implored us to recognize the teacher’s responsibility to listen when it comes to other students’ cultural narratives, in that “the absence of an empathic listener…annihilates the story” (p. 68). Boler (1997) suggested taking up a tactic of “testimonial reading” of history and narratives, which pays mind to our respective positions of privilege throughout diverse social interactions (p. 265). In this way the student’s individual autonomy is preserved as she is required to “attend to herself” not as a centre of fear but as a centre of “affective obstacles that prevent the reader’s acute attention to the power relations guiding her response and judgments” (Boler, 1997, p. 265).

What this entails for consequent models of empathic, inclusive teaching is a kind of return to the self in its awareness of the perpetuation of other selves. These models warrant both teachers and students to sustain and take up their own situated responsibility to equity in the literacy classroom. Part of this framework of empathy is in allowing the very capacity for it; in approaching another’s narrative while being critically aware of the
self’s binding responsibility and yet still allowing the space for the other’s autonomy to exist.

Perhaps it would be meaningful to conclude this section by restating the paradox of empathy. In a lecture by Professor Robert Goff, he states that to actualize even a degree of empathy towards such traumatic cultural/historical events such as the Holocaust, we need to engage narratives “until it becomes, precisely, unimaginable” (as cited in Boler, 1997, p. 261). When we consider such a powerful statement, empathy seems impossible. But perhaps what is significant here is in our acknowledgement and confrontation to the means of maneuvering around this impossibility, that the divisions between people are not necessarily enclosed, but can potentially serve as a place of connection (Boler, 1997; Felman & Laub, 1992). Hopefully this research can in part provide an account of seeking out these means.

2.4 Conclusion

This literature review was intended to amalgamate what research there existed on CRP with respects to the application of inclusivity and empathy as it applies to cultural dialogue. To restate the problem, there exists a danger of consumptively and presumptively engaging cultural narratives in the resources available to teachers. Not enough research delves into how teachers pragmatically negotiate this problem. If there is to exist a space for empathy, inclusivity and negotiation, CRP needs to adopt an encompassing framework that in its very articulation subverts the act of forming linear distinctions between cultural narratives. The rhetoric of interpreting silence as outlined above, is to serve as one trajectory to subverting this problem. These preceding ideas should be at the forefront of understanding CRP, which can hopefully amalgamate a
meaningful and valid framework of how teachers can better include and empathize with students.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

Chapter 3 will outline the methodologies that support my research. First, I will provide a review of the general approach taken, followed by an outline of its procedures and means of data collection. Next, I expand on the parameters determined regarding participant sampling and recruitment. Subsequently I describe the procedural details of data analysis and review whatever ethical considerations may be relevant. As a supplement, I situate a range of methodological limitations while contrarily detailing its strengths. Finally, I will summarize significant methodological decisions and justify why these decisions were appropriate given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Method and Procedures

The primary approach to the research will constitute a qualitative research study, conducted through a review of existing research and semi-structured interviews with educators who have taught intermediate Language and identify with a culturally responsive approach to teaching. My intention behind this method was to listen and attend to valuable narratives from which further questions and insights arise.

My method draws upon the constructivist paradigm as described by Guba and Lincoln (1994). In particular, my research method stems from a position that “realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based” in a largely subjective and individualized way (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111).

What is significant here is that this approach warrants the space for both reflexivity on my part in my role as researcher, as well as a space for the participants’
voices to be heard (Creswell, 2007). It allows me the opportunity to be transparent about my own construction of meaning throughout the progression of this project (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This is to imply that the procedure provides a “complex, detailed understanding of the issue” in a way that “empower[s] individuals” while diminishing the power relations between interviewer and interviewee (Creswell, 2008, p. 48). Part of the intent behind this reflexive approach is to implement a critical lens, calling attention to the ways in which personal experience is both subject to and the authority of social power dynamics (Brookfield, 1995). What I am proposing here is for reasons similar to the advantages of a critical reflection model proposed by Fook and Gardner (2007): a deconstructive analysis of hegemonic assumptions, succeeded by a reconstruction of experience, reflection, reactions, practice and meaning by all participants involved. To aptly unpack the question of how teachers confront, contest and negotiate their own application and understanding of CRP, it is necessary that this research’s approach be sensitive to difference, individuality, and to what cannot be essentialized.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The research will adopt a semi-structured interview process as its principal means of data collection. A semi-structured interview will entitle me to draft and propose a series of centralized questions and themes for discussion, while allowing the interviewees to expand, explore their own trajectories of thought and wholly contribute to the dialogue (Creswell, 2007). I believe it would be appropriate to mention what Mischler (1986) describes as an uneven balance in power when it comes to the interview process. I would like to clarify that when I use the word ‘allow,’ it is not to suggest that I am somehow imbued with the authority to grant interviewees their participation, but rather that in my
position as interviewer, there exists a large burden of responsibility—a certain level of awareness regarding the dynamics of this power imbalance—to create an environment wherein interviewees may feel free to participate as fully as they wish.

The difficulty here is that this imbalance does not completely describe the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Scheurich, 1995). There exists the important occasion of resistance where an interviewee may choose to withhold or speak/act in a manner to disrupt the dichotomy between her and the person asking questions, or even to subvert the logic of a dominant social narrative (Freire, 1973).

However, given the purpose of this research, if the participants’ autonomy and voices are to be upheld, we must negotiate across even the binary distinction of a dominant interviewer and resistant interviewee (Scheurich, 1995). Indeed, the prospect is likely that the research participants may possess a social authority that I immediately lack (age or experience, for example), insofar as the very opposite is likely. This format is thereby meant to acknowledge and bring to the forefront of the reader’s perspective that transactions of authority, knowledge and power are real, dynamic and unavoidable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In consideration, I made my best effort to follow Scheurich’s advice (1995), to first highlight the “baggage” I bring to the table of discussion by contextualizing my position and motives as acutely as possible, and second, to emphasize the “open indeterminacy” of the interview process (pp. 249-250). By this I mean to allow room for ambiguities, retractions, elaborations, et cetera, throughout the interview and interpretation process.
3.3 Participants Involved

In the following section I review the predetermined criteria I implemented to enlist my participants. Subsequently, I outline the procedures taken and the means through which I was able acquire my participants. Lastly, I incorporate a section to introduce each participant and their respective background.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The first and foremost sampling criterion is that the participants must have taught Language at the intermediate level at some point in their career. Given both my position as a pre-service teacher and my interests in seeking a comprehensive understanding of CRP, I attempted to connect with educators at different points in their career.

The second criterion is that participants identified with and demonstrated a commitment to CRP. I sampled educators without specifying any demographic detail as a criterion, as I believe that either disparities or commonalities along demographic or cultural lines could provide insightful findings.

Lastly, independent knowledgeability, participation in professional development regarding CRP, or previous work with social enterprises that focus on community development (such as Me to We or Free the Children) would further substantialize the research, but were not considered as imperative criteria. With respect to my participants however, all three met at least one of these in some capacity.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

Considering the parameters of the resources and means available to me in implementing this research, I adopted a purposeful, albeit convenient, sampling approach. I selected participants precisely by their satisfaction of the criteria listed above. Notarized
permission was procured from all participants involved and identities are pseudonymously protected out of respect for their privacy. In effect, this is to garner an established understanding of the research problem and the key phenomenon at hand (Creswell, 2007). Consequently, in terms of sample size, I will be adhering to Dukes’ (1984) suggestion, concentrating on no more than three participants. Being part of a pre-service education program that provides extensive access to an experienced community of colleagues and mentors, I relied on their associations and recommendations for assistance in acquiring participants.

Independently I sought out participants as proactively as possible, among speakers and attendees at professional development conferences held by school boards and at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, as well as from professional relationships built during my practicums in the Master of Teaching program.

3.3.3 Participant bios

Maggie has been an educator for 23 years. She started as a teacher in an independent girls’ school where she taught Grade 5, and then 7 and 8 Language. She later went on exchange to an all boys’ school where she taught from Grades 3 to 8. Later in her career she became an assistant principal, teaching Grade 8 Language and Grade 5 Math. She worked as vice principal before becoming principal at two separate elementary schools. Most recently in her career, she was seconded to the Ministry of Education.

James first taught a Grade 5 class in Montreal and an additional 11 years in Ontario. The latter 6 of these years were in the intermediate division, mostly Grade 7 and 8 in a variety of schools. Over the years he taught Language, History, Geography and
Mathematics. For two years prior to our interview, he was working as faculty advisor for a university.

Wallace has a background in English and History and was starting his third year of teaching at the time of the interview. He was teaching at an all-boys private Catholic school, where he is responsible for a variety of subjects but primarily taught English at Grade 7, 8 and 10 levels.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis took the form of a four-stage process. The first involved the compilation of raw data—narratives the participants conveyed about their understanding and application of CRP during the interview along with field notes—into transcripts and addendums. The second stage was to organize the transcript into key codes, and the third into themes. Broadly speaking, the codes in their implementation addressed the various suppositions on my part prior to the study, new and unexpected insights obtained during the collection of data, and particularly notable information that may be of interest to future researchers, participants and audiences (Creswell, 2007). Themes assembled corresponding codes under conceptual umbrellas to facilitate the interpretive process. Finally the fourth stage incorporated a constructivist approach in an effort to synthesize a comprehensive understanding of my participants’ responses that remains accurate to the context in which they shared those responses.

It would also be conducive to the research question to consider what themes or issues are absent in the interviews, whether it takes the form of an unanticipated component brought up during the interview process, or whether the participant(s) chose to refrain from speaking on the subject or simply neglected to comment on it. This may
potentially indicate where the research could be taken in the future or raise interesting questions about self-censorship, stigmas and uncertainties.

### 3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

It should go without saying that there are multiple ethical procedures involved in undertaking this research, the rationality for which are certainly contentious topics, however it may be mindful practice to remind ourselves of why ethical research procedures exist in the first place. Scott (2008) writes that ethical procedures are ultimately devised so as to prevent harm. It is entirely possible however that they have become a means to harm in their “ability to prevent research, silence debate, and stymie the acquisition of knowledge about difficult issues” (p. 13). Consent forms for example, with their potentially arcane language, carry risks of patronizing participants and may render the research obscure and inaccessible to the participants (Scott, 2003; 2008). Sikes and Piper (2010) reason that most researchers are most likely not setting out to intentionally harm the subjects of their research. It is critical therefore that behind each procedure is a conscious awareness of who is being protected, beyond measures of “governance and regulation” (p. 213).

With this in mind, the ethical procedures involved for purposes of protecting the rights and autonomy of those involved with this research are the following:

1) As mentioned, participants are referred to pseudonymously and all other relations or references to schools, organizations and students remain confidential through the use of an alternative alias.

2) Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from their involvement in the research project up until the point of publication.
3) The above is ensured by way of a consent letter (Appendix A) for participants to sign, thereby providing permission to be interviewed as well as recorded on an audio-recording device. The letter outlined an overview of the study, addressed relevant ethical implications, and specified the expectations of their participation (a single 45-60 min. semi-structured interview).

4) To further protect confidentiality, all data acquired including audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password protected personal laptop to be erased five years past this research’s completion.

3.6 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

One immediate limitation to the methodology is the scope and specificity of the participant sampling. It would be of interest to expand the research in the future to incorporate a larger sample size to contest or validate my findings. Given the ethical parameters of the MTRP, interviews are strictly with teachers; although there exists an extensive body of research pertaining to the perception and effect of CRP among teachers, it may be useful to further investigate how students themselves perceive and are affected by culturally responsive practices. Interviews with parents could also open the discussion to whether is being taught at home aligns with the characteristics of CRP, and whether or not their expectations of schools, teachers and classes are corroboratively met.

On the other hand, an advantage to this approach is that it warrants a more thorough account of the participants’ experience beyond the cursory scope of a survey. It allows for the participants to freely contribute and shape the content of the dialogue insofar as the research questions serve as a springboard for their ideas. In this way, as the researcher, this allows me to draw connections between the interview data and the
research literature, but still be attentive to the participants’ meanings behind the discussion by staying true to their context (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the process there is enough leeway to consider my own position and assess how this might influence my analysis in a way that is considerate of the complex manifestations of my research problem, namely the way in which (Creswell, 2007; Hickson, 2011). Furthermore, a potential benefit of the interview process is that participants can take a moment to imbue their personal experience with meaning, reflecting on their own practices and how they mediate the theoretical with the pragmatic.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods and procedures, and reflects a critical and self-reflexive orientation with which I undertake this research and pursue the research question. I have described here for reference the instruments of data collection, participant criteria, methods of analysis and the various ethical considerations that stem from all of the above. In short, it serves to describe the ‘how,’ the steps I initiate in investigating the topic of my study. The consequent chapter reports the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents my findings based on three semi-structured interviews conducted in person with participants Maggie, James and Wallace. Throughout the interviews, research participants shared with me their interpretations of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), providing examples of how these interpretations manifest throughout various activities and projects brought into both their Language classroom and the larger context of the school community. Analysis of the data led me to discern four overarching themes: 1) conceptualizing CRP as student-centred, assets-based growth-oriented, and transparent; 2) real-world connections, student/community initiatives, and fostering respect/empathy as reflective of CRP; 3) CRP as constrained by opposition from educational community, which was met by 4) establishing healthy rapport and finding unique entry points to cultural discussion.

I report on each theme in detail, in the ensuing sections.

4.1 Interpreting CRP: Comprehensive and Multifaceted

Participants described several facets of CRP that when considered, support a comprehensive understanding of CRP. These facets included a student-centred teaching approach, an assets-based perspective of students, personal growth and development and transparent practice.

4.1.1 CRP as student-centred teaching

All three participants described a teaching approach that centers specifically on the needs and interests of their students:
Maggie: For me the essence of [CRP] is knowing your students very well [and] understanding as much as possible—and continuing to learn—their identities, and then trying to match what you’re doing with them so that it plays on their strengths and interests and passions.

James: I think firstly it means responding—teaching in response to the needs of your students in your class. That’s the first thing I think of. So understanding the students who are in front of you and trying to bring in content that responds not only to their interests but to their background [sic].

Wallace: For me it’s—truthfully—meeting the kids where they’re at and trying to understand what are the entry points for their knowledge, for their passions and what are the experiences that they bring to class, and how do I make space for that in the content that we’re engaging.

To try and synthesize their responses here, I suggest considering my participants’ understanding of student-centred teaching as having two interconnected components: 1) accommodating curriculum and classroom activities in a way that accounts for students’ strengths and interests, and 2) developing an ongoing understanding of one’s students, their backgrounds and identities.

Addressing the first component, Wallace mentioned that he found that “as the years go on, our curriculum gets a little more rigid and constraining,” and yet, this did not discourage him from finding resources that students were enthusiastic about and “familiar with” while still meeting curriculum expectations. Additionally, James spoke to proactively seeking resources beyond what is immediately available by the Ministry and “not limiting yourself to what you’re given or what’s in a curriculum document.” Maggie
phrased it thusly: by creating “meaningful tasks” and “focusing on the big ideas of the curriculum as opposed to the nitty-gritty expectations,” teachers may find themselves having met most of those expectations along the way. In this way, my participants sought ways in which their students could engage curriculum expectations primarily through their interests rather than the other way around, by engaging interests primarily through the curriculum.

Moving onto the second component, I discern two dynamic elements in tandem. One element is the range of students’ interests and needs, and the second is the teacher’s ongoing ability to understand these interests and needs. The latter, I believe, is demonstrated by Maggie’s particular emphasis on “continuing to learn” about students’ identities. Indeed, the research described CRP as a pedagogical approach that holistically considers first and foremost who the students are and what they relate with so as to encourage sincere engagement with both schooling and the greater community (Rodriguez, Jones, Pang, & Park, 2004; Sleeter, 2010).

The teacher’s ongoing ability to understand student identity, then, is crucial in identifying what Wallace called “the entry points” for students’ knowledge and how to “make space” for the students’ assets. I move to explore this in the next section.

### 4.1.2 CRP as assets-based teaching

What arose in the interviews was a consistent reference to what one participant phrased as an “assets-based approach.” Occasionally used in association with community development practices on the premise that “all communities are asset rich” (Garouette & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014, p. 50), an assets-based approach in the literacy classroom stands parallel to CRP as an agent to inspire community building (see 4.2.3). In the
context of my participants’ responses, this assets-based approach was described in conjunction with participants’ efforts to familiarize themselves with their students’ prior skills, backgrounds and participatory roles in their wider community.

Maggie explained what she meant by an assets-based approach in detail:

…thinking about what [students] bring to the classroom as opposed to what they don’t have, or what experiences they haven’t had…to thinking of the kids as having all kinds of strengths. And they might not be the ones that typically have prepared kids for an Ontario school system, but that doesn’t mean that the kids aren’t full of strengths and talents.

For Maggie, the attitude amounts to considering what wealth of skills the students’ possess, and teaching in response to this, rather than teaching to what skills the teacher believes their students lack. I see a similar sentiment motivating James when he responded to what influenced him in selecting the resources he provided for his students:

I want to know about what their background is and their experience is because that’s going to help me really understand, not only where their learning is going to take them, but what kind of material I’m going to bring into the class that respond to their interests and their needs, and maybe things that I think they might find interesting.

To me this expressed how James valued his students’ backgrounds and experiences as they informed his judgment with respect to both the progression of his students’ learning and his choice of resources. To provide a comparison, I turn to Wallace who shared the following about the diverse skillsets respective to his students:
There are so many new and emerging types of literacy that these kids are experimenting with that we’re not doing a great job of reflecting in classrooms. So a kid who can edit and put together a YouTube video, that’s a form of literacy, they have so many skills as far as [sic] how to build a narrative arc in those videos that I don’t possess.

Here Wallace’s concern is regarding teachers who fail to respond to students’ skills with respect to media literacy, iterating again that students’ backgrounds are both abundant and meaningful, and need to be taken into consideration in the culturally responsive classroom.

This reflects back to Ladson-Billings (2008), long-standing proponent of CRP and critical race theory, who discussed how teacher’s attitudes towards their students have a significant impact on their learning:

Whether teachers think of their students as needy and deficient or capable and resilient can spell the difference between pedagogy grounded in compensatory perspectives and those grounded in critical and liberatory ones (p. 164).

Indeed, there is a possibility that teachers’ attitudes towards their students can function as “self-fulfilling prophesies” that perpetuate prescriptive behavioural roles (Rist, 1970, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2008, p. 165). In this respect, it is integral that teachers not only adopt an assets-based approach but also perpetually check and gauge their own personal biases as part of their development. This is explored in the following section.

4.1.3 CRP as personal growth and development

All three participants mentioned furthering their own educational knowledge and personal development as part of their process of becoming a culturally responsive
educator. In this respect, it is worth noting that in their responses, participants spoke to their personal lives in the same capacity as they did their professional lives.

Consider the following: Maggie explained that for her, being a culturally responsive educator “is very much about your own journey of learning, about how you think about things and about how other people experience the world.” Furthermore, she described CRP as “understanding culture and identity and how complex it is.” For Maggie, part of understanding what it means to be culturally responsive means taking into account the complexities of culture and identity and the respective ways in which we account for this complexity.

James discussed his personal development as broadening his sense of culture and identity by trying to understand education “in a global sense.” He explained how whenever he traveled, he liked to take the time to visit schools, “talk to local teachers,” and see “what’s happening in the classroom.” Furthermore, this helped him develop his “cultural awareness” but also “helped [him] in understanding students who come from immigrant families who are recent immigrants to Canada.” This seems indicative of James’ ongoing commitment both in- and outside the classroom to developing his educational knowledge.

Similar to James’ efforts to substantialize his cultural perspective, Wallace explained how “reading up [on] different resources about how to facilitate more effectively or how to pull different questions” was also part of his personal development. This wasn’t limited to texts but included “listening to TED Talks or podcasts like This American Life or radio stations.” Yet beyond the medium of the resource itself, he emphasized always considering its practical applications to both himself and his students:
…thinking of it from a vein of, is there value for this in my classroom, how can I incorporate this in my classroom, but also what impact does it have on me as a person, how can I apply this to my own life?

In addition to this, Wallace made reference to the importance of receiving feedback for self-improvement as a means to resist complacency:

…there’s always going to be a tendency to gravitate to the path of least resistance, ‘I’ve always done it this way, so maybe I’ll always do it this way,’ so making sure I don't get complacent or asking myself or asking my students what areas that I could grow in or where might there be oversights, and being comfortable enough to sit with that feedback and try to figure out ways to go forward.

Preexisting research emphasizes the urgency of complicating teachers’ educational knowledge and positioning; what teachers know or presume they know certainly goes beyond content, but moreover requires further extension towards critical thinking through a “rhetoric of reflexiveness” (Slee, 2010, p. 19). This reflexive positioning is further explored in the ensuing section, which examines how my participants critically engaged with their personal biases in an effort to move towards a transparent approach to their practice.

### 4.1.4 CRP as transparent practice with respect to bias

All participants spoke to CRP as encompassing a transparent approach to teaching that makes personal bias explicit. This was reflected in their integration of curriculum, intent and the various challenges encountered in class.

Beyond suggesting that “teachers should be quite explicit about what they’re doing,” Maggie also emphasized the importance of not only “trying to understand what
your own biases and mental models are and stereotypes, and all those kinds of things that limit your perspective,” but furthermore “trying to challenge them in yourself.” This idea was consistent among my other participants as well. When I asked James how he adequately prepared so as to ensure a non-prescriptive presentation of course content, he responded in part by emphasizing that “you state your own bias, and be transparent with the students of your previous experiences.” Similarly, Wallace explained how a “challenge” for him was “always understanding that [he] bring[s] a certain bias to the table and a certain experience to the table.”

The significance of teachers’ awareness and confrontation of their own personal biases is consistently reflected in the research. Brown-Jeffey and Cooper (2011) argued that if teachers wish to be “culturally attuned to the identities of their students,” it requires an awareness of their own identities, “as well as how those identities may be divergent from the identities of their students” (p. 73). Gay and Howard (2000)—speaking with respect to European-American teachers in particular—argued that teachers need to “seriously analyze and change their cultural biases and ethnic prejudices (toward self and others)” otherwise risk perpetuating a disengaged and non-critical approach to curriculum in their students (p. 8). Furthermore, Parhar and Sensoy (2011) suggested that the participants of their research felt that “teachers must move beyond feelings of hesitancy to critically self-reflect upon their biases and prejudices and how they are implicated in their practice” (p. 206).

In the case of my participants, not only did they emphasize personally acknowledging their own biases and how these mental models are constructed, but also by making this overt to their students and furthermore questioning the origin and nature
of these biases themselves, set the environment for a more collective effort in the construction of meaning.

4.2 CRP in Practice: Making Student Experience Meaningful and Relevant

Participants emphasized the importance of reinforcing enduring understanding in that the content students explored in class was made meaningful and relevant to their lives. This involved further extending students’ learning to what was occurring in both their communities and the larger society. I was able to identify five practices to which my participants brought this about, namely through making real-world connections, establishing student initiatives, building community, fostering a culture of respect, and teaching empathy.

4.2.1 Real-world connections

In their own unique ways, each of my participants spoke about how they extended students’ learning in the classroom to tangible, real-world applications.

Maggie: …we were looking at issues of teaching conflict and peace…. So we looked at conflict in stories, we looked at conflict in our personal lives, we looked at world conflict…we chose novel studies around—we used the Holocaust as a theme—and we actually took the kids to New York and we went to the UN and we went to Ellis Island.

James: We did a lot of ‘outside the classroom’ pieces. Whether it was looking at pre-structured programs like ‘Free The Children’ and ‘Me to We’ or other pieces like responding—we do a lot of current events—so for example my students watched…a live stream of the fall of the leader in Egypt, and we watched that whole process transpire in real-time, and we had a dialogue.
Wallace: …there’s so many other perspectives that I could either bring into my classroom or that I could bring my classroom to, …so trying to understand how to go about doing that, …be it having a spoken word artist come into the classroom, or going down and watching [documentary films], or going down and looking at a photo exhibit in Toronto. I think there’s all these fantastic teaching tools that exist outside the classroom walls that add a certain depth and breadth to the education that I couldn’t possibly, and it’s trying to figure out ways to integrate those things more.

Along all my participants’ responses were practical ways in which curriculum was extended beyond the classroom environment. In some instances, students leave the formalized physical environment of the classroom, as in Maggie’s case, by taking a trip to Ellis Island, or in Wallace’s case, by going to a theatre to watch a documentary film or by visiting a photo exhibit. In another instance, student learning was extended by bringing resources into the classroom as it was in James’s case, through a live-stream following of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. In either case, participants shared practical attempts to encounter different perspectives and integrate a multidimensional engagement with the curriculum, similar to how Maggie explored the theme of conflict in stories, in students’ personal lives, and on a global scale.

This aligns with the research, which reflects the importance of substantializing student learning by complicating the curriculum in a way that engages “critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration and the recognition of multiple perspectives,” which Villegas and Lucas (2002) argued “[prepares] students to become active participants in a democracy” (p. 25). Ladson-Billings (2008) also argued that culturally responsive
teachers “deconstruct, construct and reconstruct” the curriculum as their students attempt to “make sense” of it through critical analysis (p. 166).

Apropos to personalizing course content for students, I found a similar ethos driving my participants’ efforts to support student initiatives.

### 4.2.2 Integrating student initiatives

Participants underlined that students feel a sense of ownership towards their curriculum engagements when their issues, interests and needs are addressed. In my interviews, I found that my participants often worked towards enabling opportunities where students could actively express their concerns, explore their interests and respond to issues that were relevant to them.

In the years of her role as a principal, Maggie discussed the organization of a student council and a Participatory Action Research Project primarily as an effort to provide a means to identify with students and their needs (see also 4.4.2):

[In the Participatory Action Research Project,] the kids were researchers along with the teachers and the parents, and they were able to make change in the school. So that’s another way that we got to know them, because that research project came out of issues they had. And student council, they brought up issues they had, things that they were concerned with. Yeah, so there were all kinds of things going on where we were trying to give them an opportunity to express themselves.

This could be an example of a long-term, school-wide effort, although participants also referred to activities specific to a classroom.
In particular, James discussed a “movie-making project” that was “very collaborative, very self-directed or group-directed” which students “took a lot of ownership over”:

…they did public service announcements and they got to choose whatever they thought was important to have a public service announcement about, so they created these pieces that were completely directed by their own ideas whether it was kids using too much technology, or anything from gay rights to…bullying.

James’s intention here was for his students to direct their own learning by allowing them to speak to topics of their own choosing, which they were passionate about. Wallace spoke of a similar activity where students were to “film rants…where they could complain about anything…or celebrate something that you’re really passionate about on a positive side.” Not only did both participants’ incorporate student choice, but their efforts were also indicative of the student-centred aspect of CRP in motivating student ownership. Wallace spoke to his students experiencing ownership in the following way:

…by virtue of seeing themselves out there and hearing their voices and their concerns, I mean that was a small thing, and…maybe not culturally responsive in the sense that race, class, ethnicity, but culturally responsive in that there are different voices, different faces being expressed at the front of the room that aren’t mine, that are theirs, and that they have choice in determining what they’re speaking about.

My findings here directly correlate with the student-centred approach my participants described in 4.1.1. Collie and Slater (1987) related the importance of “student-centred activities” particularly when working with “students who are not literature specialists and
who may not as yet have developed a wish to read literature in the target language on their own initiative” (p. 9). But beyond this, student initiative is significant precisely because of how it enables students to interact with curriculum content in a way that is meaningful to them, so as to foster a sense of “cultural competence,” in other words that both teachers and students are able to work effectively across cultural circumstances (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 483).

4.2.3 Community building

Two of my participants discussed their work in creating meaningful relationships with their communities. Maggie described an initiative where “parents would be invited to tea with the principal, and a different cultural group would host…and tell us about their culture.” This was part of the school’s ongoing effort to pattern the school environment to be representative of the cultures it represented:

Usually we would have a conversation about you know—how is school different in Canada than where you’re from? And what kind of things are you missing about education? And so things came up—like, they really wanted cricket at the school. So we started a cricket club. And we had a partnership with the senior’s club across the road so we started intergenerational clubs…. As people let us know they wanted things happening, we tried to act on them.

In James’s classroom, students were provided with the opportunity to initiate a fundraiser for aid organizations in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010. He also described an initiative called “Dare Your Teacher Day,” in an effort to raise money for schools in lower socioeconomic areas in Toronto. He explained that in this respect “we do a lot of community building in the classroom.”
Although Wallace did not speak to his efforts in community building, he aligned the learning goals he set for his students very clearly as instilling the idea that they have “an active role in their culture and community.”

The efforts my participants describe here are consistent with research that calls for student participation in asset-based work (Garouette & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014). Furthermore, student engagement of this kind can bring about a deeper understanding of their role as members of an interconnected community (Garouette & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014).

4.2.4 Fostering a culture of respect

Two of my participants spoke explicitly to their efforts in establishing a classroom culture of respect. According to Maggie, “making it clear…that identities are complex and that everybody has a different point of view and that we need to respect different experiences” is one way in which such an environment can be fostered. Practically speaking, Maggie explicitly incorporated character education into assemblies as an approach to fostering respect, where “we’re talking about respect and that kind of stuff all the time.” She also emphasized these were not isolated events but that she would “weave character education into the units and what we were doing.”

Furthermore, James explained how in his classroom, they would “[talk] a lot about respect, and having respect for each others’ beliefs.” He explained:

That's what—intermediate, it’s all about—I believe, I really do believe—developing a strong rapport with your students which will allow for honest, authentic conversations. Students at that age can see right through an inauthentic
teacher. But if you are authentic and honest with your students, and open to their ideas, then they will be open to your ideas.

James believed that his authenticity with his students enabled him to establish “an open classroom that was open to conversations and honesty.” To this end, he also shared how he explicitly discussed what a respectful classroom “looked like” with his students, by “talking about attentive listening, and talking about respectful language.”

I explore how authenticity enabled my participants to negotiate difficult topics in the classroom in 4.4, but I believe the emerging consideration at this point is that part of what enables productive dialogue in the class is a healthy culture of respect, which involves participation from teachers as well as students. Cammarota and Romero (2009) described the importance of a “critical pedagogy” which involves “authentic caring in which educators demonstrate deep respect for students as full human beings” (as cited in Sleeter, 2010, p. 574), while Brown-Jeffey and Cooper (2011) discussed how “teachers should recognize and respect their students for who they are as individuals and as members of a cultural group” in their efforts to establish a culturally respectful environment (p. 77).

4.2.5 Teaching empathy

In response to the second supplementary question of my guiding inquiry, the following theme emerged: participants often incorporated culturally specific literature in their effort to broaden perspectives in the classroom as an instructional initiative to teaching empathy. I discuss what they shared with me here.

Maggie discussed an experience from her first year of teaching at an all-girls private school, where students read a book by Jane Yolen called *Encounter*, which was
“from the perspective of an indigenous child.” She incorporated activities such as in-role journal writing, so as to “look at different perspectives,” and although the perspective at hand “wasn’t necessarily related to their culture,” it was rather about having students consider “because they were in this very privileged environment, what would it be like to be the other.”

To deconstruct this to some extent, part of the power of activities such as in-role journal writing is that they have the ability to gently displace students from what could be an insular understanding of their own place of privilege and culture, to considering the possibilities of experiences beyond their own frame of reference. As always, there is a certain risk to these activities if they are taken out of context, out from our interpretations and biases. For example, Parhar and Sensoy (2011) discussed in their findings that one teacher who implemented a “slave diary” activity, realized that her “learning objectives were far from being met” (p. 207). In this respect, Maggie explained that she was trying to choose texts with themes that were “universal and engaging,” but ones that “kids could bring their own experiences to.” She elaborated her opinion:

A text is really created between the text and the reader. So it’s a different text for everybody who reads it. That’s something that I deliberately talked to [students] about. …From my perspective, once the words hit the page and it’s published, it’s not really the author’s anymore, it’s somewhere between the text and the reader. Bound up in the reading experience is what readers bring to the text, our interpretations and experiences. Manzo and Manzo (1995) termed this, and what was at the time an emerging view, as “actualization perspective” which “merges the socio-political emphasis on the effect of the text on the reader with the transactive emphasis on the
reader’s own contribution” (p. 140). It is this interpretive space where empathy transpires that teachers must account for, investigate, and extend with their students.

Correspondingly, Wallace expressed his belief that “literature is one of the best ways you can truly come to understand another person’s perspective or another person’s feelings or experiences.” He continued:

So I think it has an incredible ability to create these bridges of empathy, where we’re asked to try on a different hat or another person’s shoes for a bit, and though we might not completely understand where that person’s coming from, we might begin to come to understand where that person’s at.

From this I believe it can be said that part of the culturally responsive teacher’s accounting for the interpretive space relates back to their efforts to set the grounds wherein this reciprocity is established between the text and the student: students relate to the content as much as the content resonates with students. Without this precondition, the possibility of empathy is removed or gratuitous at best.

I turn to James to emphasize this point. James shared with me his belief that “it’s incredibly important” for students to read about other cultures, but having said that, “it’s really important on how you do it.” To elaborate:

If it’s kind of tokenistic, then it’s a waste of time. Because [then] they don’t understand why it’s important—it’s not relevant to them. So it’s always about making pieces relevant. You know if you’re just going to bring in a short story about Asian immigrants as a singular piece of text and then you’re going to read it one day and that’s all you do, that to me is tokenistic. I don't think you’re going to
build capacity or empathy for cultural awareness through that, I think what it has
to be is ongoing and integrated into everything that you do.

For James, part of what it means to provide students with the opportunity for empathy to
occur is in this very extension of relevance, and by further complicating and elaborating
upon the literature.

The research literature highlights the many benefits of fostering empathy among
students. In particular, it discussed how students’ capacity to identify with teachers, the
school and the overall community lead to better performance in all aspects of academic,
extracurricular and domestic life (Blum, Mcneeley, & Rinehart, 2002; Schargel,
Thacker, & Bell, 2007). Yet it is imperative to consider the risks of a passive form of
empathy, what Boler (1997) described as a “consumptive mode of identification with the
other,” where students empathize with different perspectives in a self-gratifying way (p.
253). Part of navigating this risk involves taking into account the students’ feedback,
repositioning one’s approach, and reincorporating newly acquired knowledge into
empathic engagements (Warren, 2013). This self-reflexive pedagogical adaptation
corroborates with what was described in 4.1.3 with respect to the culturally responsive
teacher’s ongoing development. Digić, Dosković, Stojiljković, and Todorović (2014)
substantialized this even further in speaking of “self-concept,” or a holistic perception
and evaluation of one’s socio-global and physical-psychological experiences, as integral
to improving the teacher’s empathic capacities (pp. 875-876).

4.3 Community Opposition as Constraint to Exploring Cultural Controversy

One of the major components of culturally responsive pedagogy is “to challenge
issues of power and openly confront racial and social injustices” (Gay, 2000, as cited in
Yet this often places the teacher in a position vulnerable to censure from members of the learning community. There were many constraints to a culturally responsive pedagogical approach that my participants responded to, including opposition from students, colleagues and parents. In this section, I explore how the possibility of opposition from the learning community could pose challenges to teachers exploring culturally controversial subjects.

Graham shared the following anecdote, which aptly emphasizes the need to explore these topics of controversy:

We had students in our one classroom chanting—it was a grade 7 classroom—I walked by at break and they were chanting ‘we are the one percent.’ And those are the moments where the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, and you realize that there needs to be more done to help them understand their position of privilege, for example, without being dictatorial about how you’re teaching.

Similarly, Simon shared how he was teaching a unit of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, bringing in the topic of carding policies in Toronto and the idea of “inherited privilege or inherited penalty,” and explained that “when you’re talking to a class of predominantly white students about white privilege, they’re not entirely receptive to the fact that it exists.”

Furthermore, Simon spoke to the resistance he encountered from his colleagues: …they might not be ready to have those conversations and because we try to coordinate courses across things that they might not be ready or they don't want to or they fear what it is, so you kind of have to navigate those lines and say, ‘well okay if my colleagues aren’t comfortable discussing this and I’m one of three of
them who are teaching this course, what right do I have to enforce this opinion on them?’

Naomi also explained that at the time that she was teaching, “the message to teachers was that they have to reach certain expectations” and that this was reflected in the Education Quality and Accountability Office and through standardized testing, resulting in teachers feeling “a little more nervous” about teaching highly individualized curriculum.

With respect to parent opposition, Maggie shared with me that one grandmother in the community was “very, very angry” about the content she was teaching regarding Canadian colonization because of the fact that “we were presenting this other story that made the explorers not look so good.” James told me that he encountered parents who thought his choice of bringing in resources with controversial content was “inappropriate.” However, he considered his selection of The Outsiders as worthy of study because “it talks a ton about class,” despite its depictions of gang culture, violent imagery, underage drinking and smoking.

To complicate matters further, my participants’ responses suggest that the very possibility of opposition, particularly from parents, can be a deterring factor for teachers to explore controversy entirely. For example, Wallace shared the following:

We potentially thought about bringing in The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian in a Grade 7 curriculum and there were concerns where as a Catholic school—and there’s even just the brief mention of masturbation and we have a pretty liberal admin and things like that—but even then some teachers are like, ‘ah, I don't know if I want to deal with that headache of having that conversation with a parent,’ so I guess, okay, we’re not doing it this year.
At the risk of being met with censure, teachers may not be willing to pursue culturally controversial topics to the extent that they could. James spoke on this constraint in more general terms:

A lot of teachers are fearful—rightly so—of bringing in something that’s too controversial, because it’s such a litigious society now in education and parents are so quick to—when I was a kid at least, and certainly when my parents were kids, what the teacher said was what the teacher said, and now—and I’m okay with this—but now, parents are not shy to question what you are doing, or how you’re doing it, not shy at all.

Although James is speaking of the larger social milieu in this context, it is perhaps significant to observe that a similar opinion arose in the research literature. Research participants in Parhar and Sensoy’s (2011) work also raised their awareness of a general “reluctance to experience discomfort” among their colleagues (p. 213). Notwithstanding, teachers are certainly justified in their concerns toward parents, their reactions and positions. However and on a side, it seems worthwhile to note the possibility that this concern be used in defense against exploring controversy and discomfort, which could detract from teachers’ efforts to engage a critical pedagogy. Indeed, Parhar and Sensoy’s (2011) study observed that their participants associated experiencing discomfort as a precondition to critical self-reflection. Once again this echoes what was discussed in 4.1.3 with respect to ongoing self-development.

Regardless, for my participants, there was both willingness and a means to explore opportunities to develop their pedagogy in this respect. For example, James offered me some advice as a starting teacher to “take risks” and to “[not] be shy to touch
controversial topics with your students because that’s what they want to know. And that’s what really legitimately engages them.” How my participants navigated this discomfort is further explored in the ensuing section.

4.4 Navigating Constraints: Authenticity

As discussed in section 4.2.4, part of establishing a culture of respect in the culturally responsive literacy classroom involves coming from a place of authenticity (for a compelling account of the impact of pedagogical authenticity, see also Kreber, 2010). In this section I discuss how my participants managed to explore difficult topics, navigate constraint, and embrace discomforting moments.

4.4.1 Communication and ongoing rapport with parents

One theme that was prevalent among all three participants was an emphasis on the importance of developing communication and a healthy rapport with parents. Returning to Maggie’s anecdote regarding the grandmother who was upset with course content:

What I said to her was, you know, this is great that we are doing something in school that is interesting enough for you to—that you’re feeling strongly that we shouldn’t be doing it. That’s kind of how our approach to [unintelligible] like that’s great! We’re starting a conversation! We don’t have to agree with each other, the fact that we’re having a conversation, that’s wonderful!

Despite there being a disagreement, Maggie strongly valued any initiative towards conversation as part of coming to a better understanding of herself, her students, and her community.

Similarly, Wallace talked about explaining the learning goals behind his incorporation of media texts in his class, by “communicating to [parents] or making it
clear to them that the same skillsets [from studying conventional texts] will transfer over.” Not only was it important for Wallace to have clear learning goals for his students, but also it was imperative that he was transparent about them.

In James’s case, he discussed how he would maintain email communication with parents every two weeks “with exactly what we were talking about in class—all the topics we were talking about—in hopes that they would have those conversations at home, which they often did.” What is unique to James’s response here is that part of his motivation to keeping communication with parents is not only to be transparent with parents about course content, but also to extend his students’ learning to their life outside the school at home.

When I asked James to extend any words of advice to a beginning teacher, he suggested that I “keep parents aware of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it.” He explained:

The reason I had almost no parent issues was because I always told the parents what I was doing and why I was doing it, and allowed them to ask me questions. Having an open line of communications with them is vital to feeling free to bring in controversial topics and resources to use with your students. Rather than feel constricted by the possibility of parents’ opposition to course content, he found that ongoing communication enabled him to explore contentious subjects.

4.4.2 Authentic entry points to exploring cultural controversy

In light of all these findings, I would like to propose a final consideration, namely that participants’ cultural identifications provided different entry points to discussing difficult topics within the classroom in an authentic and highly individualized way. The
guiding theoretical positioning behind this section was perhaps best articulated by Felman and Laub (1992), who succinctly expressed that if education “does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of (an explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught... " (p. 53). In this respect, this section explores how my participants attempted to hit on these crises or the aforementioned cultural controversies through their respective cultural identifications.

To begin, Maggie recalled a time when she confronted students who were using the words ‘fag’ and ‘gay’ as insults. Maggie, who self-identified as Jewish, recounted to the students an experience from her own past about a friend who had unknowingly used the word ‘Jew’ as a verb, not realizing it was anti-Semitic. She explained this to her students describing it as “the same thing with calling someone a ‘fag’ or saying that ‘it’s gay’. Maybe you’re not making the connection, but you’re basically putting down anybody who’s gay and that’s not okay.” Drawing from a particular cultural experience she identified with, Maggie was able to speak from an authentic place to open up a dialogue and to challenge the use of discriminatory language.

James, who self-identified as gay, shared that the subject of gay rights was “important” to him insofar as it “affects my life.” Given his cultural identifications, he was motivated to incorporate “pieces about equity in terms of sexual orientation” into his classroom. For James, the incorporation of these pieces came from a deeply personal place but were ultimately supplemented with discussions that extended to the larger culture and to history:
…talking about when my student would use a word like ‘faggot,’ talking about what that means and the cultural implications of saying something like that, and how hurtful it is, and the history of gay rights and—that’s important. And I think that having those conversations is so integral to developing a student who is aware and culturally aware of the world around them.

As personally important as it was to explore these difficult topics, for James it was just as imperative that they were explored in a transparent and honest way that still honoured students’ individualities, opinions and backgrounds. In particular, he spoke to how he would allow students to “have a different point of view”:

I had a couple students in my class who were brought up in very religious Christian households, a couple students who were raised in Muslim households, where that piece wasn't culturally similar to how I was raised and what I believe, and I allow for that opinion and that dissent to my opinion and the opinions of others. And ensuring that students are able to open up dialogue.

In this way, both his cultural identification and his authentic approach to discussion enabled James to speak to social injustice with respect to gay rights.

For James and Maggie, their cultural identifications set a place from which they felt empowered to explore difficult and controversial topics around culture. However, questions arise as to how educators who do not positively identify with a particular culture might experience difficulty in doing the same. In Wallace’s case, he was very forthright when he acknowledged the fact that he was part of a dominant cultural identity, given that he was a “white, heterosexual male.” Since the demographics of his classroom was “predominantly very privileged, predominantly white” students, he emphasized that
he felt it was important to create a safe classroom environment where students who possessed an “alternative voice” felt comfortable in sharing their perspectives.

When asked to recall specific examples of incorporating culturally specific literature in his lessons, Wallace first responded by describing the wider context of his school’s focus and trends, namely the adherence to teaching “formal texts,” such as short stories, novels and text-based literature. He then gave an example where his choice of literature worked within the school’s adherences in an effort to reflect cultural diversity (specifically regarding ethnicity), and to address what he later phrased as the “deficit of perspective” in his classroom:

…instead of having just the standard white male protagonist…I had two young Hispanic people. And that’s not to say I have a lot of Hispanic kids in my class, but it brought in a different voice, different cadences and different language in that text.

Part of CRP is broadening class curriculum to include multiple perspectives (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) but as Wallace explained:

There’s the…challenge of, when you explore a text especially with a school like mine where there’s maybe ten or fifteen percent, visible minority population of that person [sic] becomes the voice for that specific segment of the population, right? So, ‘oh there’s a black kid in class, what’s his experience in that?’ And there is a danger in that and you definitely need to caution students against that and challenge that when it comes up…

This was directly relevant to the challenges of empathy mentioned earlier in 4.2.5. Although Wallace took precaution to ensure that his students do not generalize a
particular individual’s experience, he did not consider himself possessive of this “alternative voice” and perhaps to a certain degree felt limited in his capacity to speak on the subjective experiences of these alternative voices.

Where Wallace’s approach to engaging cultural subjects was unique in this respect was that he was able to come from a different approach than those of James and Maggie. The “bigger focus” for Wallace was rather in “incorporating different types of new media.” His responses were largely emphatic on this point, of addressing culture qua multi-literacies and new media, than on culture qua race and ethnicity. He shared how his notions of CRP “evolved and expanded” to represent a variety of new media or digital content. For Wallace, the text is not a literally bound artifact, by which I mean it is neither limited by its medium nor its scope. Particularly, he described a 3-D documentary that takes place in a Syrian refugee camp he studied with his students. He spoke of the experience in this way:

…having the students participate or look at this thing where it very much put them in a Syrian refugee camp with the potential to guide the framing of each scene and determine what they were looking at and how they looked at things, I think it really brought it home of what that experience was like for them. And I think yes that’s a novel text, a 3-D thing, but I think it's the same when you pull in a memoir. We looked at “Leila” by Marina Nemat this year with my Grade Ten boys, and I think a memoir of people in a war zone and having a young teenage girl tell that in a short story account I think resonated with them because they could relate on some level—they couldn’t entirely—but they came to a level of understanding through that.
For Wallace, conversations around cultural topics such as race and ethnicity were voiced as “vital,” and yet he voiced a concern that the extent to which these conversations were explored seemed limited by the lack of diverse perspectives in the classroom (perhaps even including his own). However, based on his response, I believe he is implementing a creative and highly authentic approach that still engages the very difficult topics, regardless of the medium’s novelty.

Among my participants’ practical applications of CRP, I find several places where many pedagogical lines overlap. James expressed this very succinctly, in that, “culturally responsive pedagogy really infiltrates everything.” For example, the practical efforts my participants made towards establishing a sense of community was deeply tied to their understanding of CRP as student-centred. Part of this was based on my participants’ belief that the students’ possessed preexisting assets, which were further explored through real-world connections so that students could—as Maggie described—“experience having the power to make change in their own environment.” In this way, the applications, constraints and the means of negotiation the constraints of CRP as described above should be considered not as a series of disconnected events isolated in their effects, but rather part of an educator’s ongoing development of what it means to teach in a culturally responsive way. Further implications of this are addressed in the final chapter.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this project was largely investigative, to extend out from the literature to practical applications of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), namely a teaching approach that accounts for the cultures both present in the classroom and the greater society. What follows hereafter is a succinct overview of this research’s findings and their significances, as well as the resulting implications to both the educational community and my own personal practice. In addition, I include some initial pragmatic recommendations for current and future educators. Finally, I close by indicating areas for proceeding research based on this project’s endeavours.

5.1 Significance of Key Themes

The first theme that emerged from the research was conceptualizing CRP as student-centred, assets-based growth-oriented, and transparent. All participants provided a complex and multifaceted understanding of CRP. CRP was not ascribed to a single feature but was largely described as an approach that involved the dynamic way in which teachers identified with students and themselves.

The second theme explored participants’ discussions of culturally responsive practice, which in addition to making real-world connections, was described as both student- and community-driven, and supplemented through fostering an inclusive and respectful environment that accounted for building empathetic relationships. Participants felt that establishing such an environment enabled them to enact on their commitments to exploring different cultural perspectives within and outside the classroom.
The third theme pertained to CRP constraints, namely the opposition participants encountered from the educational community, particularly where perspectives conflicted among both students in the classroom and parents outside the classroom.

The fourth theme explored how participants found ways of negotiating these constraints through teaching from a position of transparency and authenticity in their efforts to establish healthy rapport with parents, and also by finding unique entry points to cultural discussion.

For the most part these findings aligned with preexisting research explored in chapter 2. Returning to the themes explored in the literature review, participants discussed how personal growth and development through being open to students’ feedback was integral to creating an inclusive environment. Participants took efforts to foster empathy in the classroom by complicating students’ relationships to texts, and by extending course content and student learning in a counter-tokenistic way through considering real-world applications and diversifying perspectives.

Regarding where participants felt enabled to engage and navigate cultural controversies with their students, findings were unique in that they reflected each participant’s individuality in their genuine identifications with a particular culture. Whether this was accomplished by sharing a personal experience of discrimination, by drawing from the values inspired by their sexual orientation, or by finding alternative ways to speak to other cultures to which they did not belong, each participant positioned him- or herself in a way that enabled them to speak to social injustice.
5.2 Implications

There are multiple implications to consider in light of this study with respect to how CRP is engaged in the literacy classroom. I begin by discussing the broad implications of the project for the wider educational community. Subsequently, I discuss the narrow implications of the project with respect to myself in my roles as both a starting teacher and ongoing researcher.

5.2.1 Implications to educational community

Broadly speaking, I believe my findings implicate larger administrative and supervisory entities in formal education to not only affirm and propagate the multidimensional features of CRP, but to also be explicit about the highly individualized and contextualized nature of a culturally responsive pedagogy. In Ontario, this would include the Ministry of Education, the Ontario College of Teachers, teachers’ unions and teacher education programs. This could lead to resources based on teachers’ testimonies and personal accounts of what has or has not worked in their classroom, so as to provide the community of teachers with an individualized, context-specific understanding of CRP. Perhaps this could be collected through a highly iterative, qualitative research process involving a series of interviews and transcripts of a specific sample of participants, regularly updated and shared prolifically through the Ministry, or through corresponding websites, newsletters, et cetera. Furthermore, I encourage teachers and educators to consider independently seeking out new knowledge and practical approaches to CRP, whether by actively pursuing professional development or requesting administration to make such resources more readily accessible.
5.2.2 Implications to personal practice

As a prospective educator, part of my motivation behind this project was based on my interest in understanding what it means to provide the experience of a culturally responsive education. There is a saying that the function of art is to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. I believe this is largely why I fell into literature, and why I believe that part of the experience of literacy classrooms is to investigate this discomfort and simultaneously be comforted.

For me, education needs to propagate democratic and social-justice minded classrooms where identity, difference, and dissent can provide valuable entry points to knowledge and knowledge construction. Indeed, one reverberating takeaway from my findings is the need to actively engage the things that make up our respective identities, and furthermore explore the differences among them. I think this means stepping away from standardizing students, despite how prolific standardization is throughout all levels of education, especially as it perpetuates to serve the neoliberal agenda of a system wherein the main goals are to secure, streamline and allocate children’s futures as a kind of economy. Again, my findings repeatedly stress how vital it is to student development that teacher’s see them as highly autonomous individuals. In this respect, throughout this project, I’ve come to accept the onus, status and responsibility of a teacher as one who aims to disrupt this logic of prescription.

The implications this project has on my part as a future educator is a commitment to fostering an authentic sense of autonomy and responsibility for who my students are as human beings, and what this means in the context of a classroom, a school, a community and a society that consists of a wide range of experiences, values and knowledges. These
acknowledgements demand of me an ongoing development of my knowledge of culture and my own identity. In this way, I think CRP aligns closely with critical pedagogy in its purpose to equip students with the skills necessary to engage what Giroux (1987) described as a radical literacy, that is a kind of reading and interpretation not exclusive to text but of the very space one occupies, and of the relationships between these spaces, of the people whose lives we affect and are affected by. As important as it is to foster this in my students, it is imperative to me that I continue to develop this literacy in myself as well.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of my project, I propose a few of many possible recommendations. Firstly, schools need to account for the formation of safe spaces and programs in schools to accommodate a multiplicity of identities, the goals and boundaries of which are as fluid and dynamic as the cultures they represent. I encourage teachers to consider integrating and normalizing cultural experiences in a way that does not accept representations of the cultural experience verbatim but acknowledges it as a partialized account to ensure that students do not generalize narratives. Additionally, teachers could look beyond the notion of their practice as a means of understanding but for effect—how are students extending their critical thinking skills? Are they factoring a comprehensive approach to considering the oversights, inclusions, and exclusions to their critiques? In this respect, teachers might also consider working towards disrupting the perpetuation of stereotypes, and teach students the skills necessary to develop awareness around their habits of iterating totalizing narratives.
More generally, teachers, schools, and administration must account for the biased histories that drive the education system and explicitly address the implications of these histories in their daily practice with students and their communities. I recommend teachers incorporate more student- and community-centred initiatives, extending student learning further through unit studies that correspond with initiatives in an ongoing and dynamic way. More than this, I suggest teachers endeavour to take up the challenge of exploring controversy and discomfort especially as it relates to social injustice through these overarching unit studies. In this respect, the governing entities in education need to prioritize provisional support networks for teachers to accurately inform themselves of culturally respectful/sensitive pedagogical approaches in exploring such content. One part of this support could be manifested in professional development workshops and regularly updated resources that deviate from transmitting a standard of knowledge but rather provide opportunities for dialogue in an effort to construct meaning.

Lastly, teachers may find solidarity among parents, colleagues, and administration by being transparent about the resources they use to spark discussions on controversial topics in their classrooms, while still honoring the cultural values of the community.

5.4 Concluding comments and areas for further research

My participants’ responses and the resulting findings were informative and opened up questions that could be taken in many possible directions. With that said, given the focus of this research project, it remains important to keep in mind that which was not pursued, particularly that my participants’ self-perceptions (of their learning goals, or levels of transparency and communication with parents, etc.) corroborated with student, parent or administration perceptions. In addition, it should be noted that all my
participants were open proponents of CRP. They were also vocally explicit about acknowledging their membership in a dominant culture, namely that they self-identified as White. Another limitation to my research in this respect is that it did not consider the accounts of educators who self-identified with a non-dominant culture and how this may have informed their understanding and practice of CRP. Nevertheless, having considered these limitations and giving credence to my participants’ responses, there are several significant takeaways to consider. These are summarized below.

In her seminal work *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) spoke to the urgency required of White teachers to acknowledge their membership in a dominant culture, furthermore acknowledging that Whiteness is a culture and hence subject to the same modes of critical analysis. Given that my participants were familiar with CRP and acknowledged their culture, this raises interesting questions: 1) if students are resistant to acknowledge their own positions of power, and if teachers do not feel that they possess this ‘alternative voice,’ where and how can discussions around privilege and class take place? And 2) is it fair then that the onus falls on minoritized students to bring up these discussions? Although my project explores the former question to some extent, both questions could be further explored.

Secondly, as I briefly mentioned in the introduction of this section, the project was limited in its sample size and further research could move to substantialize the scope of this study, to encompass teachers who self-identify with a non-dominant culture. Future research should also explore the extent of empathy and its perceived actualizations among members of the learning community beyond teachers. More investigation into how teachers work collaboratively and communicate with the learning community would
be valuable. Additionally, research could investigate how teacher education programs adequately prepare teacher candidates to experience discomfort and engage opposition. Pragmatically speaking, future research could further explore the ways in which students experience discomfort, and how teachers navigate the students’ resistance as a result.

I believe the project’s findings can be placed in relief to a theoretical framework of unlearning as suggested by Britzman (1998). Just as my participants were explicit about being aware of personal bias, Kumashiro (2000) explained how this concept of unlearning functions to counter the fact that “Whiteness is often disguised as ‘authenticity’” in a normative way (p. 37). Future research could explicitly explore how the normativity of a dominant culture affects and constrains the efforts of CRP.

To conclude, a major finding from this study was how a deeply personalized and authentic approach to CRP could enable educators to explore contentious discussions with their students. This implies teachers continually develop their understanding of CRP in a dynamic learning environment that students approach with a highly individual set of beliefs, values, and knowledge. Finally, speaking now on a personal level, the project allowed me the opportunity to explore the methods and philosophies that sustain CRP, and to depart with a holistic understanding of its constitution. It is within the intersections of cultural and critical theory, pedagogical training, personal growth, bias awareness, and a student-oriented approach marked by solicitude, where empathy is bridged between teachers, students and members of the wider school community.
References


Date:_______________________________

Dear ______________________________,

My name is Aaron Joo and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on intermediate teachers’ interpretations and applications of culturally responsive pedagogy. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have demonstrated commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy. I believe that your knowledge and experience will provide insight into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructors ___________________ and __________________. You are free to change your
mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will erase the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Aaron Joo
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Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Aaron Joo and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.
Introductory Script:

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making the time to meet me today. As I mentioned in our correspondence, my research aims to investigate how educators with experience teaching intermediate Language understand and reflect culturally responsive practice. The length of the interview will be about 45-60 minutes, and I’ll be asking you a series of questions on your beliefs, practice, support and constraints around culturally responsive pedagogy. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and that you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. Background Information
   1) Would you speak a little bit on your educational background?
   2) What do you teach?
   3) How long have you worked as a teacher?
   4) How long have you been teaching at your current school?
   5) Can you provide me with a range of the kinds of texts your students like to read?
6) How receptive would you say your students are to reading culturally specific literature (i.e. literature that illuminates the experiences of a member of a particular cultural group)?

2. Beliefs and Values

1) What drew you to teaching Language?

2) What thoughts and feelings come to mind when I say the words “culturally responsive”?

3) Where do you see the connection between literacy and culturally responsive education?

4) In your opinion, what does it mean to be a culturally responsive Language teacher?

5) In your opinion, how important is it that students’ engage literature about their own cultures? How important is it that students’ engage literature about other cultures?

6) What draws you to pursue a commitment in this area?

3. Practice

1) In what ways do you incorporate culturally specific content into your Language lessons?
   a. What steps do you take to familiarize yourself with this content?
   b. What influences you in choosing some culturally specific content over another?

2) How do you provide students the opportunity to be culturally responsive?

3) Can you provide an example of a lesson where students have this opportunity?
a. What do you hope your students will ultimately take away from these lessons?

b. What have you found to be effective in achieving these learning outcomes for your students?

4) In which Language strands do you create these opportunities? (Reading, Writing, Media Literacy, Oral Communication) Can you provide examples?

4. Supporting Factors

1) Are you aware of any policies or strategies related to engaging in culturally responsive pedagogical practice? (Either provided by the Ministry of Education, the school board, or self-sought.)

   a. If so, would you elaborate on some and discuss how they were helpful or unhelpful?

2) Where else have you found support in this area? Please elaborate.

5. Challenges

1) One common issue that comes up when talking about teaching culturally specific literature is the risk of misinterpretation or stereotyping. How do you navigate this issue?

2) What sort of resistances have you encountered among students, if any and why do you believe this is so?

3) Are there any other complications, challenges or conflicts you would like to mention?

6. Next Steps
1) Speaking generally, where would you like to see more being accomplished regarding culturally responsive literacy?

2) Where would you like to see personal growth regarding culturally responsive literacy?

3) What advice would you give to a beginning teacher on teaching culturally specific content?