A Summary of Virginia High School English Teachers’ Cultural and Linguistic Classroom Experiences: Learning about Learning and Talking about Talking

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A Summary of Virginia High School English Teachers’ Cultural and Linguistic Classroom Experiences: Learning about Learning and Talking about Talking

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from The College of William and Mary

by

Rachel Elizabeth Brooks

Accepted for ____________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, Virginia
April 28, 2014
A Summary of Virginia High School English Teachers’ Cultural and Linguistic Classroom Experiences: Learning about Learning and Talking about Talking

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Abstract

I address the question, “How do experienced high school English teachers respond to students’ cultural and linguistic variation to maximize learning?” by applying community studies, sociolinguistic, and policy frameworks to the experiences of high school English teachers in southeastern Virginia schools. Abundant sociolinguistic research (Bernstein, 1971, 1973, 1977, 1990) argues life circumstances largely determine academic achievement, but my work adds to the scholarship on the negative implications of this line of reasoning through the collection of in-depth qualitative data on teachers’ viewpoints. A literature review of criticisms and arguments from sociolinguists (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000; Labov, 1975; Rickford & Rickford, 2000) and education policy experts (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010) add to my knowledge base and enhance this research. I worked with high school English teachers involved in the School University Research Network (SURN) at the William & Mary School of Education to evaluate their knowledge of cultural and linguistic variation, their reactions to such variation, and how they seek to maximize student success regardless backgrounds and circumstances. This research explores important implications surrounding socioeconomic status, language patterns, and educational opportunities. The findings highlight effective learning strategies, such as multifaceted classroom activities and individualized help to students, for culturally and linguistically diverse classes. My results apply to the education system’s deficiencies in multicultural instruction. My research gauges the extent to which teachers consider student variation when managing their classrooms and the extent to which they believe life circumstances, like poverty or minority status, make it hard for students to succeed.
Acknowledgements

There is a tendency for researchers to rely on others for expertise, assistance, support, and direction (Cress, Collier, & Reitenauer, 2013), and my research would not have been possible without the involvement and support of many. I want to thank my family for their unwavering support and confidence in me throughout my research process. This work relied on my partnership with SURN at the William & Mary School of Education and its staff who let me sit on meetings, workshops, and conferences as well as practice interviews with them. I am grateful for the involvement of the SURN lead teachers and other high school English teachers involved in SURN for their time and thoughtful responses. I want to highlight that the teachers who participated in my study chose to do so out of a genuine enjoyment of discussions about teaching, their love of professional development activities, and a willingness to help people interested in high quality education. Despite low pay, two of the teachers told me they intended to use the monetary compensation from their participation in my research for new textbooks in their classrooms. This dedication to the profession cannot be overlooked.

Additionally, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Anne H. Charity Hudley, for her positivity and guidance. Her review of my papers every Monday throughout the Spring 2012, Summer 2012, Summer 2013, Fall 2013, and Spring 2014 terms was key to my research process and timeline. This project would not have been feasible without her assistance and dedication to high quality undergraduate work. I want to thank Dr. Christopher Howard for teaching me about social welfare programs in the Government Department’s American Welfare State course, helping me consider the ways in which reform can help mitigate structural inequality and gaps in opportunity and achievement, and serving on my committee. I also want to thank Dr. Jeremy Stoddard for serving on my committee after I stumbled into his office in the School of Education
to discuss past honors fellows’ theses and the intricacies of qualitative research methodology.

Finally, thank you to my peers, such as Elizabeth DeBusk, Noella Handley, John Welch, Katherine DeFazio, Jennifer Posner, and many others, for their comments, feedback, and support as I completed this project.
Chapter 1: Introduction

My research topic is close to me, as I attribute much of my success to the high quality teachers I had growing up in Virginia Beach, Virginia as well as my professors at the College of William & Mary. Neither of my parents had the means to attend college, but their emphasis on the importance of learning and my educational upbringing left me with an expectation of college after high school. Many of my K-12 teachers maintained high expectations and worked tirelessly to make education fun and engaging. I have always loved English and know high school is an important period in students’ lives, as they consider the best path for them beyond high school graduation. I am interested in college and career readiness and would like to work in academic advising to help students with the transition between high school and their post-graduation plans. These experiences and interests are the inspiration for my research.

1.1 Research Questions

My research question is: How do experienced high school English teachers respond to students’ cultural and linguistic variation to maximize learning? After analyzing my participants’ responses, I compiled thematic results to address a broader question for high school English classrooms: What are effective teaching strategies for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms? I then use those thematic responses to inform education policy to answer the question: What are the U.S. education system’s deficiencies in multicultural instruction? This research helped me gauge the extent to which the high school English teachers I interviewed consider student variation when managing their classrooms and the extent to which they believe life circumstances, such as poverty or minority status, make it hard for students to succeed (Winch, 1990; Oakes, 2008). From those findings, I assessed what gaps exist in current U.S.
education policies and the importance of professional development opportunities, such as their involvement in the School University Research Network (SURN) at the William & Mary School of Education. Because other universities have similar programs, such as the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education’s Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, and research interests that can inform teachers and policy, my results apply to other organizations and their research.

I sought to answer my research questions by applying sociolinguistic and community studies frameworks to the experiences of high school English teachers in southeastern Virginia schools. The purpose of this study was to collect and evaluate qualitative data about teachers’ perceived strengths of their teaching practices and classroom management and how those qualities inform their interactions with students of different social, economic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Over the course of more than thirteen months, I developed relationships with the high school English teachers who serve as the School University Research Network (SURN)’s lead teachers at the William & Mary School of Education. I worked with them to evaluate their knowledge of and responses to cultural and linguistic variation in local schools. I investigated how they believe they maximize achievement regardless of classroom differences. My research explored significant implications regarding socioeconomic status, language patterns, and educational opportunities. The findings highlight what expert teachers believe to be effective learning strategies for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms and inform discussion of the American education system’s deficiencies in multicultural instruction.

1.2 Virginia’s English Performance Expectations

Virginia’s College and Career Ready English Performance Expectations “define the content and level of achievement students must reach to be academically prepared for success in
entry-level, credit-bearing English courses in college or career training” (VDOE, 2011).

Collaboration among college and university faculty members, businesspersons, and high school English teachers in Virginia led to the development of these standards for the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). The College and Career Readiness Initiative (CCRI) centers reading, writing, and communication. Reading encompasses vocabulary, nonfiction as well as literary reading, and critical reading and analysis. Writing includes composing, revision and editing, and documentation and ethics. Communication deals with speaking, listening, and collaborating. Students are expected to “use grammatically correct language, including vocabulary appropriate to the topic, audience, and purpose” and write “for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences” (VDOE, 2011). In order to accomplish these statewide goals, we must consider language and language variation as they relate to student success.

1.3 Community Studies

I employed a community studies framework to blend the disciplines of linguistics, sociology, and public policy and create an interdisciplinary approach to instructive practices in local school systems (Cress, 2006; Cress et al., 2013). I investigated sociolinguistic theory’s application to educational opportunities and achievement for all student subgroups. Through a series of interviews with teachers in southeastern Virginia schools, I evaluated teachers’ thoughts on and knowledge of language variation and examples of their use of culturally relevant instruction. I was also able to explore the ways the high school English teachers seek to address—or not address—students’ speaking, writing, and other communicative differences in the classroom. Because of my continued involvement with SURN related to its Capstone English Academy, SURN Leadership for Effective Teaching, and Visible Teaching, Assessment, Learning, and Leading grants as well as the NSF grant entitled “Research Starter Grant: An
Examination of Effective Methods of Communicating About Language Variation to Educators” (project number 0930522), I had the opportunity to hear directly from teachers with diverse backgrounds and teaching styles at local Virginia public schools in both rural and urban areas. This opportunity is unique because I worked with teachers who were already leaders within their schools and involved in professional development activities (“SURN,” 2014). My interviews focused on teachers’ comments about their years of experience working with diverse populations, which allowed me to extrapolate common techniques as well as key differences in their teaching styles and beliefs about education.

My project incorporates my coursework in public policy, sociology, linguistics, government, and community studies, as I have taken courses addressing societal issues and structural inequalities since my participation in the Sharpe Community Scholar Program freshmen year. My coursework includes methods courses, such as Social Statistics and Research Methods, and other classes relevant to my research, such as Ethics, Public Administration, Cultural Anthropology, Language Attitudes, and Social Psychology, which offer interdisciplinary insight for this project. My government senior seminar, Education Policy and Politics, delved into the intersection of education and policymaking from the perspectives of different administrators and government officials. I have completed research-oriented independent studies in interdisciplinary studies as well as the Speech Department and read research texts (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008; Cress et al., 2013) that allowed me to pursue my community-based participatory research. My project dovetails National Science Foundation collaborative research called “Research Starter Grant: An Examination of Effective Methods of Communicating About Language Variation to Educators” (project number 0930522) that Professor Anne Charity Hudley at William & Mary and Professor Christine Mallinson at the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County were awarded. Their research focuses on how language patterns affect classrooms. My project is unique in that I worked with the teachers on a one-to-one, private basis to assess their perceptions of and responses to social, economic, and linguistic diversity among students. Much of SURN’s work is to provide professional development to teachers and work collaboratively in groups (“SURN,” 2014), but I talked to each educator individually and on a repeated basis to address specific questions related to their instruction. I added original work while supporting SURN’s overall mission.

In order to accomplish the goals of this study, I focus primarily on qualitative research methodologies. I developed a questionnaire to provide a quantitative assessment of teachers’ beliefs and feelings. I gauged the extent to which the teachers consider students’ social, economic, and linguistic variation and the extent to which they believe life circumstances make it hard for students to do well in school. Questions range from basic demographic information to policy preferences about contested issues in education, such as high stakes testing and tracking, which evaluate teachers’ background and beliefs and how those factors inform their teaching. Sample questions about socioeconomic status include “How, if at all, would you say your classes are representative of the school as a whole?” and “To what extent do you believe poor socioeconomic circumstances make it hard for students to succeed?” Sample questions about language variation include “Do your students use slang in the classroom? If so, any phrases in particular?,” “How often do you allow your students to engage in informal conversations?,” and “How do you account for varied reading, writing, and communicative skill levels among students in the classroom?” I observed whether the teachers believe their classrooms embrace or attempt to correct language variation and the influence that distinction has on the students.
The research presented in this paper is important, as it provides teachers’ perspectives on what they consider to be the most effective kinds of instruction to help all student subgroups succeed and their views on key aspects of education policy. All of the teachers who participated in my study are leaders in their profession, and their classrooms had consistently high success rates and low failure rates (“SURN,” 2014). This report could help other teachers implement similar instruction techniques and achieve high standards. While each teacher contributed his or her own unique examples and ideas, there are some lessons and responses to student backgrounds, circumstances, and concerns that are transferrable across classrooms.

Additionally, teachers deal with the implications of education policy firsthand, so their thoughtful feedback can better inform policy. This project offers insight into implications for the American educational system on a large scale. An analysis of my interview data and workshop observations speaks to some common barriers to achievement, problems in multicultural classrooms, and the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy to embrace student diversity. This research contributes to the growing analysis of sociolinguistic theory and the models for understanding the dynamics between social, cultural, and linguistic effects in various educational settings. Applications of my findings are useful to the study of how educators account for and manage differences within their classrooms to improve learning outcomes. Structural inequality or gaps in opportunity should not exist for any students, and a better understanding of how teachers can maximize achievement for all student subgroups is crucial to improvement of the education system.

Chapter two of this paper discusses the literature surrounding my research question. Chapter three provides an overview of my methodology. In chapter three, I explain my reasoning behind the use of ethnography, my protocol and participants, data collection and presentation,
and the limitations of my research methodology. Chapter four details my study’s results and the conclusions I draw from my data. Chapter five provides a discussion of the study’s implications and offers suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order for teachers to successfully educate students, teachers need to be treated as professionals with meaningful insight to share about the education field. Teachers’ practices have, can, and should inform education policy for the state and the country (Crawford, 2000; Ravitch, 2010). When studying education, it is crucial to examine the relationship between student achievement and language background, differences in language and how those differences develop, academic language and the language of schooling, and how to utilize students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds to improve outcomes (National Research Council, 2010). Because of the breadth of research on each of these areas, this paper focuses primarily on the best teaching practices to incorporate students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds to improve learning outcomes. Thus, in this section, I examine the size and scope of the need for more culturally relevant instruction, possible remedies to this need through education, and possible remedies to this need through policy.

2.1 Size and Scope of Problem

Issues with communication arise from variation in grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and speaking style and affect student achievement (Adger, Christian, & Taylor, 1998). It is difficult to exact the extent to which students struggle with language barriers, as much of the problem is undocumented in schools or hard to measure on a large scale, and I could not uncover reliable statistics on the subject in Virginia schools even after much searching. It is clear that speakers of different languages and language varieties often face problems communicating with each other (Winch, 1990). In order to promote excellence for all students regardless of cultural and linguistic differences, research into language and its effects on education are critical.
2.1.1 Barriers to Students

An appreciation for and understanding of language is key to successful learning for all students, as the ability to express thoughts and ideas through communication is vital to success in relationships, school, and beyond (Ravitch, 2010). Some students who speak non-standardized English, English as a Second Language, or other language varieties have trouble communicating verbally or in writing with people who possess different language capabilities than their own (Lippi-Green, 2012). This language barrier has adverse effects for teacher-student and student-student dynamics as well as the acquisition and understanding of knowledge presented inside and outside the classroom (Lippi-Green, 2012). Lippi-Green (2012) discusses how there is mutual responsibility among participants in any given conversation to share the burden of communication, so people can better understand each other.

Race and social class influence the assignment of students to certain ability groups and tracks, which in turn affects academic outcomes (Oakes, 2008, p. 704). While many factors impact student achievement, socioeconomic status and cultural differences are central to the language people employ and how they communicate with others. Darling-Hammond (2010) explains that the U.S. has a high poverty rate for children among industrialized nations, yet America offers few social supports and resources for those children (p. 31). Based on data from 2007, Darling-Hammond (2010) projects that twenty-three percent of children in the U.S. were living in poverty that year. Such poor social circumstances affect students’ focus, before and after school availability, and access to resources, which can all influence learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The gap between wealthy and poor Americans has widened over the past few
decades, as neighborhoods and schools across the nation have become more racially isolated and economically segregated (Oakes, 2008).

A code, as defined by Littlejohn (2002), is a “set of organizing principles behind the language employed by members of a social group” (p. 278). Atkinson (1985) asserts that code refers to a regulative concept, which motivates various message systems, particularly curriculum and pedagogy (p. 136). Classroom size, teacher perception and effectiveness, and school resources are commonly researched and important issues related to student academic achievement (Okpala, Okpala, & Smith, 2001). Although there is abundant research on the effects of socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Gorard & See, 2009; Gorski, 2010; National Research Council, 2010), it is crucial to also examine the ways educators can help students of low socioeconomic status overcome language barriers and succeed in schools. Continued school improvement, qualified teachers and administrators, and strong relationships among families, communities, and schools can help poor, minority, and other disadvantaged students overcome language and educational barriers to success. In order to address the burden of communication, all parties involved in education, including teachers, students, parents, and policymakers must possess mutual responsibility to work toward greater understanding (Lippi-Green, 2012).

2.1.2 Linguistic Poverty and Language in Schools

Winch (1990) details how “linguistic poverty is…a poverty in what can be talked about and how it can be expressed,” and theorists and educators often assert that poor language and poor social circumstances coincide with low educational achievement (p. 41). Language operates as a mechanism of power and “reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one
from, the larger, public, or communal identity” (Baldwin, 1979, p. 1). Although some people may speak a common language, the assortment of dialects and accents within that language can expose factors that impact people’s future success, including where they come from, how much education they have, and how much money they make (Baldwin, 1979; Gorski, 2010). Unfavorable social conditions and hardship certainly do not have to cause low educational achievement (Lippi-Green, 2012).

The idea of verbal and cultural deficits theorizes that the linguistic and cultural differences among social groups affect people’s education (Winch, 1990). When groups of students are called “culturally deprived” by teachers or other community members, it implies their knowledge as well as their ways of acquiring and expressing knowledge are inferior to that of other groups (Winch, 1990, p. 41). Categorizing people as culturally deprived or as inferior learners puts those students at a disadvantage and makes it hard for them to receive equal treatment and fully benefit from the education system (Lippi-Green, 2012; Oakes, 1985; Ravitch, 2010). For example, looking at tracking and educational opportunities in twenty-five secondary schools across the United States, Oakes (1985) noted disparities in access to high-quality teaching, curriculum, learning, and classroom environments based on how people rate a students’ skill level and predict educational success. The negative effects of tracking are particularly significant for students seen as low performers early in their educational journey, and New Jersey’s Columbia High illustrates how tracking in schools with diverse student bodies leads to a combination of segregation and inequality (Oakes, 2008, p. 703). Oakes (2008) found that high-level classes had more access to “high-status knowledge,” more chances to participate in engaging learning exercises, and stronger relationships between students and their teachers as well as their peers
than lower-level classes, and the lower-level classes’ lack of advantages hurt low-income
students and students of color the greatest (p. 703).

Students who speak certain varieties of English, including Appalachian English, Gullah,
Mexicano English, and many other varieties, often face stigmas surrounding their use of
language in schools, social settings, and other contexts (Lippi-Green, 2012). NCTE, the National
Council of Teachers of English, and the IRA, the International Reading Association, consistently
review, edit, and publish Standards for the English Language Arts, a list that highlights reading
and reading comprehension abilities (Lippi-Green, 2012). These abilities go beyond just spoken
language, as reading and writing skills are also crucial to language comprehension. The goal of
schools and teachers should not be to “insist that some children forego the expressive power and
consolation of speech which is the currency of their home communities” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p.
97). Students bring unique cultural experiences, attributes, and perspectives to the classroom, and
teachers can react to these differences in a number of ways. When it comes to language and its
effects on academic achievement, options are to standardize the differences, embrace the
differences, or ignore the differences (Winch, 1990). One positive reaction would be for
researchers and teachers to use servant leadership, an approach that “emphasizes empowering
others and helping them meet their own identified needs” (Cress et al., 2013, p. 125). With this
approach to leadership, researchers can serve teachers by conducting studies related to teachers’
needs, so teachers can, in turn, better help students. Students can share their insight and
contribute to discussion, so they feel more confident and capable in the classroom. Likewise, the
students can learn from their peers’ unique perspectives.

Middle-class African Americans may rarely or never use AAVE’s grammatical features
but can probably still “signal solidarity with the greater African American community by careful
engagement of discourse strategies, intonation contour, and pitch” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 182).
African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features dealing with phonology and the grammatical and syntactic structures distinguish it from other varieties (Lippi-Green, 2012).
Speech acts can be specific to communities and generate certain perceptions of people and their intelligence.

Sometimes teachers are the ones being judged negatively. Rubin (1992) found that the perception of a teacher’s accent could lead to negative expectations of the teacher by students and that a communicative breakdown could lead to a poor classroom experience. Linguistic differences and discrimination can appear between students, teachers, administration, or any combination of parties. Accent reduction, meaning a “concentrated effort to take a person who speaks English with a stigmatized regional, social, or foreign accent, and (supposedly) replace it with one which is favored,” often finds support in those who believe language homogenization is a good thing (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 230). Language and accent are often tied with a person’s identity (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011), so such beliefs are harmful to linguistic diversity.

No one way of speaking is a better way to communicate than another; each language and language variety is important yet different (Charity-Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Lippi-Green, 2012; Winch, 1990). In fact, middle class speakers have a higher frequency of certain linguistic items compared to the working class and the working class exhibits more “logical simplicity” in their language (Winch, 1990, p. 66). With regard to those working class people with restricted codes, a style of language that assumes shared knowledge and understanding and is typical in informal settings, it is feasible to complete complex reasoning with only a limited vocabulary, but it is imperative that others have the capacity to understand terms and connections (Winch,
In order for mutual understanding to be possible, both the person speaking and the person listening must have the capacity to understand and value the language employed.

The language of school, meaning the kinds of standardized communication teachers typically emphasize in the classroom, is an important consideration for this research because the frequently chosen response to linguistic variation is standardization when it should be to embrace and learn from the differences. Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2011) discuss how society places a particular emphasis on speakers to learn “standardized, grammar book-style English” for uniformity and clarity (p. 13). This emphasis is especially visible in the classroom. There is sometimes a belief that non-standardized versions of English are only appropriate in limited settings and at particular times, but a person’s language is often critical to their history, culture, and identity (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). A person’s language can also be difficult to change. Based on my interviews with local teachers, they seem to feel their effectiveness is dependent upon strong communication and understanding between students and teachers. Teachers can and need to help students communicate effectively and understand others while also embracing their existing language varieties for the students to succeed.

Lippi-Green (2012) addresses the magnitude of the language subordination process, which is how people are oppressed and excluded through standard language ideologies (SLIs). Her language subordination model analyzes the dissemination of standard language ideologies and the reasons why people accept the stigmatized social positions associated with SLIs (Lippi-Green, 2012). The idea of language correctness is a dangerous belief for students’ self-esteem, cultural identity, and success in school. I address the tension about the supposed proper use of language in my interviews with local high school English teachers. Language subordination
happens in schools when teachers and/or students perceive the qualities and language of a good or bad student (Chandler, 1992).

2.1.3 Dialect Differences

Dialect and style signify “how something is said rather than what is said” and contribute to an individual’s sense of community and culture (Winch, 1990, p. 45). Dandy (1991) defines a dialect as a variation of a particular language and contends that all English speakers speak a dialect of their native language based on distinctive features of pronunciation, vocabulary, and word order. Winch (1990) explains that it is essential to note how different levels of prestige accompany different dialects and styles, as various parts of society value certain dialects and styles more than others. Dialect is more than simply speech (Dandy, 1991), as it is a system of communication that encompasses vocabulary, grammar, sounds, style, nonverbal behavior, unique speaking behaviors, sociolinguistic rules, and even moral teachings (Dandy, 1991, p. 12; Hoover, 1985). Linguistic models (Rickford & Eckert, 2001; Schilling-Estes, 2002) investigate the study of social constraints or inter-speaker variation, which includes sociolinguistic variants and factors, such as age, social class, sex, and race, as well as the study of stylistic constraints or intra-speaker variation, which looks at shifts in speakers’ or groups’ sociolinguistic context and language use.

Bernstein (1971) notes that usage of the restricted code is more common in the working class, and usage of both the restricted codes and elaborated codes, a language style that does not rely on outside knowledge or shared understanding and is typical of formal settings, is common in the middle class. People in the working class only have access to restricted codes because those are the ones they learned through the process of socialization, according to Littlejohn
Building on research Bernstein (1971), Pring (2009) looked at data collected about the education and training of people between the ages of fourteen and nineteen years old to examine various concerns facing young people of different backgrounds over the course of those five years. He notes that changing family patterns, extended adolescence, mental health problems, presence in a family in which no member has been employed, and the unhappiness many young people reported are challenges to the development of language codes (Pring, 2009). Pring found that young people not involved in education, employment, or training have lower rates of participation in school, higher rates of attrition, and lower levels of academic achievement compared to their peers throughout the study (2009, p. 7). While research by Bernstein (1971) suggests some tasks can be more difficult with a restricted code, students from low-income backgrounds can succeed in aspects of language and school.

2.1.4 Socioeconomic Status

Many of the challenges that can be associated with home life—including emotional or physical abuse and other obstacles—are not easy or even appropriate to address through schooling. It is crucial to note, however, that speech differences influence behaviors and educational outcomes, as students attend school with varying amounts of resources based on income level and social status and often follow patterns based on poverty level and family origin (Gorard & See, 2009). Lewis (1961) argues that there is a culture of poverty: “that people in poverty share a consistent and observable ‘culture,’” but work by Gorski (2010) finds that the culture of poverty concept stems from a series of stereotypes, including ones that poor people have poor work ethic and are linguistically deficient, that have become more mainstream thinking. Gorski (2010) contends that the so-called culture of poverty does not exist and that
“differences in values and behaviors among poor people are just as great as those between poor and wealthy people” (p. 1). Gorski (2010) suggests society should make school involvement possible for all families, keep stereotypes of poor people and other groups out of learning materials, and ensure curricula is relevant to poor students. All of these things can help to validate the experience and intelligence of students regardless of their socioeconomic status.

In addition, Darling-Hammond (2010) examines how disparities extend beyond physical facilities; measurable inequalities leave many minority students without essential skills to succeed in schools. School equity data from studies in over twenty states depicts how schools that serve students of color as well as low-income students have substantially fewer resources than schools that serve largely Caucasian, wealthy student populations. The difference of resources is striking and includes curriculum offerings, class size, teacher quality, textbooks, computers, and other measures (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 22). These differences affect use of restricted and elaborated language codes and academic attainment.

The National Research Council (2010) asserts that vocabulary and language differences explain at least part of the differences in school achievement for students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The focus on IQ tests and other efforts to standardize student evaluations promotes socioeconomic and cultural bias rather than serves its purpose as a way to actually test student knowledge (National Research Council, 2010; Winch, 1990). Variation in comfort with concepts and degrees of comprehension is natural among students, but administrators and educators must strive to make instruction suitable for all kinds of learners in the classroom.

Sociolinguistic theory suggests speech patterns and socioeconomic status are closely related and influence student performance in the classroom (Jensen, 1969; Pring, 2009).
need to teach children from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Although there is a possibility of generational mobility among classes (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006), children have a propensity to “follow the educational pattern, interests, and occupations of their parents” (Winch, 1990, p. 16). One possible explanation for this trend is that some educators assume students’ abilities are fixed at a young age and will not change; however, as Winch (1990) asserts, this notion is false (see Baldwin, 1979). Abilities, interests, and potential are all subject to grow throughout a lifetime if schools and educators work to ensure the success of each student through clear, rigorous expectations.

Student interviews and research described in Chandler (1992) during different class periods depicted how students perceived various traits as those of a “good student.” Students in Period 1 agreed that a good student follows the “rules overtly, without question” and must be quiet during silent reading time (p. 38). Period 2, in contrast, asserted that a good student asks “a lot of questions” and participates “in discussions a lot” (p. 39). Different from Period 1 and 2, Period 3 thought the most important qualities of a good student include “keeping your daily log up to date,” “being on time,” and turning in homework on time (Chandler, 1992, p. 39). When people view a classroom as a culture, interactions, expectations, resources, and context shape the roles of the teacher and students (Green et al., 1990; Chandler, 1992). Unfortunately educational opportunity for students “has been normalized as a scarce rather than abundant commodity,” which leads many educators to focus on getting the already high-ability students to continue succeeding at tests and other accountability measures rather than assisting all students attain high educational goals (Oakes, 2008, p. 710). Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds disproportionately end up in lower-level classes than higher-level classes (Oakes, 2008), and that lack of access to educational resources inhibits language learning. Because of
these disadvantages, special attention to low-income and minority student populations is crucial to ensure their success in society. Crawford (2000) notes that current language policy is insufficient to meet national priorities, such as improving education, as policymakers often create inadequate and conflicting policies.

It is natural for people to feel an attachment to their social group and community as a place where they feel at ease and are typically proud of their upbringing and community’s unique characteristics and outlook (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Winch, 1990). Some situations make students from low socioeconomic backgrounds feel less confident about their verbal ability and intelligence, according to a study by Spencer and Castano (2007) using self-reported surveys. Any social program, including those pertaining to education, needs to account for different backgrounds and ways of life to make people feel comfortable and like they can create a good future for themselves through a strong education. It is necessary to understand and aim to unlock the “underlying equality of human potential and the vast diversity of its realization in the interaction of culture, interest, and community that occurs in modern, complex society” (Winch, 1990, p. 110).

There is a clear association between socioeconomic disadvantage and the achievement gap for students, so these factors must be considerations for education policy. Circumstances and background vary from student to student, but every student has the potential to succeed, and it is the role of educators to release that potential. Throughout this paper, it is clear how effective English educators in Virginia account for diverse kinds of learning among students as well as what classroom management practices they employ to improve overall student success. A socio-cultural perspective of education suggests embedding instruction in meaningful social interaction
to facilitate learning and language and relies less on grammatical accuracy or explicit attention to grammatical form (National Research Council, 2010).

2.2 Possible Education Remedies

It is critical that teachers embrace students’ existing funds of knowledge, use culturally relevant instruction, and integrate multicultural education into their classrooms to encourage success for all students (Brown-Jeffy and Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Policy literature (Saunders and Kardia, 2004; Ravitch, 2010) discusses potential barriers, such as school factors like administrative leaders, the structure of teacher time, and costs, to implementation of culturally relevant and multicultural instruction.

2.2.1 Funds of Knowledge

It is essential to consider cultural and linguistic differences in all aspects of the classroom. Saunders and Kardia (2004) conducted focus group interviews in 1995-1996 with college students from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds and departments. Students noted multicultural issues related to classroom climate, course content and materials, and teaching methods and made recommendations about how classrooms could be made more inclusive (Saunders & Kardia, 2004). A suggestion from the interviews was to emphasize the importance of daily attendance logs rather than mental notes of absences during class periods, as teachers may more easily notice the absences of pupils who are African American or Latino in a primarily Caucasian class or have other visible differences from their peers, which can inadvertently lead to a wrongful assessment of their attendance and, by extension, performance as a student (Saunders & Kardia, 2004). This perception of visibly different students can disproportionately influence their attendance reports and academic success.
Through their perceptions, judgments, and cultural sensitivities, teachers play a vital role in creating a classroom where all students feel involved, think critically, and reflect on the knowledge they learn (Allen, 2003; Hartnett & Carr, 1995). Class periods that deal with controversial topics, like when discussing contentious books or topics in high school English classes, may result in any number of outcomes, such as the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and assumptions, altercations among students, offensive speech, or silence from the class based on the subject matter (Saunders & Kardia, 2004). Controversial topics often enter classroom discussions, and teachers must be sensitive to the backgrounds and experiences of different students.

Rather than teachers drawing on just their own experiences for clarification of points in the classroom, research by Saunders and Kardia (2004) and findings from focus group interviews with diverse students call attention to the potential benefits of teachers asking students about their familiarity with topics and examples before discussing them or having students create their own examples. Saunders and Kardia (2004) argue that this tactic helps students with diverse experiences and cultures relate to the subject matter. Teachers should encourage minority students to draw upon their “funds of knowledge,” which are defined as “historically developed and accumulated strategies...skills, abilities, ideas, practices...or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being” (“Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households,” 1994, p. 1). These funds of knowledge develop and enrich learning based on the aspects of minority students’ households and home life (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).
The model from “Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households” (1994) encouraged teachers to enter students’ homes and note the knowledge that exists there; the teachers found that the funds of knowledge are immense, varied, and include topics such as construction, farming and animal husbandry, trade, and finance. Because teachers’ capacity makes it hard for them to enter every student’s home, teachers can and should make efforts to learn about students’ funds of knowledge inside the classroom and during breaks. Saunders and Kardia (2004) underscore how vital it is to offer thoughtful, considerate responses to students’ comments and views based on personal experience or background, so students do not perceive responses as dismissive or disrespectful, which may inhibit students’ future participation or confidence in school.

As the “Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households” (1994) model suggests, when teachers consider student backgrounds more deeply, they better recognize how culturally and linguistically different working-class and minority homes contain worthwhile information, experiences, and knowledge. Because of household visits to uncover and record funds of knowledge, teachers start to see culture as dynamic and applicable to the learning process and view diverse students with more understanding and respect for their home situation and lifestyle (“Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households,” 1994). Educators gained insight into the multifaceted nature of different cultures and how participation in activities at home influences children as students (Moll et al., 1992). Home life is important for the acquisition of knowledge (“Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households,” 1994), but there are many classroom-based factors that influence language development and schooling associated with peers, learning environments, and the greater
community (National Research Council, 2010). Aside from demographics, income, and home life, the most important factor in student achievement is teacher quality (Ravitch, 2010).

### 2.2.2 Culturally Relevant Instruction

Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) explain culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) as pedagogy that emphasizes the significance of culture in schools and “maintains that teachers need to be non-judgmental and inclusive of the cultural backgrounds of their students in order to be effective facilitators of learning in the classroom” (p. 66). Gay (2010) emphasizes that teachers can use culturally relevant pedagogy to integrate students’ backgrounds into the learning process to ensure the curriculum is relevant, understandable, and interesting to students. Hood (1998) advocates the importance of instruction that responds to the various cultures and differences among students. He asserts that such instruction allows educators to adapt content in the classroom to incorporate students’ cultures and helps students learn about and be more cognizant of their cultures and the cultures of others (Hood, 1993, 1998). This research could translate into actual instructional practices if teachers feel comfortable enough to engage students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in meaningful and sensitive discussions about those differences. Each student is unique and possesses a different set of circumstances and experiences that influences how the student learns inside the classroom. Teachers should capitalize on these differences to ensure that no child feels isolated or overlooked by instruction that teaches only to the majority of students and does not include minority or low-income students who have plenty of knowledge to share and things to learn. In cases when minority students make up the majority, it is imperative that teachers understand the needs of low-income students and students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds.
Ladson-Billings (1994) and Darling Hammond (2010) explain other benefits of culture as a factor in the classroom because educators can shape curricula to be relevant to students’ backgrounds, offer student-centered and culturally sensitive instruction (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011), and act as a facilitator for learning in different contexts of students’ home lives and experiences. Because everyone has a culture, possesses unique life circumstances and experiences, and is capable of contributing something to a classroom setting (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Dandy, 1991), culturally responsive instruction is a style of teaching that can take place in classrooms anywhere. Virginia schools should be no exception. This research can help schools meet their goals set by the state, which is relevant to teachers and principals across the state.

Cress et al. (2013) argue the importance of educators’ intercultural competence, defined as the “ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” through their mindset, skillset, and heartset (p. 68). The authors define mindset as the framework for understanding culture, skillset as the skills for bridging differences, and heartset as the interest and motivation to investigate cultural factors (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Cress et al., 2005). Cress et al. (2013) and Mezirow (2002) explain how transformational learning is when knowledge becomes more meaningful and connected to the community. Such learning allows people to use their knowledge to ask crucial questions, reflect, and discover strategies to create positive change. Transformational learning allows researchers to integrate their skills and talents, such as academic concepts and work, to improve the community and meet its needs.

Research by Fendick (1990) states that an effective teacher must assess the needs of the class, articulate a lesson’s subject matter in a way that is simple for all students to understand, and solicit student feedback in order to communicate well. These goals are admirable and easy to
state yet difficult to carry out, so the case studies of Virginia teachers shed light on practices currently in use as well as their benefits and shortfalls.

### 2.2.3 Multicultural Education

For the purposes of this paper, multicultural education is defined as the acquisition of cultural knowledge, attentiveness to differences in student backgrounds, and the assessment of social, economic, and cultural considerations of individuals and relationships (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2003; Sleeter & Grant, 1999). Boyle-Baise and Kilbane (2003) assert that educators need to “question their own racism and biases, learn more about cultural diversity and poverty, and grapple with realities from multiple perspectives” (p. 55). In order to achieve multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy, educators must be willing to reflect on their past and present beliefs and be wary of possible false assumptions or potential stereotypes (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011), as recognition and incorporation of cultural differences in schools can help enable educational equality for students regardless of the classroom demographics.

Stoddard (2010) completed a collective critical case study, a study to investigate differences within and between cases to predict similar and contrasting findings, about teacher practices and beliefs as well as student thinking and experiences and found that teachers often choose films or other teaching methods that present the perspective the teacher personally holds. While these perspectives might not necessarily be extreme, the presentation of one perspective and not another can be detrimental to critical thinking about the topic. People, whether parents, teachers, students, or others, frequently select media and things that reinforce existing beliefs (Stoddard, 2009). Through extensive interviews and in-depth analysis, Boyle-Baise (2002) found that while teachers often do not hesitate to become involved in multicultural service learning
projects, they tend to keep their involvement at a safe, somewhat distant level. Examples of these
cautious interactions include only offering positive comments without any constructive
statements or criticism and simply responding to children rather than interacting with them
(Boyle-Baise, 2002).

Well-intentioned caution causes uncertainty and can lead teachers to fall back on
comfortable, ongoing classroom practices that are not the best ways to instruct a class of diverse
students. For this reason, it is crucial to examine and share the practices experienced teachers
have developed or, in some cases, are developing in their classrooms to help all their students
grasp concepts and learn information. While teachers should explore and learn about new
practices, if they choose to do so, they need to feel comfortable and my work needs to be ethical.
Cress et al. (2013) highlight the necessity of mutual respect, common goals, and values about
how to proceed in accomplishing the research’s goals, and collaboration among involved parties.
I integrated the ethical guidelines that Cress et al. (2013) outline into my research design and
implementation.

Effective teachers enable learning outcomes and student success, but excellent teachers
are able to acknowledge the assets students possess coming into the school year and utilize those
assets to promote learning, as there are often connections between children’s home lives and
school lives (Mahan, Fortney, & Garcia, 1983; Sleeter, 2000; Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2003). For
example, Mahan et al. (1983) note that learning experiences and utilizing the students’ existing
knowledge in low-income and diverse neighborhoods, organizations, and communities can lead
teachers to think beyond their personal experiences and recognize children as community
members with knowledge to contribute.
Research by Moll (1988, 1992) focuses on observation and documentation of aspects of the lives of Latino students from working class backgrounds in the Tucson, Arizona school system and the students’ families and backgrounds. The ethnographic analysis of Tucson’s Latino community includes interviews about the acquisition, presence, and continuation of skills and knowledge existing among people observed and interviewed as well as discussion with students’ family members to learn about their personal and work experiences (Moll, 1988, 1992; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994). The research found that teachers better understood their students’ circumstances, strengths, and weaknesses after the observations. The teachers, in turn, felt like they could better connect to their students and improve their effectiveness in the classroom.

Such qualitative research is useful to examine unique histories, people’s means of thinking and learning, and individual’s everyday skills, language, and labor history that contribute to community life (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). It is also helpful to study how people can integrate their personal experiences and background into the learning process, as teachers can view communities as sources of educational resources and adjust and enhance learning to include the diverse life experiences of students. Every class in every school in every city, whether it is Richmond, Newport News, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Norfolk, and Williamsburg, has different students with different needs, capabilities, and strengths, so each of my interviews sheds light on the insights of different teachers and their experiences from year to year with unique classes. Effective models of community-based research focus on partnership building between the teachers and me, the process of nurturing, strengthening, and sustaining that partnership, and evaluation of the project’s positive impact (O’Fallon, Tyson, & Dearry, 2000). Giving a voice to teachers allows them to share thoughts on effective practices to aid new and
prospective teachers who want more direction or expert advice from people actually in the teaching profession as opposed to policymakers.

2.3 Possible Policy Remedies

Language policy, professional development, and teachers unions all play critical roles in the quality of teachers and America’s education system as a whole. Creswell (2012) points out that qualitative research has the capacity to create an agenda for reform or change in the education system, which is needed if we as a society want to reduce education inequality (Ravitch, 2010).

2.3.1 Language Policy

Crawford (2000) defines language policy as “what government does officially – through legislation, court decisions, executive action, or other means – to (a) determine how languages are used in public contexts, (b) cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities, or (c) establish the rights of individuals or groups to learn, use, and maintain languages.” Another explanation he offers is language policy as “government regulation of its own language use, including steps to facilitate clear communication, train and recruit personnel, guarantee due process, foster political participation, and provide access to public services, proceedings, and documents” (Crawford, 2000). Crawford (2000) argues that American policymakers create intermittent language policies, not a solid language policy, to respond to urgent needs and pressure, which can generate insufficient and conflicting mandates.

Although America finds pride in being the melting pot, many Americans take issue with newcomers to the country who look and speak differently than they do (Lippi-Green, 2012;
Monteith & Winters, 2002). Given how some restaurants, legislatures, and other parties support an English-only movement in America (Lippi-Green, 2012), it is especially important to promote multicultural education, so future generations will see less linguistic discrimination. English-only policies hurt multiculturalism and fail to recognize the value of Americans whose native language is not English or those who speak more languages than English alone (Lippi-Green, 2012). Teachers are not immune from such prejudices about the perceived state of America and their students, so emphasis on multicultural education and culturally relevant instruction is vital to a more inclusive education system and society as a whole.

One key decision for education and language policy was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002). When the government creates education policies that call for higher standards, government officials behind the policies hope the mandate will result in increased student achievement rates; however, the implementation of such policies like No Child Left Behind places a heavy burden on students and teachers to perform at certain standards while the government does not provide sufficient support or structures for the higher levels of achievement to actually occur (Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004). Some scholars (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Hood, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994) suggest that superior classroom practices and high quality instruction, such as culturally relevant instruction and a demonstrated sensitivity to multicultural classrooms, as opposed to school or district policies, can make a remarkable difference in the educational caliber of students and that culture, as a key consideration for educators, can aid learning.

In a “Diminished Vision of Civil Rights” in Education Week, Crawford (2007) discusses the contention over whether No Child Left Behind represents a significant step for civil rights or a damaging act for the children it aims to help. Despite admirable intentions for education reform
and improved student performance, the unrealistic standards for achievement, flawed system for testing and intervention, and limited accountability for schools make it hard for actual progress to occur (Ravitch & Chubb, 2009). While one of the Education Next forum participants, John Chubb, advocates the benefits of NCLB, likes its respectable principles and potential to improve achievement with more time and additional changes, the other, Diane Ravitch, underscores the miniscule gains in achievement thus far, the diminution of learning and preparedness for the workforce, and the poor testing regime.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) offers position statements on key education issues and recognizes the need to respect languages and heritages. The “CCCC Guideline on the National Language Policy” (1992) notes an American citizen should not be denied his or her civil rights due to linguistic differences. The United States Constitution promises the right to free speech (amend. I) and stresses the rights of all U.S. citizens to ensure equal protection under law (amend. XIV). To take away or mock someone’s right to speak in their accent or dialect or to abridge the privileges and immunities of any U.S. citizen, naturalized or otherwise, is wrong and intolerable, and there needs to be appropriate language policy to protect people’s existing language, funds of knowledge, and culture.

Economic, political, and judicial systems often favor one group over another (Cress et al., 2013), which puts some students at a disadvantage in school and in society as a whole, so people often need to alter their worldviews and consider novel courses of action if they want to instigate social justice and education equality efforts in today’s society. Although it is advantageous to observe the students’ lifestyles and experiences in the home, if possible (“Funds of Knowledge: Learning from Language Minority Households,” 1994), it is typically easier for teachers to perceive students’ home lives from a distance. Despite not knowing all of their students’
situations, a majority of educators promise understanding and sensitivity to students’ life circumstances (Boyle-Baise, 2002). In order to provide such an understanding, teachers must actively evaluate community strengths and resources, situate their classroom within the greater framework of society, and advocate for equality through their teaching (Boyle-Baise, 2002).

2.3.2 Professional Development

Goldhaber & Hannaway (2009) find that there are “no systematic links between participation in professional development and teacher effectiveness” (p. 307). This lack of a link is likely because most districts’ professional development programs are disconnected, do not relate to curriculum well, and do not significantly improve student outcomes or teacher proficiency (Hattie, 2012; Hess & Osberg, 2010). Increasing fiscal pressure pushes districts to cut costs, and teacher pay is low. Convenience is a large factor in teachers’ decisions in choosing professional development programs (Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2009). Districts should ensure that the money they spend on professional development activities directly relates to and improves the teachers’ core skills, including the delivery of effective and engaging instruction, ability to successfully manage their classrooms, and maximization of classroom time (Hess and Osberg, 2010). Rice (2009) notes that teachers are frequently rewarded for seat time in professional development opportunities rather than by measuring changes in student achievement. While it is unclear how teachers’ decisions would change if their involvement in professional development was measured by student achievement, one might expect their demands for high quality opportunities to increase the professional development offerings available and their effectiveness (Goldhaber and Hannaway, 2009).
2.3.3 Teacher Unions

It is vital to consider the relative significance of teacher influence in the context of all factors, such as family, peer, demographic, school, and environmental influences, that affect student performance (Weingarten, 2009). Weingarten (2009), the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), contends that “teacher quality is the most important school-related variable affecting student achievement” (Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2009, p. 276). Because of teachers unions’ size and scope as the single most powerful interest group in United States, they can act as a force to influence district policies and have the ability to veto significant policy changes (Hess & Osberg, 2010). While teachers unions have the power to block changes to established policies, they do so in the interest of and for the protection of teachers (Hess & Osberg, 2010).

It is critical to address the criticism that teachers unions seek to stop bad teachers from ever being fired; unions seek to act in the best interests of education, which includes firing bad teachers but also helping struggling teachers and protecting good teachers (Weingarten, 2009). The argument that struggling schools result from a concentration of ineffective teachers fails to note that those struggling schools typically lack the appropriate supports for both teachers and students (Weingarten, 2009). One solution is to improve the pool of teachers with more mentoring and professional development programs. While an improvement of current teachers is ideal, large-scale implementation is an obstacle for the realization of this goal (Hanushek, 2009; Weingarten, 2009).

Peer assistance and review (PAR), one way AFT confronts teacher quality, offers new teachers support and professional development from expert, experienced teachers. Weingarten (2009) asserts that these relationships create a system in which only well-prepared and capable
teachers who meet high standards receive permanent positions. PAR needs to start with the districts’ teacher hiring and orientation processes and continue through the review of teachers to assess whether they meet the high standards established. All recommendations about whether new teachers merit continued employment must be transparent and based on evidence (Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2009; Weingarter, 2009). When done properly, PAR is beneficial and fair to the teachers receiving the assistance and review as well as the teachers offering it. The success of this system, of course, requires the district budget to allocate sustained, adequate financial support (Weingarten, 2009).

2.4 Conclusion

Educators’ previous life experiences with different cultures, diversity, and inequality influence their values and perspectives of and sensitivities toward other people (Boyle-Baise, 2002). Boyle-Baise (2002) asserts that multicultural service learning, if only a brief educational intervention, slightly unnerved but did not drastically change teachers’ views and practices. These findings suggest why it is important to study the practices experienced teachers have developed over time in local Virginia schools, so other teachers can witness their effectiveness and help all of their own students achieve high standards.

The purpose of my research was certainly not to make generalizations about teachers’ patterns of behavior or suggest how they should manage their classrooms (Cress et al., 2013) but rather to study a few experienced teachers’ practices in depth and use their cultural capital, or specialized knowledge, to uncover what techniques they find most effective, and these practices have, can, and should inform education policy. I needed an informed sense of how to mobilize my values and beliefs about education into action. Service-learning challenges stereotypical
beliefs and prejudice (Fuller, 1998; O’Grady, 1997; Boyle-Baise, 2002), but it is crucial to find out why service learning combats those beliefs and helps give teachers culturally considerate perspectives.

An ultimate yet ambitious goal of this research was for teachers to understand what practices help students regardless of background develop critical literacy, literacy beyond the basics of decoding text and determining meaning, which requires teachers to shift away from traditional roles and encourage students to talk and write about personal experiences, knowledge, and opinions (Murphy, 2009). Hattie (2012) discusses the importance of classroom climate and relational trust for the school’s sense of community and achievement, as the “stronger the feeling of trust in a school community, the more successful that school will be” (p. 70), and it is necessary to uncover the best practices to achieve that success. Discussion-centered teaching approaches increase student talk and decrease teacher talk (Murphy, 2009), which allows students to share thoughts more and feel comfortable participating during classroom time when compared to approaches in which teachers serve as lecturers. When students discuss class material more during instruction time, the results are more potent for below-average students than average or above-average students, as children of higher ability levels likely possess the skills necessary to understand complex texts (Murphy, 2009). An open dialogue about how experiences and aspects of students’ culture relate to class material enhances achievement and creates a positive classroom climate for discussion and learning (Cress et al., 2013).
**Chapter 3: Methods**

In this section, I describe the steps I took to answer my research question, “How do experienced high school English teachers respond to students’ cultural and linguistic variation to maximize learning?” I include information about my interview preparation, the acquisition and description of participants, the structure of interviews, and data collection. While investigating my research question, I used a qualitative approach involving in-depth case studies of high school English teachers and pseudonyms to protect the identities of all research participants.

### 3.1 Qualitative Methods

My approach used primarily qualitative methods and focused on in-depth case studies of teachers. The case study approach allowed me to collect multiple teachers’ perspectives to build a deep understanding of my interdisciplinary topic. Researchers (Punch, 2005; Gray, 2014) emphasize that it is hard to define a case but that examples include a role or occupation, individuals, and organizations. Case studies frequently produce large amounts of data, so I created case records to organize details about each of the study’s participants (Patton, 2002; Gray, 2014). This study valued credibility through a conscious effort to ensure confidence in the accuracy of data interpretation and the description and explanation processes (Lincoln and Guba, 1994; Gray, 2014).

My study involved reflection on the overall political and cultural contexts of participants’ action (Gray, 2014). My research incorporated “an understanding of the power of group dynamics and the relationships between individuals, groups and communities” (Gray, 2014, p. 166). That understanding as well as a cycle of planning, taking action, observing, and reflecting informed my research and allowed me to get into great detail.
Rather than relying on a distinct set of hypotheses going into the interviews, the responses and experiences of the teachers who participated in my research guided my study (Heath, Street, and Mills, 2008). Specific hypotheses would detract from the quality and importance of teacher responses and limit the scope of potential answers, as hypotheses and leading questions would cause teachers to respond in a specific, unproductive way (Flick, 2009), which is not the purpose of my research.

I created a set of provisional questions and related hypotheses, which I altered and improved as my research progressed (Gray, 2014). I asked open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview format so that I could ask additional questions (Gray, 2014). I then dispersed a follow-up online questionnaire to conduct a final survey with each of the participants (Gray, 2014). I examined the data to outline patterns of similarities and differences across the cases and organized those patterns into thematic sections (Gray, 2014). The dimensions I measured were a combination of those mentioned in literature searches and those I chose as a researcher based on participant responses (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gray, 2014).

After starting workshop observations, I recognized that all participants were qualified to comment on strong teaching practices because they demonstrated the specified knowledge and appropriate authority in the subject matter (Gray, 2014). They highlighted their competence in presentations on teaching techniques, small group and one-on-one conversations, and thoughtful questions and comments. I wanted to establish the teachers’ opinions on certain concepts and phenomena related to education to bring personal value to the research study. While I had general ideas of what would be discussed based on my literature review research on culturally relevant pedagogy and multicultural instruction, I was in no way limiting the teachers’ responses for a reason besides time constraints, so they could talk about the issues and aspects most
important to them and their jobs as teachers in Virginia. In order to accomplish this goal, I waited for the teachers to finish their thoughts and pause for a few seconds before moving to follow up questions. I studied the participants’ views of how they function in the school setting with other teachers and students. Personal stories and examples during the interviews as well as the fact that I worked with multiple educators help validate the accuracy of my findings.

My data are qualitative and from one-on-one interviews in quiet, private locations either in person or via Skype. In two rare cases, I spoke with a participant over the phone because of a snowstorm on the interview day. I wanted to maintain strong communication, so I chose to conduct most of the interviews over Skype because of the video capabilities. In comparison to other means of communication like phone interviews, Gray (2014) stresses that Skype’s visual element “offers the possibility of generating much better inter-personal communication, the development of greater trust and, as a result, more rounded and detailed responses” (p. 405). I was careful to consider my use of language and general impression from my appearance and body language throughout each video or in-person session with a teacher (Gray, 2014). For example, I dressed in business casual for interviews to show the participants that I took each opportunity to talk to them seriously, but I did not dress in overly formal clothing because I wanted to maintain a comfortable, conversational element. I attempted to maintain a neutral face in response to participants’ comments and was conscious not to add verbal cues.

For thoughtful, honest responses about educators’ and students’ cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic background and how those aspects influence the teachers’ ability to relate to and teach students from similar or different backgrounds, I wanted the educators to feel respected and at ease, so I used informal interviewing techniques in familiar school settings. A formal interview, as Labov (1969) discusses, affects the interviewee’s motivation and perception, which
can lead a subject to become anxious and wary (Winch, 1990). Research by Edwards (1980) points out that educated people who are more accustomed to social science research are usually cooperative and understanding of the requirement to “make a verbal display” under these conditions (Winch, 1990, p. 68). Winch (1990) goes on to say it may be hard to elicit a reply about how the interviewee acted rather than how he or she should have acted in order to give the “right” or expected response to the interviewer; however, informal interview techniques and a comfortable, natural setting for the discourse can help obtain honest answers (p. 68). I conducted my interviews with the Virginia English teachers in settings, such as classrooms and private office spaces, where I believed the teachers would feel comfortable.

My study’s methods allowed teachers to talk about subjects that were not necessarily in the literature review research, which added unique insight to the scholarship. A more quantitative means of data collection would not let teachers go into detail about their experiences, and I would not be able to observe their body language, speech patterns, and other paralinguistic cues (Scherer, London, and Wolf, 1973). I did not want to constrain the participants in my study to respond only to a limited set of analytic categories because of too much structure (Flick, 2009).

Quantitative research, while important, often overlooks the direct interactions between teachers and students (Mehan, 1992) to focus on easy to measure characteristics of teachers, such as their highest degree of educational attainment, using large samples rather than studying teacher-student relations in depth (Wenglinsky, 2001). Qualitative research through individual observations helps produce accurate comparisons across days, weeks, and isolated results to reduce bias and paint an accurate picture of teacher performance (Piper, 1974). Wenglinsky (2001) credits qualitative methods as essential to study the relationship between students’ academic achievement and the classroom practices educators employ as well as useful to
examine the effects of teachers’ background characteristics and professional development on student achievement, which are important factors in my research.

Qualitative research’s discursive and in-depth practices that involve interviews or analysis of historical materials are valuable to study and make inferences in the field of education (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994), but consideration of how education research relates to policy is also essential. A study by Johnson (2003) examines the multicultural policies of schools in New York City and underscores the social and political contexts of the time and place. Johnson’s research takes into account the history of civic involvement in the development of policy, such as during the intercultural education movement in the 1930s and 1940s, the community control movement in the 1960s, and Children of the Rainbow curriculum controversy in the 1990s (2003). The expansion of multicultural policy is an excellent tool to consider the past, aid people in low-income and diverse communities, and continue conversations about the best teaching practices to celebrate differences. Regardless of what demographics are in the classroom or elsewhere, people need to notice and pay careful attention to present circumstances of adversity and inequality rather than choosing to ignore or overlook it in our daily lives.

The nature of my qualitative research also allowed me to collaborate with interview participants through questions that promote discussion and elicit responses that provide novel data related to teaching. Teachers could explain concepts fully, as I worked with them one-on-one during the interviews. While workshops were helpful to see collaboration among the educators, one or two more talkative members could easily dominate the group setting at the expense of others’ participation. I wanted to allow each teacher to have an equal and even input on my research data and help me with the findings.
3.2 Community Partner

My community partner is the School University Research Network (SURN), a partnership that has existed between the William & Mary School of Education and K-12 school divisions in Virginia since 1993 (“SURN,” 2014). The organization’s mission is to conduct applicable research and offer professional development to promote high quality teaching and learning outcomes. SURN works with at least twenty-seven school districts in Virginia cities and counties, including those in Richmond, Mathews, Newport News, Southampton, Poquoson, Charles City, Isle of Wight, King and Queen, Williamsburg/James City, York, King William, Prince George, Lancaster, Portsmouth, Middlesex, New Kent, Northumberland, Petersburg, Suffolk, Surry, West Point, Franklin, Gloucester, Hampton, Hopewell, and Norfolk (“SURN,” 2014). I worked with teachers in Richmond, Newport News, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Norfolk, and Williamsburg. I wanted to limit my scope to teachers who work in local schools with low-income or high-need populations.

Dr. Jan Rozzelle is SURN’s executive director, and there are six staff members for the School Leadership Institute at William & Mary as well as some people involved in the Division Leadership Support Team and in other capacities related to SURN. Staff and volunteers make events and initiatives such as SURN Leadership for Effective Teaching, Visible Teaching, Assessment, Learning and Leading, and the Capstone English Academy happen (“SURN,” 2014). The districts involved in SURN offer access to their schools, faculty, and students for research and participate in free and/or discounted programs for professional development to respond to needs identified by the schools’ superintendents (“SURN,” 2014), so both William & Mary and the schools benefit from the partnership and interactions. The organization and its work influence
teachers, principals, superintendents throughout Virginia as well as staff and research at the William & Mary School of Education.

My project’s audience is people interested in education research, including teachers, college students, and education policy professionals. Through my research, I produce a comprehensive overview of the interviewed teachers’ methods, practices, and considerations to help prospective teachers and teachers who are new to the field or looking to improve their abilities by compiling a list of teaching suggestions offered by the teachers involved in my research. Boyle-Baise (2002) notes that teachers often want to engage all of the students in a multicultural classroom but find it difficult to relate to or interact with students of different backgrounds. This problem leads the teachers to unintentionally stay distant from the students for fear of offending them (Boyle-Baise, 2002).

The purpose of this collaboration is to work with the high school English teachers to collect qualitative data about high quality teaching practices and classroom management procedures. Cress (2006) notes that research often focuses on outcomes rather than the process, so it is useful to study the experiences and interactions among teachers, students, and administrators that affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Bowen (1977) contends that higher education should give students the necessary cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills for civic engagement and teach students how to discern what is right and what is wrong in their communities. Intellectual development is important, but students also need to 1) understand information, 2) make meaning from that knowledge, and 3) apply their skills to situations, service, and/or research to be active citizens (Bowen, 1977; Cress, 2006). These steps were useful for my community-based research, as I applied my knowledge and coursework to
discussions with high school English teachers and drew conclusions about high quality teaching and learning outcomes.

From my community partner’s perspective, the purpose of this collaboration is to help satisfy needs and best use the resources, including time, effort, and established partnerships, of those involved (Cress et al., 2013). I wanted to make efficient use of SURN’s time and contribute new findings to support their mission. I also provided a small amount of monetary compensation to the participants involved in my research study for their assistance. Each participant was given a check for fifty dollars because that amount is sizable enough to compensate somewhat for their time but not large enough to coerce them into participating in my study if they otherwise would not (Booth et al., 2008). I was careful to reduce any feelings of discomfort or coercion. I let all participants know that their participation was voluntary and that they could discontinue their involvement at any time without penalty.

3.3 Participants

My research focused on a small and heavily involved group of people, six teachers and four staff members and past teachers. By confining the number of cases, I was able to investigate a small number of cases in detail and discover their personal experiences in education (Flick, 2009). The teachers involved in my research come from low-income and urban schools around Hampton Roads, Virginia and have been designated as “lead teacher” or sometimes “power team member” by the William & Mary School of Education through SURN. I ensured that my interviews allowed the perspectives of all of the participants to receive sufficient attention (Howard and Scott, 1981; Heath, Street, and Mills, 2008). This tactic allows teachers to offer novel thoughts on multicultural classrooms and the state of education. I examine a number of
variables, including teacher background, classroom qualities, and familiarity with sociolinguistic theory as it relates to education.

The SURN teachers involved in my study come from different local school districts. See Appendix A for the profiles of teacher participants. Ms. Nelson teaches English 12 and AP Language at a high school in Norfolk, Virginia. Ms. White teaches at a high school in Chesterfield County, Virginia. Ms. Fleming teaches at a high school near Williamsburg, Virginia. Mr. Watson teaches 10th Grade English, Hip Hop Verse and Poetry, and a College and Career Readiness seminar at a rural high school in Warsaw, Virginia. I have a good geographic spread of teachers (see Figure 1 for a visual of all the partnership locations for SURN), so they offered insight into various local communities in Virginia.

Because each teacher teaches at a unique location in the Commonwealth, I examined the Virginia Department of Education’s School Report Card for each of their schools. I used the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data to uncover the accreditation status, annual measurable objective targets and performance, and enrollment numbers by school. Virginia has a commitment to provide a good education to all of its students, and the Virginia School Report Cards offer “transparent information about the performance of Virginia’s schools. School accreditation and federal accountability ratings for a specific school year are based on student achievement on tests taken during the previous academic year” (NCES, 2013). I outline some of the teacher and school qualities below.

Mr. Watson teaches 10th Grade English, Hip Hop Verse and Poetry, and a College and Career Readiness seminar at a rural high school in Warsaw, Virginia, which is located on the Middle Peninsula. This high school is “fully accredited” and does not maintain a Title I priority or focus. The school met all accreditation benchmarks and annual measurable objective targets
for all student subgroups for the 2013 to 2014 school year. The Hispanic student subgroup is too small to evaluate the objective accordingly. During the 2012 to 2014 school year, enrollment was about 345 students (NCES, 2013), which is on the smaller side of the schools from which I am interviewing teachers. Appendix A offers profiles of teacher participants, which includes the kind of teacher (high school, middle school, lead teacher, non-lead teacher), classes taught currently and additional activities in their school, school system, gender, and ethnicity.

Ms. Fleming teaches English and Film Production at a high school near Williamsburg, Virginia. The school’s enrollment was approximately 600 students during the 2012 to 2013 school year. This high school is not a Title I priority or focus and has a status of “accreditation with warning,” as it met the accreditation benchmarks for English, history, and science but not for mathematics as of the 2013 to 2014 school year. In the 2013 to 2014 school year, while African American and Hispanic students met the set performance requirements, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged students did not have satisfactory performance in mathematics, and the economically disadvantaged student subgroup did not meet the Federal Graduation Indicator (FGI). This means the high school did not make the annual measurable objectives for proficiency in reading and math test participation and performance for all subgroups. It is important to note that schools with “one or more subgroups not meeting a minimum passing rate target— and not identified as a Title I Priority or Title I Focus school — are required to implement an improvement plan” (NCES, 2013).

Ms. Nelson teaches English 12 and AP Language at a Norfolk high school. This high school has an “accredited with warning” status and does not have Title I priority or status. The school met the accreditation benchmark for English but not for mathematics, history, science, or the graduation and completion index for the 2013 to 2014 school year. The proficiency gap
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dashboard for federal accountability chart reveals that the school met the annual measurable objective target for all students in reading based on the current year result and met it in mathematics by reducing the failure rate by at least ten percent (NCES, 2013). The enrollment for the 2012 to 2013 school year was about 1,300 students.

Ms. White teaches in the English Department at a high school in Chesterfield County, Virginia, which is part of the metro-Richmond area located southeast of Richmond City. This high school maintains a “fully accredited” status and is not a Title I priority or focus. The school met all accreditation benchmarks for the 2013 to 2014 school year. The proficiency gap dashboard for federal accountability chart depicts that all students reached the annual measurable objectives target for reading, but school’s category for students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students met the annual measurable objectives target for reading but not for mathematics for the 2013 to 2014 school year (NCES, 2013). The enrollment for the 2012 to 2013 school year is roughly 2,300 students.

My sample of teachers represents the perspectives of both males and females and different races to allow for an in-depth look into the study’s main questions from various sociocultural perspectives. It is important to have ample male and minority teacher participants in my qualitative study for a more comprehensive view of teaching. Diverse viewpoints among participants can help predict potential problems for teachers with different backgrounds in terms of culture, language, and socioeconomic status (Boyle-Baise, 2002). The teachers who participated in my research come from public schools that typically serve students from lower socioeconomic and urban backgrounds. Because these students are already seen as disadvantaged compared to their peers (Howard & Scott, 1981), this research can help ensure that high quality and culturally relevant instruction diminishes those disadvantages.
3.4 Materials

Because of the qualitative nature of my study, I did not have many materials. Materials used include a laptop computer with a webcam and Skype installed, Zoom H1 and H2 digital audio recorders, and Audacity audio recorder and editor software. I constructed a Qualtrics research suite survey that contained twenty-two questions dealing with participants’ demographics and their classrooms’ qualities, such as typical class size and failure rates (see Appendix D, the Teacher Background Survey 2014).

3.5 Procedure

Prior to interviewing the educators, I submitted a Human Subject Proposal to the College of William & Mary’s Protocol and Compliance Management system. The proposal was reviewed by the student Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approved. All of the interviews were conducted with the guide of a Semi-Structured Interview Protocol. In this section, I explain data collection and presentation.

3.5.1 Data Collection

The main components of my collaboration with SURN include a questionnaire and series of interviews with high school English teachers who serve as SURN’s lead teachers, which means they have been designated as strong teachers in their individual schools and school districts. This service-learning endeavor requires me to work in a project-based capacity more so than a direct-service capacity (Cress et al., 2005), as I collected qualitative data from my conversations with the teachers. The sociolinguistic interview is a constructed speech event to
“maximize comparability of speech samples for multiple speakers [and] elicit a predictable range of stylistic output from the interviewee” (Eckert & Rickford, 2001, p. 119). Eckert and Rickford (2001) suggest that interviews should have the same question order and structure to maintain comparability and avoid bias. My interview questions are divided into three separate but related categories: teaching techniques and practices, classroom qualities, and theory and policy. The combination of these three categories is intended to provide a comprehensive view of the teachers and their classrooms. I utilize the three-interview structure suggested by Seidman (2006). The first interview is essential to provide a context for participants’ experiences in schools and in situations such as coaching, counseling, tutoring, or related activities (Seidman, 2006). The second interview is vital to uncover the details of experiences and concentrate on particular aspects of the teachers’ day-to-day roles and responsibilities. Seidman (2006) points out that the third interview is useful to reflect on the meaning behind experiences and delve into the connections between the teachers’ work and personal lives and beliefs. It is interesting to see how various factors of people’s lives lead them to their present situations. A strong foundation from the first two interviews is crucial to a successful third interview.

Seidman (2006) notes the three-interview structure also allows for more validity than singular interviews because it puts participants’ responses in a greater context and encourages internal consistency of statements. By articulating and reflecting on their experiences, people make meaning and process those experiences (Seidman, 2006; Vygotsky, 1987). When people select specific events and stories from the past, they attach meaning to them and put the experience in the context of the conversation. It is advantageous to make use of the “interactive and cumulative nature of the sequence of interviews” (Seidman, 2006, p. 13). This interview structure allows for a comprehensive, in-depth view of participant responses over the course of a
couple weeks (Seidman, 2006). Such an approach is worthwhile because it lets the researcher and participant process the material over time and follow up on past responses. Seidman (2006) and Cress et al. (2013) emphasize the community piece of research.

I collaborated with my research advisor, Dr. Anne H. Charity Hudley, as well as graduate students, Darlene Dockery, Hannah Franz, April Lawrence, and Kerrigan Mahoney, in the School of Education regarding the construction of my interview questions, so they provide relevant insight into my topics. After attending workshops and conferences through the organization in the spring, summer, and fall of 2013, I met many of the teachers I later interviewed, saw them interact and share ideas with each other, and felt comfortable and safe working with SURN as a community partner. Through open body language, including uncrossed legs and arms and good posture, and engaging discourse, I presented myself in a way to elicit natural, detailed responses rather than anxiety and overthinking (Eckert & Rickford, 2001). I posed open-ended questions and provided encouraging responses and follow up questions in order to create a conversational tone and engaging discussion with the SURN teachers I interviewed. Patton (2002) perfectly articulates the importance of relationships in qualitative research and that “distance does not guarantee objectivity; it merely guarantees distance” (p. 575).

The observer’s paradox is the vernacular the linguist wishes to observe is unlikely to be produced in the relatively formal context in which participants interact with interviewers who are strangers (Eckert & Rickford, 2001; Labov 1975). I attended workshops and conferences with the teachers I interviewed, so those interactions allowed us to get to know each other in a rather informal atmosphere. That familiarity helped me ensure everyone involved in my research was comfortable. It is sometimes difficult to separate casual speech from careful speech in interviews
(Rickford & McNair-Know, 1994), but this distinction is important, as honest, detailed, and accurate responses are ideal.

Language and effective communication play a key role in my project, and I ascertained the teachers who expressed interest in my study felt comfortable and at ease. Interviewers’ personality and general impression on participants make a significant difference on the quality of the responses, as speech is most natural when the speaker feels at ease and is not actively monitoring his or her speech (Labov, 1975; Eckert & Rickford, 2001). Labov’s model (1966, 2001) highlights the beliefs that individuals change their speech according to how much attention they pay to it and that attention individuals pay to their speech is determined by given interactions’ perceived level of formality (Moore, 2004). I tried to make interviewees feel at ease by getting to know them over the summer of 2013. I also did not ask any confrontational or leading questions during discussions with them.

I practiced interviews with staff at the William & Mary School of Education, including Dr. Jan Rozzelle, Dr. Jennifer Hindman, Ms. Kerrigan Mahoney, and Ms. April Lawrence (see Appendix B, the profiles of staff participants). By working with different graduate students, past teachers, and staff at the School of Education, I ensured my questions allow the teachers to provide adequate details about educational experiences and speech differences without causing discomfort, using leading questions, or taking up too much of their time. I avoided leading questions, explored rather than probed the participants, and asked open-ended questions that give the teachers the opportunity to take different directions with certain questions as they see fit (Seidman, 2006). By carefully researching and practicing interview techniques, I was conscious to avoid mechanistic responses, give contexts to responses, and gather stories from which I could extrapolate important trends for current and prospective teachers (Gray, 2014).
If a teacher moved in a different direction from the set of question and changes the subject, I politely returned to the prior topic without forcing the conversation in a specific way. This concept is known as the Principle of Tangential Shifting, formulated by Ivan Sag (Eckert and Rickford, 2001). I did not maintain a rigid interview structure but rather allowed the teachers to take control of the flow of the interview and provide more detail if certain questions relevant to my topic strike their interest.

The relative personal or social importance of topics, such as one’s income level, speaking skills, or standard of living, discussed in interviews and the overall formality of the setting influence the flow of the discourse (Giles & Powesland, 1975). I had participants explain stories of academic troubles, considerations, and successes in their classrooms to collect meaningful research data and interview results regarding differences in education. As the interviewer, I made decisions that altered the scope and structure of the conversation (Seidman, 2006). I worked to maintain a balance between open-ended and fluid with focus and direction (McCracken, 1988). I did not want to erode the interview’s goals or concentration. I decided to make each interview one to two hours, as Seidman (2006) asserts that a ninety-minute format to ensure unity and chronology without exhaustion of participants (Schuman, 1981). I followed up on what the teachers said to ensure a natural conversation with concrete descriptions and stories that exemplified concepts found in the literature.

Although research on the views and input of the students is vital to an understanding of classroom effectiveness, I limited the scope of my research to the views and input of teachers. I used in-depth interviews, an online survey of twenty-two questions, and workshop observations to assess teacher perceptions, but I would like my future research to involve student perceptions as well, which I further explain in the discussion section of this paper. With particular emphasis
on teaching style and expectations in classrooms of different student makeups, I analyzed the most useful tactics to address common problems for high quality educators when it comes to diverse student needs. In order to understand the most effective classroom procedures from the teachers’ perspectives, my study used qualitative data from interviews with select, experienced, and effective English educators in Virginia who have been designated by their schools as strong teachers. The dimensions of excellent teachers, according to Hattie (2009, 2012), include a proficiency at creating an optimal classroom climate for learning, belief that all students can reach the criteria for success, and influence on surface and deep student achievement, so I examined the extent to which the teachers met these goals. This methodology provides in-depth understanding of the teachers’ experiences with students who are perceived to have little academic potential, who are of low socioeconomic status or minorities, and who have fallen behind on basic reading, writing, and research skills. In this paper, I include details about the protocol of my research, the acquisition of educators to interview and observe, descriptions of the teachers and their classrooms, the structure of interviews and observations, how data was collected and analyzed, and the limitations of this research. For the purposes of my case studies, I used semi-structured interviews with an extensive list of foreseeable questions to guide discussion and ethically get the answers to the questions I needed to know for my research (Booth et al., 2008). While it was difficult to determine socioeconomic status of specific classrooms, I relied on the schools’ overall demographic records and the teachers’ knowledge of the diversity in the classroom. Although teacher report has some limitations in that there is bias, the findings offered insight into teacher beliefs and actions related to those beliefs.

3.5.2 Data Presentation
My data are primarily qualitative and center on written descriptions of experiences and observations (Cress et al., 2013). I present my data in my thesis in a safe manner that respects the privacy of all those involved in my research. In order to achieve that goal, I got approval from the Institutional Review Board and use pseudonyms for the specific educators and their schools when I explain my research’s findings and results. I am sure to incorporate teachers’ examples and anecdotes from their different classroom experiences over the years in the presentation of my research.

Cress et al. (2013) note that part of the Self-Assessment Matrix for project evaluation is that it allows people to determine their strengths and weaknesses by recognizing levels of experience with different components of service-learning, such as reflection, intercultural competence, and capacity to work in the community. Because I am not a teacher, a limitation I recognized is that the participants in my interviews are highly qualified for the teaching profession and have years of experience. These teachers’ qualifications and experience also served as a limitation because it was difficult for them to remember the aspects of teaching they struggled with as new teachers. Although I am not currently a teacher, the educators I interviewed are more than qualified to talk about their experiences and offer vital input to other teachers.

A goal of this project is reciprocity. I hope that in listening to the educators’ stories and experiences and examining their input for trends that arise, I can help give a voice to the teachers and compile a valuable paper to lay out strong practices and techniques for other teachers. Important parts of my evaluation process include whether or not I created and strengthened the relationship with my community partner, have measurable personal growth, and investigate the learning and teaching processes (Cress et al., 2013). I accomplished these goals because the
teachers I interviewed exhibited comfort with me through playful comments and relaxed body language, and I know I have grown personally because I have compiled extensive literature and data on the teaching profession. I will work to ensure my research reaches audiences outside of teachers. I have already spoken with people involved in professional development and professional development evaluation.

In the presentation of my data, I explain the concepts I wanted to know, how teachers mitigated the effects of low socioeconomic status and other classroom differences as well as the indicators to measure it, which are personal responses and experiences from teachers. I then evaluated the evidence and how well it demonstrates the concepts I outlined. This evidence is in the form of qualitative information from my interviews, which are in audio files on my password-protected laptop.

I examined my project’s outcomes during my evaluation of data. By analyzing the trends and repeated comments I heard from the teachers I interviewed, I presented my data around specific concepts and phenomena (Creswell, 2012). These concepts and phenomena include their reactions to language variation, cultural diversity, and socioeconomic disparities, concepts that emerged from my interactions and interviews with the teachers. I outlined teachers’ general feedback around each topic through participant profiles. I used member-checking documents so educators can approve their statements following the interviews. These documents summarized teachers’ views expressed during the interviews and give them the opportunity to fix, clarify, or change their statements. They also allowed me to concisely summarize and state important data from the interviews with each participant. I then evaluated responses and offered conclusions based on the feedback I received from the SURN teachers and examined how well that feedback conflicts with, supports, and/or extends the existing literature on socioeconomic and minority
status and academic achievement for students and the effects of strong teachers on those relationships.

The hope is that my project inspires future research. I would like my project to help schools of education, principals, and other administrators carry out more concerted efforts to teach culturally relevant instruction strategies to teachers. These strategies could help teachers integrate the variety of backgrounds and experiences each student in their classroom possesses.
Chapter 4: Results

In this section, I outline each of the SURN lead teacher’s unique insights and then discuss the themes that emerged from their interviews. Below I outline each of the SURN lead teachers I interviewed, and then I explain the thematic responses in the following section.

4.1 Individual Teacher Responses

4.1.1 Mr. Watson

While Mr. Watson asserted, “I went into undergrad swearing I would never teach,” he is currently in his tenth year of teaching at the same school. In fact, he teaches at the same high school he attended. He went to a nearby university after graduation, so he has remained in the area for a long time. He has no intention of leaving except to get his Doctor of Philosophy in education. He repeatedly referenced his college mentor as having impacted his trajectory and skill at teaching and that mentorship is a cornerstone to his profession. Mr. Watson decided to teach high school students because he likes “the idea of being with a little more mature students.” He believes that having gone to the same high school where he now teaches gives him a unique perspective and insight into “opportunities, advice, things I didn’t have when I was their age.” Mr. Watson points to “collective work and real world reading” as ways to engage his students.

Mr. Watson feels he connects with his students through music and art. He said, “They know that I like rap music. A lot of the students like rap music. One example of integrating music into his class is when he raps himself: “Then all of a sudden I just started doing this rap…I think that caught people’s attention…all my students from first period, they just started clapping.” He stated that he encourages students to develop and share their skills as well. He said, “I do a class open mic. I try to get them to embrace their talents—whether that’s rapping, art, or singing,” and “I let them know my more personal side.”
As an African American teacher, Mr. Watson has also had to deal with racism. He explained, “I had this one student who gave his presentation and did a very nice job. During the course of his presentation, he took out a confederate flag.” When I asked how he responded to that action, Mr. Watson calmly stated, “I congratulated him on his presentation…then I saw him later in the hallway and once again congratulated him on his presentation…I think I messed with his mind.” He focused on respect and staying levelheaded in the classroom. He noted that he always wants to show respect to his students and expects respect from his students in response.

Mr. Watson is willing to stay afterschool to tutor students individually on weekdays. He noted that oftentimes the students who need the help the most do not come. Mr. Watson does not know the exact reason for this situation—whether the students do not have rides, do not want to come, or have some other problem. Other students do choose to come and benefit from their extra time. He said he values mentoring kids because “they kind of yearn for somebody to care for them—to really be there for them.” For example, he explains, “I’ve got a kid that I’m mentoring now. I can see a big change in him. I lie to you not, when I first started mentoring him, he got straight Fs…and now his grades have gone from straights Fs to passing six courses with two Fs…that’s big progress. He’s not where we want him to be, but he’s made tremendous strides. He’s bought into the idea of going to tutoring.”

He discussed how he strives to have his students stay “attentive to details, attentive to language.” One example of how he plan to achieve this goal is: “Within the classroom, you know, dealing with sensitive issues…I plan on doing a lesson on the N word—or really harmful language is the broad scope of things—but I’m going to zero in on the N word, and the reason I’ve decided to do that is that that’s a word that has a very, very sordid past. It’s still problematic to this very day, but it’s a word that’s often used too loosely by today’s youth—African
American males in particular…I lie to you not, kids in class will use it.” He has no tolerance for the N word in his classroom and calls students out when they use it or other offensive words and phrases. He contended, “I try to help students realize you can be very successful [and] don’t buy into stereotypes.”

He is aware that some students have limited vocabularies and may not know the definitions of words such as “advantageous.” He thinks, “It’s just interesting to see how, you know, certain words you think should be self-explanatory or you think everybody should know the definition to, and they don’t.” He believes some linguistic gaps exist because some of the students “haven’t been exposed to all the literature, all the conversations you and I have.”

4.1.2 Ms. White

Ms. White taught for nine years, left teaching to work in the business world for nine years, and then came back to teaching. She believes her time away from teaching did a world of good for her confidence in the classroom and her relationship with colleagues and parents. Ms. White teaches English 12 and is the school’s yearbook advisor. Her husband is also a teacher. Ms. White said, “I always think I can motivate that slacker kid. I always think I can do it by…telling them that my class is preparing them for life.” A lot of being successful, in her opinion, involves being on time, being prepared, being productive, and being nice to people. She says all of her expectations are based around those four things. In her view, students see her as a “teacher with very high expectations,” as she expects their best effort.

Ms. White points out that she has many students who like to hunt and who “don’t think they need to read or plan to ever have to read.” She tries to find specific books for their interests related to hunting and nature. She wants to engage those students as well as the rest of the class in any way possible. She noted that the students get excited that she is spending time thinking
about them and looking for books for them. Ms. White recognizes that students can become disengaged. For example, she asserts that some days “what we’re teaching isn’t going to be that engaging, and you can see that coming. You know, if I’m teaching a grammar review.” These lessons are important to language comprehension but less engaging than other possible lessons.

Ms. White said that “there is a college out there for anybody” and tries to treat every student as though he or she could go to college. She seeks to instill the idea that students could go to college down the line even if it does not seem possible or likely right after high school graduation. Ms. White has students who sometimes feel bad about themselves when the high school overemphasizes the pursuit of college during their senior year. Some would prefer to enter the workforce right after high school, and she believes that there is nothing wrong with that path. Additionally, some of her students want to attend college but lack the proper information. For instance, a few of Ms. White’s students have “very big dreams with very small GPAs,” and she tries to give them a reality check without discouraging them. She says that some kids in her classes have GPAs around 2.5 and believe they can go to William & Mary or Duke. She wants to enable her students to complete better research on the schools that fit for them and their qualifications.

On a number of occasions, Ms. White has tried to make calls to students’ home numbers and found out that they were actually in foster care programs. She did not find out about that fact until she called those listed numbers, which was oftentimes not until late in the school year. On the other hand, she does find out about some things in her students’ lives through their personal statements, college essays, and other class writing pieces. She gets insight into their baggage and believes that insight allows English teachers, as opposed to teachers in other disciplines, to access more information about students and their circumstances. After finding out about her
students’ lives, Ms. White better realized that each child is not “just a student but also a person,” something she says she better understands in recent years as opposed to when she started teaching. Once teachers break through that initial information barrier with students, they can better incorporate multicultural service learning efforts into their teaching and lesson plans (Boyle-Baise, 2002). Ms. White asserts that hearing about those circumstances makes her teach the students differently and distinguish lessons not just based on ability but also based on individual experiences. Ms. White had a student whose mother passed away the previous year, and she was careful not to choose or discuss books in which the characters’ parents die. She does not want classroom experiences to trigger negative emotional reactions based on their home lives. She filters what she says based on who is in her class.

Ms. White notes that teachers have “heard and seen everything” and cannot take too much seriously. Teachers do not necessarily start their first year with a thick skin but must develop one. Oftentimes, she says, parents can get to teachers more than students. Most of the time she must directly contact the parents, as the parents rarely take the initiative to contact her much. Ms. White believes the reason is not that the parents do not care about their children’s success. She thinks parents might be busy, might be trying to let go a little bit, or are “just done with the kid” because of the child’s persistent, negative behavior in school over the years. By the time they get to her class as a senior, the students’ behavior and work habits are largely set in stone in her opinion. This belief conflicts the idea that teachers can affect students at any stage of their education to create positive outcomes. Ms. White had previously mentioned that a few students had never read a book until they entered her classroom, and now they have finished reading entire books. This improvement signifies that students can change their behavior and work habits through high school and that some teachers underestimate their influence.
Her students say “struggle” a lot, but they very rarely use profanity in front of her. Although curse words sometimes slip out, those instances are almost never intentional. She wants students to use their common vernacular in writing for her class and college essays because it allows the students’ personality to be more vivid and clear.

4.1.3 Ms. Fleming

Ms. Fleming teaches English and Film Production at a public school in York County. She was an administrator for nine years and believes her time in administration makes her a better teacher because she has seen education from different perspectives. In two of my three interviews with her, Ms. Fleming called herself “an educator through and through” and repeatedly noted that she loves professional development. She does not shy from serious or controversial topics, such as evaluation and tracking, and asserts, “As educators we need to take back our profession.”

Ms. Fleming repeatedly emphasized how she seeks to equip her students with skills and competencies for the real world. Ms. Fleming noted that teachers must show evidence that they are reaching teacher competencies and that does not understand why students are not evaluated the same way. She believes working with students one-on-one is the most effective strategies she has as a teacher. She asks herself and her students, “What am I not doing as a teacher to make you successful?” She recognizes that factors outside of the classroom are typically the cause of shifts in student behavior and achievement and states that she tries to address issues as soon as she notices them. Teachers may take a while to note changes in students and that teachers may lack an understanding of students’ circumstances (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

When asked about how her students’ ability levels have changed over the years, she contended, “Recently the mistakes that I see are more shocking than when I first started.”
said that students “hate commas, and I hate that they hate commas…or they love commas too much.” She uses strategies to examine how commas change the meaning of different sentences. Another problem she encounters is that students often give answers with one word and do not develop their ideas as fully as she believes they should. Ms. Fleming believes that students want instant gratification, struggle with the difference between “your” and “you’re,” and spend too much time texting, which hurt their writing and communication skills.

She makes students edit and reedit their work until they correct all of their mistakes. She has found that students end up correcting each other and helping each other through the editing process. She emphasized that she tries to make class as enjoyable and effective as possible. In her opinion, it is useful for peers to work together on projects and common goals.

Ms. Fleming thinks her administration trusts her and her opinions. She said, “I do not hesitate to go to my administration with ideas” and that she does so in a professional manner. She has talked to the administration about all kinds of issues. Ms. Fleming is upset that most students have not diagrammed sentences in recent years, so she talked to them about her hopes to bring that technique back into her classroom. She also saw that some teachers in her school seemed lost or confused when dealing with certain students or course material and wanted to take action. With the administration’s support, she piloted a professional learning community in which she meets with the teachers once a month. She leads this effort for free and in her own time to help her colleagues. She contends that administration is there for collaboration and to help students but from a different perspective than that of teachers. Ms. Fleming asserts that the relationship between teachers and students as well as the relationship between administrators and teachers should be that of “mentors not friends.”
The school has a new principal this year. He has implemented a lot of sudden initiatives, but she feels that she has a good relationship with him. She worries about school systems attempting to give into parents’ demands, though. She points out that it is not socially acceptable for parents to challenge doctors or lawyers in the same way that they challenge teachers. In her opinion, people who have not been educators should not decide what education should look like. She has heard non-educators say, “we just have to get teachers to buy in”, which is a sentiment that frustrates her.

4.1.4 Ms. Nelson

Ms. Nelson graduated from college with a focus on English and Community Health and later went back to school to get her teaching certification. When students are not engaged, Ms. Nelson does not take it personally—though she used to in her first years of teaching. She says, “Oh, they’re trying to communicate how bored they are right now…the students are real honest for some reason.” If students do not want to participate, she does not fixate of them. She states, “I try to make them feel comfortable. If that doesn’t work, we’re gonna move on.” She emphasizes how she does not think it is right that the students who act as troublemakers receive the most time and attention when there are other students there to learn. Just because a student is quiet or follows direction does not mean they need less help or guidance from the teacher.

She suggests teachers must have a strong rapport with their students. She referred to a few students in particular. One girl “would come to me on a daily basis and give me updates. The mom pretty much took the child, and she ended up going to court…I even wrote a letter for her to give to the court.” Another student Ms. Nelson believed to be about three hundred pounds at age seventeen confided in her about her aunt who died of morbid obesity at a fairly young age. The girl would come to her during free blocks or lunch to discuss health-related issues and
advice. Ms. Nelson proudly stated that she is a “recent convert to veganism,” and the two were able to bond over that discussion. She has no trouble politely “calling students out” when they eat junk food and suggest they read the list of ingredients. Ms. Nelson likes to be available to her students and genuinely enjoys having conversations with them.

4.1.5 Ms. Carlson

I interviewed a first-year high school English teacher, Ms. Carlson, who is recently involved in SURN to gauge what she found to be the biggest challenges that face her as a new teacher. She teaches in Suffolk and finds it difficult to manage her classrooms and large workload. She explained that she has a busy schedule with five classes this year. She teaches one class of regular 11th grade English, one class of inclusion 11th grade, two classes of regular 12th grade English, and one class of inclusion 12th grade English. Ms. Carlson noted that inclusion means the classroom contains students with various disabilities as well as students without disabilities. She finds teaching her inclusion classes especially difficult because of the varying needs of students and limited time she has to offer one-on-one assistance. She said her biggest challenge this year has been classroom management and that she did not really have much coverage of classroom management in her graduate school program. Her student teaching was in a school with a “different population” than where she now teaches but did not seem to want to elaborate on exactly how the populations differ. She instead spoke in general terms about how she knew students would have “different expectations, different goals, different experiences” and stressed that “learning that and experiencing that are very different.”

Ms. Carlson identified another teacher in the school as a mentor and goes to her for advice, assistance, and emotional support. Her kids often tell her that she is ruining their lives, which got under her skin at first but affects her less so now that she has spent more time in the
classroom. One of the things Ms. Carlson learned from her teacher mentor is that “you have to grade everything.” Her reasoning is that if students find out you are not grading an assignment, they will not do that assignment.

4.2 Thematic Conclusions

I draw four majors themes from my data analysis of the interviews and survey results. In this section, I discuss the themes as follows: 1) consistently high expectations based on students’ past and potential performance and clear evaluation of that performance, 2) strong relationships with students, 3) diversity of instruction to meet students’ individualized needs, and 4) collaboration with administration. These four themes are relevant to my literature review and can aid college and career readiness efforts in Virginia high school English classrooms. While these factors are not the only aspects of strong teaching practices, they surfaced as major trends across the interviews.

4.2.1 Consistently High Expectations and Clear Evaluation

All of the teachers with whom I conducted interviews expressed their frustrations with standardized testing’s lowered expectations and generalization of diverse students’ achievement for the sake of measurability. My survey results showed that the teachers interviewed varied in the percentage of their high school English students receiving As from 5% to 41%, which is notable grading difference among the teachers. Many of the teachers mentioned that their strict teaching styles let the students know they cannot slack off, miss deadlines, or act inappropriately. Ms. Fleming maintains a “2:05 Rule,” which means certain assignments are due at 2:05 p.m. no matter what the circumstances are. Students know these deadlines far in advance and must turn the assignment in by 2:05 p.m. for full credit regardless of whether the student is at school or not. She notes that students are sometimes absent because they know assignment are due that day. Ms.
Fleming points out that her “goal is not to fail students; [her] goal is to teach students responsibilities.” She believes her method helps students develop a sense of responsibility and feel successful in meeting requirements. She said she has an almost nonexistent failure rate and few disciplinary problems because of her uncompromising expectations.

Ms. Carlson emphasized the significance of “creating an environment where everybody can be learning.” She said she really wants all her students to listen to her and to make sure that students do not throw things—a problem she did not expect to encounter in her 11th and 12th grade classrooms but frequently does. Ms. Carlson points out that some students are not interested in what the teacher has to say or are not worried about the disciplinary actions the teacher can take, which she believes makes it hard to discipline the class. Ms. Carlson goes on to say that oftentimes the parents are not interested in what she has to say as their children’s teacher either. She claimed this made it difficult for her to establish that there are real consequences for what the students do.

Ms. Fleming expressed disappointment that teachers must spend a lot more time addressing the students with disciplinary or other behavioral problems than helping the students who actually want to learn and succeed. Ms. Fleming encourages other teachers to avoid focusing a disproportionate amount of time on students who crave attention. She hopes quiet students are able to receive the one-on-one time they may need but not want to speak up about in class when there about more boisterous students. Ms. White explained that her style is not confrontational. If a student has a “rotten attitude,” she tries to uncover the reason for such an attitude and is naturally a little softer to them. Her tactic to discipline children is to give them one chance after behaving badly. Ms. White tells her students that she knows they would not be so rude to her if they actually thought about their actions and takes care of the situations in that
manner. In her opinion, kids’ behavior depends on the day and that teachers must acknowledge that their students’ actions are not always consistent and can fluctuate from day to day.

Mr. Watson notes that his classroom management has improved over his time as a teacher, but he has an unwavering expectation that students behave respectfully. He offered an example of a student who wrote a vulgar note calling him “the N word.” Instead of reacting strongly, he calmly talked to the student, treated him with respect, and made it clear that such language and offensiveness were not tolerated in the classroom. Mr. Watson believes the student appreciated the fact that he had a teacher who gave him a second chance and did not immediately write him off as a bad student. After the note incident, the student “straightened up” and adhered to classroom expectations.

Ms. Nelson recognizes that some students are not as willing to participate in class and believes that difference in personality is okay as long as they show a strong understanding of concepts in other ways. In addition to quizzes and tests, Ms. Nelson evaluates students through oral presentations, posters, group projects, and other non-traditional measures of student learning. Because some students are quieter or shyer than others, Ms. Nelson does not mind if students do not want to share comments with the class as long as they appear alert and are paying attention. This method allows the students’ evaluation to be more comprehensive, as some students are poor test takers or nervous speaking in front of their peers. The measures have clear requirements and potential for success but require time and effort from students. Likewise, she believes formal assessment and standardized testing should be only one of many ways to assess students and even teachers.

Even when students select their own reading, there are always reluctant readers who become “a project” for Ms. White. She identifies them earlier on in the school year and is sure to
monitor their growth over time. She recognizes students will not always reach benchmarks, but she is mostly looking for progress in her students. One of her female students typically reads trendy books, but Ms. White hopes to encourage the student to read more literary texts over the next few weeks. Ms. White notes the differences in her students’ inclinations for reading but is glad when students are reading more than they did previously.

Some of her students take immense pride in their improvement and react by saying things, such as “I am really proud that I finished a book. I haven’t finished a book the entire time I’ve been in high school.” Ms. White mentioned that one girl in her class only reads three pages a week. Ms. White believes the student truly cannot read, but her parents refuse to believe that their daughter lacks that skill. If a student does not possess basic reading comprehension by high school, a lot more pressure is put on the teacher to bring the student up to speed academically. My interviews revealed a tension among the teachers’ perspectives about their role as an educator in relation to state standards. Ms. White and a couple other teachers noted that they just want to see improvement in students’ abilities. Their argument is that it is not realistic to expect a high school student to learn to read at grade level if the student could barely understand the words on the page a couple months ago. Current standards and assessment do not take the issue of struggling readers into account when examining the results of high-stakes testing (Ravitch, 2010). High-stakes testing often assumes the issue lies in poor teacher quality or student disengagement (Weingarten, 2009). Rather than placing blame, policy should reflect the need to help those students learn to read and improve their skills at a substantial yet reasonable pace.

When linguistic problems persist over years, all of the teachers I interviewed felt it was their responsibility that the students correct—or at least attempt to correct—their mistakes for future assignments and grade levels. When she was new to teaching, Ms. Lawrence was
surprised by the frequency of sentence fragments, incorrect subject and verb agreement, words being spelled phonetically, and lack of evidence and support for arguments in high school students’ writing. She advocates for teachers to identify grammatical and mechanical errors only once or a couple times in a paper, so the student can catch the other instances of the mistakes for themselves. Most of the teachers talked about the necessity of qualitative feedback in addition to the correction of individual errors. Ms. Carlson said she wants her students to do well but she will undoubtedly take off points if the students do not follow the given instructions or turn something in on time. Many of the teachers discussed how the maintenance of standards and high student performance are important but that the pursuit of those goals should not disengage students and make school less enjoyable for learning.

4.2.2 Strong Relationships with Students

All of the teachers offered examples of students who confided in or discussed serious topics with them ranging from eating habits to relationship advice to abuse. Ms. White articulated the importance of seeing students as both students and people. She said, “When they tell me…how their dad abandoned them or some other terrible things that’s happened to them, you can’t help but…you see the human side of them. You know, they’re not a student; they’re a person who’s in your class.” Ms. Nelson discussed an ongoing conversation she had with one of her students. She stated, “She would come to me on a daily basis and give me updates. The mom pretty much took the child, and she ended up going to court…I even wrote a letter for her to give to the court.” Given the instability of some students’ home lives, teachers frequently become a source of stability. With the increasing rate of student homelessness, it is important to note that a lack of adequate housing for low-income students and families has a significant effect on
achievement (Rothstein, 2004). Rothstein (2004) states that families who have trouble finding stable housing are more likely to be mobile, and student mobility causes lower levels of student achievement.

Ms. Carlson, the first-year teacher, discussed how she has students write about personal topics to give them a space to open up if they choose to do so. For example, when studying *Othello*, she assigned a writing prompt about how much is too much to handle in a relationship. She gets both big confessions about abuse and other serious topics as well as little confessions about crushes and other random things. Ms. Carlson contends “the most important part of [working with kids] is establishing a personal connection.” She enjoys Russian literature and gave them information about pieces of her background, and the students did the same with their own interests and experiences. She does not listen to rap but is open to learning about rap from students interested in that genre if it can help them learn and feel engaged in the classroom. Ms. Carlson said that one of her student who was always cheerful and completed her assignments told her about how her father was abusive and that her home life was not a healthy environment. It is important to note that teachers only know what students or counselors tell them and much of students’ home lives can go unknown to teachers if those personal relationships do not exist.

If Ms. White could offer advice to new teachers, she would say:

It's not about you [the teacher]..it's about the students. Planning fascinating lectures or PowerPoints isn’t the same as teaching. Good teaching demands student engagement. When I started teaching, I thought it was enough for me to be wonderfully prepared and for them to be quiet…my heart was in the right place, but I missed the point. Now I spend my energy on finding ways to facilitate their learning through action and engagement.
All of the teachers try to make themselves available and open to students. This availability is critical to building relationships and engaging students in the learning process. After getting to know her students and their abilities, Ms. Fleming tries to give students different opportunities to improve. She designates some days as portfolio days, which allows students to update their wiki pages and work on their portfolios of writing samples and assignments for class. She also tells certain students that they can—or are highly suggested to—see her afterschool for their issues with writing and/or analysis. In her opinion, standardized testing only measures minimal requirements, and she believes such methods for evaluation have caused a decline in her students’ writing quality.

In terms of language, Ms. Fleming says that she uses the “old lady doesn’t understand technique” when students use slang. In other words, she asks the students to rephrase their statements, so they can alter their language to be more formal and appropriate for her classroom standards. While she says slang is fine under some circumstances, she emphasizes the importance of speaking standardized English for interviews and professional settings. The focus should be on differences rather than correctness or incorrectness of language. Variation in language typically signifies a sense of the students’ identity rather than “low intelligence, uncooperativeness, or hostility” (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011, p. 100). In Ms. Fleming’s opinion, her students get comfortable with their language when they are around other students. Ms. Fleming wants her students to understand that they cannot use a lot of slang or non-standardized language when speaking with their teachers or bosses and that they should be able to speak formally to command respect and positive perceptions. Ms. Fleming noted that she tries to group kids strategically and thinks that the students never know. She groups students based mostly on their ability levels and pairs specific students together so they can build off of each
other and contribute to the group. Her reasoning is that people must work with all personality
types and ability levels in the real world.

### 4.2.3 Diversity of Instruction

Personal relationships often result in the ability to better understand students’
individualized needs. Oftentimes having those relationships with students allows teachers
diversify their teaching techniques and instructions based what they know about specific students’
performance, interests, and personalities. Fortunately for my study, the teachers’ involvement in
SURN allows them to take some autonomy in their classrooms. This autonomy means the
teachers can implement lessons that focus on student choice and individuation rather than
standardization. The teachers who taught grades or classes without SOL testing expressed relief
about not having to teach to the test. The teachers incorporate movement of seats, large and small
group learning, and the development of portfolio work for teacher and peer editing to diversify
their kinds of instruction. Mr. Watson discussed how he meets students’ different needs and
interests when he said, “I try to approach the topics from different angles…I do a lot of written
responses…intended for the students provide their feedback, thoughts, and questions. A lot of
personal feedback.”

Mr. Watson detailed how he likes to work with students by bonding with them over their
artistic and linguistic interests. Speakers of non-standardized English may be understandable, but
society often vilifies or marginalizes them for not speaking a standardized version of the
language (Lippi-Green, 2012). The teachers recognized that some students speak differently and
reacted to this variation in different ways. Mr. Watson said that rather than trying to correct
students’ language, he focused his energy on giving them code-switching abilities and unique
outlets to speak in the way that is most natural for them. Perceptions about accentedness and comprehensibility vary from person to person, but he worked with interested students to write poetry and perform spoken word in class and afterschool. The teachers interviewed all note that language variation is incredibly useful for communication—be it poetry, spoken word, discussion, presentations, projects, or other aspects of the classroom.

Ms. White lamented that there is no honors English in 12th grade at her school, so students must choose from Advanced Placement English and a John Tyler Community College course, or drop to regular English. She contended that students would benefit from an honors English course senior year. Ms. White notes that she very rarely tests students per se and has a high engagement class. For example, her students do a lot of “independent work and self-selection. They select their own reading. They even select their own vocabulary from the reading.” Ms. White asks her students to rank their reading from most to least difficult, which she says allows for a great deal of reflection and the use of literary terms they have learned in high school over the years. She has also talked to other educators about her participation in my research since this project sparked her interest in hearing about what strategies other teachers find the most effective. Ms. White found the following:

I asked [my student teacher from the University of Richmond] what piece of advice has been most useful...she said that the best thing I’ve shared with her…different from what she’s learned in classes...is the importance of reading in the classroom and the importance of offering choice in that reading. She’s seen that allowing choice and time for reading in class creates engaged readers.
Ms. White feels that this independence is difficult for many of the students because they are not used to that freedom and choice when it comes to their learning. The kids are not being told exactly what to do and are learning in a more non-traditional, more independent way.

Ms. White feels like she has gotten better about fitting her instruction to her different classrooms over the years. She likes to integrate the children’s cultures and existing knowledge. She mentions, “I don’t know. [Hearing about students’ past experiences] makes me teach them differently. I differentiate in a different way…not just ability wise but experience wise.” She cites how the students go through various situations and how, if they want to share those experiences, develop the skillset to discuss those experiences in personal statements, college essays, or other forms. The focus on college and career readiness was an important topic within the teachers’ discussion of how they diversify instruction. Since the teachers cite that they usually know what students hope to do after graduation, whether it is going to college, learning a trade, or immediately entering the workforce, they seek to help their classes achieve those individualized goals.

Ms. Carlson discussed the politics surrounding education as well and said “public schools get judged a lot by their student performance.” In her opinion, many “students often get pushed through” high school. She attributes this pattern partially to the school system, partially to parents who do not want to see their students fail so they “create a stink,” and partially to teachers who do not want to get in trouble with the school. She takes issue with the mandated curriculum in that it focuses almost solely on preparation for college, which overlooks students who want to pursue other paths, such as cosmetology or welding. She hopes for more emphasis on trade school as an acceptable path after high school graduation.
On the first day of class, Ms. Carlson and her students made culture timelines in which students write down details they consider to be important from their childhood and different stages of life thus far as well as how they think they are different from their peers. Ms. Carlson also noted that it took her a while to understand that “doing badly in class can give you some kind of cred” since she took advanced classes in high school and went to a nationally ranked college, both of which had mindsets that doing well in school translates to success. Because of these differences in her classrooms’ mindsets, she responds to various students differently. For example, sometimes she congratulates students on their papers but does not verbally say it because she knows certain students would be embarrassed. While some students want that recognition in front of the class, her personal relationships and resulting understanding of student differences with students allows her to judge the best ways to encourage her students. Ms. Carlson tries to offer choice in her assignments. For example, she will have students pick two or five essay topics on tests rather than making them answer all questions. Ms. Carlson said some students need personal attention and that one-on-one time if they need help with a particular topic that most other students have already grasped. This extra attention requires effort on the part of the teacher to regularly monitor and check up on all of their students’ level of understanding at any given point compared to their peers. As a new teacher, Ms. Carlson wants to see that the students understand the concepts first and foremost, but that she is still struggling with accurately and regularly measuring her students’ understanding.

4.2.4 Collaboration with Administration

The teachers, many of whom have previously served as administrators, discussed how a good administration is key. Over the course of their teaching careers, the teachers have worked under different styles of administrations that vary in their levels of receptiveness, rigidness, and
visibility. The participants who have served as administrators feel especially confident confronting their administrators about questions, needs, or ideas. Ms. Fleming notes, “As educators we need to take back our profession…I was an administrator for nine years…I do not hesitate to go to my administration with ideas, but I do so in a professional manner.”

By nature of SURN, the lead teachers were nominated by their school and their administration, so it is likely these teachers have a positive, open, and involved dynamic with their schools, which is not always the case. Ms. Carlson, the first-year teacher, asked, “What do you do if your administration doesn’t support you?” This question probably exists for a lot of new teachers who have yet to establish a relationship with their administration or those who have unresponsive administrations. Mr. Watson talked about the benefits of a good relationship with his school’s administration and said he feels as though he has a good relationship with the school administration. When asked what the relationship has allowed him to try, he said he is happy he could “add some classes to our course offerings. I’ve been able to bring some new classes that they didn’t have in the past…I didn’t have to write a proposal. I just mentioned it. I lucked out on that one. I just mentioned it.” While this theme is difficult to control to some degree, a few of the teachers noted that their school’s administrators change fairly regularly, so they must adapt to those changes.

He proudly stated, “I got this hip hop mentorship thing I call Freestyle Friday. Every Friday from 3:30-4:30, I have a group of guys—who are not only African American. I got some Caucasian males in there—it’s open to any male student who’s interested in hip hop and writing.” He spends his free time serving as a mentor and building closer relationships with his students, and he can hold these meetings because he has administrative support. He believes the hip hop mentorship sessions have multiple benefits for the children. He discussed how “in addition to
working on their rhyming skills, you know, another teacher and I, we look at that as an opportunity to mentor the students in regards to life issues—topics that writers are concerned with.” Those skills are useful inside and outside of the classroom, and the administration listened to his request to integrate more artistic electives. He contended that pushing the students to think about tough topics helps them be more “socially conscious, socially responsible” and that he could have done this mentorship program without administrative support.

When people are beginning their careers as teachers and deciding what school to work for, they should choose schools where the current teachers feel comfortable and content with their administration. Each of the teachers I interviewed cited their administration as either a source of help, indifference, or frustration, which directly impacted how they operate the classroom.

4.2.5 Conclusion of Thematic Results

The themes of consistently high expectations and clear evaluation, strong relationships with students, diversity of instruction, and collaboration with the administration all tie together to meet students’ unique needs, experiences, and backgrounds. These strategies, when used together, can help teachers have the classroom management, culturally relevant instruction, and administrative support to embrace the specific makeup of their classrooms. Regardless of who makes the top-down decisions about the American education system’s policies and procedures, teachers are the ones interacting with students and implementing the policy at its most basic level (Ravitch, 2010). Thus, these teachers need support to educate a new generation of teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

My research question, “How do experienced high school English teachers respond to students’ cultural and linguistic variation to maximize learning?,” allows me to collect effective
teaching strategies for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms from expert teachers in southeastern Virginia schools. From these teachers’ responses and feedback, I consider the question: What are the U.S. education system’s deficiencies in multicultural instruction? Based on my thematic results, the trends suggest that teachers feel more effective when they have close relationships with students and more secure when they have solid relationships with their schools’ administrations. These findings suggest that the education system should emphasize support systems for teachers and students to feel confident enough to reach out for help and secure enough to try learning strategies. These approaches are likely to lead to better results than calls for higher test scores for struggling teachers who lack mentors or other means of support (Ravitch, 2010). In addition to test scores, schools’ administrations should survey teachers about their feelings of efficacy and policymakers should gauge which aspects of teaching teachers want to explore or improve. The designers of standardized tests should also be cognizant of the necessity for them to embrace cultural and linguistic differences. It is crucial to note that linguistic differences and test design can lead to systematic differences in students’ test scores and academic achievement (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). These differences can also impact the assessment of students and their teachers.

While it is easy to become overwhelmed and disenchanted by the bureaucracy of policymaking (Wilson, 2006), teachers unions and other advocates for improved education standards and metrics for those standards will not rest until more qualitative approaches are considered (Ravitch, 2010). Given that teachers will almost certainly have a student or students from a different background than their own, the importance of culturally relevant instruction cannot be overstated or ignored (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2010). Such instruction ensures that the curricula are relevant, understandable, and interesting to students. It also allows
teachers to tap into existing funds of knowledge, which can increase other students’ understanding of different cultures and global perspectives (Moll et al., 1992; Saunders and Kardia, 2004).
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

In this paper, I constructed a review of relevant literature and conducted my own research to investigate the perspectives of Virginia high school English teachers regarding their students’ communicative abilities and differences. I explored the current state of and gaps in teacher preparation programs and educational research and policy. Students are on the receiving end of the education system, and teaching practices can have massive implications on student learning. Effective teaching requires—among other things—challenging yet not impossible coursework for students, open communication with parents and administration, and integration of students’ existing knowledge and background into the classroom (Roth & Swail, 2000). Effective training and professional development opportunities are critical to strong teaching and learning.

While I work within a specific research area, namely high school English teachers, my results are generalizable to some degree and highlight feedback and advice from expert teachers. Teachers have a great deal of power over their students’ level of comfort and confidence in the classroom and in their daily lives, as they correct students’ mistakes, offer feedback, and assign grades. It is vital that teachers recognize the distinction between “what are actual errors of understanding in students’ writing and what are errors based on language variation” (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011, p. 52). The context in which the student is speaking and consideration of common language patterns are key aspects of this understanding. For example, many teachers consider multiple negatives such as “I don’t know nothing” to be unacceptable (Lippi-Green, 2012), but Charity Hudley and Mallinson (2011) note that this linguistic trend is common in Southern English and other non-standardized varieties of English.

It is important to harness teachers’ individual and collective voices to both inform research knowledge and empower teachers to excel at their profession. Two of the teachers who
participated in my research felt that their teaching experience alone was not enough to be taken seriously, so they entered other fields, such as business and administration, in order to gain more credibility in education before returning to teaching. Teachers should feel confident staying in the classroom if they want to. Roth & Swail (2000) explain that today’s society views teaching as a substandard or temporary career with low pay and dismal opportunities for raises or promotions. American society should shift its view of teaching to appreciate their hard work at the student-to-teacher and teacher-to-teacher levels. Such a shift in ideology is very unlikely to come without a push from experienced, expert teachers and administrators. Popular programs, such as Teach for America, de-professionalize teaching, overlook professional standards of the teaching practice, and devalue the need for quality teachers in high-need communities (Darling-Hammond, 1995).

5.1 Importance of Research

The fact that teachers with decades of collective experience were overjoyed to talk to a college senior about their teaching practices indicates two things: 1) they are in the correct profession, as they talk to students on a daily basis, and 2) they have hours’ worth of insights to share and those insights should be heard and acknowledged. Three of the teachers I interviewed made at least one remark about not having other major professional development or related opportunities (besides SURN and my interviews) to talk to someone about their past experiences and current practices.

While SURN and my research make a concerted effort to collect these high school English teachers’ stories, our efforts are not enough. In order for this advice to be used effectively and efficiently, school administrations and education policymakers must listen to the information provided by expert teachers. Otherwise policy will continue to consist of
incremental changes to existing policies with little improvement for teacher quality or student learning outcomes. Emphases on standardization, evaluation, and one-size-fits-all approaches stop the realization of individualized learning and specialized instruction that the expert teachers who participated in my research discussed repeatedly.

Insights that teachers have offered thus far have fallen on deaf ears because policymakers with little to no experience believe they know what is right for education (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Rather than relying on their perceived knowledge of education, policymakers should consult expert teachers with decades of results in the classroom and firsthand experience with culturally and linguistically diverse students (Lippi-Green, 2012). Roth & Swail (2000) contend that if teaching remains seen as a substandard profession with poor pay, high-need communities will keep struggling to recruit highly motivated, effective teachers into their classrooms. This perception of teachers makes it seem as though teaching is a temporary job before a transition to law, medicine, or business rather than a potentially long-term and satisfying career on its own (Roth & Swail, 2000). This negative perception paired with low teacher pay discourages potential teachers from entering the profession as a career. Ms. White had the following to say about the public’s perception of teachers:

The core of our education system has to begin and end with the classroom teacher. This sounds politically correct, but I mean it literally...the classroom teacher is the most influential piece of the education puzzle. We have the relationship with students, and we facilitate their learning...every other position in education is a support position for the classroom teacher, including the superintendent of schools...classroom teachers need to know this in their hearts...because we do know our students and we do assist them in their
learning...I could go on about how despite this fact we are paid half what staff in our central offices are paid and are told we are valued but are not shown we are valued.

Policymakers often overlook teachers’ opinions when crafting education-related legislation (Ravitch, 2010). While there are efforts, including NBC’s Education Nation, to give a voice to teachers in media, there is not enough emphasis on treating teachers as education professionals. Such respect may lead more people to enter the teaching profession.

5.2 Understanding Language

Teachers need more information on what constitutes language variation. People who speak non-standardized English often face pressure to speak Standard American English (SAE) in specific settings and communities and deal with the threat of exclusion for nonconformity (Lippi-Green, 2012). Speakers may confront skepticism and distrust for not conforming to certain linguistic trends. Teachers can educate students on standardized English’s verb conjugation patterns but acknowledge the patterns that exist in students’ home language varieties (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011). After conducting interviews with SURN teachers, it became clear that teachers hope to embrace their students’ backgrounds and experiences but are not given many professional development opportunities regarding how to best approach cultural and linguistic differences (Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2009). The literature and teachers agree that a focus should be on differences rather than correctness or incorrectness of language. For example, Ms. Fleming asks her students to rephrase any phrases she or another student does not know so that everyone can understand and participate in the discussion. Variation in language typically signifies a sense of the students’ identity rather than “low intelligence, uncooperativeness, or hostility” (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011, p. 100). Most of the teachers I interviewed had at least a few students who are from different backgrounds than they
are, and these differences ranged from socioeconomic status to race. The teachers felt that such divides made it more difficult—but not impossible—for students and teachers to relate on a very basic level. There is not enough current professional development that addresses this need for teachers to learn more about language variation.

In order to address the relationship between socioeconomic status and language, my interviews with teachers delved into how to make students from poorer backgrounds with more restricted codes feel comfortable and better express their meaning. Many of the teachers with whom I worked discussed structural problems and barriers to achievement in high school and beyond, such as standardized testing, negative perceptions, and fulfillment of stereotypes. These structural issues exist for different student subgroups in the United States public education system. Teachers have a lot of expertise and insight to offer, so it is important to consider their needs, comments, and suggestions in the formation of education policy. In January 2014, I presented a summarized version of my research to teachers who work at the high school I attended in Virginia Beach, Virginia. I also explained my project to the SURN teachers involved in college and career readiness when I served on a panel as part of a February 2014 SURN workshop. In both instances, the teachers were incredibly receptive to my study and interested in my results. Teachers alone cannot rid the world of structural inequality and close the opportunity and achievement gaps, so it is vital that schools, administrators, and legislators make an effort to prioritize high quality education.

5.2.1 More Culturally Relevant Instruction

There is also a responsibility for the researcher to address an existing community need and possess an awareness of the complexity of community needs (Cress et al., 2013). The need I
addressed is the United States education system’s deficiencies in culturally relevant instruction and diversity preparation for high school English teachers. Teachers, new or old, often feel unsure about how to address students’ cultures, home lives, and personal experiences, particularly when they are of a different background than that of the students (SURN workshop, February 14, 2014).

Through my data analysis, I found that effective teachers are conscious of the ways their students’ language and levels of interest influence learning. The teachers who participated in my research make an effort to allow their students to select books with which they identify rather than assign the same book to everyone. They also let students come to them during lunch and other breaks for extra assistance and strategically pair certain students for group projects to match specific ability levels and personalities with each other. SURN’s Capstone English project allowed teachers to embrace student selection of books rather than giving a blanket assignment for all of the students (“SURN,” 2014). Verbal and written reports from the teachers overwhelmingly found that the newfound option of book choice heightened student engagement and interest (J. Rozzelle, personal communication). These teaching practices can help create a more multicultural and interdisciplinary approach to education (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Dye (2010) defines public policy as what the government chooses to do or not to do. It is crucial that those parties look beyond quantitative outputs and statistics and to embrace the views and advice of expert teachers in the education policymaking process (Ravitch, 2010). Important considerations include who will pay for the implementation of public policy mandates and how much benefit the changes will produce for teacher quality and student achievement (Dye, 2010).
In order to achieve a truly high quality education system, they must embrace individualism, culturally relevant instruction, and a range of leadership and learning styles.

5.2.2 Genuine Accountability

Standardized testing and one-size-fit-all assessment are extremely controversial, and solid forms of assessment need to incorporate the opinions of teachers as professionals and partners with policymakers in the fight against educational inequality (Ravitch, 2010). Many teachers acknowledge the immense “power and control they have, but how many of them realize how very influential their personal opinions are in student success?” (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 79). Even for well-trained, educated, and experienced teachers, objectivity in grading and other forms of assessment of students is difficult to attain in communication and the classroom (Lippi-Green, 2012). While it is useful for teachers to avoid personal opinions about which students are likely or unlikely to succeed in school, it is vital that teachers keep some autonomy and decision-making ability in the current assessment-heavy and punitive environment for education (Darling-Hammond, 2010). To assess students fairly and accurately, teachers must be given the toolkit to do so. This knowledge can come from graduate school training, professional development, or other sources, but it needs to come from somewhere.

Accountability is a controversial topic in education. The teachers I interviewed all agree that the current means of evaluation do not allow for genuine accountability. The Standards of Learning (SOL) testing for Virginia Public Schools sets minimum expectations for students and, based on my interviews, cause teachers great strife. Ms. Carlson said, “To be honest, I don’t focus on the SOL much” and that she chose to stress the curriculum rather than simply teaching to the test. She acknowledged that this viewpoint deemphasizing standardized testing is
uncommon among her peers given the high stakes of the tests nowadays. Weingarten (2009) helps determine the cornerstones of genuine accountability: recognition that teacher, student, and school success is more than high test scores, consideration of factors beyond teacher or school control, goal to fix schools rather than place blame, and assurance that everyone—including school and districts leaders and not just teachers—is held responsible. It is vital to recognize that teacher, student, and school success is more than high test scores and that factors beyond teacher or school control exist and influence student learning. These goals for genuine accountability can be accomplished with a wide range of measures to assess the value added to student learning by individual teachers to offer a more level playing field for teachers (Weingarten, 2009).

Ms. White uses a number of evaluation methods, but none of them are labeled “test” or “quiz,” which is contradictory to today’s climate of high stakes testing (Darling-Hammond, 2010). For instance, her students keep journals, which she looks over for review. She has students summarize their reading in a way they could explain the plot to their peers and different audiences. Such a model would be difficult to implement on a large scale and to sustain in other classrooms because so much of education calls for consistent and systematic evaluation. The people who created past policies, such as NCLB, have oversimplified education to emphasize one measure: high test scores on one or more standardized tests (Weingarten, 2009). While standardized tests may be useful for accountability’s sake (Blinder, 2009), Weingarten (2009) explains that it is difficult for standardized testing to encompass a representative and comprehensive sample of the kinds of knowledge and skills students learn both formally and informally through the high school English curriculum. Informally, students learn things such as respect, understanding, courtesy, honesty, and a host of other social skills in the classroom (Blinder, 2009). Non-cognitive abilities are vital for success after high school and can predict
future earnings. Rothstein (2004) explains that employers regularly “report that workers have more serious shortcomings in these non-cognitive areas than in academic proficiency” (p. 7). Such factors are impossible for standardized testing and its focus on fast, objective, and cheap results to measure (Weingarten, 2009). Additionally, it is hard for the current state of the value-added evaluation system to isolate the teacher contribution from other effects on student learning. For instance, measures of poverty are insufficient. There is typically no report of parents’ education levels or family crises, and students who are older or immigrants often do not apply for free or subsidized lunches (Weingarten, 2009). Ms. White said she will extend a deadline for students undergoing extenuating circumstances because of what she called “the human side of teaching.” It is vital to consider what events a student may be going through at any given time (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). She noted that such circumstances include if students are worried about where they will live, if family members die, or if there are other serious situations at play.

Evaluation of teacher quality should include multiple measures of high quality instruction and student learning (Blinder, 2009), including the teacher’s ability to adjust instruction to meet student needs and interactions with parents and the larger school community (Weingarten, 2009). Mr. Watson detailed the struggles that come along with “communicating with parents in regards to any of their concerns or questions about educational practices in the classroom…and compromising with parents, which may require a teacher to design alternative lessons and assignments whenever there is a topic of focus or a project that a parent finds inappropriate.” A more comprehensive means of evaluation for teachers would assess student comprehension, involvement, and effort rather than rote memorization and recall of facts. Weingarten (2009) contends that broad and qualitative assessments could include observations or videotapes of
instruction time, portfolios of classwork, student and parent surveys, and evaluation of classroom
management and engagement by objectives evaluators. Ms. Fleming repeatedly expressed the
desire for portfolios to be a means of assessment for her high school English classes.

More multifaceted assessment would benefit both teachers and students. Teachers who
have classes that must take the SOLs might attempt to focus on student engagement and
improvement. It is difficult to look at the whole picture when the state’s bottom line is a test
score, and this tension can impede the improvement of learning outcomes (Ravitch, 2010).

Another topic that repeatedly appeared in interviews and the literature is that current measures
make it hard to attribute students’ success or failure to one teacher as opposed to the combination
of the current teacher and teachers the students have had in previous years (Weingarten, 2009).
The policymaking process surrounding education makes it difficult to initiate meaningful reform,
and many of the reforms advocated for by different parties would cause significant political
conflicts. Goldhaber and Hannaway (2009) note that typically only small changes happen during
legislative session. Competing interests, such as those of the legislators, teachers, administrators,
policymakers, and parents, at the collective bargaining table slow many major changes
(Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2009). Through the collaboration of teachers, administrators, and
policymakers, all parties should be eager to support innovative ideas to better student learning.
Policy changes must be created with teachers rather than just created for teachers.

5.3 Disciplines

My research about teachers’ instructive practices in Virginia school systems lends itself
to an interdisciplinary approach (Cress, 2006; Cress et al., 2013). This project has important
implications for government, public policy, sociology, education, and community studies.
5.3.1 Government

Educational inequality is not a simple problem to tackle; beliefs and perceptions about cultural deficits and abilities as well as persisting social inequality hinder improvement (Oakes, 2008). Both Republicans and Democrats speak to the education system’s flaws as well as the opportunity and achievement gaps, but politicians criticizing the nation’s schools rarely create effective, long-term action to see that all children succeed in school (Oakes, 2008). No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) mandates that schools disaggregate data by racial group to investigate whether all children receive the same treatment within education. Unfortunately, tracking, a system of organizing students based on their characteristics early in school, and apparent inequalities still exist in schools (Oakes, 2008). The complex nature of education reform, whether it is for school design, curriculum, assessment, involvement, or some other aspect, requires at least three to five years of continual effort, analysis, and reflection on progress as well as capable teachers and good administration for improvement to occur (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 110). Although government analysts and educators typically view curriculum as a document that guides teachers’ actions to meet the standards and goals for a course (Beauchamp, 1975), the role of curriculum extends beyond the existing plans, books, and content to include the interactions and engagements among teachers, students, and the environment (Chandler, 1992; King, 1986). If given the chance to speak with education policymakers, Mr. Watson offers the following advice about the education system:

Reevaluate the level of rigor we engage our students in throughout their K-12 experience…there are way too many students who are unchallenged or unwilling to work consistently at a high level…there are way too many students who lack the focus and
academic endurance needed to complete the amount of work that’s necessary to be successful in college and the real world.

Mr. Watson also asserts that the American education system needs to increase the “amount of academic diversity that we offer and engage our students in throughout grades K-12…[students] are still lacking when it comes to the amount of cultural, artistic…and real world preparatory electives they can choose from.” All of the teachers involved in my research agreed that students should have more college and career readiness opportunities in high school and believe that change should come from the top. Those opportunities can come in the form of elective classes, afterschool sessions, or other activities. The teachers asserted that information about different colleges and career paths is interesting and meaningful in their students’ present and future lives.

5.3.2 Public Policy

I considered different disciplines’ perspectives and examined my research through a lens of education policy. Each teacher I interviewed had a distinct perspective and set of expectations about service-learning, and those expectations informed their beliefs and responses about educational practices (Cress et al., 2013). It is also crucial to note the institutional perspective and capacity of the community partner. In my project’s case, the college may value balance of resource efficiency and program funding with its institutional dedication to teacher relationships and quality (Cress et al., 2013). Such an array of priorities creates a related array of values put on potential outcomes. It is important to recognize the importance of diverse input to community issues, but consensus in education policymaking is hard to accomplish (Cress et al., 2013). For
the purposes of my paper, I focused primarily on the perspectives of experienced, expert teachers involved in SURN, but I note teachers union and institutional perspectives as well.

Wilson (2006) notes that scandal and waste are common in bureaucracy and lead to inefficiency. In terms of schools, examples of scandal include cheating and fraudulent test scores, and examples of waste include unproductive spending and uninformed decisions about how to allocate money for professional development and other resources. Sometimes teachers and administrators prioritize the avoidance of doing something wrong over the achievement of results (Wilson, 2006), and it is key for teachers to recognize the importance of tangible results for students over all else. When the students’ achievement is put first, it allows the children to gain important skills rather than simply achieve minimal test scores.

Public policy uses government to achieve an improved society and reach public goals through policy analysis (Mead, 2004). Language policy, a subfield of public policy as a whole, is vital to a functioning education system, government, and country, yet Crawford (2000) notes that there is no clear delineation of whose responsibility it is to organize resources, conduct research, and make decisions related to the area on a wide scale. If given the chance, Ms. Nelson would advise new teachers and policymakers that “classroom theory rarely applies to real life day-to-day instruction” and that “standardized testing should not be so punitive.” A study by AFT (2013) highlighted how SOLs absorb school days that could be used for instructional time. There are immense time and money costs for schools and classrooms. Testing and test preparation take away lecture time, and often schools cannot assign homework during those times (AFT, 2013). Sometimes substitutes have to come in so teachers can proctor a test, or the school may have to hire or repurpose other individuals to proctor the tests. Such testing generates a lot of wasted time, money, and energy.
It is difficult yet important to consider education beyond the confines of theoretical issues and bureaucracy to consider how decisions affect students in the classroom and create positive change at the school level, which is why my research includes interviews with highly effective teachers who work in southeastern Virginia schools. America’s demography is constantly changing. Crawford (2000) notes that the civil rights movement put equal opportunity for education at the forefront of America’s agenda, yet there is controversy about the best ways to implement policy and administer changes. It is essential to empower long-suffering minorities and emphasize the nation’s multiculturalism (Crawford, 2000), but the question remains how to best do so.

### 5.3.3 Sociology

Monteith and Winters (2002) explain that prejudices cause people to judge and fear people from cultures that are different than their own. These prejudices can cause teachers to unfairly judge students on the basis of personal qualities rather than measures of their academic achievement. Such problems can arise in diverse classrooms when teachers do not know how to interact with and engage their students, which is why my research on ways teachers can embrace cultural and linguistic diversity is so important. Consequences of these prejudices include students getting wrongfully put in lower level classes, students feeling uncomfortable speaking up in class and asking questions, and students failing to develop higher level thinking skills that would allow them to excel in college (Boyle-Baise and Kilbane, 2003). Teachers need to be aware of how their judgments and beliefs can affect a student’s confidence and success in the classroom (Boyle-Baise and Kilbane, 2003).
Potential ways to minimize prejudice include contact with members of different groups and multiculturalism, a proposal that different groups in society maintain their unique identity while also respecting the unique identities of other groups (Monteith & Winters, 2002). I interviewed expert high school English teachers about the ways in which they promote multiculturalism and welcoming classroom climates despite any existing cultural or linguistic differences.

5.3.4 Community Studies

Cress et al. (2013) emphasize the individual, group, and community levels of leadership in service-learning projects. Through my continued work with SURN, I was able to identify SURN’s group action for the common good of educators, which allowed me to better orient myself with learning about effective teaching practices and have ongoing discussions with the English teachers. At the individual level of leadership, Cress et al. (2013) point to congruence, commitment, and consciousness of self as key factors to success. I was very conscious of how I treated and interacted with the teachers. I was careful to make sure the relationship was constructive and pleasant for all parties involved in the research project by having open discussions with them about what they would like to improve or learn from my research. Collaboration, common purpose, and civility are important to group dynamics (Cress et al., 2013). Within SURN, there is an emphasis on research about effective teaching, teacher leadership, and improved literacy efforts. My research fits in with these emphases in a focused, in-depth study of a few of its participants. Education plays a vital role in the language and lives of teachers and students, and it is necessary to research the important—and highly politicized—role of education in America.
5.4 Limitations

It is unlikely that educators notice all the peer factors and dynamics within the classroom, as many students’ interactions happen outside of the classroom (Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2009). One of the criticisms of my research could be that I reported what teachers think rather than know. I address this issue by only working with expert teachers who have been nominated by their schools and school districts as highly effective teacher leaders. Still, much of what their and other teachers’ students face happens outside the classroom and is beyond the control of even the best teachers. Another potential question is how my findings are applicable to other classrooms or add to scholarship. Many of my findings, such as the importance of strong relationships with administration, students, and parents seem like common sense; however, they are not a reality for many new or struggling teachers (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Patton, 2002). The significance of the trends I found, such as putting in time and effort outside of the regular class day, are critical to success. The differences between a poor, unengaged, or average teacher and a highly effective teacher lies within my research’s findings about individuation of instruction for diverse students, integration of personal interests such as poetry, theater, or other passions, and open dialogue with students made possible by the teacher opening up about pieces of his or her own life.

Because of the scope of my research and its focus on intensive interviewing, unfortunately I could not conduct classroom observations, so I worked with the teachers on a case-by-case and individual level. I was able to collect observations from workshops and see how the educators interact with each other and administrative people. The teachers are each developing their own materials to use in the classroom. For example, Mr. Watson devised a unit
plan called “Using Poetry, Poetic Oratory and the Open Mic Experiences to Develop an Appreciation for Language and Communication” that he shared at the SURN workshop on August 29th, 2013. His plan includes a writing activity in which students compose their own poems as well as a hip hop art review. Ms. Fleming presented on her use of film and Socratic seminars to encourage preparation, participation, and solid analysis from all of her students (SURN workshop, August 29th, 2013). Because the students could prepare for their performances and seminar discussion, she believed they would be less nervous and more willing to participate. I recognize that notes on classrooms’ day-to-day activities, climate, and overall effectiveness on academic ability would be immensely helpful to the study of strong teaching practices. Rather than including my own classroom observations, I examined existing research (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2013) that includes these observations and previous work with the SURN lead teachers. Because I built off of previous research, I was able to devote more time to in-depth interviews and attendance at workshops. I acknowledge that teachers are biased in reporting their own teaching ability, techniques, and effectiveness, but these teachers have the experience, stories, and results to back up their statements and have the designation of “lead teacher” and “power team member” by the William & Mary School of Education through SURN.

Acknowledgment of commonalities is necessary, but another limitation of my research is that those supposed commonalities sometimes “eschew[s] difference in favor of human universals” and may not be correct (Boyle-Baise, 2002, p. 36). Every student and person is unique and likely to differ from the assumed universals a person may believe to be true. Equality is about providing students with the same standards but also encouraging equal access and opportunities, and I wanted to study how teachers diversify their methods to aid the learning of diverse and low-income students in classrooms. It is imperative to recognize the worth of these
teachers’ experiences and put together trends from those experiences. In-depth interviewing does not seek to test hypotheses or answer very specific questions (Seidman, 2006). It aims to discover and understand people’s lived experiences and the meaning behind them. My research exists to discuss the context of teachers’ behaviors and the meanings, as understood by the teachers, of their choices and actions.

It is important to note that theories and models of policy change guide teachers’ actions, as I learned in my Bureaucracy course in the Government Department. A theory of policy change, bounded rationality, assumes an inability for agents to consider all potential solutions to education inequality and that agents seek solutions that are good enough rather than the best possible outcome (Simon, 1947, 1955). This model, according to Simon (1947, 1955), holds that there is uncertainty around the current situation and that imagined education policy solutions possess related consequences. Bounded rationality recognizes that information is imperfect and resources are limited but is marked by an unwillingness or inability to consider all potential solutions to education policy issues.

Incrementalism, another model for policymaking, relies on available information about current and future conditions and consequences. This approach aims to solve problems by reacting to issues that arise rather than planning long term policy. Such a perspective of education policy only focuses on fixing the existing flaws in policy. While this is how legislation is typically constructed, it does not consider entirely new policy that could help teacher quality and student achievement. While it is good that this model builds off of existing decisions, it only aims to adjust a small part of the wide size and scope of education policy.

When asked if she had advice for education policymakers, Ms. White pleaded, “Talk to us…come to schools and spend weeks, not days, with us…be in the classroom more as
participants, not just observers. Substitute for teachers whenever possible…stay connected to the classroom because that’s where education takes place.”

5.5 Future Research

As mentioned previously, this project is only one piece of the greater network of SURN’s research projects. Future research should explore age groups beyond high school to include elementary and middle school. Additional research could also include cultural and linguistic diversity in other subject areas beyond secondary English. While I would like to study such diversity as it relates to social studies classrooms, I want to stress how more research in STEM fields is also necessary. I would like to extend my study to go beyond teacher interviews and include student perspectives as well. My research would be more comprehensive if I had comments from students about what they believe makes a particular teacher or teachers effective. I was not able to receive student IRB approval to interview high school students, but such an extension of research would offer insight into the intersection of teacher and student beliefs.

My study is important, but more work must be completed. I have taken extensive coursework in education and education policy, and I know I have gained a great deal from this research experience. The ability to conduct in-depth interviews about how effective teachers respond to cultural and linguistic diversity is valuable to me on a personal level. I hope to gain more first-hand experience in a tutoring and mentoring setting and then teach secondary English or social studies. These experiences will allow me to directly apply my thematic findings and incorporate what I have learned from my research in a school or afterschool setting.

5.5.1 Resource Website
I want future research to build off of my involvement with SURN and my findings about how high school English teachers from southeastern Virginia schools can use their strong relationships with students, parents, and school administrations to incorporate cultural and linguistic diversity into their classroom instruction. One way to build from my work is to create a website with resources for high school English teachers in various regions in Virginia beyond just the southeastern part of the state. Since teachers in different areas may face some similar challenges inside and outside the classroom, it is likely helpful to know about nearby organizations and resources that can help with problems unique to that area or its students’ specialized needs. SURN is part of the William and Mary School of Education in Williamsburg, Virginia and partners only with nearby school districts. While other education-related research organizations operate as components of other colleges and universities, there is not a comprehensive database of existing resources. Whatever the geographic location, there is a trend that the children and schools with the greatest need are historically those who suffer the most from low expectations and insufficient resources (Roth & Swail, 2000). A website of resources could help these students and school access resources and succeed. The online platform I propose here enables teachers to share information about teaching techniques and struggles with other people in the profession.

The website would need regular updates, as new organizations and partnerships form and change. The website should showcase new and existing resources, so teachers can feel support from the online database. These resources could come from the websites and other accessible information about University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Education, Virginia Tech’s School of Education, George Mason University’s Graduate School of Education, James Madison University’s College of Education,
and other schools in the state. For example, Richmond schools could benefit from VCU’s partnerships with the Center for School Community Collaboration, the Literacy Institute, and the Center for Teacher Leadership. Harrisonburg schools could gain insights from JMU’s relationship with the Center for Assessment and Research Studies. Virginia Tech takes the geography of its education students into account and offers their programs in regional centers around Virginia, including Hampton Roads, Northern Virginia, Richmond, Roanoke, and Southwest Virginia. Roth and Swail (2000) note that online communication and professional development resources are cheaper than different forms of professional development that require travel, lodging, and other associated costs. The website will outline what programs and partnerships are available in different regions of Virginia, their contact information, and what their specialties are. For example, some schools’ or organizations’ research may focus on gifted and talented students, students with disabilities, special education, diversity, or language and literacy. These differences are essential to note, so website visitors know the strengths and weaknesses in various regions of Virginia.

Depending on the administration of each school, district, and state, such resource databases may already exist. SURN’s College and Career Readiness Initiative (CCRI) uses Edmodo, a social learning platform for students, parents, and teachers, to share resources. SURN has also contributed documents linked to the VDOE website as part of their college and career readiness efforts, but those links are sometimes hard to find amidst the website’s many tabs (SURN Professional Learning Guide, 2012). The purpose of my website of resources based on geography is to organize information in one easy-to-understand place. Information about individual resources may be more readily accessible in different parts of the web, but this resource would put it in one place and organize the information by area. If teachers move from
one school district to another, I want them to be able to use this website as a resource for their transition. This endeavor requires research into different regions’ sense of their needs and what resources they know—and do not know—about. The VDOE website lists all Virginia public schools and school divisions and offers resources, data, and research on college and career readiness; however, that information is general and does not include regional differences in resources and needs. The site will feature hand-selected links to helpful pages of resources, articles, and other sources that are relevant to teachers’ interests.

The purpose of this site is to collect and disseminate the information I collected for my thesis and present it in a digestible way. The website would have subcategories, such as sections about how to talk about diversity and how to address language differences, to reflect visitors’ needs. I will add specific search phrases, so the website will appear in search engine results. It is vital to maximize the usage of the website and the amount of help visitors receive when they come to the page. I would ask guest authors—likely teachers—to write blog posts about their experiences. I will make sure my website is ethical and that I have the proper permission from organizations and partnerships. The website would, of course, not post teachers’ names, student’s names, or school’s names but rather accounts of general teacher struggles, successes, or advice that could provide guidance to different teachers. VDOE’s website offers a lot of resources, but the information primarily comes in the form of quantitative data, board meeting agendas, progress reports, and policy briefs rather than qualitative data or input directly from teachers who serve in the state’s high school English classrooms.

Accessibility to the resources is key, which is why a free online platform would be ideal for the dispersion of information to teachers. Another consideration was a pamphlet, but that kind of resource would be harder to disperse and more costly to produce hard copies. The costs
of online education-related resources will only continue to drop over the next few years because of the increasing importance of technology (Roth & Swail, 2000). The website will list an email address to contact with questions, comments, and concerns. Such a website would serve any individuals interested in research related to education or education policy. Anyone with feedback to offer is welcome to message the email address on the website, so that the site can best meet teachers’ needs. People will be able to comment on articles, but I will use my discretion to delete hate speech, spam, or other comments that I deem unacceptable or not useful for the intended audience of teachers.

A comprehensive database of resources and advice from teachers not only aids new teachers, but it also empowers expert teachers by giving them a way to share experiences and insight into their profession. Ms. Carlson articulated this idea well when she said, “It’s nice to have somebody to listen to you.” This empowerment of teachers underscores the importance of my research as well as continuing efforts to involve teachers in policy decisions. The teachers involved in my study were very willing to help with my project, as it is rare for researchers or policymakers to contact even expert Virginia teachers about their experiences. The experiences of expert teachers in and around Williamsburg, the rest of Virginia, and the entire United States necessitate further study. For those planning to go into education, Mr. Watson attests that teachers must “find a way to be resilient and persevere…the life of an educator will not be easy.”
## Appendices

### A. Profiles of Teacher Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Kind of Teacher</th>
<th>Classes Taught, Activities</th>
<th>School System</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mr. Watson</td>
<td>HS English Lead Teacher</td>
<td>English 10, Hip Hop Verse &amp; Poetry, College &amp; Career Readiness</td>
<td>Richmond County</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ms. Fleming</td>
<td>HS English Lead Teacher</td>
<td>English, Film Production</td>
<td>York County</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian, Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ms. Nelson</td>
<td>HS English Lead Teacher</td>
<td>English 11, SOL Preparation</td>
<td>Norfolk</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ms. White</td>
<td>HS English Lead Teacher</td>
<td>English 12, Yearbook Advisor</td>
<td>Chesterfield County</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian, Non-Hispanic</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ms. Carlson</td>
<td>First-Year HS English Teacher</td>
<td>English 11 and 12</td>
<td>Suffolk</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian, Non-Hispanic</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### B. Profiles of Staff Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Area of Specialization</th>
<th>Past K-12 Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dr. Rozzelle</td>
<td>Executive Tasks</td>
<td>HS Reading Specialist and Administrator in Richmond</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dr. Hindman</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>HS Science in Newport News</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ms. Mahoney</td>
<td>Graduate Assistant Duties</td>
<td>HS English in Connecticut</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ms. Lawrence</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>HS English in Newport News</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C. Location Dispersion of SURN’s Virginia High School Partnerships
D. Teacher Background Survey 2014

1. Where are all the places that you have lived?  

2. What brought you to the area where you currently teach?  

3. Have you been able to teach anywhere else? If so, where?  

4. What is your age?  
   - 19 or younger  
   - 20-24  
   - 25-34  
   - 35-44  
   - 45-54  
   - 55-64  
   - 65 or older  

5. Please specify your race.  
   - American Indian or Alaska Native  
   - Asian  
   - Black or African American  
   - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander  
   - White  

6. Please specify your ethnicity.  
   - Hispanic or Latino  
   - Not Hispanic or Latino  

7. What is the highest level of education that you have had a chance to finish?  
   - Less than High School  
   - High School/GED  
   - Some College
8. If you attended college, where did you go to school?

9. What percentage of your students would you say go to college after high school (either a two or four year school)?

10. How would you classify your family's socioeconomic status growing up?
   - Working Class
   - Lower Middle Class
   - Middle Class
   - Upper Middle Class
   - Upper Class

11. How would you classify your current socioeconomic status?
   - Working Class
   - Lower Middle Class
   - Middle Class
   - Upper Middle Class
   - Upper Class

12. What grade(s) and subject(s) do you teach?

13. Have you taught any other grades or subjects? If yes, please list them.

14. How many classes do you currently teach?

15. How many students are in a typical class at your school?

16. Please estimate the number of hours you work in the classroom in a given week.

17. Please estimate the number of hours you work outside the classroom in a given week.

18. How many years have you been a teacher?
19. Have you worked in other areas of education besides teaching or outside of education? If so, please explain.
20. What percentage of your students would you say receive As in your class(es)?
21. What percentage of your students would you say receive failing grades in your class(es)?
22. How did you get involved in the School University Research Network (SURN) and when?

References


Atherton, J. (2002). http://www.doceo.co.uk/language_codes.htm


U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education
Brooks 120


