


4-2015

# "How Do They Do It?": Characteristics of Successful Teachers of African American Students

Chloe C. Miksovic

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses>

 Part of the [Elementary Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Other Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Miksovic, Chloe C., "How Do They Do It?": Characteristics of Successful Teachers of African American Students" (2015).  
*Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 135.  
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/135>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

**“How Do They Do It?”:  
Characteristics of Successful Teachers of African American Students**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree in Bachelors of Arts in Africana Studies and Elementary Education  
from The College of William and Mary.

by

Chloe Miksovic

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Dr. Jeremy Stoddard**, Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Dr. Jamel Donnor**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Dr. Leah Glenn**

Williamsburg, VA  
April 10, 2015

**Table of Contents**

**Chapter One: Introduction ..... 4**

**Chapter Two: Literature Review ..... 9**

Whiteness in the Classroom..... 11

    Understanding Discrimination and Racial Privilege..... 12

    Assumption of Lower Achievement for Students of Color ..... 13

    Lack of Knowledge about Other Cultures ..... 17

    Lack of Awareness of Themselves as Cultural Beings..... 20

    Summary: Whiteness in Schools ..... 21

Teacher Preparation Programs ..... 22

    Elements of Effective Programs ..... 24

    Elements of Ineffective Programs..... 26

    Conclusion ..... 29

Successful Teachers of African American Students..... 30

    Culturally Relevant Teaching..... 33

Conclusion ..... 39

**Chapter Three: Methodology ..... 41**

Research Site..... 43

Participant Selection ..... 44

    Participant Descriptions..... 45

Data Collection ..... 48

Data Analysis ..... 50

Limitations ..... 52

Conclusion ..... 53

**Chapter Four: Results ..... 54**

Relationships with Students..... 54

    Importance of Care and Respect..... 55

    Connections on a Personal Level..... 60

    Community-Building..... 62

    Communication with Parents..... 63

Expectations..... 66

    Behavioral Expectations ..... 67

    Academic Expectations..... 68

Connections between Curriculum and Students’ Lives ..... 71

Factors that Promote and Impede Success..... 74

    Personal Backgrounds..... 75

    School Context..... 79

Conclusion ..... 84

**Chapter Five: Discussion..... 86**

Origins of Success: Where Success Comes From ..... 87

Effects of Multicultural Education..... 89

Characteristics of Effectiveness in the Classroom.....	92
Implications for Future Action.....	95
<b>References.....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Appendix A: Informed Consent Form.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Appendix C: Observation Field Notes .....</b>	<b>106</b>

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

When I started Kindergarten and immediately began dressing like my teacher in an attempt to be more like her, I knew I was destined to become an educator. After all, teaching runs in my family: my mother is an elementary school reading specialist, my uncle is a music teacher, and my grandfather was a teacher, a principal, and a superintendent. I have been shaped not only by the educators in my family, but also those in my K-12 experience and in my college career. They have helped cultivate my love for teaching and my interest in pursuing a career in elementary education.

Recently, I have become especially interested in the relationship between education and race. In my junior year of high school, I took an elective class called African American History with a teacher who inspired my research interests more than anyone else. I was a White female in a class of mostly African American males, and I experienced a discomfort and unease that I had never felt before. For the first time, I realized my Whiteness and what it felt like to be in the minority, which was a strange experience for me. Fortunately, though, this class provided a safe space for me to learn about race and Whiteness. I learned about African American history and culture, which was not taught in my other history classes. I also learned about racism – both interpersonal and institutional – which I quickly learned was not a phenomenon of the past as I had previously thought.

When I began my academic career at William and Mary, I was particularly interested in classes in the Africana Studies department that were similar to my high school African American Studies course. As I was highly interested in both education and Africana Studies, I decided to major in both departments, leading to my interest in the opportunity gap. Typically, discussions

about the disparities in education caused by race and socio-economic status are defined by the phrase “achievement gap,” which summarizes the different educational outcomes and achievement between groups of students. Statistics about the disparities often focus on graduation/dropout rates, test scores, and the “school-to-prison pipeline.” For example, in 2010, graduation rates for White and Asian American students were 93.5 and 83 percent, respectively, while graduation rates for African American and Latino students were only 66.1 and 72.4 percent, respectively (Carter, 2013, p. 2). In addition, one in five African American students fail a grade in their school experience, and the average White 13 year-old reads at a higher level and performs better in math than the average African American 17 year-old. Finally, African American students (especially males) are “twice as likely as their White peers to be suspended from school and three times as likely to be expelled” (Carter, 2013, p. 2). While the “achievement gap” focuses on educational outcomes and alarming statistics like these, it does not focus on the causes of the problem; instead, the phrase “achievement gap” highlights only the results of the larger problem (Carter, 2013, p. 3). The phrase “opportunity gap,” on the other hand, “shifts our attention from outcomes to inputs – to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational ... outcomes” (Carter, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, the term “opportunity gap” is used in this paper to signify the stark differences in educational opportunity that provide the setting for my research.

Though many of my classes have influenced my research interests, a few stand out in my mind as being particularly influential. Both African American History since Emancipation (HIST 236) and Intro to Africana Studies (AFST 205) further developed my interests in racism and African American culture. African American English (CMST 250) allowed me to engage in

service learning in the Williamsburg community and to research my interests in dance and education, which gave me my first experience of conducting community-based research on a topic of my choice. Further, in *The Idea of Race* (AFST 302) I learned about the history of racism in the United States, and I completed a research paper on race and education. In *Methods of Social Research* (SOCL 352), I learned about sociological research methods that are used in my thesis. Finally, in *Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education* (EDUC 310), and most of my other education classes, I learned about institutional problems facing schools, especially those schools with high minority and low-income student populations. My classes at William and Mary, both in the Africana program and in the School of Education, have led me to become very interested in the opportunity gap, which I believe is one of the most urgent problems facing schools today.

Therefore, combining my interest in Africana Studies and my future career as a teacher, I began to think about my personal connection to the opportunity gap, and why I was so interested in the problem. After discussing my ideas with Dr. Jeremy Stoddard and reading both *A White Teacher Talks About Race* by Julie Landsman and *The Dreamkeepers* by Gloria Ladson-Billings, I realized that I wanted to research how teachers could personally work to overcome the opportunity gap in their own classrooms. In *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings writes about her three-year research project to identify the qualities of successful teachers of African American students. After interviewing and observing teachers in an urban area, Ladson-Billings created an account of the personalities and practices of these teachers. Additionally, in *A White Teacher Talks About Race*, Landsman writes about her experiences as a teacher in an urban area, working with minority and low-income students who have a different background than her own. Combined, these two books shaped the ideas for my research topic.

Out of these books and my interest in becoming a successful teacher (like those interviewed in Ladson-Billings’ book), I developed the following research question: “What are the characteristics of teachers who are successful with African American students?” Specifically, I sought to understand the dispositions, backgrounds, and classroom practices of teachers who foster success for their students in the current context of standardization and high-stakes testing. When Ladson-Billings completed her study in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the wave of standardization and high-stakes testing had not yet begun. The passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 dramatically changed the way that educators were able to teach in the classroom: in my research study, I sought to discover the characteristics of successful teachers within the testing context, and if they differed from the characteristics that Ladson-Billings found. As a White woman hoping to become a successful teacher of diverse students within this context of standardization, research in this field is incredibly important to me.

In order to research this topic, I interviewed and observed five successful teachers in an elementary school in Eastern Virginia in order to collect data on their life histories and practices in the classroom. Each teacher is highlighted in the study. From them, I hope that I, and other preservice teachers, can learn from their successful practices. This field of research is personally important to me because it will help my future career, but I believe it is equally important for others. Research on successful teachers will help improve teacher preparation programs and preservice teachers like myself. It will also help improve schools, as school districts become more aware of what makes an effective teacher of African American students within the era of standardization in education. Ultimately, research in this field will help the success rate of African American students, who have been too long disadvantaged by society and schools.



In Chapter 2, I discuss and review the previous research that has been published on the challenges that teachers face in diverse classrooms, teacher preparation programs, and successful teachers of African American students. In Chapter 3, I describe my methodology for collecting and analyzing data generated for my study. In Chapter 4, I present the resulting data and findings organized by four major themes, and in Chapter 5, I conclude with a discussion of the findings and implications of my study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

When the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) was passed, it seemed that education for African American children would finally become equal. African American and White students were integrated into the same schools, but the decision had some unintended consequences. Because schools were integrated, there was a drastic reduction of African American teachers in public schools: Black teachers, who had been teaching in schools designated only for African American students, were laid off when schools were integrated. There were no more African American schools, and they were not hired at the public schools controlled by White educators (Hancock, 2011, p. 95). Epps (1999) estimates that “in the eleven years between 1954 and 1965, thirty-eight thousand African American teachers lost their jobs” (as cited in Hancock, p. 95). As a result, teaching became what Hancock terms “white women’s work.” Continuing through today, White women are the most prominent demographic in the teaching industry: according to the most recent data from 2011, about eighty-two percent of teachers are White and seventy-six percent are female (Schools and Staffing Survey, 2013).

Though the teacher population is largely one demographic, the student population is far from it. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics’ data from the 2011-2012 school year, the student population was 49.3% non-White, and was projected to continue growing (State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013). As Sleeter (2008) argues, “the demographic gap between students and teachers is growing as the student population continues to diversify but the teaching population does not” (p. 559). Therefore, if the vast majority of teachers are White women, but many of their students are not,

does this pattern contribute to the continuing opportunity gap in schools? Sleeter (2008) suggests that the discrepancy plays a major role in the quality of teaching that students of color receive. She argues, “this gap [between students’ and teachers’ races] matters because it means that students of color – especially Black and Latino students – are much more likely than White students to be taught by teachers who question their academic ability, are uncomfortable around them, or do not know how to teach them well” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 559). In fact, a White female teacher may change her teaching entirely when she makes assumptions about her students.

Terrill and Mark (2000) speculate about a young, White, middle-class, monolingual woman in an urban teaching setting:

How does her experiential background affect how she approaches this urban experience and subsequently conducts her classroom? What expectations does she have for urban students and the community, and how do those expectations shape her behavior? ... Does her classroom management strategy indicate that she expects most of her students to be well behaved and naturally motivated, or does she assume that they are difficult and not interested? Does she make frequent attempts to keep parents informed and conduct regular home visits, or does she avoid parents and after-school activities because she feels unsafe in the neighborhood? (p. 149)

Terrill and Mark (2000) have identified potential problems that White female teachers face when entering the teaching field. Because of these challenges, many researchers believe that the discrepancy between teachers’ and students’ races is one of the leading causes of African American students’ low success rate in school. To solve this problem, researchers argue that there are two ways to change the success rate of teachers of diverse students: either teacher preparation programs and employers should recruit and hire more racially and culturally diverse

teachers – which many researchers believe is the only solution – or teacher preparation programs can change to *more effectively prepare* teachers for diverse classrooms. By analyzing the practices of successful teachers of African American students to answer my primary research question, I hope to answer the following supplementary question as well: How can we prepare preservice teachers to become better educators of African American students?

In the following literature review, I divide my research into three headings. In “Whiteness in the Classroom,” I discuss some common beliefs of White teachers (and individuals in general) that are detrimental to African American student success. In “Teacher Preparation,” I review different kinds of multicultural education programs that attempt to reverse some of the beliefs discussed in the previous section. Finally, in “Successful Teachers of African American Students,” I highlight some of the dispositions and practices of great teachers of diverse students.

### **Whiteness in the Classroom**

As the student population becomes more and more diverse, the teacher population remains relatively homogenous. White teachers, who generally grow up in homogenous communities, are often not exposed to diversity, which can lead to problems in their diverse classrooms. Their own experience in school, “first as a K-12 student, then as a university student, and subsequently as a new teacher, solidifies taken-for-granted conceptions of how schooling should go and what teaching should look like, making it difficult to envision alternatives” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 562). Since the teaching force in the United States is comprised of mostly White men and women, preservice White teachers are educated by other White teachers. The overwhelming presence of Whiteness – both in and outside the school system – makes it difficult

for White teachers to question the status quo. Since the vast majority of teachers in the United States public school system are White, a discussion of the prevalence of Whiteness in the classroom is needed in order to understand the relationships between students and teachers.

In the following sections, I discuss some of the beliefs that White teachers possess that hinder their relationships with students of color, and that ultimately lead to low achievement from their students. These four problems are identified in Sleeter’s “Preparing White Teachers for Diverse Students.”

### Understanding Discrimination and Racial Privilege

First, many White teachers lack an understanding of the kind of discrimination and racism that prevails in schools. White teachers may understand racism as a “problem of interpersonal interactions, which they believe that an open attitude towards others solves” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 560). Instead, Sleeter (2008) argues that racism is a system of “patterned institutionalized structures and processes that allocate social resources differently based on race and that have long historical roots” (p. 560). Lacking an understanding of racism as a “system of power and advantage,” most White teachers believe that there is no racism present in schools, and that discrimination is a phenomenon of the past (Johnson, 2002, p. 154). In addition, believing that they themselves possess open attitudes towards students and diverse cultures, most White teachers believe they are not discriminatory. As researchers point out, however, racism is an institutional system that perpetuates White dominance, not necessarily individual acts of discrimination.

Institutional racism relies on Whiteness, or the dominance of White culture “in terms of values, religions, art, languages, and perspectives” (Hyland, 2005, p. 431). This dominance of

White culture denigrates other cultures and values, marking them as exotic or different because they are in opposition to White culture (Johnson, 2002, p. 162). Whiteness goes largely unrecognized by White people, who believe that their culture is normal and unquestionable. Most White teachers resist the idea of Whiteness as a pervasive system because they do not “see” it: the culture they experience is “normal.” In addition, many White teachers resist the notion of Whiteness because they do not understand discrimination and they resist the idea that racism exists. As a result, many White teachers feel that calls for multicultural education and culturally relevant teaching are just “whining” and “special treatment” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 560).

In *A White Teacher Talks about Race* by Julie Landsman, Landsman discusses a graduate student in one of her teacher education classes who resisted multicultural education. After a class period when Landsman asked students to come up with lesson plans on the Civil War based on the racial makeup of their hypothetical classes (all White, all Black, half-and-half, or mostly White with two Black students), a student named Matthew approached her and angrily asked what the point of her class was. Landsman (2001) responded that she wanted students to open their minds and “question the way things were done and are being done” (p. 125), to which Matthew argued that everyone will be placed in “traditional” schools anyway, not schools with diverse student populations. Matthew resisted multicultural education preparation in Landsman’s class because he did not understand institutional racism and Whiteness, and did not see the importance of questioning the status quo.

#### Assumption of Lower Achievement for Students of Color

In addition to White teachers’ lack of understanding about racism and discrimination, they also often assume that students of color will achieve less than their White counterparts,

without understanding this assumption as a form of racism. There are two different mentalities – deficit mentality and the “White savior” mentality – that go along with this assumption, discussed below.

*Deficit Mentality:*

Ladson-Billings (2000) says that when one searches for “black education” in the current literature base, phrases like “culturally deprived” and “culturally disadvantaged” often arise as synonyms, constructing African American students as deprived and deficient (p. 206). As Ladson-Billings (2000) argues, “African American learners are often treated as if they are corruptions of White culture [because] schools and teachers treat the language, prior knowledge, and values of African Americans as aberrant and often presume that the teacher’s job is to rid African American students of any vestiges of their own culture” (p. 206). This belief, that African American students are deficient, is one of the biggest problems facing relationships between White teachers and African American students. White teachers often “hold lower expectations for the achievement of students of color than for White students” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 560), stemming from the era when African Americans were assumed to be uneducable. Beginning in slavery and continuing to the 1990s with research such as *The Bell Curve*, African Americans were assumed to be “genetically inferior and not fully human,” and therefore unteachable and not worth educating (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 208). This mentality affects White teachers’ perceptions of their African American students and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As White teachers presume low achievement of their students, students’ engagement in the class and grades decline, which confirms the teachers’ initial beliefs.

In addition to believing that students of color achieve less than White students, many White teachers attribute other classroom problems to African American students as well. For

example, when Terrill and Mark (2000) asked White teachers to rate their expectations of students, results showed that the participants held very different expectations for their racially and linguistically diverse students. Specifically, they expected lower achievement, higher discipline problems, lower parental involvement, lower student motivation, and higher levels of child abuse at home (Walker-Dalhouse, 2006, p. 69). Not only did these teachers expect lower achievement of students of color in their classrooms, they attributed it to “their families not valuing education, *rather than to factors under control of classroom teachers*” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 560, emphasis added). Expecting that African American students’ home lives are destructive and their parents are uninterested in education, teachers can assume that their students’ low achievement is completely outside of their own control. Sleeter (2008) states,

Consider the teacher who knows algebra well and knows how to teach it to children much like herself, but believes that her low-income Black, Latino, and Indian students are not only too far behind to learn algebra, but also too uninterested and too lacking in home support. She does not lack teaching methods or content knowledge, but rather in the academic capabilities and *willingness to gear her teaching toward those students* (p. 573, emphasis added).

Rather than changing their teaching to include more diverse students, many White teachers expect them to be uneducable, and as a result they fail to teach them effectively. These teachers engage in a deficit mentality that blocks students from achieving their fullest potential.

Therefore, the deficit mentality – assuming that African American students are deficient in their academic capabilities, their home lives, and their cultures – is a problem that plagues many White teachers’ classrooms.



*“White Savior” Mentality*

In addition to the deficit mentality, White teachers can also engage in another mindset termed the “White savior” mentality or the “missionary” mentality. Like the assumption that African American students are deficient, White teachers who engage in the “White savior” mentality expect that their African American students need to be “saved” by their White culture and intellect. In many situations, White teachers enter urban school districts expecting a broken system, broken classrooms, and broken students. These White teachers, who believe they are doing good deeds by bringing their culture to these “broken” systems, are actually engaging in racist behavior.

Researcher Nora E. Hyland (2005) interviewed teachers who believed they were successful with African American students. One teacher, Pam, engaged in a “White savior” mentality: identifying as a “helper” and a “benefactor” in her teaching, Pam often assumed a certain superiority over her students and their families (p. 440). In her own words, “I am just here to help kids, but I find I spend a lot of time helping families too. I guess students just need someone to care for them and give them some of the attention that they deserve” (Hyland, 2005, p. 439). Pam’s identification as a “helper” resulted in perpetuating a “racist status quo [because] she saw students and their families as quite needy and in some ways incapable” (Hyland, 2005, p. 440).

In addition, as a special education teacher, Pam oversaw the referral and testing process for special education classes in her school. She believed this process was “race neutral” and did not believe that there were a disproportionate number of African American students in special education, as research suggests (Hyland, 2005, p. 441). She rarely tried to get students out of special education classes once they had entered the program, even if they had met or exceeded

their goals. She believed that “once you are LD [learning-disabled], you are always LD ... because, let’s face it, they need the help” (Hyland, 2005, p. 440).

Her lessons in her special education classroom significantly lowered expectations for students: in one class session, Pam taught students that using an ellipsis (...) meant that they could omit some words of a sentence and it would still be a real sentence. On the whiteboard, she had written an example: “My mother, my brother and I ... at the store” (Hyland, 2005, p. 441). Telling her students that using an ellipsis to omit words was a well-intentioned lesson, but “it did little to prepare [her] fourth graders as writers” (Hyland, 2005, p. 441). She held such low expectations for her students that she sacrificed their education in order to “help” them. Extremely paternalistically, Pam said in her interview, “It’s like I’m God’s greatest gift to Black children because you know I’m caring and I worry about them” (Hyland, 2005, p. 439). She demonstrated a sense of superiority over her students and their families, and in an attempt to help them, ended up perpetuating a racist mentality.

These two mentalities – deficit mentality and the “White savior” mentality – tend to shape White teachers’ thoughts about their African American students, and can have devastating results for student achievement. Often believing they are benefiting their students by holding lower expectations for them, White teachers are instead underpreparing their students and engaging in a self-fulfilling prophecy of low achievement.

### Lack of Knowledge about Other Cultures

In addition to a lack of understanding about racism and the assumption of low achievement of students of color, White teachers also have trouble connecting with their students of color because they lack the knowledge about their cultures and home lives. Sleeter (2008)

argues that White people are the “most segregated and isolated racial category in the U.S.” (p. 559), so they often lack understanding of other cultures. As such, White teachers often have trouble forming valuable relationships with their diverse students, which can lead to negative stereotypes in the classroom. As Sleeter (2008) argues,

White teachers often have more difficulty forming constructive relationships with students of color, particularly African American students, than with White students. Commonly assuming that African American and Latino parents do not value education, White teachers are much less likely to build relationships with them than are teachers of color. Lacking familiarity with communities their students of color come from, many White teachers are unable to build bridges between students and curriculum, but then interpret students’ lack of engagement as disinterest in learning, or their academic problems as inability to learn (p. 559).

As we can see, a number of problems can occur when White teachers lack the knowledge about their students’ culture.

Additionally, White teachers who lack cultural knowledge are often fearful of discussing race and racism. One way that these White teachers sidestep discussions of race is by claiming to be “colorblind,” meaning they do not recognize race. In fact, history allows White teachers to believe that colorblindness is essential to student success. When *Brown v. Board of Education* was passed, the verdict suggested that African American children and White children were the same and “deserved the same educational opportunities” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 208). This verdict set the stage for one of the biggest problems that White teachers face in their classrooms. The integration of schools and the rhetoric of “separate is not equal” assumed that, instead, equality meant sameness. This fundamental message “tended to ignore the distinctive qualities

of African American culture and suggested that if schools were to make schooling experiences identical for African Americans, we could somehow achieve identical results” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 208). As such, most White teachers think that they must give every child an equal education in order to achieve good results. They assume that “seeing” race in the classroom is bad, and instead they identify as *colorblind* in regards to their students, claiming they do not see anyone’s races and instead see alike and equal students. As Milner (2011) summarizes, these teachers operate under three assumptions that shape their positions on the topic of race:

1. “If I acknowledge the racial or ethnic background of my students or myself, then I may be considered racist.”
2. “If I admit that people experience the world differently and that race is an important dimension of people’s experiences, I may be seen as ‘politically incorrect.’ I may offend others in the teacher education classroom.”
3. “I should treat all my students the same regardless of who they are, what their home situations are, or what their racial experiences happen to be. Race does not matter, and racism has ended and certainly has no place or relevance in the classroom”  
(Milner, 2011, p. 58).

These assertions cause teachers to become completely silent on topics of race by shutting down conversations and ignoring its effects in the classroom. Teachers who are colorblind “fail to challenge the status quo, when they accept the given as the inevitable” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 32).

### Lack of Awareness of Themselves as Cultural Beings

Finally, White teachers often lack awareness that they are racialized beings. White people generally view themselves as “normal,” and everyone else as “different” and sometimes “deficient” because they don’t possess “normal” cultural qualities. Linking to the deficit mentality discussed earlier, this viewpoint can lead to problems between White teachers and diverse students because students are seen as lacking in culture. Valli (1995) argues that White teachers often assume that their beliefs and behaviors are “the norm to which others should aspire,” (as cited in Sleeter, 2008, p. 560) while other beliefs are “exotic” and “different.” As Sleeter (2008) argues, “As long as [White teachers] see themselves as normal but not cultural, they use their own unexamined frames of reference against which to judge students, students’ families, and their communities,” which reinforces deficit thinking (p. 561). Instead, White teachers should learn to view themselves as racial beings as well in order to realize that their culture is not necessarily the norm and that their students’ culture is just as valid.

In Hyland’s (2005) research, a teacher name Sylvia was interviewed about her viewpoints on her own race and how it affected her teaching. A native-born South American, Sylvia was adopted at age six by a White family in the United States. Sylvia believed she was a successful teacher for students of color because she served as a role model for students who “could choose to be White, as she had” (Hyland, 2005, p. 443). Because she had grown up in a White household, she self-identified as White and disregarded her Hispanic heritage: “Basically, I feel White. I mean, I was born Hispanic, but I am White. ... I think that I have been successful in my life because I have never considered myself Hispanic” (Hyland, 2005, p. 443). In her interview with Hyland, Sylvia claimed,

I make things a lot simpler for my kids than you'd see in a regular White class, or middle-class school. ... I basically spoon feed them everything and go through everything with them because they just don't like to do things independently. It's too hard for them. They get too flustered by it (Hyland, 2005, p. 444).

Sylvia contrasts her teaching and students with what one would see in a “regular White class,” portraying her students and school as different than White, middle class schools. In addition, by stating that she lowers the standards for her students, she implies that her students are also deficient compared to the “regular White” students. Because of her White culture with which she identifies, Sylvia views the cultures of her students as deficient, and believes that the only way to become successful is to be White.

#### Summary: Whiteness in Schools

Since over eighty percent of public school teachers are White in the United States, it is particularly important to understand how successful teachers of African American students overcome the challenges described above. In summary, Sleeter (2008) describes four problems that White teachers face in the classroom. First, White teachers often lack an understanding of racism and discrimination, so they generally fail to challenge the status quo of schools and instead view their school system as normal. Second, White teachers often believe that students of color lack the motivation and skills to achieve in school. Sometimes, they lower their standards for their students of color because they believe the students are incapable, which can lead to deficit mentality and “White savior” mentality. Third, White teachers generally lack knowledge about other cultures, which can cause them to fear talking about race and racism, leading to colorblindness. As researchers have found, teachers who identify as *colorblind*

effectively ignore students’ culture, which can lead to problems in the classroom. Finally, White teachers are not aware of themselves as cultural beings because they view their culture and race as “normal” and everything else as “different.” This mentality can also lead to deficit thinking, which is problematic in the classroom.

These four major problems that White teachers face in their classrooms all hinder relationships between teachers and students. Since these problems come from years of lived experience, it can be hard for White teachers to change their beliefs. In the following section, I discuss how some teacher preparation programs in the United States attempt to combat years of lived experience of Whiteness in order to teach preservice teachers the importance of multicultural education.

### **Teacher Preparation Programs**

As discussed in the previous section, there are several different problems that White teachers can face in diverse classrooms because of their years of lived experience. How can teacher preparation programs attempt to combat these problems? Several researchers have studied the effectiveness – and ineffectiveness – of different kinds of multicultural education classes for preservice teachers. In this section, I will review the literature on teacher preparation programs for multicultural education in an attempt to understand the best type of preparation for successful teachers of African American students.

#### What Is Multicultural Education?

Multicultural education is a widely used term that can apply to many different types of pedagogical techniques and curricular models. James A. Banks (2012) defines multicultural

education as “an idea, an educational reform movement, and a process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school” (1). Banks (2012) describes five dimensions of multicultural education that are useful to its understanding: 1) content integration, where teachers use examples and artifacts from different cultures in their instruction, 2) knowledge construction, where teachers facilitate conversation about how cultural assumptions and biases influence the way knowledge is constructed, 3) equity pedagogy, where teachers modify their teaching in order for all students to achieve, 4) prejudice reduction, where teachers facilitate change regarding students’ racial attitudes using teaching materials, and 5) empowering school culture, where teachers create a school and classroom culture that empowers each student (p. 23). In order for multicultural education to be successfully implemented in schools, traditional power relationships and the curriculum must be examined for biases. Multicultural education can take many different forms, but understanding it as a reform movement that changes “the total school or educational environment,” rather than “limited to curricular changes” is essential (p. 4). Effective multicultural education, therefore, is not simply an effort to include examples from more cultures in the instruction (even though that is the first dimension listed), but rather an integration of all five dimensions across the school environment. This definition of multicultural education will be used throughout the paper.



## Elements of Effective Programs

### *Cross-Cultural Experiences*

In cross-cultural community experiences, preservice teachers learn about their students' community by spending time there, which is one of the “most powerful venue[s] for helping White preservice teachers begin to critically examine racism, move beyond fear, and see teaching with ‘a cultural eye’” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 564). Cross-cultural experiences can vary in length: some can be short visitations, like tutoring in another community, while the most intensive are immersion experiences where preservice teachers live in the community for a long period of time. As expected, longer cross-cultural experiences are more effective because preservice teachers are able to “see functioning communities and everyday cultural patterns first-hand, form relationships with people, confront stereotypes, and hear stories of lives that reflect abstractions they may have read about in textbooks” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 564). These kinds of immersion experiences actively confront deficit thinking.

One researcher followed preservice teachers into their immersion programs to find out how they incorporated multicultural education into their classrooms. Milnick and Zeichner (1996) found that after being immersed in an American Indian reservation, student teachers made “efforts to connect their classrooms to community people, practices, and values, even when cooperating teachers did not support these practices” (as cited in Sleeter, 2001, p. 97). These preservice students experienced the importance of learning from someone else's community, which Sleeter (2008) argues is essential for preservice teachers “in order to build pedagogy that is culturally and contextually relevant to students from backgrounds different from their own” (p. 563). Preservice teachers who are immersed in communities readily learn how to build bridges

between students’ lives and curriculum, making learning more relevant and interesting for students.

*Coursework on Race and Education*

In addition to cross-cultural experiences, teacher preparation programs should also include adequate professional coursework on race and education. Sleeter (2001) argues that based on a study that she conducted where she surveyed 456 practicing teachers, teachers who have taken more than four credit hours in multicultural education coursework are more likely to use these strategies in their student teaching than students who have taken less than four credits (p. 100). These courses can range in topics, including multicultural education, urban education, and English language learner education. Multicultural education classes typically begin with the “big picture” by examining institutional racism in schools so that preservice teachers gain a deeper understanding of discrimination. Then, these courses move to “an anthropological examination of culture,” and finally a “personal examination of teacher candidates’ own identities” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 566). By following this pattern, preservice teachers are able to understand what needs to be changed in schools, and how they can become change agents. Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that successful courses in multicultural education help students develop a social consciousness to become such change agents (as cited in Sleeter, 2008, p. 568). Multicultural education courses should also teach the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices. Professional coursework should be intrinsically connected to the other components of the teacher preparation program, including the cross-cultural community based practicum experience, so that preservice teachers are given the tools to connect their classroom knowledge into their practicum experience.

### *Guided Reflection*

In addition to their cross-cultural experiences and multicultural education coursework, preservice teachers should engage in guided reflection of their practicum experiences. In one study, LeCompte and McCray (2002) observed preservice teachers in a multicultural education course during which they wrote reflective essays. The topics were, 1) think about the multicultural self to explore your own “cultural intersections,” 2) think about privilege and power, and make a list of privileges you enjoy, as well as a list of privileges you enjoy but did not earn, and 3) think about your “growth as a developing teacher” and your future career (p. 28). In another study, participants were interviewed about their understandings of their racial awareness, how they characterized their racial identity, and their awareness of race in the classroom. Johnson (2002) found that “constructing an autobiographical narrative [in these interviews] helped guide teachers’ personal reflections and heighten their racial awareness” (p. 164). Guided reflection practices should be monitored to make sure that preservice teachers are not entering their practicum experiences with flawed understandings of race and their role as a teacher. By including all three of these components – cross-cultural experiences, effective multicultural education coursework, and guided reflection – teacher preparation programs can become more successful at teaching the importance of multicultural education.

### Elements of Ineffective Programs

#### *Disjointed Information*

One of the biggest problems for teacher education programs is that, often times, multicultural education is not comprehensive over the entire program. Many programs in “predominantly White institutions ... provide disjointed preparation for diversity and equity,

dependent on the interests of individual professors rather than on a comprehensive conception of preparation for excellent training in racially diverse contexts” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 562). As a personal example, I was lucky enough to register for a Foundations of Education course in my own teacher preparation program that focused on race and inequity in education, rather than another Foundations class that did not focus as heavily on these topics. It was only because of my professor’s interests that I received any formal education on these topics; other students who registered for the alternate Foundations class did not receive as much training. In a program like this one, where multicultural education training is disjointed and sporadic, student teachers “may develop a superficial understanding of multicultural teaching, but in the classroom follow the lead of their cooperating teachers,” who are often not trained in multicultural education either (Sleeter, 2008, p. 562).

Sometimes teacher preparation programs offer only one or two classes on diversity training for preservice teachers. Stand-alone multicultural education courses are not sufficient for teaching the importance of multiculturalism because prospective teachers can develop stereotypes about students. For example, when one researcher reviewed a program that required fifteen class sessions about “background information and pedagogical techniques for working with culturally diverse students,” it was found that the “didactic presentations about various groups actually taught stereotypes and generalizations and did little to change the thinking among the preservice students” (Sleeter, 2001, p. 98). In addition, preservice teachers who are exposed to this kind of multicultural education often become frustrated because they do not understand how to translate their knowledge into practice: as Ladson-Billings (2011) argues, these students proclaim that “Everybody keeps telling us about multicultural education, but nobody is telling us how to do it” (p. 43). These prospective teachers become frustrated because

the multicultural education in these classes is disjointed and cursory, and does little to teach them how to translate the information into practice.

### *Getting the “Diversity Requirement”*

According to Sleeter (2001), 56% of the teacher preparation programs she reviewed required some sort of multicultural education course (p. 95). The types of multicultural education tend to vary: some programs require students to take one class in multicultural education, while some programs require students to spend part of their practicum experience in an urban setting. However, when these classes and practicum experiences are required, some students approach multicultural education as just having to “get the diversity requirement.” Many preservice teachers view these practicum experiences as “hurdles in the way of their ‘real’ student teaching (i.e., in middle income, suburban schools)” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 209). For a successful teacher preparation program, multicultural education should be comprehensive over the entire program, not just one “diversity requirement” class. Programs that view multicultural education as separate requirements, instead of integral to the entire program, will not prepare preservice teachers to be successful with African American students.

### *Maintaining the Status Quo*

Teacher preparation programs often play a large role in maintaining the status quo and homogeneity of the teaching profession, mostly because teacher educators are generally middle-aged White women as well (Ladson-Billings, “Yes,” p. 42). In addition, since the teaching profession is already so homogenous, the likelihood of a preservice teacher to be placed with a White cooperating teacher is very high. Often, when they get to their practicum and student teaching experiences, preservice teachers focus only on “surviving in the classroom” and following the “demands of their cooperating teacher,” instead of incorporating multicultural

education practices into their classrooms (Sleeter, 2001, p. 95). As Tiezzi and Cross (1997) argue,

When we immerse inexperienced, misinformed, and sometimes resistant prospective teachers in urban classrooms by themselves for their first field experience, the result is predictable. The prospective teachers are overwhelmed by the urban context and focus primarily on problems rather than possibilities in teaching and learning (as cited in Sleeter, 2008, p. 569).

Prospective teachers who are placed in urban contexts with little instruction will often become overwhelmed with the challenges. In addition, these student teachers will often follow the lead of their cooperating teachers, which reinforces the status quo. Partner schools for teacher preparation programs are often not good schools for teaching the importance of multicultural education, and yet they serve as the model for these preservice teachers. Consequently, cooperating and preservice teachers only maintain the status quo in schools, failing to incorporate new multicultural education information.

### Conclusion

In her article, Sleeter (2008) imagines the perfect teacher preparation program that includes,

(1) community-based learning connected with professional coursework emphasizing reflection; followed by (2) early field experiences in culturally diverse classrooms connected with professional coursework that examines culture, language and learning; continuing with (3) foundations and methods coursework that is explicitly designed

around teaching diverse students; and culminating in (4) student teaching in a school that serves a historically oppressed community... (p. 572-573).

Sleeter (2008) imagines that the entire program, from the practicum experiences, to the coursework, to the student teaching, revolves around multicultural education. The goal is to develop a coherent program: “Ideally, everyone who works with preservice students – including arts and sciences faculty, university administrators who support teacher preparation programs, and teachers and administrators in partner schools – would share the same vision and orient their work toward it” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 562). If teacher preparation programs were to change to become more comprehensive for multicultural education, preservice teachers would enter classrooms more prepared to handle issues of diversity and race. As Hancock (2011) argues, “If urban schools are to close the achievement gaps, maximally educate urban students, and create healthy rapport among students, teachers, and community, [then teacher education] must be a top priority (p. 96).

### **Successful Teachers of African American Students**

In the previous sections, I have discussed the problems that many preservice teachers have when dealing with diverse classrooms, and the elements of effective teacher preparation programs that attempt to combat these problems. In the last section of my literature review, I focus on previous research of successful teachers of African American students in an attempt to understand their characteristics and practices in the classroom.

According to Garmon (2005), “despite over twenty years of [multicultural teacher education] efforts, research on the various types of MCTE has yielded only mixed results” (p. 275). Some researchers find that multicultural education classes are effective for preservice

teachers, while other researchers find negative or negligible results. In his research, Garmon (2005) identifies six characteristics that preservice teachers must possess in order for multicultural education programs to work. Preservice teachers who possess these dispositions are more likely to respond favorably to multicultural education than those who do not. Garmon (2005) argues that preservice teachers need to be, first, open to receiving new information and opinions (p. 277). Students who are not open will either reject new information or “interpret it in ways that [are] consistent with their current views” (Garmon, 2005, p. 277). Secondly, preservice teachers must be self-aware and self-reflective in order to critically examine their role as an educator (Garmon, 2005, p. 277). For example, successful teacher and author Julie Landsman (2001) remembers the first time she thought about race: she used the N-word in a child’s song and her housekeeper asked her not to use that word because it hurt her feelings. Landsman (2001) remembers how this moment in her childhood changed the way she thought about herself (p. 4). Thirdly, preservice teachers must be committed to social justice issues both in and outside the classroom (Garmon, 2005, p. 278). Those who have life experiences that deal with racial and ethnic diversity tend to show a deeper commitment to social justice issues. For example, researcher Johnson (2002) found several successful teachers who attributed their success to their social and political activism. Diane, who was very politically active in high school and college, carried her activism to the classroom and characterizes becoming a teacher as “the most political thing I’ve ever done in my life” (Johnson, 2002, p. 159).

In addition to the aforementioned dispositions, Garmon (2005) also identifies three types of experiences that these preservice teachers must possess. First, preservice teachers must have intercultural experience. One teacher identified in Ladson-Billings’ work, Anne Lewis, attributes part of her success to her experience in the Black community. When she was young,



her mother did not participate in the “white flight” of the 1950s, so she lived in an African American community and has speech patterns similar to African American people (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 40). In addition, a teacher named Carol says that she began to “see” race when she married a Black man and expanded her friend group to be more racially diverse, which broadened her intercultural experience (Johnson, 2002, p. 159). A teacher named Mary says,

A lot of White, middle-class teachers may be very open in terms of multiculturalism and very liberal, but at a gut level they’re not really comfortable, especially if they were in a situation where they were in the minority. Experience goes beyond that... It’s more than those surface beliefs. It’s gut (Johnson, 2002, p. 159).

These teachers believe that intercultural experience is extremely important to success with diverse students.

Secondly, Garmon (2005) believes that preservice teachers must have adequate multicultural education training in their educational experiences. In these educational experiences, teachers should be challenged to re-examine their beliefs about race and education (Garmon, 2005, p. 281). Finally, Garmon (2005) emphasizes the importance of support-group experiences that provide “feelings of safety and acceptance for a person while also encouraging that person’s growth” (p. 282). These support group exercises can happen in teacher education classes, where preservice teachers are given the opportunity to talk freely and safely about diversity. In Johnson’s (2002) research, successful teacher Diane attributed her understanding of diversity and multicultural teaching to her teacher preparation program because her program focused on diversity. Diane “cited classes where she experienced multiracial dialogue about institutional racism and her participation in an ongoing antiracist teacher support group as important factors in her racial awareness” (Johnson, 2002, p. 163). Therefore, educational and

support group experiences are needed for preservice teachers to be receptive to multicultural education.

### Culturally Relevant Teaching

Teachers who are successful with diverse student populations and possess the above qualities are often called culturally relevant. Geneva Gay (2010), a prominent researcher on culturally relevant teaching, describes this model of teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Culturally relevant teaching is empowering for students and teachers because it creates a community of learners and an “ethos of achievement” (Gay, 2010, p. 35). According to Ladson-Billings (1995)

[Culturally relevant teaching] rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they can challenge the status quo of the current social order (p. 160).

For her book, Ladson-Billings (1994) interviewed and observed several successful teachers of African American students. Before beginning her study, she talked to parents about what they wanted for their children’s education. Across the board, parents wanted their children to receive an education that emphasized traditional academic tasks like writing and math skills, but also an education that wouldn’t alienate them from their community and culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 27). Parents wanted their children to have an education that was intrinsically connected to their culture, not the White dominant culture. During her study, Ladson-Billings (1994) found culturally relevant teachers who emphasized academic success and cultural

competence in their classrooms. All of these teachers “identified strongly with teaching ... [and] saw themselves as a part of the community and teaching as a way to give back to the community” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 163). All of the teachers believed “their work was artistry,” and all were highly involved in their students’ lives (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 163). These teachers, highly successful with African American students, serve as the model for my study.

In the following sections, I highlight some of the practices that are integral to culturally relevant teaching. As Ladson-Billings (1995) argues in her article “But That’s Just Good Teaching!”, the practices often seem obvious and commonplace in classrooms. Culturally relevant teachers use these practices everyday with their students to create a positive and successful classroom climate.

#### *High Expectations for All Students*

Culturally relevant teachers hold high expectations for all students and create classroom climates that foster and encourage student success, which stands in opposition to some of the critiques about White teachers who hold a deficit mentality regarding their students. In the classrooms that Ladson-Billings (2000) observed, “teaching and learning were exciting, symbiotic events” (p. 210). Teachers created classrooms where “students were expected to work hard, and they welcomed this responsibility” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 210). These teachers never engaged in deficit thinking, assuming that students could not be taught. Instead, all of the teachers “demanded, reinforced, and produced academic excellence in their students” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). As Ladson-Billings (1995) argues, “the trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to ‘choose’ academic excellence” (p. 160) instead of forcing it upon them. Students in culturally relevant classrooms are excited to learn, normally because the

curriculum connects with their own lives. As Gertrude Winston – a successful White teacher in Ladson-Billings’ study – states, “You know, they’re all successful at something. The problem is that school often doesn’t deal with the kinds of things that they can and will be successful at” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 46). Instead of assuming that students are lacking in culture and academic preparation, Winston believes that all students are successful even before they come to her classroom, and it is her job to build on that success. Teachers like Winston are culturally relevant because they hold all of their students to high expectations that yield high academic success.

### *Community-Building in the Classroom*

In addition to holding high expectations for all students, culturally relevant teachers build community in their classrooms to allow all students to feel safe. One of the biggest social problems facing high-achieving African American students is the notion of ‘acting white’: often, peers ostracize high-achieving African American students for “demonstrating interest in and succeeding in academic and other school related tasks” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). The notion of ‘acting white’ makes school a place where African American students cannot be themselves. Culturally relevant teachers actively oppose this notion in their classrooms, building community between and among students.

Anne Lewis, from Ladson-Billings’ study, builds community in her classroom by taking students on an annual camping trip to teach them about the environment and to “build a sense of togetherness and team spirit among her students” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 41). While many teachers view their time with students as an 8:00-3:00 commitment, Lewis goes above and beyond to facilitate a sense of community among her students.

In addition, Gertrude Winston, from Ladson-Billings’ study, involved parents and community members into the classroom to facilitate community building. Winston created a program where she brought in students’ parents or relatives to the classroom to speak about varying topics, including pie making, carpentry, and nursing. These parents would come to class for one to two hours and demonstrate skills that Winston would later use in class. For example, one of the parents in the community was well known for her sweet potato pies, so she taught the students how to make pies over several days. Then, students “did reports on George Washington Carver and his sweet potato research, conducted taste tests, devised a marketing plan for selling pies, and researched the culinary arts to find out what kind of preparation they needed to become cooks and chefs” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). The students carried the skills they learned in the seminars into every other facet of their school day. Importantly,

... all of Winston’s guests were parents or relatives of her students. She did not ‘import’ role models with whom the students did not have firsthand experience. She was deliberate in reinforcing that the parents were a knowledgeable and capable resource. [Her students] learned that what they had and where they came from was of value (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161).

Winston and Lewis both worked to foster community building in their classrooms by encouraging students to be proud of their culture and of each other, which is important to culturally relevant pedagogy.

#### *Connecting with Students on a Personal Level*

Culturally relevant teachers also connect with each of their students and families on a personal level so that each child’s interests can be used in the classroom. One teacher, Margaret Rossi, made a practice of finding out as much as she could about students in the first days of the

school year so that she could “plan an instructional program that motivates them and meets their needs” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 67). Often she had students fill out a questionnaire at the beginning of the year to gauge their interests, their birthdays, and other relevant information. As Rossi states,

You’d be surprised how many kids tell me that nobody has ever bothered to even ask them what they like. The entry questionnaire is also a great way to learn a little about their reading and writing levels. I think that it’s hard enough for sixth graders in a community like this one to trust, White people especially. They’ve been lied to too many times. I don’t blame them for not wanting to open up to me right away. But soon enough they begin to see that I take the information they give me to heart (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 67).

Culturally relevant teachers like Rossi use connections with students in the curriculum throughout the year in order to make learning more interesting for students.

*Making Connections between Curriculum and Students’ Lives*

In addition, culturally relevant teachers also make sure that each student feels personally invested in the curriculum so that they are interested and connected to what they learn. Too often, students – especially those of color – fail in school because they are not interested in the material. The curriculum used in most schools is highly Eurocentric and distant, which can cause problems for students who are not interested in the material. Culturally relevant teachers aim to fix this problem in their classrooms by building bridges between students’ lives and the curriculum. Though a critique of White teachers is that they often lack knowledge of other cultures, culturally relevant teachers often possess this knowledge and use it in the classroom in order to make meaningful connections for students (Gay, 2010, p. 157)

For example, Margaret Rossi, from Ladson-Billings’ study, made sure that everything she talked about had a concrete connection to students’ lives. In a current events lesson, she and her students discussed the Gulf War in the Middle East, and Rossi asked the students what the war had to do with them. After a long discussion, the students came to the conclusion that Blacks and Latinos like themselves were often overrepresented when it came to fighting in wars, and they discussed that they did not want even more Black men to leave their community (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 50). Since so many of them had personal connections to those lost to incarceration and other institutionalization, the current event lesson had a personal connection with each of them.

Anne Lewis, from Ladson-Billings’ study, encouraged students to use their home language “with which they were more knowledgeable and comfortable” when expressing themselves in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Then, Lewis asked students to translate their writing and speaking into the Standard form of English. By the end of the school year, Lewis found that her students were better able to switch between forms of English quickly, and were also more fluent in both languages. Lewis, coming from an African American community herself, did not discount her students’ dialect of English, and instead used it as a learning opportunity in the classroom. She built a bridge between students’ home culture and academics by allowing them to speak in their own dialect and translate.

Finally, Anne Lewis discussed Nelson Mandela in a current events lesson and asked her students why they should care about Mandela. The students came to the consensus that Mandela stood for all Black people like them, and they became highly interested in reading books about Mandela’s life. By reading about topics that interested them, students were improving their reading skills (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 51).

*Becoming Critical of Institutional Racism in the School System and the Curriculum*

Finally, culturally relevant teachers are highly critical of institutional racism in schools and teach their children to be so as well. Culturally relevant teachers do not believe that students begin on level playing fields, as so many others do (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p. 34). Instead, they believe that students should be observed in relation to their social contexts. Ladson-Billings (2000) argues, “students must be challenged to ask questions about the ways that whole groups of people are systematically excluded from social benefits” (p. 210). To draw from an example already used, Rossi’s students had been taught to think critically about injustice because they understood the connection between incarceration and race. Culturally relevant teachers in Ladson-Billings’ study, “in conjunction with their students, critiqued the knowledge written in the textbooks, and the system of inequitable funding that allowed middle-class students to have newer texts. They wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper to inform the community of the situation” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). These culturally relevant teachers were critical of racism in their schools, and taught their students to be critical as well.

**Conclusion**

The topics covered in this literature review serve as the basis for the analysis of my research study. Culturally relevant teachers are not as prevalent as they should be: years of lived experience bar preservice teachers from becoming successful with diverse classrooms, and often their teacher preparation programs do not emphasize multicultural education as much as they should. Culturally relevant teachers, like the ones discussed in the last section of the literature review, serve as models for my research and for my career. Their practices in the classroom lead to high achievement for all of their students; therefore, culturally relevant teachers effectively



close the opportunity gap in their classrooms everyday. In addition to seeking the characteristics of successful teachers of African American students, however, I also want to find out how the context of standardized testing affects the practices of culturally relevant and successful teachers. The previous literature review will guide the analysis of my own research. In the following chapter, I discuss the methodology of my study.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The previous chapter compiled the existing research on the topic of successful teachers of African American students. By providing existing knowledge on the prevalence of Whiteness in schools, the different kinds of teacher preparation programs, and the practices of successful teachers, I hope to understand how teachers in an elementary school in Eastern Virginia demonstrate successful practices in their classrooms.

For my study, qualitative research methods were employed in order to find out from teachers themselves what practices are used in the classroom that are successful within the context of standardization. Qualitative research “places more emphasis on the study of phenomena from the perspective of insiders” (Lapan, 2012, p. 3) which was useful in my study since I wanted to discover the phenomena of successful pedagogy within the context of standardized testing from the perspective of effective teachers themselves. According to Corbin and Strauss (1998), qualitative research “can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations” (as cited in Lapan, 2012, p. 9). Qualitative research methods can be useful in discovering information about the lives of individual people as well as broader social organizations and cultural phenomena. Since I wanted to accomplish both – the practices of individual teachers, as well as the context they come from in their teacher preparation program and school climate – qualitative research methods were most useful. Qualitative research uses empirical information, “derived through direct observation, experience, or experiment” (Lapan, 2012, p. 4) as the source of data, instead of using quantitative numbers and scientific experimentation with hypotheses and laboratory

work. In addition, my research methods were drawn from ethnography, which focus on “real people and their everyday activities in their natural environment” (Lapan, 2012, p. 163).

According to Lapan (2012), there are two dimensions of qualitative research. The first is interpretive, which assumes that “reality is constructed through the meaning individuals give to a certain phenomenon” (Lapan, 2012, p. 9). Interpretive researchers acquire data for their research from the constructed lives of individuals and the meaning they give to events in their lives. The second dimension is critical, where researchers focus on the ways that power structures are embedded into the context of the research. Critical theorists add to interpretive research: in addition to focusing on the ways that individuals construct their views, critical theorists examine the ways that power and oppression systems inform their worldviews (Lapan, 2012, p. 9). In my research study, I am examining the ways that individual teachers construct their success in the classroom, while also examining the contexts that these teachers work in. The system of power – Whiteness – that surrounds them, as well as the education system and teacher preparation program that prepared them to be successful, are both important factors to my study. Therefore, in my study I employ critical and ethnographic qualitative research methods in order to understand the individual lives and contexts of successful teachers.

During this chapter, I will describe in detail the research methods that I used in my study. I sought to answer the primary research question, “What are the characteristics of successful teachers of African American students?” I also wanted to find out where their success came from, whether through life experiences, their teacher preparation program, or other methods. In the following sections, I will describe the process I took during my research, including selecting the research site, selecting my participants, collecting data, and analyzing the data. I also include short descriptions of my participants within the section on participant selection.

## Research Site

For my research study, I chose to work in an elementary school in an urban district of Eastern Virginia. Kirkland Elementary School<sup>1</sup> serves over 380 students and is located in Randolph County, which serves over 20,000 students. In the 2012-2013 school year (most recent data), 47% of students were African American, 37% were White, 7% were Hispanic, 2% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7% identified as two or more races. I felt that this elementary school was fit for my research study because of its high percentage of African American students. In addition, 52% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.

The teacher population, on the other hand, was overwhelmingly White. Though the school's principal was African American, 78% of the classroom teachers were White. The disconnect between the percentage of non-White students versus the percentage of White teachers made this location a good fit for my study because I was able to observe these teachers in diverse classrooms. It also reflects the national trend of largely White and female teacher populations in diverse urban schools.

I took several steps to confirm Kirkland Elementary School as my research site. Having a prior relationship with Kirkland Elementary School, I was able to easily contact the Principal and Assistant Principal with my ideas, who were both very willing to help. Before contacting the school administration, I submitted a proposal to the Charles Center Undergraduate Student IRB committee, via the Protocol and Compliance Management System. On April 15, 2014, my project was approved. Then, in early May of 2014, I met with both the Principal and Assistant Principal of Kirkland Elementary to discuss my research plans. Over the next few months, I continued developing my plans, and on July 27, 2014, I submitted an application to conduct

---

<sup>1</sup> All names of schools, counties, and teachers are pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of my participants.

research in the Randolph County School System. After acquiring permission from both the William and Mary Student IRB committee and the district school system, I began my study.

### **Participant Selection**

In order to find successful teachers of African American students at Kirkland Elementary School, I took several steps to identify research participants. First, I developed the criteria for selection of participants. I wanted my definition of a successful teacher to be broadly defined, both in terms of high test scores and the development of good relationships between teachers and families. Teachers were nominated based on four criteria: 1) good relationships with African American students, 2) high academic achievement in the classroom, through grades and test scores, 3) low rates of behavior issues in the classroom, and 4) good reputations among parents and community members. These criteria came from the research on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 147-8), as well as my own definition of a successful teacher.

I then asked the school administration and other school community members for nominations of teachers to participate in the study, who were given the criteria for nomination to keep in mind as they developed their lists. Participant nominations came from the Principal, Assistant Principal, reading specialist, and a member of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). The principal is an African American woman who has been at Kirkland for four years, and the assistant principal is a White woman who taught at Kirkland Elementary School for several years before becoming the assistant principal last year. The reading specialist is an African American woman whom I felt would be a valuable resource because of her contacts with all of the teachers in the building. Finally, I asked for nominations from a board member of the PTA, whom I felt could be representative of parent voices in the Kirkland community. The PTA board member's

race is unknown since all of my correspondence with her was by email. By asking for nominations from a range of school personnel, I was able to ensure that my participants were nominated based on a range of factors, not just high test scores.

In order to identify my participants, I took the following steps. The school community members above were given the criteria above and asked to nominate any number of classroom teachers who they felt would be fit for my study. After each person gave me anywhere from two to eight nominations, I compiled the lists. There were six teachers' names that showed up on more than one list, so those teachers were contacted for my study. I explained my study via email and in-person meetings with each teacher, and all six agreed to participate. After interviewing and observing the six teachers, I decided that one teacher did not fit the correct profile for my participants and she was eliminated from my study. In the following sections, I will give descriptions of each of my five final participants.

### Participant Descriptions

#### *Ms. Payne*

Ms. Payne is an African American teacher in her 30s who currently teaches 2<sup>nd</sup> grade at Kirkland Elementary School. She has been teaching for eight years in Randolph County, and has been teaching at Kirkland for three consecutive years. Until she was thirteen years old, she grew up in Brooklyn, New York, which she describes as a predominantly African American district. Then, she moved to Syracuse, New York, which was predominantly White. She says that in her education, she went from being the majority of the class to the minority of the class, which was an adjustment for her. For her undergraduate degree, she attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in the mid-Atlantic region. She was, again, the majority of the population

at her school, but she says that it was a population of “very diverse African Americans” because they “all came from different backgrounds.” Ms. Payne is certified to teach Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade in Virginia.

*Ms. Myers*

Ms. Myers is a White teacher in her 30s who is currently teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. She has been teaching for eight years and has spent all eight at Kirkland Elementary School. Growing up, Ms. Myers attended elementary school in a rural southern district where students were predominantly White. Then, in middle school, she moved to Randolph County, and attended middle school and high school in an area where she perceived the racial demographics to be about 50% White and 50% African American. She attended a university in Virginia for her undergraduate and graduate studies, majoring in English for her Bachelor’s Degree and receiving a Master’s Degree in Elementary Education.

*Ms. Harrison*

Ms. Harrison is a White teacher in her 40s who is currently teaching 1<sup>st</sup> grade at Kirkland Elementary. She has been teaching for twenty years – all in Randolph County – and has been at Kirkland for ten. As a child, Ms. Harrison grew up in Randolph County and actually attended Kirkland Elementary, where she describes her experiences as “fairly diverse.” For her undergraduate degree, Ms. Harrison attended a college that she describes as having “maybe a dozen African American students” because of its reputation in the desegregation efforts of the 1970s. Following her first few years of teaching in Randolph County, she began taking classes at a university in Virginia for her Master’s Degree.

*Ms. Tucker*

Ms. Tucker is an African American teacher in her 60s who is currently teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at Kirkland Elementary. She has been teaching for thirty-four years and has been at Kirkland since 1987, but not continuously. As a child, Ms. Tucker attended segregated schools in a rural area of Virginia. Her mother was a maid in a White woman’s house, which she remembers to be her only exposure to White people until her schools integrated in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade. She says that she did not have many personal experiences with discrimination, but it bothered her to see other African Americans being treated unfairly. Ms. Tucker attended an HBCU in the mid-Atlantic region and says that there “wasn’t a whole lot of diversity” because it was mostly African American students and professors. She received her Master’s Degree in the following years.

*Ms. Fisher*

Ms. Fisher is a White teacher in her 30s who currently teaches 4<sup>th</sup> grade at Kirkland Elementary. She has been teaching for twelve years: one year at a high school with her provisional license, and eleven at Kirkland. She also completed her student teaching experience at Kirkland. Ms. Fisher grew up in Florida and Arizona, and says that her school experiences were fairly diverse. In elementary and middle school, her schools were split with about 50% White students and 50% African American students. Then, when she moved to Arizona for high school, she says that there were more Hispanic and Native American students, and almost no African American students. Ms. Fisher received her undergraduate degree in History at a college in Georgia, and then her Master’s Degree in Elementary Education at a college in Virginia.

*Early Comparisons*

There are several comparisons that can be made about the participants, simply based on their backgrounds. All of the participants are women, but they range significantly in age. All of



them completed traditional teacher preparation programs at colleges or universities, not alternative education programs. Most teachers have spent a significant amount of time at Kirkland Elementary, and all but one have spent their entire teaching career in Randolph County. Ms. Tucker was the only teacher who had experience in another district, since she taught in Louisiana for a couple of years. Two teachers had spent their entire elementary teaching career at Kirkland. All of them spoke very highly of Kirkland, expressing that they had found their home at that school and always felt extremely supported working there.

### **Data Collection**

Two forms of data collection – interviews and observations – were used in my study. First, teachers were asked to participate in a one-hour interview about their backgrounds and teaching practices. The major goal of these interviews was to find out how each teacher framed their own success. Since the teachers in my study had been nominated for being particularly successful with African American students, I sought to find out how they came to be so successful and what kinds of effective practices they used in the classroom. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), the most important goal of interviewing is to understand how the participant thinks and constructs his or her own life (p. 97). By conducting in-depth interviews with each of my participants, I was able to better understand the topic of successful teachers from an insider’s perspective, rather than from an outsider’s point of view, which would not have been as useful (Lapan, 2012, p. 184-185). To find out how these teachers framed their own successes, interviews were the most useful source of data collection because they allowed me to understand each teachers’ background and perspective on teaching.

Before interviewing, each participant was given a copy of the Informed Consent Form, which detailed her commitment to the research. All information about each participant would remain confidential and they could decline any question or further involvement at any time. An example of the Informed Consent form is located in Appendix A. Once each participant had signed the informed consent form, I began my interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed me to ask everyone the same specific questions, but also granted me the freedom to deviate from the interview protocol to ask follow-up questions (Glesne, 2011, p. 102). The semi-structured interview protocol is included in Appendix B.

Each interview followed a general format. In each interview, I began by introducing myself and my research topic. I re-stated that anything they said during the interview would remain confidential, and that pseudonyms would be used in the study to represent their names, the school, and the school district. Once my goals were made clear, I began by asking participants about themselves: where they grew up, why they decided to become a teacher, and what kind of teacher preparation program they attended. I also asked about their experience as a teacher, the area where they taught, and the students and families with which they worked. Then, I asked more specific questions about their teaching philosophy and their views on the education system as a whole. Finally, I asked them, specifically, what they believed made a good teacher of African American students and what practices they used in the classroom that yielded high success. These interviews allowed me to understand how each participant framed his or her background in relation to their current teaching practices, which was useful in my data analysis.

In addition to interviewing, I also engaged in participant observation in each classroom. In these observation sessions, I sought to understand how the successful practices that were

identified in the prior interviews, as well as successful practices identified in the existing research on culturally relevant teaching, played out in the classroom. Glesne (2011) states that “the main outcome of participant observation is to better understand the research setting, its participants, and their behavior” (p. 66). I used participant observation in conjunction with my interviews so that I knew what types of practices to look for in the classroom. I conducted two half-hour observations for each participant. For each observation, I took general field notes on the classroom, the students, the lessons, and the dialogue between the teachers and students. These field notes were descriptive, and presented all aspects of the classroom setting “in detail, rather than summarized or evaluated” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 121). I then transferred these notes into a chart that highlighted several aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as other practices they mentioned in their interview. An example of this chart is included in Appendix C. Therefore, in these observation sessions I was able to see how culturally relevant teaching and the successful practices identified in interviews actually played out in the classroom, which was a useful addition to the interview data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was recorded in order to have a near perfect account of what was said by my participants and myself. Following each interview, I transcribed the audio files word-for-word and included pauses, silences, and “details of struggling for the right word,” which is important to narrative ethnography and conversational analysis (Glesne, 2011, p. 117). After listening to each audio file several times and transcribing, I sent the transcripts to my participants to be checked. I used this process as a type of member-checking to make sure that I had accurate and complete detail in my data. Then, I began coding the interviews from the transcripts I had

created. Each line of the transcripts was analyzed for meaning and given a code. I developed my codes using the framework from my review of the literature above, and in particular the characteristics of culturally relevant pedagogy. Using my literature review, I created codes based on the successful practices of teachers that were apparent in Ladson-Billings’ study and in Geneva Gay’s definition of culturally relevant teaching. I also developed new codes to represent the secondary questions of my study, including where teachers’ successes came from. These codes emerged from the analysis of interview data while searching for similarities and differences between participants. My codes were: racial awareness (RA), diverse experiences (DE), knowledge of Randolph community (KR), community (C), student homes (SH), socioeconomic status (SES), mindset toward education in the homes (ED), teacher preparation (TP), multicultural education (MC), expectations of students (EX), community-building strategies (CB), student modifications (SM), connections with students on a personal level (PL), relationships with students (RS), behavior (BE), parent relationships/role (PR), best practice (BP), connections between curriculum and students (CC), critiques of the school system (CR), standardized testing (ST), teacher accountability (TA), and using test data to guide instruction (GI). To provide an example, the interview transcript for one participant stated the following: “I tell them always to try their best. Always, always, always. I don’t want them to belittle themselves and say, ‘I can’t do this. I don’t know what’s going on.’” This section of the transcript was coded with an EX for academic expectations. For another participant, my observation notes say: “For the vocabulary words, [she is] stating the definition and making connections about what they may already know about the term. She says, ‘The next word is \_\_\_\_\_. What is the word?’” This note was coded with a CC for curricular connections because

the teacher was creating a connection for each of the vocabulary words of the unit before moving on to the next word.

After this coding process, conceptual memos were created for each participant in order to write thoughts, make connections, and think about further questions. According to Charmaz (2000), “through memo writing, we elaborate processes, assumptions, and actions that are subsumed under our codes. Memo writing leads us to explore our codes” (as cited in Lapan, 2012, p. 55). In my conceptual memos, I was able to analyze each participant and make comparisons across interviews by compiling quotes from the transcripts and my observation data. The conceptual memos included information about their backgrounds, their teacher preparation programs, their thoughts and opinions about how they teach and why they were identified for the study, and an overall summary from me about why I believed they were identified for the study based on the interview and observation data. My conceptual memos were useful in identifying themes and comparisons across participants. After writing each memo, I did a cross-comparison of each participant and looked for emerging themes within and between cases. I took data from each memo and applied it to the major themes that I found, which served as a preliminary outline of my findings.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations in my study that prevent my research from being generalized to the experiences of all teachers. Because of the time constraints of an honors thesis, I was only able to interview and observe five teachers at one elementary school. These teachers’ practices, though very successful in the context of their own school, cannot be generalized to critique other teachers in other schools and school districts. In addition, since most

of these teachers had only taught in Randolph County, and some only at Kirkland Elementary, they were often unable to comment on how their teaching might be different if placed in a different community. I recognize that successful teaching will look different in every classroom, and may look vastly different in other schools, counties, or states. Therefore, I attempt to avoid any generalizations that may compromise the validity of my study.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter chronicled the process I took during my research. After identifying my participants through nominations, I interviewed and observed them in order to answer my primary research question. My next chapter explains my findings and answers the questions, “What are the characteristics of successful teachers of African American students” and “Where did their successes come from?”

## **Chapter Four: Results**

The following chapter presents my findings. In order to identify the characteristics of successful teachers of African American students, I interviewed and observed five effective teachers who were nominated by school personnel for their success. There were three primary characteristics of successful teachers that emerged throughout my data collection, which answered my primary research question of “What are the characteristics of successful teachers of African American students?”. In the first section, I discuss how establishing a positive relationship with students is important to success in the classroom because it often leads to high achievement and positive behavior among students. Then, I discuss expectations: many teachers said that being consistent and firm with students is the best way to be successful. In the next section, I discuss how teachers explicitly connect the curriculum to students’ lives. Finally, in the last section I consider the life experiences and context that either promoted or impeded my participants’ success, which answered my secondary research question of what characteristics or dispositions helped these teachers become successful in the classroom.

### **Relationships with Students**

Each of the teachers in my study emphasized the importance of building relationships between students and teachers that are built upon mutual respect, care, and trust. These relationships lay the foundation for success in the classroom. In her interview, Ms. Harrison described her philosophy of teaching as very relational: “I build relationships with the students so that they might come to trust me, and that I can come to know and understand the level of need that they’re operating out of, so that I can best meet their individual needs.” Ms. Myers

said that she sees herself as a mother figure and a nurturer for her students, and Ms. Payne described her feeling that a classroom should be a student’s home away from home. Ms. Tucker said that she treats her students as if they were her own children, and Ms. Fisher argued that a positive relationship with children shows students that you care, which makes them want to do well for you.

In the following sections, I describe four findings related to positive relationships with students, including the importance of care and respect, connecting with students on a personal level, community building in the classroom, and effective communication with parents. These four subcategories indicate the immense importance of establishing multifaceted and positive relationships with students in the classroom in order to yield success.

### The Importance of Care and Respect

According to all of the participants, showing students respect and care is one of the best ways to establish positive relationships with African American students. These positive relationships often lead to effective behavior management. In her interview, Ms. Fisher said,

I want them to know me; I want them to know that I care. I want them to know that, you know, this is a team. ... I think the bottom line is, when you’re forming that relationship with them, they need to know that you care about them, and that you’re here for them, and I think that’s very important to get at the beginning of the year.

Ms. Fisher said that showing care is one of the most effective ways to be successful with students. When asked about the highlight of her teaching career, Ms. Fisher described a student a few years ago who had been a behavior problem in every classroom he had entered. During



the second week of school, he got in trouble for something minor and ended up punching Ms. Fisher. A few days later, she responded by leaving positive notes on his desk:

Just little things – I would fold them up and be like, ‘You did so good on this test yesterday, I’m so proud of you, you’re so smart, you’re so brilliant.’ Other things like, ‘I saw how you helped so-and-so get the ball at recess today. You did such a great job – you’re such a good friend.’ Um, and he started warming up to the point that, by the end of the year, he was my best student. He was my favorite student; he came and gave me hugs every morning. I was the only one that could calm him down if he was having a problem, and his mom even called and told me that he saved every single little note that I ever put on his desk.

Ms. Fisher’s response to his behavior – showing care through notes of encouragement – changed her student’s behavior and mindset so that he could be more successful in school.

Ms. Fisher’s positive relationship with students is evident in her classroom, which is a very high-energy environment. She talks very quickly and somewhat loudly, and the students are able to talk as they work. When I walked in for my first observation, Ms. Fisher was loudly yelling at one of her students, “Shane! Don’t you talk about my *q*!” She was joking with him: apparently he always made fun of the way she writes *q*’s, and she responded later in the lesson by walking around and making fun of everyone else’s handwriting, too. She had established a good rapport with the students, able to joke with them and yell things like, “Pick up your pencil, man!” to get their attention. Overall, her relationship with students made her classroom an exciting and entertaining environment, and her rapport with students showed that she cared about them. This care that she had for her students – shown by her stories about past students like the

one who punched her, and by the rapport with her current students – was an essential characteristic of her success in the classroom.

Similarly, Ms. Tucker shared a story in her interview from several years ago that demonstrated her relationship with students. At the time, she taught at another school in Randolph County that was an open-classroom school where the county sent students who had been expelled from their other schools. On her first day teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, two of her boys packed their bags and decided they would walk out of the classroom without permission. She tells the story:

The first day of school, when it was near the end of the day, I had two boys that decided ‘Imma pack my book bag up and Imma walk out the classroom.’ I stood in front of that door and I said, ‘You will not go through this door. I’m gonna take you to your bus.’ [They said,] ‘No, you’re not taking me to my bus! I’m taking myself to my bus!’ with the attitude and all that ... And something’s like – something rose up in me and said, ‘If you don’t nip this in the bud ... you gonna have problems with these two boys for the rest of the year.’ ... I took them by the hands, and I said, ‘Rest of the class, I want you to line up.’ And I looked down and both of these boys were crying. I said, ‘What are you crying for? First you were like macho...’ [They said,] ‘Mrs. Tucker, we’ve never had anyone to tell us that they would take care of us, that they will help us to do something.’

Shocked, Ms. Tucker listened to them describe that no one watched after them when they got home from school. In response, Ms. Tucker looked them “eyeball to eyeball” and said, “Now look, I’m your teacher and I am going to watch over you like you are my own child.” For the rest of the year, these two boys “got everybody straight” in the classroom so that she experienced few behavior problems. Her response to these two students showed them that she cared about

them, which then positively affected her students’ behavior. In her interview, she argued that children “just want someone to believe in them,” so she often tells them, “No matter what, I like you and I see potential in you and I see greatness in you.” Ms. Tucker’s memories of past students indicate that she does not hold a deficit mentality towards any of her students, and instead she connects with students through her genuine care for their wellbeing. Her care for students positively impacts their behavior in the classroom, which also contributes to her overall success.

Many of Ms. Tucker’s students remembered her years later because of the relationships she formed with them in the classroom: one student contacted her in high school saying that he finally made the honor roll, another stopped her on the street to apologize for being a “knucklehead” in her class, and another found her email address and still corresponds with her today. During my observations, she was constantly complimenting students for their answers, saying things like, “Thank you for saying that; I appreciate you saying that,” or “I believe, because you have been listening and participating, that you are going to do well. I hope you believe it too.” Her interactions with students in her class showed that she cared about them and the way they thought about themselves, which contributed to her success in the classroom.

For Ms. Harrison, the moment that epitomized her caring relationship with students was in 2008 when her father passed away. She had already “laid the groundwork” in her classroom and shown her students that she cared about them, and said,

I could not believe the compassion and the care that those students had for me when I returned after being out for a few days. And that came out of them knowing how much I love them. You know, if I hadn’t, if I hadn’t laid that groundwork and I hadn’t shown them how much they mattered to me...

Her thoughts trailed off, but the message is clear: Ms. Harrison’s caring relationship that she had established with her students early in the year demonstrates her success in the classroom. When observing her class, I noticed the caring and compassionate tone that she took with her students. She said everything in a very quiet and sweet voice: “John, I’m so sorry that other people are being rude and not listening to you!” and “Oh, you’re so smart. Everybody kiss your head!” These caring relationships that Ms. Harrison establishes with her students positively affect their behavior and her own success in the classroom.

In addition to the positive behavior effects for Ms. Fisher, Ms. Tucker, and Ms. Harrison, establishing caring relationships with students also positively affects students’ academic achievement. As Ms. Myers pointed out, students “want to make you happy and they want to do what’s best for you.” Ms. Harrison also recognizes the importance of establishing relationships for academic achievement: she says, “It’s really powerful to be able to look at a kid and say ‘Just do it for me... Look at all the things I’ve done for you.’” For these teachers, establishing respectful and caring relationships with students early in the year was one of the ways that they demonstrated success in the classroom. Even though they developed these relationships with their students in different ways, their end goal remained similar. By forging such relationships, these teachers saw that students were more likely to demonstrate good behavior and achieve academically. Since having low rates of behavior problems and high academic achievement were two of the criteria for success in my participant selection, it is clear that these teachers’ care for their students positively contributed to their success and nomination for my study.

### Connections on a Personal Level

In addition to demonstrating caring and respectful relationships with students, my participants also make an effort to connect with students on a personal level. To do this, some teachers share stories about their own lives in order to seem more approachable to students, and other teachers attempt to learn more about their students' lives. Ms. Harrison described the most important aspect of her approach to teaching as her ability to know her students. She often spends class time talking to them and watching them work, as well as sharing details about her own life with her students to encourage them to talk about themselves. On Monday mornings, she shares events from her own weekend and listens to stories about her students' weekends. In addition, she brings in pictures of her own family, which puts her students in a position to reciprocate.

Ms. Fisher does activities with her students in the beginning of the year to figure out what their interests are. She says that the first few weeks of school are all about getting to know her students personally so that she can “decide how to approach different things with them, and what’s going to work best for them.” On the first day of school, she does an activity where students tear off a strip of toilet paper (without knowing the content of the activity) and must say one thing about themselves for every piece they pull off. Ms. Fisher also sends home parent surveys, as well as student surveys that have questions like, “Who is at home when you get home from school?” and “How much TV do you watch when you get home?” in order to gauge their lives away from school. She does many activities like this in order to figure out who they are, what they like, and what they care about.

Ms. Payne tailors herself and her personality based on what she knows about her students. In the beginning of the year, she tries to get to know students by observing their

behavior and listening to their conversation. She also talks to students to understand their home lives and backgrounds. She says, “Every child needs a certain different type of ‘me,’” and she tailors herself to meet her students. In addition, Ms. Payne tries to make connections with students based on what they like: she said that in past years, she began to watch Nickelodeon and Frozen in order to relate to students. She says,

When they heard me singing Frozen and they were like ‘She knows Frozen?!’ I do! I like cartoons! So, just being able to relate to them is like, big for them because they’re like, ‘Oh, she’s just like us!’ So, I think that’s important.

Even though Ms. Payne used pop culture references to relate to students, Ms. Harrison pointed out in her interview that she did not make efforts to connect with students this way.

*Ms. Harrison:* I think you have to be authentic. I think if I were to alter who I am dependent upon who was in my classroom, they would see through that in a second. I think it’s really important for you to be your authentic self, ‘cause like I said, otherwise you’re just a phony and a fake and they’ll see through that in a minute. ... I don’t try to identify with them, on like a musical level. Like, you know, what’s the – I’m not even going to be able to think of it. Like the boy band?

*Interviewer:* One Direction?

*Ms. Harrison:* Yeah! 1D? Isn’t that what they call them sometimes? I don’t even know what they sing. ... But there are a lot of other ways that I can identify with them. You know, I don’t listen to One Direction, and if I were to try to fake that, that would come off weird. I’d end up looking stupid instead of effective.

Teachers in my study, therefore, vary in their methods of connecting with students. Both Ms. Myers and Ms. Fisher used student and family surveys to get to know students, while Ms. Payne

and Ms. Harrison relied primarily on listening to student conversations in the classroom. No matter the method, though, all of the teachers agreed that getting to know students early in the year was very important to being successful in the classroom.

### Community-Building

Another way that my participants build relationships with students in the classroom is by using community-building strategies that allow students to work together to create a cohesive classroom community where students can thrive. First, several teachers stressed the importance of group work and cooperative learning groups. Ms. Myers, Ms. Payne, and Ms. Fisher all preferred to pair or group students who wouldn't otherwise talk to each other in order to “force interaction” between students. Ms. Myers emphasized the importance of her students knowing how to interact with each other in order to build relationships between students who may not come from the same backgrounds. In addition, Ms. Harrison discussed the importance of teaching children how to experience empathy and disagree with each other in a rational way. She talks with her students about using kind words with each other, which she says builds community in her classroom.

In addition to using cooperative learning groups, Ms. Payne uses a positive rewards system in order to build community in her classroom. In her classroom, she has two behavior systems – an individual behavior system where students can earn points for their good behavior, and a class behavior system where the entire class earns checks for their behavior. By establishing a class behavior system, Ms. Payne builds community in her room because her students correct each other: “Because sometimes they have to say ‘You’re going to get a warning check; we want a class check!’ And they’ll tell each other ... to be quiet so they can get [a

reward]” that is voted on by the class. The day I interviewed Ms. Payne, her students were having a party at the end of the day as their reward, and one parent had even brought donuts to the party. This reward system seemed to build community in the room because it required that the students work together to receive good behavior checks.

Ms. Myers and Ms. Fisher build community in their rooms by explicitly emphasizing the community to students. Ms. Myers said she often refers to her class as a family, and she says things like “Now, we’re being very rude, and I know we’re not a rude class” when she wants their attention. These comments to her students explicitly emphasize the classroom community. In addition, Ms. Fisher builds community in her room by telling her students a “secret:”

I always tell them that we’re the best class. ‘We’re the best class at this school.’ I tell them it’s a secret that we can’t tell anybody else, but we’re the best class because, you know, we’re like a big family in here. And they really kind of, you know, they’re like ‘Oh really? We’re the best class in this school?’ I think it’s all about – a lot of it’s about just boosting egos.

By telling her students this secret, Ms. Fisher builds confidence and community in her classroom. The teachers in my study build community in different ways, but the classroom climate and community plays a large role in the student and teacher success in the classroom.

### Communication with Parents

In addition to the importance of building relationships with students, the teachers in my study recognize that they must also effectively communicate with parents. All of these teachers said that parents should be extremely active in their child’s education, giving constant parental support and providing extra help at home. They all spoke of an “ideal world” where teachers



would provide instruction and parents would extend the instruction at home. In her interview, Ms. Tucker argued that there is a decline in parent involvement due to the economy. She said, “It’s not the way it used to be,” when some parents came in every day to volunteer their time. The other four teachers, though, argued that Kirkland has high parental involvement because most of the parents are involved in checking their child’s agenda and helping out with homework.

One participant noted that her communication with parents had increased over the years. Ms. Myers explained that in her first few years of teaching, it was often hard for her to maintain relationships with parents because of time and energy constraints. This year, though, she finally “tapped into the parent role” by involving them with technology. She uses a website and app called Class Dojo, which is a positive behavior management system. Each day, students in her classroom earn points for their good behaviors, which are divided into categories such as participation and following directions. Ms. Myers also uses Class Dojo to involve parents in their child’s education. Since Class Dojo has a messaging feature, she can easily send all-call messages to parents to remind them of upcoming events in class or she can send personalized messages about one student. Parents are also able to message her about their child’s progress, since they receive reports of their child’s points. As Ms. Myers says, parents are able to message her, “‘Hey, I see John earned four points for participation today. I’m really excited to see that.’ Or, ‘Hey, I noticed that you said he wasn’t following directions. What specifically can I talk to him about at home so that that can be fixed at school?’” Ms. Myers has an open-door policy so that parents are able to come into class whenever they like. She attributes her success this year to making more an effort to involve and educate the parents of her students. When asked about the most important characteristics in being successful with African American students, she said:

I think that involving and educating the parents holds just as much value as involving and educating the students. ... I've found myself to see more success in the classroom when I'm able to involve parents and get them to understand what we're doing here.

Since Ms. Myers has made the effort to reach out to parents more this school year, she has seen more success in the classroom. Since having positive relationships with parents and community members was one criterion for my study, Ms. Myers' increased use of parental involvement contributed to her nomination for my study as a culturally relevant teacher.

Ms. Harrison described negative relationships with parents as one of the primary reasons that she left a teaching job at another school in Randolph County and came to Kirkland. At her other school, she found that parent-teacher relationships were very strained: “It was never like a ‘we’ way of thinking, it was always a ‘us’ the school, and ‘them’ the families.” Ms. Harrison recognized the importance of bridging the gap between parents and teachers, especially because of the trickle-down effect of opinions. She says,

Every parent that's had a bad school experience themselves brings it in that door with them. And I am the face of the teacher that picked on them. I am the face of the teacher that didn't keep her word, or let them down in some way... And so I have to remember that I am an ambassador, and that part of my job is healing [those feelings].

After transferring schools, Ms. Harrison found that parents at Kirkland have been very supportive because of the high response to requests for volunteering and the help with homework at home. She sends a questionnaire home to families at the beginning of the year, and says that the surveys tell her “a lot about the effect that the parent is probably going to have on how the child and I relate to each other.” She also sends monthly newsletters home to discuss what is going on in the classroom. Ms. Harrison's efforts to involve parents in the classroom – through

volunteer requests, questionnaires, and monthly newsletters – are one of the ways that she builds successful relationships with students and parents at Kirkland.

In conclusion, the teachers in my study often experienced success when the caring community that they established in their classrooms was also reflected in their relationships with parents. The teachers in my study seemed to respect and value the parents’ involvement in the classroom. Overall, all of my participants built meaningful relationships with students through care and respect, personal connections, community building, and communication with parents. In the following section, I will discuss how these caring relationships are combined with high expectations in the classroom to foster behavioral and academic success.

### **Expectations**

In addition to the relationships that culturally relevant teachers foster with their students, Ladson-Billings (1995) argued that the participants in her study maintained high academic expectations for their students, which countered the deficit mentality that is a problem for many White teachers of diverse students (p. 160). Likewise, all the teachers in my study described their high expectations for their students as a factor contributing to their success. In the following section, I will describe my participants’ differing models of behavior management and academic expectations that lead to their students’ success in the classroom. While Ladson-Billings (1994) only focused on her participants’ academic expectations, I add to the research base by discussing my participants’ behavioral expectations for their students as well.

### Behavioral Expectations

Teachers in my study had strict behavioral expectations for their students. Ms. Payne argued that being consistent with expectations was the best behavior strategy for African American students. She says,

Consistency, consistency, consistency is most definitely the key. If you can't be consistent, they're gonna think that they can possibly run over you ... And you don't ever want them to feel like you have no control. Because you always have control, no matter how crazy the situation may get.

In addition to being consistent with expectations, Ms. Tucker said that being firm was also extremely important. According to Ms. Tucker, teachers have to be firm with African American students by setting standards and not letting them misbehave. Her story about the two boys who tried to leave her classroom (described earlier) showed her firm expectations: in this situation, Ms. Tucker did not let her students disobey her standards, and because of her firmness, those students became the most well behaved in the class. She perceives that being firm helped her gain respect, and says that children want structure, so living by your standards is very important. During one of my observations, one of her students who has special needs began to shake his head and body very quickly, and Ms. Tucker asked the instructional assistant to take him for a walk around the school because she couldn't have the disruption in her classroom. Then, when the classes switched and new students came into her room, Ms. Tucker questioned why they all had coats on, and harshly said, “Your teacher lets you wear coats in your room? Is it cold in there?” My observations showed that Ms. Tucker had very clear behavioral expectations of her students, and most students seemed to respect her rules.

Ms. Myers clear expectations for behavior are based around her Class Dojo app. When asked why she thought she was identified for my study, she said it was possibly because of her low rates of behavior issues in her classroom. She contributed these low rates to the positive mentality that she established, saying, “At my best, everything I do is leaned towards the positive, as opposed to the negative.” Instead of yelling at a student for not paying attention while she’s teaching, she’ll say, “Oh front row, you guys are earning some points on Class Dojo because I see your hands on top of your desk and I see your eyes up front; I know you’re paying attention.” She hardly ever takes away points from students, and her behavior system is concentrated on earning points to be able to “buy” rewards with their points every Friday. Though her discussion of behavior management was much different from Ms. Tucker’s and Ms. Payne’s – who described her consistent and firm expectations and standards – Ms. Myers’ behavior system also clearly established expectations for students.

### Academic Expectations

Teachers in my study also held students to high academic expectations: they expected that all students would do their best in class. Ms. Payne’s mantra that she constantly repeated to students during my observation was “Be prepared, be focused, and do your best.” During her interview, she said that her expectation for students was for them “to be their very, very best at all times and never, ever give up.” These phrases were her announcements whenever she started something new, but she also repeated them when students were misbehaving. She never let any student give up on anything, which was evident in one interaction with a student during a group lesson that I observed. Ms. Payne was teaching a lesson on contractions, and she asked students for examples and the words that make up contractions (for example, “didn’t” is a combination of

“did” and “not”). She realized early on that one of her students had not grasped the concept yet, so she called on him ten or fifteen times during the lesson and waited until he got the right answer each time. This interaction showed that she never let students give up on anything, and she made sure they understood the concept before moving on.

Ms. Myers focused on improvement in her discussion of academic expectations. She said she expects her students to make strong efforts and work hard, but focuses on improvement as the main goal. She says,

My mantra with them is that I just need to see you improve. Would I love for everybody to pass and get honor rolls and A's, absolutely. But can I see a marked improvement from when you began to when you ended is how I note achievement and excellence in my class. Is there growth? And that's what I try to focus on, not 'Did you get a perfect score?' ... Because a student may fail at a 20%. They're also going to fail at a 60%. But holy cow, that was a 40-point jump that they made – there's something that they different, there is something that they learned in there that that one word... to name their score is not showing.

Similarly, Ms. Harrison, Ms. Tucker, and Ms. Fisher all emphasized that they expect students to “do their best” in their classrooms. Ms. Harrison said that she expects students to do their best all of the time, but recognizes that she will get it about 85% of the time. Ms. Tucker describes that students should do their best, even if their best is only her minimum. Finally, Ms. Fisher instructs students to think positively about themselves:

I tell them always to try their best. Always, always, always. I don't want them to belittle themselves and say, 'I can't do this. I don't know what's going on.' I try to turn it into a – we did an activity at the beginning of the year, again, where it was, instead of saying 'I

can't do this; I don't know how' what could you say? And we would reword those statements and be like, 'Ms. Fisher, I think I need a little more practice with this,' or 'I don't quite have it yet, but I'm gonna get it!' That kind of thing.

Ms. Tucker also talked about her academic expectations of students, which were that they should do their best at all times. She told a story about a teaching job she had in Louisiana, where she was asked to teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade science because the elementary schools went through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. When she arrived, the students told her that she was the sixth or seventh teacher they had had that year. She had bad behavior problems in that class: the students ripped her bulletin boards off the walls, brought liquor to school in orange juice bottles, and didn't listen to her at all. After a few days, Ms. Tucker went to the principal's office to talk to him about her class. In response, he said to her, "I don't care what you do in that class. I don't care if you give them kindergarten work. You better make them pass." Ms. Tucker went to the superintendent's office that afternoon to speak with him about the principal's comments. She said, "Where I come from, that's not what we do. I cannot lower my standards to do something that's not appropriate. ... This is seventh grade science." With the help of her colleagues, she was able to make small changes at the school, but she left after that year. Ms. Tucker's unwillingness to lower her academic standards for students showed the high expectations that she had. Her academic expectations were also clear in my observations. When calling on students, she said things like, "Don't say you don't know. Yes you do" and "You're not going to get the same grade [on this retest]; you're going to get a higher grade." She made these comments in a very forceful tone so that the students had to believe her and believe in themselves.

The teachers in my study all set clear behavioral and academic expectations for students, and held students to those standards every day. These high expectations are one of the main

reasons that teachers experience success in their classrooms, both because of good behavior and academic achievement. As one of the main facets of culturally relevant teaching, having high expectations for students is one of the most important ways in which these teachers demonstrated their success in the classroom. In the following section, I describe the instructional strategies that teachers use to make sure that curriculum and lessons are interesting for students.

### **Connections between Curriculum and Students’ Lives**

In the literature, researchers discuss the importance of making sure that students are interested in what they are learning. Often, they recommend that teachers make explicit connections between the curriculum and students’ lives. One of the most important ways to make students feel engaged is to tailor the curriculum and lessons to their interests. For example, Ms. Tucker uses things that they are interested in, like football players, toys, and cartoons, in order to make lessons interesting for student. She uses these elements to help them relate to the concepts being taught, saying, “I try to make it as real to them [as possible].” In addition, Ms. Harrison’s lessons often connected to things that students knew or cared about. For example, she talked about how easy it is to insert something students like into math word problems to gain their interest.

I take a situation of, you know... math word problems. And if you know something that they’re interested in, put that element into a word problem, and you already have their attention, and maybe their interest, if you do something that basic – that simple.

Ms. Harrison also said that when she taught 4<sup>th</sup> grade map skills, she went to Busch Gardens and took a class set of maps, drew a grid over them, and taught map skills using those maps instead of maps that the students had no connection to.



When asked how she made connections between the curriculum and her students' lives, Ms. Myers initially struggled with the question, saying that it takes immense time and effort on the teacher's part to do this well. She said it was possible to make these connections, but very difficult and time consuming. However, when probed for specifics, Ms. Myers came up with several examples in her classroom. In math, she said she always tried to relate concepts to their real-world applications, and highlighted the example of money. She says, “I guess my attempts to try to relate what we learn to real-world things and things they would encounter in real life are my attempts to make it relatable and relevant to them.” I then asked about social studies, because I knew that the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade social studies curriculum heavily emphasized ancient cultures and 1600s explorers, which are very distant topics for most people, especially 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. She says, “I don't attempt as strongly to make it important as I do to make it exciting. Because exciting can make you want to learn sometimes as much as important does.” During one of my observations, Ms. Myers was introducing Ancient Rome by playing an educational rap song called “Party at the Parthenon,” which students loved listening to. In addition, Ms. Myers said that she often created connections between ancient civilizations by emphasizing their contributions to today. She told a story of one student who told her that if Ancient China had never invented the kite, then Ben Franklin would have never been able to discover electricity. Even though Ms. Myers initially struggled with my question, she demonstrated these connections between curriculum and students' lives in both her interview and observations.

When asked what the most important aspect of her teaching was, Ms. Fisher said that she strived to “get them hooked” early on by creating a connection with the material. She gave me several examples: in math, she connects the material to real-life skills that students will use when they are adults, like estimation. For science, Ms. Fisher talked about how, earlier that day, she

had students close their eyes and envision the sun rising and setting around them to figure out why early astronomers thought that the earth was the center of the universe. Before, she said, the students had no connection to the words *heliocentric* and *geocentric*, but she was able to create the connection by having them visualize the sun’s apparent movement. Finally, in social studies, she talked about how she always strives for students to understand how people from history thought and felt. For example, when discussing the Revolutionary War, she creates a Stamp Tax: she gives students twenty laminated stamps and tells them that by the end of the day, the number of stamps they have will be how many behavior points they get that day (points that they use to “buy” things from her class store). She describes,

I make them pay a Stamp Tax in class, so anytime they need a pencil, or a paper, or when they want to go to recess or lunch or whatever, they have to pay the Stamp Tax. And they’re like – and I do all of this before we even talk about what the Stamp Tax is. And they’re like ‘Oh this isn’t fair! I’ve already given away all my stuff!’ And they’re getting mad... Oh they’re getting mad by the end of the day! And so, at the end of the day when I explain to them why we were doing that, and what that felt like, they kind of have that mad feeling, like – some of them get seriously mad. And um, they’ll have that mindset of, ‘Oh this is what the colonists felt like when they had to –’ But I like to sneak it up on them. ... I think that helps them to form connections with the material that way. Because social studies, you know, it’s all about how people felt, how they dealt with it, and I want them to not just say ‘Oh, Jamestown... And the colonies... They fought against the king... blah, blah, blah.’ That’s not how I want to do it.

I also saw an activity like this when I observed Ms. Fisher’s class: the students had to put themselves in the colonists’ shoes and create a speech bubble from the perspective of someone

living in Jamestown in order to discuss the hardships of the colony. The students came up with very funny and creative answers about Jamestown hardships, and Ms. Fisher was very complimentary of them when they acted out their speech bubble for the class. Ms. Fisher’s lesson plans utilize connections between the curriculum and her students that foster a relationship with what they are learning.

Relatedly, Ms. Payne structures her lesson plans to make the instructional activities more interesting for students, not necessarily the content itself. Ms. Payne has a basketball theme in her classroom, which is reflected in her bulletin boards, behavior chart, and lunch menu chart. Her “good work” bulletin board that displays student work is labeled as the “Most Valuable Player” board. On Fridays, Ms. Payne asks students information about things they’ve learned that week, and when they get the answer correct, they get to shoot a basket, which she has displayed in the room for this activity. This activity also builds community in her classroom, she says, because students are very encouraging of each other when they shoot the baskets.

These instructional techniques – both making connections between the material and students’ interests, and doing instructional activities that are interesting for students – are ways that the teachers in my study demonstrate success with African American students. These techniques contribute to their success in the classroom. In the last section, I discuss several life experiences and contextual factors that promote and impede success for my participants.

### **Factors that Promote and Impede Success**

In addition to my primary research question about the characteristics of effective teachers of African American students, I also sought to answer the question, “From where did their success come?” Teachers’ personal backgrounds are highly influential to their teaching, so I

wanted to examine whether their life experiences led to their success in the classroom. In particular, I examine their K-12 experiences and their teacher preparation programs. In addition, I sought to find out whether the school context affected their success in the classroom, both in terms of the school community and the standardized testing context. In the following two sections, I discuss the effects of my participants’ personal backgrounds and school context on their success in the classroom.

### Personal Backgrounds

#### *Positive Effects: Life Experiences*

The life experiences of my participants tended to prepare them for success in the classroom. Of the five teachers, four had lived or taught in Randolph County for a significant amount of time. Ms. Myers, for example, had moved to Randolph when she was in middle school, and has taught at Kirkland for all eight years that she has been teaching. Ms. Harrison grew up in Randolph County and went to Kirkland when she was in elementary school. Ms. Tucker had been teaching at Kirkland since 1987, though not continuously. Finally, Ms. Fisher has taught for eleven of her twelve years at Kirkland, and even completed her student teaching there. These four teachers have spent a significant amount of their lives and teaching years in Randolph County, which prepared them for success in the classroom.

Ms. Fisher described how she uses knowledge of the Randolph community in her classroom in order to form relationships with students. She says that she changes her approach to students based on what she knows about where they live: when she knows that a certain area or community of Randolph does not emphasize education as important, she will approach the students who live in that area different from others. With those students, she will use a “power

dynamic,” where she emphasizes that knowledge is power. She says, “I want them to get that ‘brain power’ and really really make something of themselves. ... I really try to get that through to my boys, because honestly I worry about a lot of them, just knowing where they live and the kinds of things that happen over there.” Ms. Fisher tries to instill a value in education for these students. Her knowledge of the Randolph community around Kirkland allows her to change her approach and relationships with students, which makes her more successful in the classroom. Therefore, spending a significant amount of time in the Randolph area helped Ms. Fisher and the other teachers to be able to relate to her students, which caused them to be successful.

Ms. Payne was the only teacher in my study who had not spent a significant amount of time in Randolph County, but her life experiences played a role in her success. Until she was thirteen years old, Ms. Payne lived in Brooklyn, New York, which was a predominantly African American district. She then moved to Syracuse, New York, which was predominantly White. She says that in her educational career, she went from being the majority of the class to the minority of the class. For her undergraduate degree, Ms. Payne attended an HBCU. She was, again, the majority of the population because the university population was mostly African American, but she says that it was a population of “very diverse African Americans” because they “all came from different backgrounds.” As part of her teacher preparation program, she had to complete one student teaching experience in a suburban environment (predominantly White) and another one in an urban environment (predominantly African American) because it was assumed “that the county schools are different than the city schools,” which she confirms that it was. When asked what the most important characteristic of being successful with African American students was, Ms. Payne replied that she felt she could relate to her students. Because

of her background in both African American and White communities, Ms. Payne could relate to students in her classroom which made her more successful.

*Negligible Effects: Multicultural Education in the Teacher Preparation Program*

Teachers' life experiences seemed to positively influence their success in the classroom, but they often perceived that their multicultural education training had a negligible effect on their success with African American students. During my interviews, I asked each teacher about their teacher preparation program to find out where they went and what they remembered from it.

When asked what the most helpful class to their practice was, the teachers gave varied responses: Ms. Myers talked of a classroom management class, Ms. Harrison talked of a reading class, and Ms. Payne talked of a lesson planning class. As a follow-up question, I asked if they took any courses on multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy. Here are some responses from their various interviews:

*Interviewer:* Do you remember any classes on multicultural education?

*Ms. Fisher:* I don't, actually.

*Ms. Myers:* You know, not specifically that I can think of. Not saying that I didn't... If I did, I believe it was tied in to some other things.

*Ms. Tucker:* We didn't have any classes on multicultural. That was way back in the '70s [when I completed my teacher preparation program].

*Ms. Payne:* Yes, I did take something like that. I don't remember what it was called, but I did take that. ... I know it had to do with like the socioeconomics of students, and like different backgrounds.

*Ms. Harrison:* There was the most pitiful little course during our professional semester. ... There was a professor that taught a class on cultural diversity ... and she kind of

highlighted, like, every ridiculous stereotype of, not only her culture, but other cultures.

... It was not a good experience. And especially for extremely sheltered Caucasian people to sit and listen to. It was awful.

Ms. Fisher, Ms. Myers, and Ms. Tucker all said that they did not remember any courses on multicultural education, which signified that their multicultural education training had a negligible effect on their success with African American students. Ms. Payne did remember that she took a class on “different backgrounds” of students, but couldn’t remember anything else about the course. Her lack of specific memories about the course also signified to me that her multicultural education training had little effect on why she was identified for my study. Ms. Harrison was the only teacher who specifically remembered a class on diversity, but said that it was an awful course that did nothing to affect her teaching because “it was just a joke” of a class.

Though these teachers’ personal experiences did seem to prepare them for success with African American students, their multicultural education training seemed to have negligible effects on their practice. Ms. Fisher pointed out that she believed she learned everything on the job instead of during her teacher preparation program: “You can’t be prepared for this job and what it’s like and everything that you actually are doing day-to-day until you’re doing it.”

In the next section, I will discuss how the school context at Kirkland Elementary – in terms of school community, standardized testing, and inclusion – has affected these teachers’ success in the classroom.

## School Context

### *Positive Effects: School Community*

The school community at Kirkland Elementary often had a positive impact on the success of my participants. Though it was not a question on my interview protocol, three out of the five participants discussed the Kirkland community in their interview. When asked about the highlight of her teaching career, Ms. Harrison described her move to Kirkland:

*Ms. Harrison:* A highlight I would say, was finding my way to Kirkland because I feel like I'm at home here – and not because I went to school here. ... I feel like I am teaching in a community [where] the families possess the same ... moral background that I do. ... And so I feel like I can partner well with them, and that is very helpful.

Ms. Harrison described the highlight of her teaching career in terms of the school community – not in terms of students – which told me that the Kirkland community played a large role in her success. Since relationships with parents was one of the characteristics of success for my participants, Ms. Harrison's sentiment shows that the school community positively affects her effectiveness in the classroom.

Ms. Myers and Ms. Tucker both expressed their admiration for the school community in terms of the school staff, not the parents.

*Ms. Myers:* I would say my highlight has overarched my eight years of teaching and it's been the people that I work with. Whether I was on the third grade team ... or the fourth grade team, I have always felt supported and encouraged and motivated by the people that I work around.

*Ms. Tucker:* This is the warmest school I have ever been into. ... The teachers here help each other, no matter what grade you're in. We help each other. ... We support each



other. ... And this has always been a home for me. ... No school is like Kirkland. And even the other schools that I’ve been to – they complain about their schools, but here we feel like family. ... There’s no other place I’d rather be than Kirkland.

Ms. Myers and Ms. Tucker expressed a community-building theme with the school staff that helped them be successful. Referring to the staff as a “family,” both teachers expressed that the school community played a large role in their success because of their fellow staff members. Therefore, the school context and sense of community between these teachers, their coworkers, and the parents promoted success for my participants. In the next section, I will discuss factors that impeded their effectiveness in the school context.

*Negative Effects: Standardization*

The participants in the study teach in an era of standardization, which has negative effects on their success in the classroom. One of the key differences between my study and previous research on the characteristics of effective teachers is that my participants teach in the context of standardized testing, whereas previous studies like Ladson-Billings’ (1994) were conducted before the era of testing began. In one of my observations of Ms. Fisher’s classroom, she was preparing her students to take two different county benchmark tests: one was a mid-quarter benchmark test in math, and the other was a district pre-test. She talked to the students about how “the people downtown” would look at their scores to see how much they had progressed, so it was important for them to do their best. In their interviews, each participant spoke about standardized testing in different ways, but common themes emerged from their discussions: Ms. Myers and Ms. Harrison argued against the time and resources needed for testing, Ms. Tucker was critical of the pressure placed on students, and Ms. Fisher and Ms. Harrison criticized the

process on inclusion and differentiation in Randolph County. Ms. Payne was not as critical of standardized testing, but her discussion is included.

First, two teachers discussed the immense time and resources taken for testing purposes, both in the classroom and in the school system. Ms. Myers argued that the standardized testing context caused her to not be able to devote time to the effective characteristics that I previously identified. During the interview, my question about testing came after all my questions about community building and relationships with students, which caused Ms. Myers to reflect on how standardized testing influenced her answers to the previous questions. She said that she wished there was more time in the day to build community and character traits in students, but “the curriculum doesn’t really leave room for that.” Ms. Myers says, “It’s very strict, it’s very stringent... I understand the necessity of it, but the emphasis that is placed – or the value that is given to standardized testing, and its importance, I feel is way, way overblown.” In addition, Ms. Harrison says that the school system wastes too much time and money “in pursuit of success on tests that don’t accurately measure student ability.” She believes that “teacher accountability is crucial for student success,” and that standardized testing was born out of this idea, but that the pressure and emphasis on testing has increased too much. Ms. Harrison pointed out that the school takes quarterly benchmark tests, wherein the school “pretty much just shuts down for a week while that goes on every quarter.” Both Ms. Myers and Ms. Harrison implied that the standardized testing context wastes too much time and resources, and poses challenges to their success in the classroom because of the limited time devoted to building relationships with students.

Instead of criticizing the time and resources needed for testing, Ms. Tucker was critical of the pressure that standardized testing places on students. She said she wished they wouldn’t test

the “little ones” because it causes them to hate school early on in life. She connected standardized testing to the dropout rate, arguing that students are hating school and dropping out because of the pressures of testing that increase as they get older: “I look at the dropout rate ... and I really believe that part of it – not all of it – but a lot of it might be because we’re trying to, you know, stuff information, where some children, they can’t handle that.” Ms. Tucker agrees that there should be standards in place, but tests should just be used as a way to guide instruction to see how students are doing. Ms. Tucker said that test scores should not determine a child’s success, and should not be used as a benchmark for whether or not the child should pass to the next grade. Ms. Tucker’s arguments about testing, therefore, focused on the pressures on students: her success in the classroom with her students was affected by the context of standardized testing because of the pressure that causes them to hate school.

Ms. Tucker, Ms. Fisher and Ms. Myers were all very critical of standardized testing because it does not allow teachers to focus on students’ individual needs. Differentiation, or the process of modifying lessons to meet students’ individual needs, is essential for student and teacher success: many of the teachers in my study were identified for their relationship with students, and their relationship leads to effective differentiation of the curriculum. According to these teachers, though, there is a discrepancy between effective differentiation and standardized testing, because as Ms. Tucker argues, “They want us to teach using differentiated instruction, but ... they still want that child to meet the criteria” of the tests.” In addition, Ms. Fisher says,

When we do our jobs and we do our jobs well, we differentiate what we do with our kids based on what level they’re at, based on what they need. So at one point, we have political people telling us that we need to differentiate instruction and meet the children

where they are, and yes, I totally agree with that 100%. But if we’re differentiating instruction, why are we standardizing testing? I can’t stand it.

Ms. Fisher’s arguments against standardized testing show that it’s effects diminish these teachers’ success in the classroom: even though they build relationships with their students, the context of standardized testing does not allow them to use these relationships to differentiate instruction. Ms. Fisher argued that she wanted tests to be “more authentic to measure student growth” in her classroom, which would allow her to meet individual students’ needs. In addition, Ms. Myers also argues that standardized testing does not allow teachers to adequately differentiate instruction: “It doesn’t leave us a lot of room to reach kids where they’re at, and it actually ends up leaving a lot of them behind because we’re so busy pushing them, pushing them, pushing them forward, that they don’t get the opportunity to master the skill at the time that it’s taught.” Therefore, Ms. Myers argument is twofold: first, she says that standardized testing affects teachers’ ability to differentiate, and second, that it affects student achievement. These teachers argue that the standardized testing context affects their success in the classroom because it takes too much time and money, it creates unnecessary pressures on students, and it does not allow them to effectively differentiate instruction for students to meet their individual needs.

Saying she has a “mixed relationship with testing,” Ms. Payne presented a different view about standardized testing than the other teachers. Ms. Payne was not as critical of the standardized testing context as the other teachers, and mentioned that it actually helped her become a better teacher because of data collection. Testing, she said, allows her to know where her students are struggling and what they need to focus more time on. She connected this concept to Intervention, which is a half-hour period everyday at Kirkland where students move

classes and receive extra instruction in areas where they are struggling. She agreed with the system of Intervention, saying that the extra instruction does help students succeed. Ms. Payne explained that during Intervention, students are divided by ability and rotated between teachers to receive extra reinforcement or even re-teaching of areas where they struggle. Intervention, she says, relies on test data. Overall, Ms. Payne was less critical of standardized testing in the school or of Intervention, but she did recognize that students and teachers felt immense pressure to do well on the tests, which may not be helpful.

Even though Ms. Payne did discuss some of the positives of standardized testing, most teachers in my study discussed the ways in which the testing environment impeded their ability to be successful with students. Overall, the personal backgrounds and school community seemed to be factors that promoted my participants' success in the classroom, while their multicultural education training in their teacher preparation program and the standardized testing context both seemed to impede their success. In the following section, I conclude this chapter with a summary of my findings.

## **Conclusion**

After interviewing and observing the five teachers in my study, I found three characteristics of their success with African American students. First, establishing positive and meaningful relationships with students was extremely important to teachers' success in the classroom. Teachers emphasized the importance of care and respect for students, the ability to make personal connections with students, and build community in the classroom. They also discussed the importance of establishing relationships with parents in their school. Second, these teachers had high behavioral and academic expectations of their students that established

structure and high achievement in the classroom. Finally, these teachers made connections between the curriculum and students’ lives, which was important for student success in the classroom.

In addition to my report of these three characteristics of success, I also discussed my participants’ perceptions of the factors that promoted or impeded their success in the classroom. Divided into the two categories of personal backgrounds and school context, each category had both positive and negative or negligible effects on teacher success in the classroom. Overall, the life experiences of my participants had a positive effect on their success because of their ability to relate to students, but their multicultural education training had little effect on their success with African American students because most teachers did not remember any courses on multicultural education. In addition, the school community at Kirkland promoted their success for several of the teachers, but the standardized testing context impeded their success in the classroom. By uncovering the factors that contributed to their success, I am better able to understand how successful teachers learn to be so effective, which can better inform teacher preparation programs in the future. In the following chapter, I present a discussion of my findings, as well as a conclusion to my study.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion**

In my interviews and observations of five effective teachers, I observed four major themes. The first three themes answered my primary research question: “What are the characteristics of successful teachers of African American students?” First, my participants found success when they built meaningful and positive relationships with students. They demonstrated their care and respect for students, made personal connections with them throughout the year, emphasized the classroom community in their teaching, and formed positive relationships with parents. Second, these teachers had high academic and behavioral expectations for their classroom that encourage students to achieve. Third, they made explicit connections between the curriculum and students’ lives, which built bridges between the students’ previous knowledge and the material so that they feel personally invested in school.

The fourth theme answered the research question, “Where did these teachers’ success come from?” Overall, their life experiences growing up tended to prepare them for success, but their multicultural education training had negligible effects on their success with African American students. In addition, the school community provides support for these teachers that allows them to be effective, but the standardized testing context often impedes their success in the classroom. These four themes will become the basis of my discussion in this fifth chapter.

Overall, my findings do support the research in this area of study in three distinct ways: where teachers’ success comes from, the effects of their teacher preparation program, and the characteristics of effectiveness in the classroom. In the following sections, I will discuss each of these areas. In the last section, I will discuss the implications for future action in the areas of professional development, teacher preparation programs, and standardized testing.

Origins of Success: Where Success Comes From

My participants’ success seemed to reflect several of Garmon’s (2005) proposed dispositions and experiences that preservice teachers should possess in order to be successful in a multicultural setting. Garmon (2005) proposed that teachers should display the following characteristics:

- 1) *Teachers should be open to new opinions and information.* In order for relationships with students to be effective and meaningful, my participants had to be open to trying new things with students. For example, when Ms. Fisher left notes on her student’s desk to motivate and encourage him, she demonstrated her openness to his success, instead of labeling him as a behavior problem in her class. In addition, when my participants build bridges between the curriculum and students’ lives, my participants demonstrate their openness to finding out about students’ lives and using their interests in the classroom, which takes a certain amount of receptivity.
- 2) *Teachers should be self-aware and self-reflective in order to examine their role as an educator.* Ms. Tucker demonstrated this quality in her interview when she said that she took time every night to reflect on her day. She would think about her students, her actions, and the consequences of those actions. If she felt that she failed to handle something properly, she would attempt to fix it the next day. The other teachers demonstrated their reflectiveness in their interviews simply by talking about their classroom dynamics and their successes.
- 3) *Teachers should be committed to social justice issues both in and outside the classroom.* None of my participants discussed social justice issues in their interviews, so it is unclear whether this is a disposition that they possess.



- 4) *Teachers should have intercultural experiences.* Ms. Payne’s experiences growing up in Brooklyn, Syracuse, Baltimore City, and Baltimore County showed that she had had intercultural experiences throughout her life. In addition, the other four teachers in the study had spent a significant amount of time in Randolph County, particularly at Kirkland Elementary, which is a school with moderate diversity in terms of student population. Their experiences working at Kirkland and living in the Randolph community for so long can be considered intercultural experiences that contributed highly to their success.
- 5) *Teachers should have adequate multicultural education training.* None of my participants had any positive memories of multicultural education in their teacher preparation program. Instead, their multicultural education training stemmed from their life experiences living in diverse communities.
- 6) *Teachers should have support-group experiences to provide safe spaces for discussing diversity.* My participants cited their supportive school community as one of the keys to their success. Though they did not specify whether this support-group community provided opportunities for discussion about diversity, they emphasized that the school community was essential for their success because of the cooperation between teachers.

Though my participants did not possess all of these characteristics, their experiences can be aligned with Garmon’s (2005) research. The only characteristic that was not as apparent in my research was item number three about social activism. Ladson-Billings (2000) claimed that culturally relevant teachers should foster a sense of activism in their students: she says, “students must be challenged to ask questions about the ways that whole groups of people are systematically excluded from social benefits” (p. 210). Critiques of institutional racism within

the classroom context seemed to be missing from both my participants’ narratives about their lives and from my observations of their classrooms.

My study also differs from Garmon’s (2005) study in the importance of each characteristic to success in the classroom. Garmon (2005) presents his six characteristics equally, with no one disposition having more weight over another. In my study, however, my participants’ life experiences in diverse communities seemed to be the most important factor contributing to their success that trumped the remaining characteristics. Their personal experiences often affected the way they related to their students, which was a major factor in determining their success. As discussed, two teachers in my study had spent their entire elementary teaching careers at Kirkland Elementary, and only one teacher had experience teaching in another district. Their time teaching in Randolph County allowed them to better relate to their students, which positively contributed to their success in the classroom.

Unlike many of my participants, though, not all teachers grow up in diverse communities or spend significant amounts of time teaching in diverse schools. If the most important factor to success in the classroom is having experience in diverse communities, then, how can we expect all teachers to become successful? One answer is involving teacher preparation programs in fostering these sort of experiences in diversity. In the next section, I discuss the effects of my participants’ teacher preparation programs, as well as what teacher preparation programs can do to better foster multicultural education in its preservice teachers.

### Effects of Multicultural Education

My findings also supported the existing research on the effects of teacher preparation programs. As stated, none of the teachers in my study had positive memories of their teacher

preparation program in terms of multicultural education. Ms. Fisher, Ms. Myers, and Ms. Tucker all did not remember taking any courses on multicultural education. Ms. Payne thought she remembered taking one, but could not recall any specifics. Finally, Ms. Harrison took a course on diversity that was “not a good experience” because it “highlighted ... every ridiculous stereotype” of several different cultures. My participants’ memories of multicultural education in their teacher preparation programs mirror the elements of ineffective multicultural education.

For a large majority of programs, multicultural education is built in to the rest of the classes – but is not discussed in length – which may be the case for Ms. Fisher, Ms. Myers, and Ms. Tucker. This type of multicultural education provides a very disjointed and cursory view of diversity, which ends up frustrating preservice teachers instead of helping them. Ms. Fisher, Ms. Myers, and Ms. Tucker do not remember their preparation in multicultural education, perhaps because it was not highly emphasized in their other classes. In addition other teacher preparation programs may require one course on diversity training, like Ms. Harrison’s program. Sleeter (2008) says that stand-alone multicultural education courses are often not sufficient because they end up teaching stereotypes about students. In her interview, Ms. Harrison’s described her multicultural education class as an “awful” experience because the professor relied on stereotypes to educate about diversity, which did little to help the preservice teachers who had had no experience with other cultures. Ms. Harrison’s perceived her stand-alone multicultural education class as offensive and as a joke, which shows that it did little to prepare her for success with diverse students.

In order to better foster diversity training in preservice teachers, teacher preparation programs should work to align their curriculum using the current research base on effective multicultural education. Teacher preparation programs should first require that students take

sufficient coursework on race and education. Sleeter (2001) says that only 56% of programs required some sort of multicultural education course, but this number should be much higher (p. 95). These courses should highlight each of the five dimensions of multicultural education discussed in the literature review: content integration, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and empowerment. Sleeter (2001) found that preservice teachers who had taken more than four credits in multicultural education were much more likely to use culturally relevant pedagogical aspects in their practice. Having four credits of multicultural education coursework better prepared preservice teachers to integrate ideas of equity and empowerment in their students. Preservice teachers should be exposed to diversity education that is embraced by the entire program – not just one course – and that provides teachers with a complex understanding of race and education.

In addition, teacher preparation programs could require extensive cross-cultural student teaching experiences like the experiences that Ms. Payne had. Since Ms. Payne student taught in both an urban and a suburban community, her teacher preparation program better served its students for different types of classrooms because they were able to make comparisons between the two experiences. Extended student teaching experiences in urban areas challenge student teachers’ ideas about race and education, as well as ideas about their own Whiteness and its affects in the classroom. Stand-alone classes on race or multicultural education will not challenge student teachers’ perceptions of students or their own Whiteness, but extended cross-cultural experiences can. These experiences must highlight effective teaching in urban contexts so that student teachers’ preconceived ideas about students are challenged, not reinforced. The cooperating teacher with whom a student teacher is placed should be identified as effective with diverse students herself so that the cycle of deficit mentality and ineffective pedagogy is not

repeated. Both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher should actively work to incorporate multicultural education into their teaching by promoting a diverse curriculum, questioning the status quo, and empowering students to achieve. In order to erase destructive beliefs like the deficit mentality and the “White savior” mentality, student teachers must be exposed to different areas and cultures than the ones that they grew up in by completing these cross-cultural student teaching experiences. Finally, since one of the main problems for White teachers is a lack of knowledge about other cultures, extensive student teaching experiences in diverse areas can help issues of colorblindness in the classroom.

Though teacher preparation programs cannot attempt to emulate the life experiences of teachers who have grown up in diverse communities, they can do much more in terms of multicultural education in order to better prepare preservice teachers for diverse classrooms. In the next section, I will discuss the characteristics of successful teachers, and how my findings align with and add to the previous research on the topic of culturally relevant pedagogy.

### Characteristics of Effectiveness in the Classroom

My findings also align with the previous research about characteristics of successful teachers. I also add to the current literature base on characteristics of these teachers. My three major findings were that effective teachers of African American students 1) build positive relationships with students by demonstrating care and respect, establishing personal connections, building community, and developing relationships with parents, 2) have high behavioral and academic expectations of students, and 3) make explicit connections between the curriculum and students’ lives. All of these characteristics were supported by Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study. Though establishing relationships with students was not a characteristic identified in

Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study, the teachers in her study did have positive relationships with their students. They established community in their classrooms and strived to connect with students on a personal level. Relationships with parents was not discussed in her study, but I found it to be a key component of my participants’ relationships with their students as well. Since my participants, especially Ms. Myers, cited technology as one of the ways that they easily communicate with parents, my study indicates that technology has changed the way that teachers are able to communicate and relate to students and families.

In addition, the teachers in Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study emphasized their high academic expectations of students. Though academic expectations were a part of my study, my participants emphasized behavioral expectations more than academic ones. Whereas the teachers in the previous research “demanded, reinforced, and produced academic excellence in their students” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160), the teachers in my study more often discussed classroom structure as a factor contributing to their success. For example, Ms. Payne and Ms. Tucker – both African American teachers – emphasized the importance of consistency and firmness when working with African American students, and described their firm approaches as evidence of their success because it helped them gain respect from students. Ms. Myers – a White teacher – attributed her success to her positive behavior management system where she rewards students for good behaviors instead of punishing negative ones. Ms. Fisher and Ms. Harrison – both White teachers – stated that they expected their students to be respectful and kind. The African American teachers, therefore, had very different answers regarding their behavioral expectations of students: both African American teachers stated that being consistent and firm with students was the most important key to success in terms of classroom management, but the three White teachers emphasized positivity, kindness, and respect. Those

two ideas are not a dichotomy – for example, a teacher can be both firm and kind, or consistent and positive – but it is worth noting that the teachers seemed to answer the question differently depending on their race. This was one of the only examples where I found a significant difference the teachers’ responses and practices based on their race. I therefore add to the current base of research: my study indicates that successful teachers of African American students have both high academic expectations and high behavioral expectations for students that create a classroom structure to foster success among students, but the types of expectations may look different depending on the teachers’ race.

One of the main reasons that teachers in my study did not emphasize high academic expectations as much as the teachers in Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study is because of the changed education context: since Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study was published twenty years ago, standardized testing and accountability are now much more prominent. Today, students must adhere to the state’s definitions of academic success, rather than the teacher’s. In other words, the teachers in my study cannot emphasize high academic standards in their classrooms as much because of the changed education context that emphasizes standardization. They are not able to create their own definitions of academic success, and instead must adhere to the success measures given by state test scores. Therefore, my participants presumably discussed the importance of behavioral expectations more than academic expectations because of the changed education context.

Finally, my study reinforces the current research base about building connections between curriculum and students’ lives. In Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study, one teacher connected Nelson Mandela’s release from prison to their lives by having a discussion about why they should care about Nelson Mandela in the United States. In addition, another teacher built

bridges between students’ own dialects to the Standard English form used in school by allowing them to speak and translate between the two dialects. Since this study was completed twenty years ago, the standardized curriculum movement had not yet begun. Teachers were able to make their own curriculums and teach topics that they knew students would find interest in. Now, teachers must adhere to a rigid and fast-paced curriculum that is often very distant from students’ lives. My participants teach during the era of standardization, but they still find ways to build bridges between the curriculum and students’ lives: for example, Ms. Fisher had an entire lesson on the Stamp Tax, which connected how the colonists felt as they were being taxed unfairly. Though the connections that my participants make in their lessons are somewhat different from the connections that Ladson-Billings’ teachers made (presumably because of the era of standardization), my research still supports the previous literature base. Therefore, my study provides valuable insights into what it means to make connections between students’ lives and the standardized curriculum. In the next section, I expand upon the implication for future action and research.

### Implications for Future Action

My findings provide a basis for understanding the characteristics of successful teachers and provide implications for future action for principals and superintendents, teacher preparation programs, and the topic of standardized testing.

First, my study shows implications for those who hire effective teachers for diverse students. Principals and superintendents should be aware of the characteristics of effective teachers so that they can hire the best teachers, as well as conduct professional development for all teachers. My study shows that teachers with diverse experiences growing up are more



effective in the classroom because they can better relate to students, have higher expectations for them, and are more able to create the connections between students' lives' and the curriculum. Principals and school districts should strive to hire teachers with diverse experiences, but that is not always possible. Instead, schools can hold professional development to educate teachers on the types of characteristics that are effective for all students. Principals can encourage teachers to live in the community where they teach, attend community functions, or get involved in students' lives outside of school by sponsoring after-school activities. Teachers should be encouraged to become a part of the community so that they can better relate to and understand their students, which will help them become more effective in the classroom. These improvements will also change the way that teachers perceive students, which can break down things like the deficit mentality that plague teachers' beliefs about students.

In addition to the implications for principals and superintendents, my study shows implications for teacher preparation programs. Preparation programs should strive to more effectively prepare teachers for diverse classrooms. Many programs, especially those at predominantly White institutions, do not emphasize multicultural education enough. Since the majority of the profession is White women who are taught by other White women, we are reinforcing the status quo if we fail to change these programs to become more focused on multicultural education. Preservice teachers need more instruction about culturally relevant pedagogy: we know practices that are successful with African American students like forming relationships with students, and often times these practices are the same ones that are successful with *all* students. Preservice teachers, as well as principals and practicing teachers, need to be made aware of the major impact that these practices can have on student achievement. If more

teachers were effectively educated about the importance of these practices, more students in more classrooms would succeed.

Finally, my findings indicate that the new standardization context adversely affects the ways in which teachers are able to be successful in the classroom. In her interview, Ms. Myers pointed out that since the curriculum is so rigid and fast-paced, she felt that she did not have time to spend on building relationships with students or building community in the classroom. In addition, it is much more difficult for teachers to make curricular connections with students' lives when the curriculum is standardized. If these are characteristics that we know are successful with African American students, and the standardized curriculum makes it harder for teachers to use these practices, how is the standardized testing movement affecting the achievement of African American students? Research by Harris and Herrington (2006) shows that the opportunity gap between White students and minority students is actually growing, rather than shrinking. Though the age of accountability and the standardized testing movement were designed to achieve educational equity and were implemented through federal legislation called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the standardized testing movement does not seem to be benefitting these minorities that it was designed to target. According to what we know about what practices are successful with African American students, the pressures of the standardized curriculum should be lessened so that we can fully achieve educational equity for African American students.

I stated in Chapter 1 that this research has personal importance to me because it will help me in my future teaching career. I have heard stories about my participants' successes, seen their classroom management in action, and talked with them about their lives. In my teaching career, which starts next year, I will use these practices in my classroom: my relationships with students

and parents, my high expectations, and my connections between the curriculum and students' lives will allow my students to achieve academically. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from the wonderful teachers in my study. Their successful practices are hugely important to their students' lives, and I hope that other preservice and practicing teachers can learn from them as well.

### References

- Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (1993). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative Research in Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.) Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Carter, P. L., Welner, K. G., & Ladson-Billings, G. (2013). *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What American Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garmon, M. A. (2005). Six Key Factors for Changing Preservice Teachers' Attitudes/Beliefs about Diversity. *Educational Studies*, 38(3), 275-286. doi: 10.1207/s15326993es3803\_7
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.) Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hancock, S. D. (2011). White Women's Work: On the Front Lines of Urban Education. In J. G. Landsman, & C. W. Lewis (Ed.), *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms* (pp. 93-109). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- Harris, D. N., & Herrington, C. D. (2006). Accountability, Standards, and the Growing Achievement Gap: Lessons from the Past Half-Century. *American Journal of Education*, 112(2), pp. 209-238. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/498995>.
- Hyland, N. E. (2005). Being a Good Teacher of Black Students? White Teachers and Unintentional Racism. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 35(4), 429-459. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.wm.edu/stable/3698537>.

- Johnson, L. (2002). “My Eyes Have Been Opened:” White Teachers and Racial Awareness. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(2), 153-167. doi: 10.1177/0022487102053002007
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 34*(3), 159-165. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.wm.edu/stable/1476635>.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for Our Lives: Preparing Teachers to Teach African American Students. *Journal of Teacher Education, 51*(3), 206-214. doi: 10.1177/0022487100051003008
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2011). “Yes, But How Do We Do It?”: Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. In J. G. Landsman, & C. W. Lewis (Ed.), *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms* (pp. 33-46). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- Landsman, J. G. (2001). *A White Teacher Talks About Race*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press.
- Lapan, S. D., Quartaroli, M. T., & Riemer, F. J. (Eds.). (2012) *Qualitative Research: An Introduction to Methods and Designs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- LeCompte, K. N., & McCray, A. D. (2002). Complex Conversations with Teacher Candidates: Perspectives of Whiteness and Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue, 4*(1), 22-35. Retrieved from <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/7539678/complex-conversations-teacher-candidates-perspectives-whiteness-culturally-responsive-teaching>.

- Milner, H. R. (2011). But Good Intentions are Not Enough: Doing What’s Necessary to Teach for Diversity. In J. G. Landsman, & C. W. Lewis (Ed.), *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms* (pp. 56-74). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). [Public School Data on Student Demographics from 1995 to 2012 from U.S. Department of Education]. *State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education*. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_203.50.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_203.50.asp).
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). [Public School Data on Teacher Demographics from 1987 to 2012 from U.S. Department of Education]. *Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)*. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_209.10.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_209.10.asp).
- Sleeter, C. E. (2001). Preparing Teachers for Culturally Diverse Schools: Research and the Overwhelming Presence of Whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 94-106. doi: 10.1177/0022487101052002002
- Sleeter, C. E. (2008) Preparing White Teachers for Diverse Students. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, & J. McIntyre (Eds.). *Handbook of Research in Teacher Education: Enduring Issues in Changing Contexts*, 3rd ed. (pp. 559-582). Routledge.
- Terrill, M. M., & Mark, D. L. H. (2000). Preservice Teachers’ Expectations for Schools with Children of Color and Second-Language Learners. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(2), 149-155. doi: 10.1177/002248710005100209
- Walker-Dalhouse, D. & Dalhouse, A. D. (2006) Investigating White Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs about Teaching in Culturally Diverse Classrooms. *Negro Educational Review*, 57(1/2), 69-84. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.wm.edu/ehost/detail?sid=f82d4113-fe11-4781-af38->

[24b92f9e4059%40sessionmgr4004&vid=1&hid=4109&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=ehh&AN=22124229](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24b92f9e4059%40sessionmgr4004&vid=1&hid=4109&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=ehh&AN=22124229).

**Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**

Participant Informed Consent Form for Charles Center Undergraduate Human Subjects Research

The College of William & Mary

The general nature of this study entitled "How Do They Do It?: Characteristics of Successful Teachers of African American Students" conducted by Chloe Miksovic has been explained to me. I understand that I will be asked to be interviewed about my background and teaching practices that demonstrate my success with African American students. An audio tape recorder will be used to record my responses, but I understand that I can, at any time, ask to review the audio file, edit the audio file, or delete any material on the audio file. I also understand that the researcher may conduct classroom observations, but I can review any field notes taken and decline their use in the study. I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and that I may discontinue participation at any time and no more information will be collected from me. My participation in this study should take a total of about one to two hours. I understand that my responses will be anonymous and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. There are no perceived risks associated with this research project. I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this experiment to the primary researcher, Chloe Miksovic, at [ccmiksovic@email.wm.edu](mailto:ccmiksovic@email.wm.edu), or her faculty advisor, Dr. Jeremy Stoddard, at [jstod@wm.edu](mailto:jstod@wm.edu). I can also report any dissatisfactions to Dr. Ray McCoy, Ph.D., the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee by telephone (757-221-2783) or email ([rwmcco@wm.edu](mailto:rwmcco@wm.edu)). I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate. My signature below signifies my voluntary participation in this project and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH THE APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY STUDENTIRB (Phone: 757-221-3966) ON APRIL 15, 2014.

**If study subject has any questions in regard to this project, please contact the Principal Researcher directly:**

Chloe Miksovic, [ccmiksovic@email.wm.edu](mailto:ccmiksovic@email.wm.edu), (540) 406-0700



## Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

### “How Do They Do It?”: Characteristics of Successful Teachers of African American Students

By Chloe Miksovic

#### Introduction

1. Introduction to myself and my interests
2. Brief description of the research study (State that they were identified as a highly successful teacher)
3. Reminder that nothing they say will be linked back to them and everything is confidential. Reminder that they have the right to discontinue participation at any time, and can choose not to answer any question.
4. Ask for permission to record the interview. Explain that the recording will be used to create transcripts, and I will be the only one to hear their voice. Will be using pseudonyms in the research study

#### Warm-Up Questions

1. General Background
  - a. Where did you grow up?
    - i. Experiences with diversity? Demographics of their K-12 school? Experiences with others?
  - b. Where was your undergrad education?
    - i. Experiences with diversity there?
  - c. How and when did you decide to become a teacher?
  - d. When did you complete your teacher preparation program?
2. Teacher preparation program
  - a. What is your teaching degree?
  - b. What kinds of classes did you take in your teacher preparation program?
    - i. Coursework on culturally relevant pedagogy, multicultural education?
  - c. What aspects of your teacher preparation program were most helpful to your practice today?
3. Experience as a teacher
  - a. How long have you been teaching? How long have you taught at this school?
  - b. Tell me about the area where you teach and the types of diversity here.
  - c. How have your students shaped your teaching?
    - i. Modifications for your students?
  - d. Tell me about a highlight in your teaching career and your greatest challenge.
    - i. What’s one great lesson that you think embodies culturally relevant teaching/multicultural education?

#### Interview Questions

1. What is the most important aspect of your approach to teaching?
  - a. How does your approach to teaching play out in your classroom?
2. What are your expectations for students in your classroom?

3. In your opinion, what do you think the role of parents and the community is in your teaching?
  - a. How does the community shape your teaching?
4. How do you view your relationship with students?
  - a. Community-building strategies? Connections on a personal level?
5. What are your views on the current education system with its emphasis on standardized testing? How does it help or not help your students?
6. Standardized testing movement – How do you make sure that the curriculum taught for the tests relatable and relevant for all students?
7. What do you see as the most important characteristics in being successful with African American students?
8. Why do you think you were identified for my research study?
9. That is all the questions I have, but is there anything else you want to add that we did not cover?

**Appendix C: Observation Field Notes**

*Participant/Teacher Name:*

*Grade Level:*

*Date:*

*Time:*

*General Field Notes:*

Successful practices identified in the existing research on culturally relevant teaching are identified on the left, and how each teacher used them in the classroom was written on the right. In addition, space was left for additional successful practices that were identified in the interviews.

Successful Practice	Use in the Classroom
<i>High Expectations for All Students</i>	
<i>Community-Building in the Classroom</i>	
<i>Connections with Student on a Personal Level</i>	
<i>Connections between Curriculum and Students' Lives</i>	

<b>Successful Practice</b>	<b>Use in the Classroom</b>
<i>Critiques of Institutional Racism in Curriculum and School System</i>	
<i>Addition 1:</i>	
<i>Addition 2:</i>	
<i>Addition 3:</i>	