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# Exploring Cultural Proficiency: A Case Study of a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Middle School in a Predominantly White School District

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EXPLORING CULTURAL PROFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY OF A CULTURALLY  
AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE MIDDLE SCHOOL IN A PREDOMINANTLY  
WHITE SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

Jared Peo

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# EXPLORING CULTURAL PROFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY OF A CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE MIDDLE SCHOOL IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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University of Nebraska, 2015

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Issues of diversity continue to plague our nation. Recent events and Supreme Court cases have revealed a side of the United States that many wanted to believe was only part of our nation's past. Diversity is a reality and predictions about future population demographics estimate an increase in diversity. As diversity increases, conflict becomes more frequent because "difference threatens dominance" (Howard, 2006, p. 57). The academic achievement and socioeconomic gaps between minorities and the dominant culture have been extensively researched and debated. However, they have not diminished despite legislation aimed at reducing them. This begs the question: how will the United States respond to the issues that are likely to follow?

Achieving cultural proficiency in school districts has been identified as one way in which students could achieve higher academic success and could be prepared to be outstanding citizens. This was the term chosen by the district being studied. Through interviews and participant observations, this study explored the cultural proficiency of teachers, staff, and students of a culturally and linguistically diverse middle school within a predominantly White school district that had taken on the task of improving cultural proficiency. Findings revealed the complexity of such a pursuit, including the ways the school had found success and the difficult issues and obstacles that arose. Cultural proficiency is about outcomes that have been achieved, not those that are intended. As such, the school and the district may have chosen the path toward cultural proficiency without sufficient planning and resources.

Dedicated to

my grandfather, Ernest R. Peo Jr.,  
whose curiosity and love for learning instilled in me  
a fascination with the world and a restless spirit.



## **Author's Acknowledgement**

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*Jared James Peo*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM .....	2
WHY CULTURAL PROFICIENCY? .....	5
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY .....	5
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>7</b>
CULTURAL PROFICIENCY.....	7
CRITICAL RACE THEORY .....	12
INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION .....	14
CULTURAL PROFICIENCY OF SCHOOLS AND ITS EFFECTS ON STUDENTS .....	17
STUDENTS AND POVERTY .....	18
RACIAL/ETHNIC MINORITIES.....	20
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS .....	22
GENDER/SEXUALITY NONCONFORMING STUDENTS .....	24
STUDENT IDENTITIES .....	25
TEACHERS AND CULTURAL PROFICIENCY .....	28
CULTURAL PROFICIENCY AND IMPROVING EDUCATION.....	30
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODS .....</b>	<b>33</b>
RATIONALE FOR USING CASE STUDY .....	33
THE SCHOOL AS A CASE .....	36
SAMPLE .....	38
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD .....	39
ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER .....	40
DATA COLLECTION.....	42
DATA ANALYSIS .....	43
<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>46</b>
PARTICIPANTS.....	46
EMERGENT THEMES FROM OPEN CODING.....	46
<i>Definitions of Cultural Proficiency.....</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Cultural Proficiency of the School.....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Teacher Education and Training .....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Identity Perception Gap .....</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Relationships .....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Cultural Incongruity.....</i>	<i>84</i>
FINDINGS FROM PRE-FIGURED CODING .....	89
<i>Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency .....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>Cultural Proficiency Continuum .....</i>	<i>107</i>
<b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>116</b>
LIMITATIONS.....	116
FUTURE RESEARCH.....	118
IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	119
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>133</b>

## **TABLES AND FIGURES**

<b>FIGURE 2.1: THE CULTURAL PROFICIENCY CONTINUUM .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>FIGURE 3.1: CURRENT MODEL OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN SLA .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>FIGURE 3.2: A NEW MODEL OF SLA KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>TABLE 4.1: 5 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF CULTURAL PROFICIENCY .....</b>	<b>49</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The population demographics of the United States have been changing rapidly over the last two to three decades resulting in an increasingly diverse population.

Predictions on population rely on a set of variables that are dynamic and often unreliable due to the nature of change and human history, however, they do offer valuable insight into likely outcomes that may take place without any major catastrophes or world changes. The US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Census released the following prediction:

By 2050, 75 percent of the population would be White; 15 percent Black; 1 percent American Indian, Eskimo and Aleut; and 9 percent Asian and Pacific Islander. The Hispanic-origin population would increase to 25 percent, and the non-Hispanic White population would decline to 53 percent. (Day, 1996, p. 13)

Changes as significant as these beg the question: how will the United States respond to the issues that are likely to follow? Despite a belief held by many that the United States is a pluralistic and cosmopolitan society, the country has a history of enforcing strict assimilationist and culturally destructive policies. Slavery and the removal, relocation, and education of Native Americans are some of the earliest and most obvious examples of these policies (Nuri Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2006). The more recent banning of ethnic studies in Arizona via HB 2281 prove that there are parts of the country still resisting the inevitable transformation.

In his 2006 book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers in*

*Multiracial Schools*, Gary R. Howard argues that diversity is not an option and it will not go away. Supporting this claim, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) predicts that the total number of White students will decrease by 2% while all other measured groups will increase by a minimum of 5% (Black students) and as high as 34% (students of 2 or more races) between 2010 and 2021 (NCES, 2012). Moreover, the majority of students in the U.S. are now below the poverty line (Suitts, 2015), and the majority of these students are not White. The current education system has been failing many minority groups across the country. Considering the 2011-2012 school year, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students graduated at rates (68%, 76%, and 68% respectively) well below their White (85%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (93%) peers (NCES, 2014). The issue has not gone unnoticed. Federal and state governments, school districts, and researchers across the country have been trying to address the achievement gap for years. In many cases, improvement has been seen, even if only minimally.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The question of how to teach every student has been a weight that teachers have had to carry for at least the last 14 years, if not since the earliest days of schooling. For many teachers, the task has become like the Greek myth of Sisyphus. No matter how hard they try, and despite their endless efforts to adapt lessons, some students continue to fail. It is as if some outside force is intervening and pushing the boulder back down the hill and the cycle repeats. Multicultural education developed as a response to the racial and ethnic movements following the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the rise of feminism and discrimination lawsuits of the 1970s (Banks, 2004). It was “devised to respond to the demands, needs, and aspirations of various groups” (Banks, 2004, p. 7)

and the unequal treatment of minority students. While interpretations and implementations of multicultural education range from specific courses offered to “total school environment” reform, the main principles behind it are content integration, an equity pedagogy, an empowering school culture, prejudice reduction, and knowledge construction (Banks, 2004). Similar approaches and reforms have been called for as well. For example, culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, and cultural proficiency have emerged since the 1990s. It could be argued that culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy are parts of multicultural education expanded upon due to the complex nature of multicultural education and the various ways it had been implemented. Similarly, cultural competence and intercultural communicative competence are parts of cultural proficiency. The last three ideas surpass the boundaries of a school or classroom and are relevant to society as a whole. Cultural proficiency is defined “as a way of being that allows individuals and organizations to interact effectively with people who differ from them” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 2). By definition, a culturally proficient school would include multicultural education. On the other hand, a school implementing multicultural education would not necessarily be practicing cultural proficiency or cultural competency.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was passed with the seemingly honorable intention of holding schools accountable for the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of all students. Unfortunately, the results and effects of the legislation are not as optimistic. Coinciding with this legislation, the cultural and linguistic diversity that had once been limited to the large urban areas had started to find its way into the smaller cities and

communities across the country. The need for multicultural education and cultural proficiency may not have been as obvious in these areas of the country. Many states in the Midwest have had graduation rates at or above the national average for the last 25 years (NCHES, 2015; NCES, 2014). Rates began to drop at the turn of the millennium, which correlated with the increase of cultural diversity in these states. It may have been easier to blame new populations rather than a system that had consistently reproduced high graduation rates. Whatever the case may be, within the last few years, more attention has been focused on closing the achievement gap and reducing the disproportional rates of discipline and graduation that exist among many minority populations in these states. Achieving cultural proficiency in school districts has been identified as one way in which minority populations could achieve higher academic success.

How proficient individuals and organizations are can be measured using a continuum where less proficiency can be described as cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, or cultural blindness. On the other side of the spectrum, more proficiency can be described as cultural precompetence, culture competence, and cultural proficiency. Exploring the cultural proficiency of a school requires looking at all members of the school, the teachers, staff, and students, and how they interact with people who differ from them. Whereas many “diversity programs are used to explain the nature of diversity... [cultural proficiency] is an approach for responding to the environment shaped by its diversity” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 2). It is important to note that the approach is not a list of steps to be followed, it is an inside-out model for transformation and change, both individually and organizationally (Nuri Robins et al., 2006; Lindsey,

Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005; Lindsey, Graham, Westphal Jr., & Jew, 2008).

## **Why Cultural Proficiency?**

At the same time that I was planning this study, I was participating in a class that dealt with intercultural communication. I felt that the terminology and ideas explored in the class accurately described my experience working in a diverse middle school. Although intercultural research “involves examining behavior when members of two or more cultures interact” (Gudykunst, 2000, p. 314), and intercultural communicative competence would express how proficient an individual could communicate with members of other cultures, cultural proficiency was the term chosen by the district being studied. On April 30, 2012, a local newspaper published an article concerning the disproportionate number of disciplinary events for minority students within the district. The multicultural school and community coordinator discussed the district’s priority of improving cultural proficiency in order to build better relationships between teachers and students. Choosing to align the district with cultural proficiency was a powerful move because it is a model that “has little to do with the outcomes we intend with our policies and practices and everything to do with the outcomes we achieve” (Lindsey et al., 2008, p. 20). I wanted to explore how well a diverse middle school within a predominantly White school district addressed the needs of its students. As a way of exploring the district’s goals, it was important to be consistent and use terminology that they have employed.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The objective of this study is to explore the cultural proficiency of the individuals belonging to a diverse middle school within a predominantly White school district. The



information from this research may be used to better inform future policies, improve the preparation and training of educators and staff working in schools, and provide better classes and services for all students. The central question is: How do the teachers and staff within this school interact and facilitate achievement with students who have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds? In addition, the following subquestions will be explored:

1. Which elements of cultural proficiency are present in the school?
2. How do teachers describe their self-efficacy to work with students who come from different backgrounds?
3. What similarities and differences are evident from different perspectives (i.e. teachers, staff, students, gender, and ethnicity/race)?
4. What, if anything, can the school improve in regards to cultural proficiency?

This study includes a review of the relevant literature concerning cultural proficiency and education in diverse schools, a description of and rationale for the case study approach, an in-depth analysis of the findings and how they relate to the literature, a discussion of the implications of the study, and a conclusion.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this section, relevant research related to this study will be discussed and explained. First, the term “cultural proficiency” is defined and essential elements that guide an individual or organization in becoming culturally proficient are outlined. Next, I will review the relevant literature that illuminates the historical and systematic preservation of inequality in education, reducing the academic opportunities for minority students. In the following section, I will review the cultural proficiency of schools and its effects on students. To provide a better understanding of the issues students face in schools, I have offered specific details relating to the following groups: students and poverty, racial/ethnic minorities, English language learners, and gender/sexuality nonconforming students. After that, I will explore the role and development of student identities and how they pertain to academic achievement. In the next section, I will outline the current issues teachers face teaching students who are different from them and the need to improve their cultural proficiency. Finally, I will review the literature concerning the benefits of cultural proficiency and a culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy.

### **Cultural Proficiency**

It is worth revisiting Howard’s (2006) claim that diversity is present in our society and it is not going to go away. Many districts and schools across the country have seen a rise in cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity. Sexual identity and orientation, racism, ableism, and gender equality are just a few of the many other issues that have grabbed national attention recently. Legislation and political rhetoric now demand an

equal opportunity for all students to find success and dignity in schools. Diversity is a reality and addressing it within an organization can be difficult, time consuming, and expensive. Built upon a framework established by Terry Cross, cultural proficiency offers a model “for developing oneself and one’s organization while seeking to address issues of diversity” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 2). Cultural proficiency is an inside-out approach that begins with an insider’s values and behaviors and expands into the policies and practices of the organization (Nuri Robins, et al., 2006).

Although there are no prescribed strategies for becoming culturally proficient, there are five essential elements that may guide an individual or an organization (Nuri Robins et al., 2006; Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005; Lindsey et al., 2008):

1. Assess Culture
2. Value Diversity
3. Manage the Dynamics of Diversity
4. Adapt to Diversity
5. Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge

Concerning schools, assessing culture refers to the awareness an individual has of his or her own culture, the culture of the school, the culture of those who are different, how others will interact with each other, when conflicts may arise and how to manage them, and how to enhance one another (Nuri Robins et al., 2006). Learning is an important part of this element and must be an ongoing process in order to manage the dynamic nature of the school culture and diversity.

Valuing diversity is the welcoming and appreciation of diversity and the challenges it brings while developing a learning community (Nuri Robins et al., 2006).

Valuing diversity will inevitably lead to conflicts within the classroom when differences in beliefs, values, and personalities intersect. The third element, managing the dynamics of diversity refers to how the teacher effectively manages these conflicts, which is “a normal and natural part of life” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 49). Dealing with these conflicts requires additional learning in order to enhance courses taught and daily instruction. This is referred to as adapting to diversity. Finally, integrating all of the knowledge learned into the lessons, collaboration with coworkers, policies, and practices is the last essential element referred to as institutionalizing cultural knowledge.

The literature contends that these five essential elements are all present in culturally proficient individuals or schools, however, cultural proficiency is much more complex. For example, an individual or a school may be considered culturally proficient to a particular culture or group of cultures, but at the same time find difficulty establishing the five essential elements for another. A school may have gone out of its way to welcome students from all over the world: students of different ethnicities, different races, and those who speak other languages than the dominant language of the school. However, that same school may have overlooked the inclusion of homosexuality in the curriculum. For the most part, heteronormativity, or “[t]he belief that the archetypal human is straight” (Thornton, 2013, p. 331), is the common belief that pervades U.S. society and is taught in schools. Thus, the term cultural proficiency refers to interacting with multiple cultures effectively. Furthermore, we must ask whether or not the cultural proficiency of a school should be measured with the inclusion of the students’ behaviors and values. If so, how often should student behavior be considered more than just adolescent or childish behavior? How much should the school’s influence account for

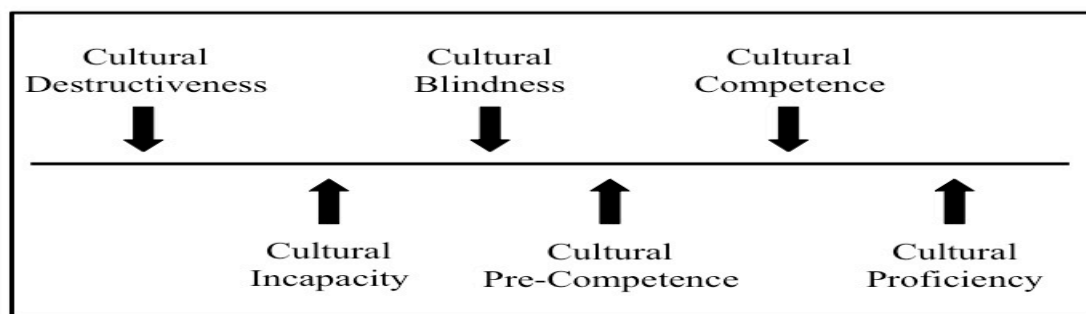


Figure 2.1: The Cultural Proficiency Continuum (Nuri Robins, et al., 2006, p. 80)

such behavior? How much should previous schooling and experience weigh in on that behavior? Faculty and staff are often at the same school for longer periods of time than the students, their behaviors and actions can determine how much time they spend at a particular school, and they have a financial motivation to act in a culturally proficient manner. Students on the other hand may have external factors that lead to behaviors and actions that are not culturally proficient. Many of the complexities of cultural proficiency can be accounted for using the cultural proficiency continuum (Nuri Robins et al., 2006; Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005; Lindsey, et al., 2008).

The cultural proficiency continuum provides a frame of reference by which organizations and individuals can be described, however, “human and organizational cultures are too complex to be relegated to fixed points” (Nuri Robins, 2006, p. 79). In other words, an individual or a school culture will fit within a dynamic range that will change depending on varying situations. The continuum (figure 2.1) consists of six

points: cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence, cultural competence, and cultural proficiency. Lindsey et al. (2008) provide the following definitions for each point:

**Cultural destructiveness:** Seeking to eliminate vestiges of the cultures of others.

**Cultural incapacity:** Seeking to make the cultures of others appear to be wrong.

**Cultural blindness:** Refusing to acknowledge the culture of others.

**Cultural precompetence:** Being aware of what one doesn't know about working in diverse settings. Initial levels of awareness after which a person or organization can move in positive, constructive direction or they can falter, stop, and possibly regress.

**Cultural competence:** Viewing one's personal and organizational work as an interactive arrangement in which the educator enters diverse settings in a manner that is additive to cultures that are different from the educator's.

**Cultural proficiency:** Making the commitment to lifelong learning for the purpose of being increasingly effective in serving the educational needs of cultural groups. Holding the vision of what can be and committing assessments that serve as benchmarks on the road to student success.

(pp. 25-26)

The left side of the continuum is concerned with others and changing their cultures, or a subtractive approach to education, whereas the right side of the continuum is concerned

with self-awareness, personal transformation, and using an additive approach to education.

Research on this approach is rather limited due to the number of similar and related approaches such as multicultural education, cultural competence, intercultural communicative competency, culturally relevant pedagogy, and linguistically responsive teaching. Due to the relationships it has with other approaches, literature on those approaches is relevant to the understanding of cultural proficiency. In the following sections, much of the research and information has come from the literature of those approaches.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) aligns well with cultural proficiency because both recognize similar realities within society. First, both recognize that there are systems of oppression embedded within society and “people are served by varying degrees by the dominant culture” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 4). Second, both recognize and criticize color-blind or culturally blind conceptions of equality. In addition, both recognize that the dominant society is dynamic in which perceptions of race, culture, language, and identity may fluctuate between privilege and disfavor. And finally, both ideologies contend that “[n]o person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4).

CRT should not be confused with cultural proficiency. However, it offers a lens through which behaviors and actions can be explained in a way that is consistent with the approach. CRT begins with propositions that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational” and it “advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people

(psychically)” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This means that racism is difficult to address because it has become so engrained within society and there is little incentive to change because it benefits the dominant group. Furthermore, CRT posits that “races that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In the U.S., racial categories have fluctuated over time in order to tell us who is not White (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 8). The categories of race have been created as a means of developing a hierarchy of citizenship. This hierarchy influences legislation and policies that want to move African Americans and other minorities “from their second class status” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). These attempts can be seen in education as well. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that the curriculum was designed to maintain the dominant culture, instructional strategies presume minority students are deficient, assessments have been used to legitimate those deficiencies, and school funding acts as a form of “systematic and structural racism” (p.20).

Despite its focus on race, White and Black (or non-White), CRT helps illustrate the uphill road ahead for any pursuit of cultural proficiency. It helps explain why people in the dominant group may be unaware of their dominance and their connection to organizations of oppression. Without awareness of the problems facing schools and their students, any attempt to remedy them and improve student academic achievement will be ineffective. In addition, Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that the transformation of schools that began with James Banks, Carl Grant, and Geneva Gay has been overshadowed by superficial attempts masqueraded as multicultural education.



## **Inequality in Education**

The United States, like many countries, has a reprehensible record when it comes to the education of disadvantaged populations. Early history saw the prohibition of education for African Americans because it was seen as a threat to slavery (Jackson, 2007). Native Americans were asked to give up their culture and language. In 1868, a federal commission concluded that “[s]chools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted,” (Atkins 1887: 18; cited in Carder, 2008: 215). Segregation in schools remained long after the abolition of slavery. Students with disabilities have also been underserved until recent changes in policies. Since then historically underserved groups have been disproportionately placed into special education (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). Furthermore, graduation rates during the 20th century illustrate that a significant portion of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian populations are not completing 12 years of schooling (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Although the percentage has steadily increased over the last thirty years, White Americans are graduating at higher rates, are placed into advanced placement and gifted courses more often, and are pursuing higher education in greater numbers (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The distance between the educational achievement of many minority students and their White peers is often referred to as the achievement gap. However, Ladson-Billings (2006) refuses to accept that the problem lies only with schools, the curriculum, and the teachers. Instead of an achievement gap, she considers the current situation the education debt, which is “the sum of all previously incurred annual” education deficits (p. 4). The

education deficit represents an individual year's achievement gap. However, the affects of the education deficits are not limited to the pages of statistical handbooks. Rather, the affects continue to influence populations post schooling and lead to social problems such as "crime, low productivity, low wages, [and] low labor force participation" (Haveman, 2006; as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5). Furthermore, African American men between the ages of 15 and 35 make up nearly 50% of the U.S. prison population despite only representing 5% of the total population (Smith & Hattery, 2010). The resources needed to fund these societal problems take away funding that could have been used to improve schooling for at risk kids, primarily minority and low income students. In addition, how much economic deficit has resulted from the untapped potential and intelligence found in diverse schools?

Education researchers often examine the following inequalities in education: unequal funding, access to high quality teaching, access to curriculum, and school environment (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Hodges Persell, 2004; Gay, 2004; Banks, 2004; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Unequal funding not only persists as an inequality in education, it also acts as a catalyst leading to other inequalities. Public education "funds are typically raised and spent locally, districts with higher property values have greater resources with which to fund their schools, even when poorer districts tax themselves at proportionally higher rates" (Darling-Hammond, 1995, p. 467). In some cases, the disparity between the wealthiest and the poorest school districts is thousands of dollars per student (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Less funding implies inferior facilities, fewer extracurriculars, larger class sizes, lower teacher pay, and fewer academic opportunities. Class size is one determinant of student achievement. Smaller class sizes offer more time

for interaction between the teacher and the students, which can improve teacher-student relationships; the curriculum can be more effectively modified to suit the diverse needs of the class; and are ideal for effective classroom management. Due to working conditions, the most experienced and effective teachers often change schools because wealthier schools offer a more positive work environment. The poorest schools are often forced to employ teachers with the least expertise. Additionally, “[d]isproportionate percentages of poor and minority youngsters (principally black and Hispanic) are placed in tracks for low-ability or non-college-bound students (NCES, 1985; Rosenbaum, 1980; as cited in Darling-Hammond, 1995, p. 474). Teachers are also tracked, which results in teachers with the most expertise and status being rewarded with the higher track classes teaching “the students who already know a lot” (Darling-Hammond, 1995, p. 473). Students placed in to lower tracks suffer from exposure to a simplified and limited curriculum, fewer opportunities for positive interaction with teachers, and fall further behind their peers (Darling-Hammond, 1995).

Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to reducing the inequalities in education is the school environment. This stems from a form of segregation that still exists today. According to Sonia Nieto (2005), despite the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), ethnic and racial segregation is on the rise. “Students in U.S. schools are now more likely to be segregated from students of other races and backgrounds than at any time in the recent past” (Nieto, 2005, p. 59). This modern form of segregation is not enforced by laws, rather it is influenced by socioeconomic issues and the use of magnet schools for programs like ESL. Concerning the arguments above, modern segregation

guarantees that disadvantaged students will receive inferior education and opportunities in school.

The cracks in society that result from educational inequalities spread with each generation due to the cycle of a self-fulfilling prophecy: society predicts that minority students will fail, thus the government does not supply their schools with enough resources, which then leads to increased rates of failure. Failure in school limits career opportunities, which then limits the neighborhoods they can live in, and the cycle repeats with their children.

### **Cultural Proficiency of Schools and Its Effects on Students**

Improving the cultural proficiency of a school can have significant and long lasting effects on students from all backgrounds. Jim Cummins (2001) posits that self affirmation and positive interactions with teachers can facilitate academic effort and active participation. The learning that stems from this experience initiates a cycle in which what a student learns increases the desire to learn more, which in turn increases the effort and participation. However, when a student's culture, language, or experience is deemed an obstacle to learning, the student is more likely to fall into a cycle of underachievement and failure. Cummins (2001) expands on this in further detail:

[W]hen students' language, culture and experience are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage. Everything they have learned about life and the world up to this point is being dismissed as irrelevant to school learning; there are few points of connection to curriculum materials or instruction and so students are expected to learn in an experiential vacuum. Students' silence

and non-participation under these conditions have frequently been interpreted as lack of academic ability or effort; and teachers' interactions with students have reflected their low expectations for these students, a pattern that becomes self-fulfilling. (pp. 2-3)

James Banks (1995) presents a case for implementing multicultural education as a way of reinforcing “positive perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes toward racial and ethnic groups and toward females and males” (p. 617). Although he looks at the historical effects of racial attitude modification, his justification for offering such education is moral rather than based on empirical evidence. He argues that:

Schools in a pluralistic democratic society, in order to promote the structural inclusion of diverse groups and help them to develop a commitment to the national ethos and ideology, should structure a curriculum that reflects the perspectives and experiences of the diverse groups that constitute the nation-state. (Banks, 1995, p. 617)

With the imprisonment of racial minorities and growth of income inequality (Mendieta, 2012; Parks, 2012, Smith & Hattery, 2010), it can be assumed that education and school policies play important and influential roles in the lives of immigrants and minority students. Middle school students are faced with many issues during this time including but not limited to: identity development, puberty, language development, academic competence, behavior, and peer relationships.

### **Students and Poverty**

Poverty is often associated with racial minorities and immigrants and often correlates with other issues such as malnutrition, mobility, and low access to high quality

child care, health and mental illness, higher drop out rates, and higher teenage birth rates (Berliner, 2013; Miller, Pavlakis, Lac, & Hoffman, 2014). Inequality in education is even greater between students from low and high socioeconomic statuses than between racial and ethnic groups. When the wealthiest schools have been known to spend ten times more than the poorest schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007), it is no surprise that such academic achievement gaps exist. Furthermore, high quality childcare is associated with positive academic outcomes, but families from low socioeconomic status have lower access to such care (Miller et al., 2014). Families may also have higher rates of mobility, which is also linked to low achievement, limiting them to poorer quality of housing (Miller et al., 2014). Such housing has been linked to increased exposure to lead and asthma triggers (Berliner, 2009; Rothstein, 2004; as cited in Miller et al., 2014).

Poverty places families and students in complex situations that can result in multiple needs. School may not be as high of a priority for students from low socioeconomic status as it is for students from high socioeconomic status. This is not due to a deficit in desire or potential. Rather, lower access to the basic necessities for survival place health, food, and shelter above education, which is considered to be the key to social mobility (Nieto, 2005). For example, if the student has siblings, he or she may be required to take care of them while parents are working. With language barriers, the student may be asked to interpret and translate for the parents. Students may be asked to take on a job to help support the family. Essentially, this type of student must deal with acting as an adult at home, while still being considered a child at school and by society.

## **Racial/Ethnic Minorities**

Sonia Nieto (1999) argues that social capital and cultural capital are equally important to economic capital in determining one's standing in the social structure. In her words, cultural capital "can be defined as the acquired tastes, values, languages, and dialects, or the educational qualifications, that mark a person as belonging to a privileged social and cultural class" (1999, p. 54). When we think of cultural capital, the school plays an important role in establishing and promoting the norms of the dominant culture. The purpose and policies of public schooling are often considered to be culturally neutral. However, schools reflect and promote the values, attitudes, and culture of the broader society (Cummins, 2001). The predominantly White teaching force is often unaware of the culture and values promoted because they are part of the dominant group; their values and culture are believed to be normal. As a result, White students may find it easier to navigate the culture of the school and find academic success. This is evidenced by the academic achievement gap that has persisted despite improving the academic achievement of disadvantaged minorities such as African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, and American Indians (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Howard, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 1995, Cummins, 2001). Furthermore, history and culture are often taught as static as if they were already complete and finished; African American English is often believed to be poor English rather than a rich and creative variety of English; generally only disadvantaged minorities are asked to become bicultural or bilingual in order to find academic success; native languages other than English are often seen as detrimental to academic success, and core cultural values of the home are often incongruent with the core values of the school (Nieto, 1999). When a student feels that his or her cultural

capital is limited or undervalued, he or she may develop an oppositional identity to the dominant culture.

When an oppositional identity develops, then the school becomes a place for the dominant culture and thus the connection between the disadvantaged students and the school is lost. Research has shown that disadvantaged students have demonstrated a much lower reading level on standardized tests than their dominant culture peers (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Howard, 2006), and the “rates of dropping out, violence and truancy increase, and achievement falls” (Grant & Gomez, 1996, p. 5). Furthermore, this achievement gap is also relevant when we compare “relative numbers of students who take advanced placement examinations; enroll in honors, advanced placement, and “gifted” classes; and are admitted to colleges and graduate and professional programs” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4).

Also of note, ethnic minorities are often grouped according to where they are from or the language they speak (i.e. Asian, Latino or Hispanic). Rather than homogenous groups of people that the classifications imply, these groups are often very diverse in terms of country of origin, culture, and language (even when a particular language is shared such as Spanish) (Knight, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2009). These classifications are fostered by stereotypes about ethnicities or cultures and racism in the media. Newspapers and other media offer a powerful vehicle for the distribution and mainstreaming of ethnic ideologies (van Dijk, 1989; Alvarez-Galvez, 2014) and sculpting public opinion (Hart, 2010). The media is able to sculpt public opinion by using referential and predication strategies. Referential strategies work to create Us versus Them distinctions that play off survival instincts of our ancestors (Hart, 2010).



Predicational strategies contribute to emotive and cognitive coercion by representing the out-group in relation to particular topoi, or argumentation schemes (i.e. immigrants: burden, crime, dangerous, disadvantage, exploitation, etc.) (Hart, 2010). This has led to common misconceptions that Hispanic/Latino students are illegal immigrants, African Americans are criminals and gang members, and Asians are the model minority. These stereotypes breed xenophobia and ethnicism. They persist in all forms of society affecting the beliefs of teachers, school administration and staff, school boards, policy makers, and students. As earlier discussed, when conflict arises teachers may feel a sense of superiority. These ethnocentric value systems are exactly what cultural proficiency aims to remedy.

### **English Language Learners**

English language learner (ELL) refers to a student who, based on the score he or she got on an English test, is considered to be limited English proficient (LEP) and is enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) courses or receives needed instructional services concerning English proficiency. An ELL is further defined by the state's Title III accountability manual (2012) as: "Has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language, and these impediments contribute to the individual's inability to meet state performance levels, to achieve in English instructed classrooms, and to fully participate in society" (p. 19). This group of students includes ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse youth who are already disadvantaged when they are included in mainstream classrooms because the classes are taught in English and most teachers are not prepared or trained enough to work with them effectively (Hamann, 2008). Unfortunately, when ELLs receive services such as ESL,

their difficulties are often not alleviated. Not only are students faced with the task of learning English, but they also need to learn through a language that is not their first language (L1) (Valdes, Capitelli & Alvarez, 2011). Further complicating their education, ELLs often lack access to advanced-level courses, which is usually a result of trying to protect the student from failure (Kanno & Kangas, 2014). Relegated to low-track classes, ELLs “do not have the same opportunities to develop higher order thinking as do students in high-track classes because high-track classes emphasize problem solving, critical thinking, original ideas, and passion for the subject matter whereas low-track classes focus on self-discipline” (Kanno & Kangas, 2014, p. 850). At Northup Middle School, ELLs in seventh and eighth grade sometimes had special schedules that required them to leave a class early to join their ELL classes. Thus, besides being placed into low-track courses, students may have also been pulled out of class, possibly missing important material. In addition, these particular students are faced with greater identity issues whether they are American or not. As Banks (2011) explains, “[b]ecoming a legal citizen of a nation does not necessarily mean that an individual will attain structural inclusion into the mainstream society and its institutions or will be perceived as a citizen by most members of the mainstream group within the nation” (p. 246). Although this identity issue affects American students not enrolled in ESL courses, it is more common with ELLs because a lack of English proficiency stigmatizes a person as coming from outside the United States. Students who have immigrated to the U.S. must navigate a new culture and education system, while negotiating identities and often learning a new language. They often enter school at a disadvantage, not because their cultures, languages, or experiences are of less value, but because they are ignored (Cummins, 2001, p. 2).

## **Gender/Sexuality Nonconforming Students**

Despite the progress the U.S. has made toward the protection of rights for homosexual and transgender populations, heteronormativity (Thornton, 2013; Sumara & Davis, 2013) and a positive cisgender bias dominate most aspects of society including schools. These ideologies are concerned with normative behavior and how such behaviors are identified with gender and sexual identity, appropriate sex roles, and sexual orientation. In contrast, Fuss (1995) suggests that “sexuality should be understood as one of the intertwining valences of what constitutes the experience of identity and the activity of identification” (as cited in Sumara & Davis, 2013, p. 318). In other words, it is not necessarily true that men are attracted to men because they are homosexual. Rather, Fuss argues that men are identified as homosexual because of an attraction they have toward other men. Heteronormativity ignores the complexity, fluidity, and instability of sexuality and instead promotes stereotypes and discrimination based on a false set of differences between what is considered normal and deviant behavior (Thornton, 2013).

Stephen J. Thornton (2013) explains how heteronormativity is the standard for nearly all K-12 social studies teaching materials. The absence of the mere existence of lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and transgender persons poses the question whether or not everybody counts as human. The academic curriculum offers examples of “normal” sex roles while the hidden curriculum supports these beliefs. It should not be a surprise then that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and gender nonconforming youth experience hostile environments and do not feel safe at school (Patterson, 2013). According to Patterson (2013):

LGBT adolescents are more likely than their hetero-sexual counterparts to be in danger at school, more likely to feel unsafe and disconnected from others, more likely to be depressed, more likely to use alcohol and tobacco, and much more likely to attempt suicide. (p. 191)

In response to such hostility, LGBT have missed more days of school, received lower grades, been involved in aggressive fights, and had lower educational aspirations (Patterson, 2013). Despite a rise in exposure through the media, these students are nearly invisible in the academic curriculum and are considered deviant in the hidden curriculum. Improved cultural proficiency has the potential to make schools safer and to reduce the stereotypes and discrimination that these students experience daily.

### **Student Identities**

The dependent relationship between identity and academic achievement is as complex and diverse as the student populations that are served in schools. Identity is considered to be dynamic rather than static (Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2011) and thus a student's performance in school may change along with his or her transformations of identity. In addition, identity is formed not only by how students see themselves, but also by how others see them. I have already given one example where an American may be considered to be a foreigner due to appearance, native language, or accent. Identity is often "marked by overt signals such as dress and language" (Cutler, 2003, p. 213) which are unique in order to exclude others. A person may also change identities based on situations. Cutler (2003) attributes this to the "fleeting collectives that make up contemporary society, reflecting the need of individuals to find meaning by bonding with others" (p. 213). An example of this would be code-switching depending on the social

environment, i.e. a student who uses African American English when he or she is with her African American friends, but uses the “standard” form of English when he or she is with her White friends. It is thus more appropriate to discuss multiple identities rather than one identity. The culture of the school can influence a student’s development of identity because the expectations, policies, and behaviors necessary for success can lead to subtractive schooling.

The curriculum of the school plays an important role in the development of the child. Students are exposed to an academic curriculum and a hidden curriculum—the expected behaviors and values promoted by the school and the “institutional regulations and routines” (Jackson, 2013, p. 124) that must be mastered by students in order to find success in the school. Examples of hidden curriculum include being on time to class, raising one’s hand to speak during class, following directions, acceptable displays of affection, and sex role behavior. Many of the punishments in school are more related to the mastery of the hidden curriculum rather than academic success or failure (Jackson, 2013). Success in school depends heavily on being able to master both curriculums, however, the dichotomy between the two is not so easily defined. The absence of culturally relevant subject matter reinforces the dominant group’s values and ideals. Students are thus forced to give up parts of their identities and adopt identities accepted by the dominant group in order to find success in school.

Richard Milner IV (2010a) establishes a direct link between identity and power struggles between teachers and students. He argues that students in secondary schools are still trying to figure out who they are individually, how they fit into their different worlds, and what are the boundaries for acceptable behavior in various situations. Students who

come from outside the dominant culture may have even more difficulty with identity as they find conflict between the culture of the home and the culture of the school (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). Students who come from more collectivist cultures, such as Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, and African American, may find difficulty following the practices and policies that reinforce a more individualistic culture found in American schools. Differences are evident in the value placed on individual and family accomplishment, use of praise or criticism, use and development of cognitive or social skills, oral expression or respect for authority in class, and the roles of parents and teachers (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). What happens when a teacher expects students to speak during class, but parents expect their children to listen quietly? If parents believe that academic instruction is solely the teacher's job, how will they respond when a teacher asks them to help their children with homework? In these simple examples, conflict arises between the culture of the home and the culture of the school. Teachers may feel that parents do not care about their children's education. Parents may feel that the schools are undermining their authority. Teachers and administrators are likely to believe that the values of the school are more important than the values of the home. The students are placed in a predicament: If they choose the values of the school over the home, there may be breakdowns within the family. If they choose the values of the home over the school, they may find difficulty fitting into the school and finding academic success. Due to the high percentage of immigrants and minority students, English language learners may have more trouble adjusting to the culture of the school than other student populations.

## **Teachers and Cultural Proficiency**

The changing student population is one of the many factors that make teaching arguably more complex today than ever before, especially when teachers are more likely to be teaching students who come from different social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds than themselves. New teachers, who are often less experienced, often work in poorer schools and teach lower tracked classes (Darling-Hammond, 1995). This implies that new teachers are the most likely to encounter differences in the classroom. In addition, Lortie (2002) argues that teacher education is too focused on learning rather than teaching. In other words, teachers spend too much time studying theory and not enough time working in classrooms with experienced teachers. As a result, new teachers are entering the profession with inadequate training and are forced to sink or swim within their first years of teaching. Less experience also implies less familiarity with the curriculum, assessments, and classroom management.

Those who enter the teaching profession do so for many reasons: their family members were teachers, strong identification with a teacher, they have always wanted to be teachers, and a significant other told them that they would make a good teacher (Lortie, 2002). Due to the time, education, and funds necessary to become a teacher, it can be assumed that most teachers had positive experiences in school (Lortie, 2002). In addition, the necessary requirements reduce the pool of potential teachers to those who could afford and have access to higher education. As a result, those recruited are often conservative in relation to education and have no desire “to alter the nature and direction of school practices and modes of operation” (Lortie, 2012, p. 54). Geneva Gay (2010) argues that “conventional teaching practices reflect European American cultural values”

(p. 22). These cultural values influence what is taught and how it is taught, what defines good teaching, and the purpose of schooling. Most teachers in the United States come from European American backgrounds and view schooling as culturally neutral. A culturally neutral education suggests that all students could learn from “good” teachers. It also presents the dominant culture as normal and appropriate for civic participation. This is concerning when students, especially particular groups, do not meet the expectations for academic achievement. This can lead to deficit theories that claim “students of racial minority and economically poor backgrounds are genetically or culturally inferior” (Nieto, 2005, p. 45). When blame is placed solely on the student or solely on the teacher, the “structural inequality, social class inequality, and racism” in society and in schools is ignored. On the other hand, multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, intercultural communicative competence, cultural competence, and cultural proficiency all aim to disrupt assimilationist teaching. Recently, culturally incompatible theory and sociocultural explanations have emerged to help illustrate the mismatch that occurs between the school culture and students who might be considered at-risk, thus leading to academic achievement issues.

As previously stated, cultural proficiency is an inside-out perspective that begins with self-analysis and understanding and improving oneself in order to meet the needs of all students. This is important for two reasons: first, understanding one’s own culture and how he or she has been served by the dominant culture will help build bridges between cultures (Nuri Robins et al., 2006). Second, teachers will often encounter an identity-perception gap between how they see themselves and how students see them (Toshialis,



2010). This gap becomes an important tool for developing one's teaching and cultural proficiency.

### **Cultural Proficiency and Improving Education**

If we intend to improve the education of all students, teachers and staff of the schools must understand themselves, who they think they are, and what their students think about them. In addition, they must understand their students and what they think about their students. This is an important first step to change because “without acknowledging the realities of dominance, we could not engage in a discussion of strategies for change” (Howard, 2006, p. 34). Once the realities of dominance are understood, teachers can begin to transform their classrooms into culturally responsive learning communities built on caring, welcoming environments, academic development, and accommodating instruction for different learning styles (Howard, 2006). Some of the most effective teaching involves using the students' funds of knowledge, or cultural and personal knowledge and experience (Howard, 2006; Moll et al., 1992).

Research has shown that “self-affirmations reduce psychological threat and stress and can thus improve performance” (Cohen, et al., 2009, p. 400). When it comes to ELLs, additive bilingual education has displayed a positive association with “students' linguistic, cognitive, or academic growth” (Cummins, 2001, p. 165). Rothstein-Fisch and Trumball (2008) explain how organizing the class and instruction based on the students' home experience can lead to more engaged students, cooperation, potential for self-regulation, cohesiveness, and synergy. This is because it “enables students to bridge prior experiences with new learning” (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2013). Cooperative learning is one way to organize instruction that reinforces the underlying aims of multicultural

education (Gay, 2010; Grant & Gomez, 1996). Gay (2010) provides two reasons for why cooperative learning has been successful in educating marginalized populations:

First, underlying values of human connectedness and collaborative problem solving are high priorities in the cultures of most groups of color in the United States. Second, cooperation plays a central role in these groups' learning styles, especially the communicative, procedural, motivational, and relational dimensions. (p. 187)

Studies on cooperative learning have shown positive effects on academic achievement (Gay, 2010; Grant & Gomez, 1996; Slavin, 1990).

Teaching that is culturally responsive recognizes that students have different learning styles and progress through the curriculum at different speeds. Many multicultural education and language theorists stress a need for multimodal and multidimensional instruction and assessment (Chamberlain, 2003; Gay, 2010; Grant & Gomez, 1996; Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2013; Hill & Miller, 2013; Larson-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) that engages students' multiple intelligences.

A culturally relevant pedagogy uses an inclusive curriculum that helps to bridge life experiences with the content and promotes acceptance while reducing prejudice (Gay, 2010). Cooperative learning and multimodal instruction are approaches that reflect the goals of multicultural education and provide more opportunities for learning, promote cooperation, improve ethnic relations, and improve academic achievement (Scherff & Spector, 2011; Grant & Gomez, 1996; Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Meyer, Bevan-Brown, Harry, & Sapon-Shevin, 2004). Having introduced the theoretical framework for this study, the next section will explain the methodology involved including rationale for case

study, the school as a case, sample, institutional review board, data collection, data analysis, and role of the researcher.

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

### **Rationale for Using Case Study**

Cultural proficiency is a complex issue that is internal and external, individual and organizational, dynamic, and difficult to understand without multiple perspectives. Qualitative research provides the necessary tools to uncover “variables that cannot be easily measured” and it can provide “a complex, detailed understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). A qualitative researcher often reaches this understanding by entering into the natural setting where the phenomenon takes place in which the researcher is the key instrument in data collection (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Merriam, 2009). The researcher relies on multiple methods of collecting data such as in-depth interviews, participant observations, document analysis, and the use of inductive and deductive reasoning (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Merriam, 2009). For this particular study, a qualitative approach seemed most fitting.

One form of qualitative research that is especially useful for dealing with “how” and “why” questions is case study (Yin, 1994). Case study is an empirical and qualitative approach that explores “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). The key element of a case study is “the identification of a specific case” which “can be bounded or described within certain parameters, such as a specific place and time” (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). This study uses a specific school as an instrumental case to explore the issue of cultural proficiency. A thick description of a

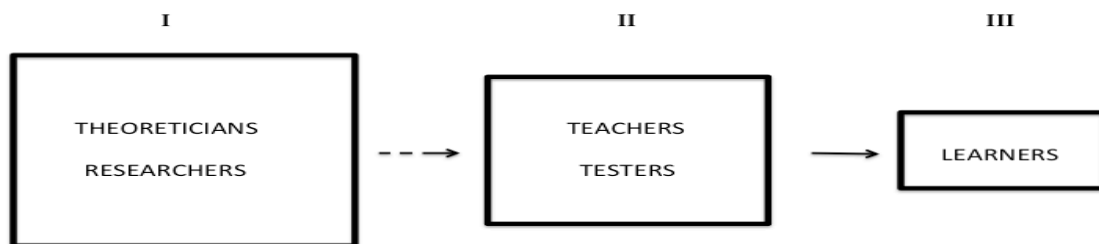


Figure 3.1: Current Model of Knowledge Transfer in SLA (Johnson, 2004, p. 3)

particular case can expand the understanding and knowledge of a phenomenon or issue because it is more concrete, more contextual, more developed by reader interpretation, and based more on reference populations determined by the reader (Merriam, 2009). This instrumental case study offers the chance to better understand the cultural proficiency of a diverse school in a predominantly White school district. Although the generalizability of findings is limited, the study does open a window to future research on population trends that are growing throughout the Midwest.

An additional component that guided the research from the outset was the work of Marysia Johnson in second language acquisition. Johnson (2004) discusses the current trends of SLA knowledge transfer and argues for a more inclusive model that meets places all members of the affected community on an equal level. Much of her argument applies to the transfer and building of education knowledge in general. Her model posits that there is a “hierarchy of power and control of knowledge,” illustrated in figure 3.1, in which “the bigger the box, the greater the power and influence it represents with respect

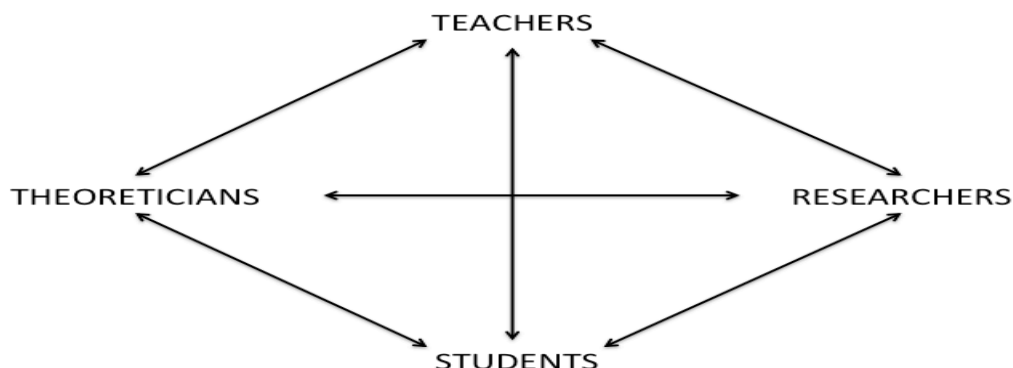


Figure 3.2: A New Model of SLA Knowledge-Building (Johnson, 2004, p. 4)

to the other components of the system” (Johnson, 2004, p. 2). The current track of interaction and codependency is one-way and unequal. Johnson (2004) argues that “a new model of interaction in which all participants have equal status, privileges, and rights” and that is “interrelated and collaborative” is needed (p. 2). This new model (see figure 3.2) would require “active involvement on the part of teachers, students, researchers, and theoreticians” (Johnson, 2004, p. 3). The model also works well with the inside-out approach of cultural proficiency proposed by Nuri Robins et al. (2006), in which the transformation begins with the self then transfers outward. In most cases, however, school districts adhere to a top-down approach to policies and practices in which the district makes a policy and the schools adopt and expand it. For example, the district initiates a program for cultural proficiency and multicultural education. Over certain amounts of time, schools, teachers, and staff are expected to be at specific stages of improvement. The district may require some training and suggest other programs or

policies, but the individual school makes many of the decisions concerning the direction the school will go to meet the goals. In this sense, exploring participants' experiences and development of cultural proficiency may provide information that can help schools and districts improve the initiation of future policies and programs, thus resulting in better services for all students.

### **The School as a Case**

Northup Middle school was chosen for this research because it was a Title I school with a culturally and linguistically diverse population. The school had one of the highest percentages of minority students within a predominantly White school district (School district statistical handbook, 2014). The school's population has seen an increase in minority populations, along with a decrease in the White population, over the last 15 years. This statistic validates the need to study the cultural proficiency of the school, however, similar trends are taking place all over the city.

Residing in a one of the largest cities of a small Midwestern state, Northup Middle School was founded in 1958 as a combined elementary and junior high school (School website). Although it has changed over the years, it now acts as a middle school for grades 6 through 8. The school district's population is nearly identical to that of the state, with minority groups making up approximately 29% of the population (District Statistical Handbook, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The district releases an annual statistical handbook. The most recent handbook (2014) revealed the following statistics: the school itself is even more diverse with minority groups making up about 56% of the student population; the largest population is White (43.9%) followed by Hispanic/Latino (23.6%), African American (15.5%), students who are considered two or more races

(9.3%), Asian (6.2%), and American Indian or Alaskan Native (1.6%). While the percentage of African Americans has remained roughly the same over the last 15 years, the White population has decreased nearly 20% and the Hispanic/Latino population has increased nearly 20% (District Statistical Handbook, 2001; District Statistical Handbook, 2014). Other fluctuations have been offset by the classification of two or more races, which was not accounted for in the 2000-2001 school year. In addition, the school meets the federal requirements for Title I funding with 71.2% of the student population receiving free or reduced lunch.

The school is also one of the few schools in the district that serves a significant English language learner (ELL) population. Many minority groups are underrepresented in gifted programs (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Thus, it is not remarkable that Northrup Middle School has only identified 9.1% of its population as gifted, and only 0.3% as highly gifted (District Statistical Handbook, 2014). Both numbers are well below the district average (15.6% and 2% respectively), and even greater gaps exist between this school and middle schools in the district that serve less diverse and wealthier populations.

Despite a diverse student population, the faculty and staff populations for the school and the district are congruent with the national trends (Howard, 2006). More than 90% of the teachers and staff at the school are White. Although the numbers do not reflect the student diversity, the district has been able to meet or surpass the national graduation rate for all groups except one, American Indian or Alaskan Native (District Statistical Handbook, 2014).

The school is organized so that each grade has its primary section of the building designated for lockers and classrooms. With each grade progression, the students move



deeper inside the building and nearer to the lunchroom and gyms. The building welcomes its guests with the 30 national flags that represent the diverse student population. The walls are decorated with murals and artwork created by the students, and each room has a window that is decorated by the teacher who uses the room. The layout of the school is both functional and traditional.

## **Sample**

The plan for this research was to interview participants who were enrolled as students in the school or who worked at the school. In planning the research, I intended to interview 5-8 teachers, 5-8 students, and 3-6 staff. Convenience and purposive criterion sampling was used in this study. The following criteria were used to select participants:

### Teachers and Staff:

- Teachers and staff had to be employed by the school and the district.

### Students:

- Only students who had been enrolled at the school for at least one year were asked to participate. Thus, only 7th and 8th grade students were approached.

As per a recommendation by the university's institutional review board (IRB), I was asked to find a gatekeeper to approach possible student participants. The IRB believed that there was potential for unintentional coercion due to my employment at the school and working relationships that had developed between myself and the students.

## **Institutional Review Board**

In order to conduct this research, it was necessary to obtain approval from the principal of Northup Middle School as well as the district's director of assessment and evaluation. After gaining tentative approval from both, the proposal was submitted for review through the university's institutional review board. The project was approved and assigned the identification number 20150114729EP.

As with any research that involves human participants, it was necessary to avoid any possible coercion and to keep the identities of the participants anonymous. Each participant, the school, and the school district were assigned pseudonyms to conceal their identities. During the planning stages of the project, the researcher openly discussed the study with teachers and staff of the school. Those who had shown interest in participating were formally approached once IRB approval had been obtained. In addition, 7th and 8th grade students who had attended the school for at least one year were approached. However, more care and consideration is required whenever minors are part of research. As a result, three gatekeepers were used to identify and approach possible student participants. Each participant was required to sign an informed consent document and to note his or her preference to be audio recorded (see Appendices A-D). Students were required to have their parents or guardians sign parental informed consent documents and note their preferences to have their children audio recorded (Appendix A). Additionally, the students had to sign a child assent document (Appendix B) verifying their willingness to participate. If either document was not signed, the student could not participate.

All possible participants were expressly told that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, it was stressed that the

choice to participate or withdraw from the study at any time would not affect the relationships between the participant and the researcher, the university, the school, or the school district. All responses or information that could identify the participant would be kept confidential. Concerning students, it was made clear that their grades would not be affected by their decision to participate or not to participate. All audio recordings were erased from the recording device and the researcher's computer after transcription of the recordings had been completed. Digital copies of documents were stored on the researcher's computer while paper copies were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. All documents were deleted or shredded after one year.

Peer-reviewers were used to help validate themes found in the interviews. These reviewers did not have access to the real names of any participants, the school, or the district, and thus did not need to sign a confidentiality agreement.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered to be a key instrument in data collection (Creswell, 2013). As the primary and researcher of this study, the design of the study, the interview questions, the interviews conducted, the documents examined, and the behaviors observed were influenced by my unique perspective and experiences. In addition, my employment at the school in this study offered me an emic perspective that I feel benefitted the study. However, due to my connection to the school and the school district being studied, I have an obligation to reveal relevant aspects of myself concerning this study.

I am the middle child of a middle-class White, Christian, American family who placed high values on honesty, respectfulness, caring for those less fortunate than oneself,

and education. My parents remain married to this day. I never attended Northup Middle School, but I grew up in the city and attended schools within the district. The majority of my teachers and peers were White. I never worried about my education. It was always an expectation that I would attend an institution for higher education and I did. My experiences as a student did not prepare me to work at Northup Middle School, and even though I would like to, I can never truly know what it is like to go to that school, whether a minority or not. However, I have been hurt by family members and those I trust most, I have lived as a minority in a foreign country, I have a wife who is Japanese and a biracial son who is being raised bilingual. I became friends with many international students during my university years, which helped me understand their difficulties with school and in society. Even though my experiences are different from those of the students at Northup Middle School, I have experienced similar situations and felt similar emotions, thus I can empathize with them when I hear their stories.

I taught English in Japan and have spent the last three years studying teaching, learning, and teacher education. During my time as a master's student, I have taught at an intensive English program for international students at the university level, worked in after school programs at elementary schools, and worked as a paraeducator at Northup Middle School. Even though, I have never taught at a middle school in the United States, I can empathize with teachers and staff when I hear their stories.

As a paraeducator at the school being studied, I was in an opportune position to see classroom experiences from multiple perspectives. Having experience as a teacher, I could discuss teaching approaches with the teachers and I had my own assumptions about their intentions. As a paraeducator, I was placed among the students to help them when

needs arose. I often had specific students with needs that I spent most of my time with.

This gave me the chance to do something many teachers were not able to do: build meaningful relationships with students who were considered at-risk or difficult to work with. The issues of diversity were easy to observe from the first week at the school. These experiences converged to construct an interest in the experiences of minority students in a predominantly White school district.

As the primary researcher, I designed the study around relevant literature on education, cultural proficiency, and critical race theory as well as my experience in schools and conversations with teachers and students. I was the sole interviewer and the only participant observer. Due to my connection to the school, the teachers, and the students, it was important for me to bracket my experiences to avoid misinterpretation of the data. Furthermore, steps were taken to validate findings (see Data Analysis) and avoid any unwarranted bias.

### **Data Collection**

Case studies often require many forms of qualitative data to develop an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994; Yin, 2003). The primary source of data collection was semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants. Most of the interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes in length. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommend that the site of the interview is “a comfortably familiar setting (for the participant)...but this must also be safe (for all parties) and reasonably quiet, and free from interruptions” (p. 63). As such, interviews were done at the school outside of normal school hours, either before or after school. In addition, participant observation was done in classrooms. I kept a journal and filled out

an observation worksheet about experiences I felt were relevant to cultural proficiency.

The focus was on my own experience working in a diverse school and the various situations I went through on a daily basis. The data was used to inform my own degree of cultural proficiency as well as offer context to what participants talked about. Finally, relevant documents such as school policies and statistics, educational materials, and multicultural education materials were collected and analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of cultural proficiency in the school.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was based on a model which was built on the works of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), Creswell (2013), Yin (1994), and Merriam (1998). First, all documents were compiled into a case study database and organized using MAXQDA11. In addition, all transcriptions were printed to make the reading more accessible and convenient. The process of analysis can be summarized by the following stages:

1. Reading and re-reading
2. Initial noting
3. Open coding
4. Prefigured coding
5. Code validation
6. Search for emergent themes
7. Participant validation

In the first step, transcripts were read and re-read in attempt to gain a general understanding of the participants' perspective. Initial notes were added to the margins whenever seemingly important information was found. Although this is listed as stage

two, it could have begun as early as the first reading of the transcription. This information was then categorized into open codes which reflected the views of the participants. Next, two prefigured coding schemes were used. The first prefigured coding scheme analyzed the data looking for the following themes: assess culture, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge (Nuri Robins et al., 2006). These codes were chosen because they were identified in the literature (Nuri Robins et al., 2006; Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell-Jones, 2005; Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009)) as the five essential elements of cultural proficiency, and thus are important to exploring the cultural proficiency of this school. In this stage, information that expressed the five essential elements of cultural proficiency was identified with special attention paid to any elements that were not discussed often or at all. The second prefigured coding scheme analyzed the data looking for the following themes: cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural precompetence, cultural competence, and cultural proficiency (Nuri Robins et al., 2006). Attention was focused on information that represented the six points of the cultural proficiency continuum. It was important for me to avoid bias and unintentionally making the data fit the prefigured coding schemes. Thus, I had colleagues assist in validating the codes and themes in order to help develop the “plausibility of interpretation” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 80). Two colleagues were chosen based on their experience with qualitative research and educational research. Both have experience teaching and doing research with language learning and cultural competence. In addition, more weight was given to the open coding. After initial coding, it was important to search for emergent themes that may have developed which did not fit into

any prefigured themes. Next, I searched for connections across emergent themes.

Finally, member checking was used to validate the researcher's interpretation and description of participants' responses.



## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter will explore the themes that emerged from interviews with participants. The diversity of the participants will be considered followed by the themes that emerged from open coding. After that, the themes that emerged from the two prefigured coding schemes will be discussed. In order to better clarify the themes, the discussion will be included with each theme.

### **Participants**

In total, 13 participants from Northup Middle School were interviewed, of which there were 7 teachers, 4 non-teaching staff, and 2 students. Of the 13 participants interviewed, 11 (85%) identified themselves as White or European, 1 (7.5%) Hispanic/Latino, and 1 (7.5%) African American. Nine (69%) of the participants were female while four (31%) were male. Both students were in the eighth grade and had been at the school since the sixth grade. The teachers and staff varied by several factors including age, experience in education, and departments. Despite such differences, the following six themes emerged from open coding: 1. Definitions of cultural proficiency; 2. Cultural proficiency of the school; 3. Teacher education and training; 4. Identity-perception; 5. Relationships; and 6. Cultural incongruity.

### **Emergent Themes from Open Coding**

#### **Definitions of Cultural Proficiency**

Understanding the definition of cultural proficiency and how it can be pursued are necessary if an organization is truly dedicated to becoming culturally proficient. The

district has laid out goals to improve its cultural proficiency and it is equally important at the school chosen for this study. As an inside-out approach, it would be necessary to understand the current understanding of cultural proficiency among the teachers and staff at the school. Both the district and the school have adopted the definition that I have used in this study, which suggests that participants should discuss the five essential elements (assess culture, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge) in some manner when giving personal definitions of cultural proficiency. These definitions should touch on the guiding principles behind the approach and barriers that stand in the way of it.

Nine of the 13 participants directly reflected on the definition of cultural proficiency. Six of those participants focused on how cultural proficiency relates to others, while three talked about how cultural proficiency requires understanding of self and of others. By exploring the personal definitions of cultural proficiency, we can begin to understand how teachers at the school interact and support each other and their diverse students. In addition, it offers a glimpse into the complexities of developing a culturally proficient school. These complexities and other issues will then be expanded on in the following themes of this chapter. For example, Mrs. Jones responded with the following:

*“I would say that being culturally proficient means to be able to navigate cultural, both awareness and then like the language of cultural acceptance, and being able to look at a culturally diverse classroom—or just you know, the one or two students that you might have and be able to navigate that with them and help them to both feel dignified and like a part of what you're doing in the classroom.”*

Without formal training in cultural proficiency, it is not surprising that many participants failed to provide a definition that encompasses the work by Nuri Robins et al. (2006). The definition above and those that follow include important elements of cultural proficiency such as acknowledging the need to value diversity and adapt to that diversity in order to make the culturally diverse students an important part of the class. Giving a similar definition, Mr. Francis suggests that cultural proficiency is “*a broad word where the important thing is that we need to respect ourselves and respect others in order to build that culture other than our own at home.*” Akin to Mrs. Jones, he believes that it is important to value diversity. However, he also suggests that there are multiple cultures and that we should not limit ourselves to only one culture. An additional two participants agreed that cultural proficiency relied on valuing diversity, or more specifically, through understanding and appreciation of differences:

*“It's an understanding and an appreciation of basically who we are and where we come from because everything is based on culture.”* (Mrs. Keller interview, 2015)

*“I think in a nutshell it's looking outside of yourself and really looking at the world and really looking at how we are all different, but we all live here together cohesively.”* (Mrs. Murphy interview, 2015).

Mr. Stuart (2015) focused on the inclusion of all students and the accommodations necessary to make the content comprehensible. According to him, cultural proficiency is:

5 Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency					
	Assess Culture	Value Diversity	Manage Dynamics of Difference	Adapt to Diversity	Institutionalize Cultural Proficiency
Participants	Ms. Summers	X	X		X
	Mrs. Dering		X	X	
	Mrs. Keller	X	X	X	
	Mrs. Harris	X	X		
	Mrs. Jones	X	X	X	
	Ms. Walsh	X		X	X
	Mrs. Murphy	X	X	X	
	Mr. Francis	X	X		
	Mr. Stuart	X		X	

Table 4.1: 5 Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency

*“Being able to relate all materials to all students at any time and without any bias, and without any ... being fair and open and non-judgmental and being able to really relate that information to the student without that student feeling like, why are you saying that to me?”*

Table 4.1 illustrates how each of the nine participants defined cultural proficiency according to the five essential elements of cultural proficiency proposed by Nuri Robins et al. (2006). While all of the definitions touch on some aspects of cultural proficiency, but lack entirety, one in particular stood out from the rest. Ms. Summers challenges the

status quo of being aware, accepting, and understanding of differences and argues for a more proactive and bold approach.

*“I would say an institution, if they have sort of a cultural proficiency program or expectation, you know, what they're talking about is being aware of other people's cultures—and being accepting, being tolerant of diversity. And so, for me I think being—cultural proficiency is more than that. You know, to me there's a social justice aspect to it, so I think you have to be more proactive. You can't just be like I understand that other cultures exist and I will be accepting of other cultures because I think that sort of ... I'm not exactly sure of the word I'm looking for, but that sort of rests on this idea that like we don't live in a society that's oppressed. Right? That's just like there's -- things are different and you need to accept difference. Obviously, but I mean, the society that we live in is incredibly racist and incredibly sexist, incredibly homophobic. It oppresses people based on their ability, their physical ability, mental health. You know, so there are all these different intersections of oppression and so for me being culturally proficient is being anti-racist, being anti-sexist, doing things that are fighting against those things, but also being always self-aware and always being cognizant of those things and being very like aware of my own White privilege, of my own involvement, my own -- what I do in a racist society or in a sexist—how do I benefit?”*

The argument that Ms. Summers makes is the same one that Nuri Robins et al. (2006) argue: teachers must be aware of their culture and the effect it may have on the

students. Entitlement and systems of oppression are two barriers to cultural proficiency. Working against those barriers helps both teachers and learners discover what is necessary to deal with issues caused by differences (managing the dynamics of difference). Furthermore, it honors students who often suffer from the effects of oppression, while also helping students of the dominant culture become better citizens (institutionalizing cultural knowledge). Even without covering all five essential elements in her definition of cultural proficiency, they are manifest in her answers and actions. As I will illustrate later, she is not merely reciting rehearsed answers. Her definition of cultural proficiency guides her classroom activities and drives her to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with her students and colleagues.

It should be noted that a lack of a consistent definition across interviews does not suggest that participants lack an understanding of cultural proficiency. Like Ms. Summers, most participants discussed or exhibited other essential elements of cultural proficiency in responses given to later questions. In addition, not being able to define something does not necessarily mean one does not understand it or practice it. However, as we explore the interviews in more detail, the lack of consistency may help to explain why participants who assert their commitment to cultural proficiency make arguments or share examples that seem to contradict the foundations of the approach. At times, participants shared answers that illustrate either a breakdown in communication between the district and the faculty or a failure to set out definite goals for the school, faculty, and staff. Although it may be easy to be critical of such failures, it is important to remember that an individual or an organization's place on the cultural proficiency continuum may

not be static or permanent (Nuri Robins et al., 2006). As I turn my attention to the cultural proficiency of the school, I will explore this in greater detail.

### **Cultural Proficiency of the School**

Except for the two students, all of the participants directly addressed how they saw the level of cultural proficiency of the school, primarily concerning the faculty and staff and the students. Five of the eleven participants believed that the faculty and staff were culturally proficient. Of the six who believed the employees of the school were not yet culturally proficient, five explained that they had come a long way, but there was still a lot that had to be done. The following quotes encapsulate this belief.

*“I think the staff here has learned a lot, I think we have a long way to go and I think that has to do with the population at our school and even where our staff comes from. We all come from different comfort levels with cultural diversity, we all come from different comfort levels with being proficient with that diversity.”*

(Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

*“If I were to rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, I'd probably would put us somewhere in the middle about a 5 or 6. I think we're evolving and people are trying to do more things to themselves to be more culturally proficient and to really think about it.”*

(Mrs. Thomas Interview, 2015)

*“So, I think we've come—we've come far, but not where we need to be.”* (Mrs.

Murphy Interview, 2015)

*“But, I think that, we’re on the right track, we’re trying, but culture changes all the time.”* (Mr. Stuart Interview, 2015)

The last comment demonstrates the complexity of attempting to become culturally proficient. Even when the best of intentions are behind the process, the change depends heavily on the individuals involved. Mr. Stuart was talking about teachers being prepared to work with diverse populations, however, as Mrs. Harris explains, the faculty and staff come from diverse backgrounds as well. These backgrounds shape one’s understanding of the world and may open a person up to being culturally proficient or close off that path. While discussing this topic, Mrs. Summers explained how some members of the school are dedicated to cultural proficiency and ending sexism and homophobia. Yet, these same people may engage in conversations that reinforce stereotypes and validate discrimination.

*“And to check our own blind spots, you know, because I know there are teachers that are really good, they really are focused and aware of issues of race, but totally blind about sexism and vice versa. Or issues where you know, they might consider themselves a feminist and they are anti-racist, but then they make sort of weird comments about maybe a transgender person, you know.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

When her colleagues demonstrated these behaviors, Mrs. Summers found it difficult to approach them without seeming offensive. She is aware that such conversations can quickly sour when people feel like they are being called racist or sexist. When certain



values are engrained in culture and personal beliefs, it becomes more difficult to change. It is difficult to see an attack on a behavior as anything other than an attack on the person who engages in that behavior. Proposals and laws that legalize marriage for homosexual couples, educate undocumented immigrants, and develop a national core curriculum have divided much of the nation, and these divides do not stop at the front doors of the school. Again, our perceptions of the world are shaped by our experiences. As a result, what one person sees as a lack of cultural proficiency, another may see as steps toward becoming more culturally proficient. Thus, when participants offer contradicting statements about the cultural proficiency of the school, it does not necessarily imply that one argument is more valid. In contrast to the statements above, five of the participants expressed confidence in the cultural proficiency of the staff and faculty as summarized in the quotes that follow.

*“If you're not a culturally proficient person or at least not working toward that, then you're not going to make it here because we have so many different cultures and so many different ways of thinking that we -- we just have to be cognizant of what's going on with our families and our kids at all times.”* (Mrs. Dering Interview, 2015)

*“Especially the 6th grade team and some of the other teachers I've worked with really are very—have been very open. And I think you have to be to work in this school, in a building like this with our population. If you're not comfortable with it or you're not willing to learn, I don't think you'd last here because you just have to by definition of who are students are.”* (Mrs. Keller Interview, 2015)

*“I think I’ve seen so many teachers trying, either on a one to one basis or just more in a group or just in their classroom, being able to help students think about who they are and how to navigate their culture and how that maybe impacts how they see the world. And in like staff development, there are so many talks of how can we reach this particular group of students and their particular needs, and how do we include ELL students in as many opportunities but help them to be successful when they’re trying to navigate a whole different world. And so, those conversations happen all the time and teachers are seeking other teachers out for advice and I just, it’s part of the collaborative nature that we have here, but I see teachers are really trying to be successful in that.”* (Mrs. Jones Interview, 2015)

Two of the participants explicitly stated that it was necessary to be culturally proficient, or at least be working towards such ends, to work at such a culturally and linguistically diverse school. These quotes fail to recognize two important points. First, the cultural and linguistic diversity of the school does not determine the teachers’ levels of cultural proficiency. As Nuri Robins et al. (2006) posit, unawareness of the need to adapt is considered one of the barriers to cultural proficiency. Furthermore, if the faculty and staff are not the problem, then the finger must be pointed at the students. This is the second point, when we fail to recognize the systems of oppression “we too often attribute failure to the culture and characteristics of the child rather than to the inherent structure of dominance in the larger society” (Howard, 2006, p. 51). Once again, I hesitate to blame the participants for a misunderstanding of cultural proficiency. Instead, it seems

that the direction and definition in which the district has chosen has not been communicated clearly enough to the school, the staff, and the faculty. As the interviews are explored in greater detail, participants' will seemingly misunderstand cultural proficiency and contradict each other on many fronts: the definition of cultural proficiency, the district's goals for developing cultural proficiency, what cultural proficiency looks like in the classroom, and whether or not it is necessary. While good intentions are present from the top down, somewhere along the way the message has gone astray.

One area that seemed to be missing from most interviews was the relevance of cultural proficiency to students. Many participants answered questions regarding the approach according to what the school was doing, what the teachers were doing, what the school was lacking, or how the school could improve. However, the discussions concerning the cultural proficiency of the student body were not as definite as those concerning the cultural proficiency of the staff and teachers. Many participants compared the students' experiences to their own as students and claimed that students were more culturally proficient than they had been at that age. Still, nine participants indicated that students were not yet culturally proficient. Despite this, participants seemed unwilling to hold students fully accountable for their levels of cultural proficiency.

*“So, to me it's more a failure of adults. Like, I would say that as adults, and especially as White adults, or especially as teachers, we need to be very culturally proficient. The most culturally proficient we can be so that we can give skills and language to students so they can continue, you know, be aware and fight against their oppression.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

*“But, I think part of that is our fault because I think if we went into classrooms more and talked more about prejudice and talked more about cultural proficiency and the things that happen in the world and things that we do as adults and the way the world works, I think maybe our kids would open up more.”* (Mrs. Dering Interview, 2015)

While it is reasonable to hold adults accountable for students’ cultural proficiency, the majority of participants failed to propose that they could learn from students themselves. Some participants were aware that culture was unavoidable for some students and that they may have different perspectives.

*“You know, I think for some of the students, they think about culture a lot. You know, when you go home and you don't speak English at home, that's going to remind you about who you are. I think it's more difficult for European American students to really think about who they are.”* (Mrs. Walsh Interview, 2015)

*“Recently, there have been a lot of cases in the news that have to do with different groups of people and different things that are going on. We've talked a little bit about them in class and for me it's so interesting to hear a different perspective. Perspectives that might not always have the same information as the perspective across the room.”* (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

*“School has to be that security blanket for some of the kids. And some kids don't want that security blanket. And also being here, you see that if parents didn't like school, the kids don't like school.”* (Mr. Stuart Interview, 2015)

There are a couple key points here. First, many of the staff and faculty are aware of the differences that exist between their students and their own experiences in school. They seem to understand that more can be done at the school, but at the same time, it is difficult to change. Second, a few of the participants admitted that adults were responsible for the cultural proficiency of the school. Despite this admission, many participants found it hard to criticize anyone in the school. One participant shed some light on this phenomenon. The following quotes come from an interview with Mrs. Thomas (2015).

*“And to also know that everybody is not where I am, and everybody is not going to be at the same place at the same time, but to know that it's a process, but to help people to just see things differently.”*

*“So, when you become an adult and changing those things, because it is so engrained, that presents obstacles. People aren't always mindful—and even me myself—of how engrained it is and how you don't really recognize that it's based on a perception or a personal belief about a person or a group of people, what have you. And so, those sometimes are obstacles. Myself, I have to reflect on that often because I know my personal upbringing and my beliefs sometimes hinder me*

*from being open as I should be. If I feel that, certainly other people when I'm working with other people, people feel the same way."*

*"I wonder sometimes if we haven't taken the adequate time to really have those honest discussions or to, you know, sometimes when you set time parameters for he or she should be at this point by this point, that everybody is just not there. I think it's a huge thing and that's a process. That's again, honest conversations and a lot of self reflection. And you've got to be even willing to do the self reflection piece and then to change once you know what it is that you need to change. So, I don't know that we really give adequate time towards what we need to do in order to really help people along the way."*

Mrs. Thomas' comments expose an interesting point: faculty and staff may be unaware of their own cultural proficiency, and even when awareness is present, an honest conversation is not going to be easy. Gary R. Howard (2006) uses "the assumption of rightness" to explain how dominant groups hold their beliefs to be truth rather than perspectives. The belief that all students will be successful if they follow school rules, participate in class, study, and do their homework is one of these false truths. For many teachers, especially those of the dominant group, it was true of their school experience. From such experience, it is rational to assume that problems lie within the students or the students' families or cultures. The success of the dominant group and model minorities reinforces these beliefs making it more difficult to oppose. Thus, it is more likely that when faced with new perspectives handed down from some form of authority, the

dominant group will be dishonest with themselves and deny the need for change. In other words, it would be easier to conform superficially than to confront the reality that they may be part of the problem. Why should a successful alumnus of the education system believe that he or she is the problem rather than the students who fail? Even when an individual believes in the change, it can be hard to accept. When discussing the district's multicultural education trainings, Mrs. Harris had this to say:

*“Sometimes what I've taken away is I've felt a lot like a very guilty criminal sometimes just for looking the way I do or living in the area of town that I do. And so, I haven't taken a lot away from those as much as I've taken away from working directly with a special education teacher, working directly with an ELL teacher, working with (name of staff).”*

In Gary R. Howard's words, many teachers today “want to overcome the effects of dominance” but “have not engaged in a sufficiently deep analysis of the root causes and dynamics of dominance” (2006, p. 30). When faced with an alternative perspective to what they have called reality, they feel blamed and respond defensively. Howard continues by explaining that it is important to remember “that the ‘enemy’ is dominance itself, not White people” (p. 31). When teachers, like the one above, leave trainings feeling hopeless and guilty rather than empowered, then the message has been misunderstood and possibly misrepresented. Comments on the multicultural trainings and education were common enough to warrant their own section. The following section will explore the multiple perspectives concerning teacher education and training.

## Teacher Education and Training

Teacher education and training covers a wide range of ideas from early years in school to district mandated training, from experience to university courses. As Lortie (2002) posits, schooling acts as a basic form of apprenticeship to teaching, albeit limited by its one-sided examination of the field. Many of the participants expressed having positive experiences in school, which most likely affected their decisions to enter the profession. A number of participants also expressed a change in perspective or attitude toward diversity resulting from some significant experience, both inside and outside of school. Some participants commented on the positive and negative experiences and influence of district training, while others focused on meetings and training events put on by the school itself. Due to the amount of time that teachers spend in school before officially entering the profession, this experience will greatly determine the perspectives from which they view education. Participants who more clearly exhibited elements of cultural proficiency could often trace their change in attitude and beliefs to a particular event or experience. As a result, this aspect will be an important feature of this section.

Having positive experiences in school is not a prerequisite to becoming a teacher, but it is a common attribute (Lortie, 2002). Three participants expressed the importance and value that was placed on schooling from an early age.

*“And I loved school growing up. I mean, I loved elementary school, I love art, so that was always a huge thing about school that I loved because there was always an art class. I loved reading... So, school in terms of going to class and learning was something I always loved.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)



*“Like, I essentially grew up in my mom's school, and I always saw school as an extra home for me. And so, I've realized as I have gone through that I am super educationally privileged. Like, my grandpa went to Harvard, my college was always an expectation for me. And so, school has just always been basically my whole life.”* (Mrs. Jones Interview, 2015)

*“My mom was a school teacher and so education was you know, really pushed to the forefront. There was no question as to what the expectations were.”* (Mrs. Thomas Interview, 2015)

Teacher enthusiasm has been positively linked to student enjoyment (Frenzel et al., 2009) and higher student achievement (Kunter et al., 2013). It could be assumed that if a teacher had a positive experience in school, and especially in his or her field, that he or she would be more likely to exhibit enthusiasm in the classroom. The teacher, however, does not determine whether he or she is displaying enthusiasm. Instead, it is the students' perception of a teacher's enthusiasm that effects students. From my observations, it was the teachers who shared their personal lives with students, who joked around with the students from time to time, and who were generally welcoming and warm in the classroom who were able to not have more effective classroom management and student engagement. However, what set these teachers apart was their ability to tie the material to the information they shared. For example, one science teacher had various labs set up throughout the room and discussed them with students. The teacher also integrated his family and past experiences into teaching the material.

On the other hand, Lortie (2002) explains how the system and organization of the school are not conducive for people who want to change it or go against the grain. Therefore, it makes little sense for a person to enter the education field if they did not enjoy it as a student. This facilitates continuity in the approach to education and the superiority of the dominant group's perspective on the purpose of education. While former positive experiences and enthusiasm may help teachers create an exciting environment that promotes learning, sharing that experience with students who have negative experiences in school may create barriers between the teacher and the students. The barrier would be even greater if the values and beliefs of the dominant culture are being taught. For example, many White people often consider what it would be like to live in an historical era other than their own. During an observation in a U.S. History class, the teacher enthusiastically asked the class, "Wouldn't it be great to travel back in time and see the beginning of our country?" This seemingly harmless query was met with the honest answer, "No. I'd be a slave." So, while American history may appeal to different groups in different ways, it may also produce the opposite impression on those belonging to minority populations. I am not suggesting that teachers should lose or hide their enthusiasm. Instead, this example only illuminates a need for more cultural proficiency. Furthermore, if a person had a negative experience studying history (or another subject) as a student, it could be assumed that teaching it would exact a similar reaction. This helps to explain why the majority of teachers continue to come from the dominant group.

Experience in school offers one motivation for becoming a teacher. Although experience as a student acts as an apprenticeship, the experience is one-sided and limited.

Furthermore, due to the modern form of segregation, many teachers have limited experience working with students who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this sense, they are not prepared to work in diverse schools and as such require additional training and education. Recently, certain required courses concerned with special education and multicultural education are necessary for graduation from teachers colleges. This offers an important area of pre-service teacher development, but is highly dependent on the quality of the course. The following two quotes offer alternative views on the experience of multicultural education courses taken as pre-service teachers.

*“Being at my college was huge. I think the way that they go about multicultural education is really great....And so, my freshman year, we took a class and essentially all of that class talked about was multicultural experiences and you know, we had to write papers on these multicultural experiences that we had and she talked about class and White privilege ... I was just really challenged about the things that I had just kind of taken for granted, and I think that's the first time that I really started to look at privilege in my life and so, as opposed to just diversity aspect of it. And so, I think that prepared me a lot to think about you know, how do I view my life? But then, how do I value and bring you know, honor and dignity to people who don't have the privilege that I have? And that just because they don't have the privilege doesn't mean that they aren't capable, and that they aren't you know, a great person or whatever. So, I think that helped me to just think about students and the world in a different way.”(Mrs. Jones Interview, 2015)*

*“The worst class I took at the university was called—I can't even remember what it was called, it was something like diversity class. Okay, and really what it ended up was our teacher -- there was some really great books that she assigned, but the discussions were not well guided and it usually just devolved into like people telling anecdotes...There was no actually in-depth analysis of racism and sexism and how those systems of oppression play out in the classroom setting or in the educational system. There was no higher level thinking.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

In the first quote, Mrs. Jones establishes a direct link to her multicultural class and her preparation to work in a diverse school. The class not only helped her assess her own culture, it also laid out strategies and approaches to working with students who may come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In contrast, the second quote demonstrates how instructors sometimes fail to meet the objectives of a course. For whatever reasons, the in-depth and critical journey necessary is surrendered and a safer, less controversial approach is chosen. Mrs. Summers had experience studying diversity and systems of oppression before she joined the university, which helped her see the ineffectualness of the class. However, what happens to pre-service teachers who have no prior knowledge of or experience with people who have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds? Lortie (2002) argues that teachers are already underprepared and isolated in their first years of teaching. When teachers are not given the tools they need, two results occur. First, teachers are overwhelmed upon entering the profession. Second, hindsight may prove the class to be viewed negatively. This awareness may lead them to

have negative opinions toward additional trainings provided by the school and the district before they even begin. Since most teachers are entering their first year with a lack of experience, the effects of not knowing how to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students may develop into long-term problems. Several participants expressed difficulties faced by new teachers.

*“So, and I had no classroom management experience, you know. I mean, you get a teaching certificate and you student teach, but really, until you become a teacher, all of that is just -- I'm not saying it's not helpful, but it's a completely different kind of experience. And so, I was totally overwhelmed and totally like, oh my gosh, I'm drowning.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

*“A college classroom is a lot different too than a middle school or elementary classroom with what you see because even for that college classroom, to get there, there are different scholarships or different financial pieces that have to be put in place before. And so, I didn't have a lot of training...And so, I came not very prepared and it was more of a learn as I went.”* (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

*“I thought I was [prepared]. But it's been a learning experience. I don't think I could have done it without having (name of teacher) as my cultural guide here. I needed someone that I could talk to honestly about the diversity and those kind of things.”* (Mrs. Walsh Interview, 2015)

*“And so, I think in terms of that I've been able to serve students whose native language is not English, I don't think I was prepared to help them as much. I think from, in the 4 years, I've come a long ways because of our ELL teachers doing stuff during our staff meetings and presenting different strategies and just background knowledge of what does it mean to learn a language? What does it mean to be a student when you don't understand what the teacher is saying? And how can you communicate to a student that doesn't speak English. So, I think I'm continually learning.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

These teachers have identified an issue that seems to be quite common. They enter the profession without the readiness to deal with the many issues they are presented. Most interesting was Mrs. Summers' use of a term that elicits Lortie's (2002) sink or swim model. Drowning evokes an image of suffering and helplessness. The only alternative to drowning is to swim, but how does one swim without knowing how to do it? Each teacher offered experience as the source of her learning. However, experience itself does not facilitate learning or change, just as one cannot learn to swim by nearly drowning. Experience is the observation of events through one's own perspective. Without critical reflection or guidance, change would not take place. Therefore, when participants talk about experience, they mean that critical reflection of an experience, considering all of the theory and knowledge they have about teaching and learning, and guidance has led them to a decision to change their approach. This is also known as praxis. The majority of teachers detailed the assistance they received from colleagues and district staff.

*“To me, the real cultural proficiency comes from being—interacting with our students, interacting with their parents, interacting with the liaisons for like the languages and being able to communicate back and forth.”* (Mr. Stuart Interview, 2015)

*“I feel very comfortable. It helps to have a teacher like (name withdrawn) where I can ask, where it goes into that gray area of accountability or enabling, you know, what accommodations can I do to help this ELL level 1 student? Oh, well modified grading scale, a lot of picture examples, having vocabulary words that are already pre-printed on cards, or having teacher generated notes where they can just fill in. And just having that resource of—she has a ton of knowledge.”* (Mr. Boyce Interview, 2015)

*“I’ve had so many great conversations with teachers about their experiences and what they’re doing here and trying to include in their classrooms and I just see just a sense of respect and you know for the diversity that we see around us here...and in like staff development there are so many talks of how can we reach this particular group of students and their particular needs, and how do we include ELL students in as many opportunities, but help them to be successful when they’re trying to navigate a whole different world. And so, those conversations happen all the time and teachers are seeking other teachers out for advice and I just, it’s part of the collaborative nature that we have here, but I see teachers are really trying to be successful in that.”* (Mrs. Jones Interview, 2015)

*“And so, I haven't taken a lot away from those as much as I've taken away from working directly with a special education teacher, working directly with an ELL teacher, working with the multicultural liaison. I've gotten to work a lot with the family coordinator. And so, learning a lot from him just about different cultural expectations. What's acceptable, what's not acceptable. How this cultural expectation differs from this one and how to kind of make sure that everyone feels safe and comfortable and welcome in the classroom. And so, that I've learned from the actual teachers who have worked it and kind of become pros at that.”*

(Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

A few participants pointed out specific trainings that they felt were influential in their development.

*“I took a class on Ruby Payne's levels of poverty situational, generational, and just kind of the effects that they have on our youth today.”* (Mr. Boyce Interview, 2015)

*“So, I attended like Ruby Payne's focus on poverty. I attended workshops with Jim Fay on love and logic. Attended lots of classes, any workshops, any conferences I could go to.”* (Mrs. Murphy Interview, 2015)

*“The other math teacher, he and I actually went to, attended the same Kagan training. I think it was 5 days a few years ago. We have a new math teacher who*



*we're teaching about Kagan cooperative learning, but I just know a sliver of it from, I mean, 5 days it was intense, but the end results have been spectacular.*

(Mr. Boyce Interview, 2015)

Despite the positive attitude toward various workshops and trainings, these were primarily directed toward national or regional events, some of which had little to do with cultural proficiency. On the other hand, opinions toward district-run trainings and workshops were not always as optimistic.

*"I've been to multicultural trainings within the district. I haven't taken a lot away from them. Sometimes what I've taken away is I've felt a lot like a very guilty criminal sometimes just for looking the way I do or living in the area of town that I do."* (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

*"The district has things that we go to, but that's all cookie cutter, it's all—I don't want to say this out loud because I don't want to be a part of it, but I want to be real with you. I feel like the stuff that we do with the district for cultural proficiency is all cookie cutter kind of stuff where they're just looking at it to make sure that we get something behind us."* (Mr. Stuart Interview, 2015)

*"And, I've attended the cultural proficiency that the district puts on and I was immediately turned off within the first twenty minutes because all they were doing was talking about minority students of color. And I'm thinking, we have a very, very diverse district here where it doesn't matter the color of your skin. We come*

*from different cultures, we need to understand each other's cultures and be empathetic not sympathetic while still providing those boundaries.”* (Mr. Boyce Interview, 2015)

This is where the cracks in communication between the district and the faculty become visible. As Mr. Stuart claims, the district is full of good intentions “*but again, good intentions aren't always the best things either.*” Furthermore, this participant feels that the district is making a surface attempt to be able to say it is trying to do something without any real desire to make it happen and without a deeper level of engagement. All of the participants who were critical of the district’s trainings either valued a specific training or explored possible areas of development that the district could employ in the future. One particular quote points out how the district’s goals are not communicated well enough.

*“You know, culture is defined a lot of different ways, but for the district it's defining culture as not only socioeconomic levels, gender, ability, religion, class, and then ethnicity. You know, the district has really pulled away from the race term and gone with ethnicity.”* (Mrs. Walsh Interview, 2015)

The district pulled away from race because it is considered a social construction and it ignores the diversity that exists despite skin color. For example, brown skin has often been categorized as Black, but there are significant cultural, linguistic, and identity differences between an African American male with brown skin, a German female with brown skin, and a Nigerian male with brown skin. Mrs. Walsh clearly identifies the district’s stance in a way that is congruent with Mr. Boyce’s opinion on race versus

culture. However, Mr. Boyce believes that the district is too focused on race. As Howard (2006) points out, it is important for institutions to approach White privilege and systems of oppression in a way that promotes the “healing work of social justice and personal transformation” (p. 115). Without this approach, White educators may become alienated rather than inspired. This seems to be what has happened with the participants above. Once lost, the confidence in the district’s goals is hard to regain, as is evidenced above. Furthermore, mandated trainings may take on a characteristic that is incongruent with cultural proficiency. Rather than being an inside-out approach within the school, the district’s approach represents an outside-in or top-down advance. This insight can be drawn from a segment of Mr. Boyce’s interview (2015) when he discussed how a behavioral intervention plan was adopted.

*“That was the year we were struggling. We didn't really have a behavior management system. And, we approached the administrator at the time saying that we'd been hearing a lot of elementary schools talking about BIST and how successful BIST has been. And so he arranged, I believe it was a two-day training, had subs come in mid-year and where we could get trained in it.”*

According to Mr. Boyce, teachers were aware of an area in which the school needed improvement and they addressed the issue. The teachers sought out their own solution, tested it, and then expanded it throughout the school. This seems to indicate that many members of the school do not accept the district’s call for improved cultural proficiency. If this were the case, the faculty and staff at the school would be equally proactive. In essence there seems to be misunderstandings emanating from both sides of this issue. On

the one hand, the district has seen a problem but has approached it from the top-down in a way that has alienated some of their faculty and staff. On the other hand, the faculty and staff may not fully understand or agree with the district's call for improved cultural proficiency. The faculty at Northup Middle School value the knowledge gained through collaboration and praxis over outside calls for change, and these outside calls for change may seem like an attack on their teaching. Further complicating the problem is the hypersegregation that exists in schools. It probably seems unfair to insinuate that a small percentage of teachers in the city are to blame for social problems they believe are beyond their control.

### **Identity-Perception Gap**

I have talked about the influence of training and education, now I will talk about the identity-perception gap that exists between how teachers see themselves and how students see them.

Three participants brought up situations in which students called them racist or at least eluded to that claim. According to the teachers involved, the issues arose when students were held accountable for their classroom behaviors. For example, one student claimed a teacher gave him a poor grade because he was racist. The teacher, on the other hand, believed it was simply a matter of not meeting classroom expectations like turning homework in. All three participants had discussions with the students and their parents or guardians and explained how they were not treating the students in a racist manner. It was simply a matter of managing the students' behavior. This is important because it presents a recurring theme in which the students' opinions of the situations are ignored and the teachers' versions are accepted. I must stress that I am not claiming that either party was

wrong, but rather there were differences of opinion in each event, and in all three, it was easy to prove that the teacher was not racist. It is also important to note that often teachers were following a behavior intervention model that has proven effective in improving classroom management. The focus of the model is high expectations and accountability for all students so that they may be successful. Recalling Ladson-Billings' (1998) argument that equal treatment is necessary for moving African Americans out of their second class status, there is certainly a thin line between having high expectations for all students and forcing the dominant culture on students. For this reason, it is important to listen to students in these situations.

All three situations were similar in occurrence and outcome. The situations began with a teacher enforcing a rule or expectation. The student responded that the teacher was racist and teacher set up a meeting with the student and a parent/guardian to settle the situation. In each case, the teacher was able to prove his or her innocence and any claims of racism were proven to be misguided. In all three situations, the students' opinions were written off as a lack of experience or a misunderstanding of the term. The teachers understood their own intentions and knew that they were not racists. However, it is possible that a person who believes he or she is not racist can participate in perpetuating institutional racism. Toshialis (2010) considers the difference between who teachers think they are and how they perceived by students the identity-perception gap. As Mrs. Walsh explained, in a multicultural education meeting, participants were asked about how often they thought about their ethnicity and race. *"And I was the only White person that raised my hand and said I thought about it every day."* This invisibility of Whiteness has been addressed by many scholars (Katz & Ivey, 1977; Helms, 1990; and Howard, 2006).

However, the Whiteness of teachers is not invisible to students who come from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. By middle school, students have had plenty of experience with White teachers and White society. They will certainly have predispositions towards their teachers. Whether these predispositions are accurate or not is beside the point. These perceptions and beliefs about the White race are reality in the minds of the students. Mrs. Summers expands on this when she says,

*“There are definitely students that I have who view school, and their parents view school, as an unwelcoming place. As a place where I'm not valued, as a place where it's oppressive for many reasons. So, when they come to my classroom, a lot of my students—I shouldn't say a lot. I'm sure there have been students who have been like, I don't trust this person. She doesn't look like me. She probably has no idea what my life is like. Another adult who knows nothing about my life is telling me to do something I couldn't care less about.”*

In these three situations, we have teachers who believe that they are not racists. In all three cases, the issues were confronted with the help of parents or guardians. All three teachers preserved their reputations and the ordeals were written off as misunderstandings. In this day and age, it becomes ever more likely that people who are openly racist will not be hired as teachers. Any accusation of being a racist is easily defended against because teachers are assessed by the academic success of all of their students. As Mr. Boyce explains, *“I get judged based on how well your child does. It is counter-productive [to be racist].”* However, this does not discredit the students’ perspectives.

Returning to Mrs. Summers quotes may enlighten how two opposite perspectives on a situation can both be correct.

*“[T]he society that we live in is incredibly racist and incredibly sexist, incredibly homophobic. It oppresses people based on their ability, their physical ability, mental health. You know, so there are all these different intersections of oppression.”*

This helps to establish the students’ perspectives. When a school promotes and endorses the beliefs of the dominant culture, the school becomes a place of oppression that devalues the culture of its minority students. While teachers are working to the best of their abilities to help students learn and develop the tools necessary to be successful, ignoring the levels of oppression in society places a barrier between the teachers and students. Being part of the school then places the teacher in opposition to the students. Furthermore, a person does not need to be a racist to do something that is racist in nature. As critical race theory (CRT) contends, society has been systematically and structurally engaged in racism as a form of maintaining power for the dominant group. Racism is so ordinary, that it is difficult to address or even see.

*“I think in the hearts of hearts we—there are no racists in this school. There are no people who are sexist, but I think there are certain ideas and certain beliefs that they have that they aren't even aware of that are racist. You know, I think racism and sexism is so insidious it's—you can be consciously racist, but there are so many things that are unconscious about it.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

Mrs. Summers shares insight from the political commentator Jay Smooth who calls on society to have honest conversations about acting and behaving in racist ways. The argument is that when confronted with an accusation of being racist, a person will respond defensively and take the accusation as a claim against his or her character or goodness. In the same tone, it is easy to defend against the accusation of being a racist because of the idea that school policies and practices are culturally neutral. So, when these conversations are avoided, the behaviors that may be racist, sexist, homophobic, and so on will endure. In other words, “without acknowledging the reality of dominance, we [can]not engage in a discussion of strategies for change” (Howard, 2006, p. 34). Even if a teacher believes that he or she is not racist, the students’ perceptions of events should not be written off. CRT posits that “political and moral analysis is situation” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13). This means that our social reality is a construction of our experiences and stories shared. White teachers may not believe racism exists in the school, but the experience of an African American student living in a racist society may believe otherwise. In this situation, the concern should not be who is right or wrong, but rather understanding why the student feels that way and showing empathy, and also understanding why the teacher may be unable to see institutional racism.

All three teachers who were called racist confronted the accusations and managed the conflict effectively. One teacher in particular spoke about having a one on one conversation with the student, before the meeting with the parent or guardian, to get a better understanding of the situation. Communication played an important role in the success of each event. Furthermore, each of these teachers demonstrated culturally



proficient behaviors and teaching approaches. Perhaps, it was individual effort to become better and more effective instructors for all students that led them to share these experiences.

### **Relationships**

Relationships play an important role in education. Teacher-student relationships and peer relationships have been shown to affect student motivation, academic achievement, and attitudes toward school (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008; Wilkins, 2014). It is no surprise then that participants discussed relationships as an important part of cultural proficiency. Participants focused on teacher-student, student-student (peer), and teacher-teacher/staff relationships.

When participants were asked to share experiences in which they had found success working with a student despite a cultural or linguistic difference, many offered stories about the need to build trust and prove that the students are cared about before the students became engaged in the class. Ways of building trust varied as much as the diversity of the students from showing up every day to providing a pencil. Participants stressed that time and effort were essential to building relationships.

*“You know, to build relationships with students, not necessarily you're the friend, but it's a you know, professional relationship. To get involved in after-school clubs where you see kids in a whole different point of view. And then also you know, to coach if you think you want to coach. Or really try to attend the events like I said. You know, students really get excited to see you. You know, you kind of put those drops in their bucket. And, like I've been basketball, like the Salvation*

*Army—or gone to different events or helped at different events. Not necessarily the coach, but you can really you know, talk to families that way and get involved, you know, just be visible.”* (Mrs. Walsh Interview, 2015)

*“You have to show them that you care by putting in the time, by always being there, by listening to them. And, by listening, you're really showing them I value what you say. I care about you. And by planning things and by sort of creating a curriculum where it's like, I want you to be a part of this. I want you to show whatever you're interested in, I want you to express that. I want you to feel like what we're doing has purpose and that I can talk to you about why creativity is important, why critical thinking is important, but until you see your own growth in the class, you know, again it's just you need to show them.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

For these teachers, building trust was done over several weeks. Mrs. Summers even explained how she had seen one student start to make personal changes and was becoming more engaged in class, however, when Mrs. Summers needed to have a substitute teacher fill in for her for two days, things changed. After returning to school, Mrs. Summers realized that the student felt abandoned. The trust that had been built was now broken, and the relationship started over. A comment by another teacher, Mrs. Murphy, helps clarify the need for these relationships and how trust is built. *“I think my life philosophy is that we have to get to know people in order to understand people.”* In

order to build trust, teachers need to get to know their students and learn what motivates them. Relationships, therefore, are critical to managing conflict and adapting to diversity.

Teacher-student relationships are not the only relationships necessary to improve student engagement and academic success. “Students who perceive that their peers support and care about them also tend to be more engaged in positive aspects of classroom life than are students who do not perceive such support” (Wentzel, 2006, p. 633; as cited in Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 114). Earlier, it was discussed that adults needed be more responsible for teaching students about cultural proficiency and holding them accountable to those ideals. The participants at this school displayed a keen interest in improving the students’ relationships with each other, especially when differences were evident.

*“I hope that students understand and can embrace diversity in whatever form it comes in because we live in a diverse country, and I really feel like if students and adults alike, are culturally proficient and understand and appreciate diversity that they will be able to be better citizens.”* (Mrs. Thomas Interview, 2015)

*“So, when they see somebody like that, not to judge. Just to say, what's up? How are you doing? And to build a friendship among everybody instead of just having that boundary of I hate you because you look like this or you don't look like me.”*  
(Mr. Francis Interview, 2015)

Two participants even discussed how they are working to improve peer relationships.

*“Every Monday and Friday, we do a team builder activity which is non-academic, it's just—kind of have some fun, but they learn about their teammates. And, we talk about building trust because once you break trust, it's very difficult to earn that back. Every Wednesday, we do a class builder, non-curricular for the entire class.”* (Mr. Boyce Interview, 2015)

*“When we do community building, we work in cooperative learning groups. And, when we work in cooperative learning groups, we'll have team building questions within those cooperative learning groups. They're not always academic. Sometimes they are. We probably have to throw some of that in as a teacher, but lots of them will be, describe your favorite experience, describe your favorite holiday and why, describe your favorite trip where you went and what was your favorite part about that... So, we talk about that and they get to know each other on more of a personal level not merely just another student who sits by me here, but I know your name, I know something about you, I know what we have in common, I know some things that are different about us and that's okay.”* (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

The interviews revealed some interesting approaches to building relationships between teachers and students and among peers. The 6th grade faculty has developed a more structured system based on accountability, respect, cooperation, and collaboration. They discussed using the BIST model for positive behavior intervention, Kagan's cooperative learning model, and Classroom Instruction that Works, which refers to the

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) developed textbook series. The advantage that can be seen with the 6th grade teachers is unity. The teachers buy-in to the system, they use similar class-building and team-building activities across various subjects, and the teachers find time to build relationships using both academic and non-academic activities. The effects of these approaches are clear when visiting the classroom. Classroom management appears to be done efficiently and with ease. The majority of the students appear to be engaged and learning can be fun for students. One of the student-participants even singled out a teacher-participant who used these approaches.

*"I have one word: Mr. Boyce, 6th grade teacher. He is the best teacher I've ever had. He makes learning fun. He makes doing your homework sound easy. He just makes it feel like a great place to be."* (Bobby Harrison Interview, 2015)

With so much focus on standardized testing and adequate yearly progress, some teachers do not take the time to incorporate non-academic activities such as team-building exercises or finding common interests. Instead, the focus is on getting through all of the material in the limited amount of time available. The failure here is not a teacher's desire to meet the expectations of the course or to prepare students for higher education. Rather, teachers take the social nature of building relationships out of the classroom. The result is that some students connect with the material and can stay motivated throughout the year. However, the students who do not like the subject or cannot connect to the material may find it hard to stay motivated. Soon, these students become disengaged and even disruptive. Any teacher who has had trouble with classroom

management will know that getting through curriculum is much slower with a class that is disengaged and disruptive. Teachers expressed the importance of building relationships with their colleagues as one way to overcome these obstacles.

*“And so, those conversations happen all the time and teachers are seeking other teachers out for advice and I just, it's part of the collaborative nature that we have here.”* (Mrs. Jones Interview, 2015)

*“The most that I've done here has been being able to work with adults and ask some of those questions, be an open book. Make yourself vulnerable because that's the only way you're going to grow.”* (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

*“[T]alk and collaborate with your fellow teachers because they're going to have - there's a lot of experience in this building and when you're a new teacher you have zero experience, you know. So, go to those people and ask them for help about building those relationships or how you can be more culturally proficient because they're all going to have those different experiences and different backgrounds. They're going to give you something new to think about.”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015)

*“So, some of this is you learn as you go, and some of it you can get from other people. So I would say, ask as many questions as possible. If you don't know which questions to ask, find somebody who you trust who works in the building*

*and go to them and say, what do I need to know about this?"* (Mrs. Dering Interview, 2015)

Building relationships with students and colleagues plays an important role in improving student motivation and academic achievement. When students have positive relationships with teachers and their peers, they are more likely to be active participants in class. When teachers work together and establish unified and consistent approaches to teaching, the effects on classroom management and student engagement are often positive. Finally, teachers can gain expertise and guidance through asking questions and collaborating with their colleagues. With positive relationships, teachers will be more likely to accept the advice of their peers. Therefore, building relationships acts as a response to issues of diversity by enhancing “students’ ability to learn and teachers’ ability to teach,” preparing “students to find their own places in the global community,” promoting “positive community relations,” preparing “students for outstanding citizenship,” and fostering “effective leadership” (Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 12). These responses are at the heart of cultural proficiency.

### **Cultural Incongruity**

Cultural incongruity refers to the assumed and real conflicts and contradictions that exist between beliefs and values of the home versus the beliefs and values promoted by the school. This can be illustrated through even the most basic of principles: the purpose of schooling. Rothstein-Fisch and Trumbull (2008) argue that from the individualistic perspective, which permeates most areas of the United States, learning is individual, students are responsible for their own learning, and one goal of schooling is

developing autonomous learners. This perspective influences all aspects of schooling from the student-teacher interactions to the assessments and grades. On the other hand, the authors argue that “[c]hildren from collectivist families are socialized to work toward group rather than individual goals” (p. 12). What this means is that for some children, the relationships between their peers take priority over individual achievement. This may be demonstrated through hesitation to ask the teacher questions or a willingness to help others on tests or assignments (i.e. “cheating” by individualistic standards). When the values of the dominant group are assumed to be superior to those of minority groups, the values of the home are seen to be damaging to the academic success of the child. When the culture of the school accepts this perspective of superiority, the real effects can be damaging. Students may be forced to choose between family/friends and education. The authority of the parents may be challenged resulting in a division within the family. For some students, finding success in school can be deemed equivalent to selling out their ethnicity and “acting White”. When faced with choosing family, friends, or culture some students can see the systems of oppression more clearly than their teachers. Mr. Stuart offers some insight into this dilemma. Having grown up poor and being turned off to school at an early age, his experience brings awareness to these situations at the school.

*“And also being here, you see that if parents didn't like school, the kids don't like school. I mean, my parents hated school. My mom dropped out, my mom finished high school, sorry. And my dad dropped out his senior year. They didn't like it at all, they didn't care to go on any further. They knew exactly—they knew their role of being low income people that they were going to stay in working jobs, blue collar hard-working jobs, for the rest of their lives until they die. And, I feel like a*



*lot of our students here at our school are exactly the same way. They look at it as they're working class citizens and they will always be working class citizens unless they play sports and they all of a sudden make it big and be Joba Chamberlain.”* (Mr. Stuart Interview, 2015)

Mr. Stuart’s analysis is poignant and possibly accurate for many students. However, it still adheres to the individualistic perspective of success. For some cultures, the success of the family takes priority to the success of the individual. Middle school students may be asked to start working, babysit their siblings, or take on other time-consuming roles that support the family. Such roles may not leave the students with enough time or energy for homework and studying. Other cultures may observe strict gender roles, reducing the opportunities for women. The dominant culture views these alternative values as destructive and neglectful. The following quotes will demonstrate how teachers can view the home culture as being incongruent with the culture of the school.

*“I guess that is another thing, being a woman, there are some cultures that have a really hard time with women as authority. And I have had some students that have, I’ve kind of gone head to head with that issue as well, culturally.”* (Mrs. Jones Interview, 2015)

*“You know, the more difficult the student is, often times it's very hard to gain the support from the parents. Not because they’re not supportive of their children, but because there's always already a problem and then it seems to get into kind of a bigger problem.”* (Mrs. Walsh Interview, 2015)

These two quotes reveal how deceptively easy it is to fall into the dominant perspective superiority complex. Both teachers go out of their way to serve their students. In other areas of their interviews, they lay out plans and approaches that promote cultural proficiency. However, here they both view the conflict in a negative light, and place the blame on the student or culture of the home. Mrs. Jones addresses an issue that finds strong support in the United States, and rightly so. Mrs. Walsh leaves the dilemma more open-ended, but establishes a connection between a behavior and a problem at home. One of the key elements of cultural proficiency states that conflict is a natural part of a diverse class, school, or society. The goal is not to mold everyone into accepting one perspective or accepting all perspectives equally. Instead, cultural proficiency aims to accept and manage conflict in a way that values diversity. Nuri Robins et al. (2006), point out that we cannot change an individual's perspective by presenting a persuasive argument. Instead, "[w]e change our values because of significant emotional events" and "[o]ur values change over time when we interact with someone or something that conflicts with our values and causes us to rethink a previously nonnegotiable belief" (p. 148).

Nuri Robins et al. (2006) also argue that conflict should not be seen as something negative. Without conflict, "we would lose the benefits of creative brainstorming, group problem solving, and collective decision making" (p. 145). A few participants offered supporting opinions.

*"I hope that students understand and can embrace diversity in whatever form it comes in because we live in a diverse country, and I really feel like if students and adults alike, are culturally proficient and understand and appreciate diversity*

*that they will be able to be better citizens. That you're able to work in different settings, get along with you know, whatever types of persons that you come in contact. That's essentially important that you're able to be accepting and to understand different cultures, and even if it's not like yours, but you could have an acceptance for it -- cultures and different people, what have you, different beliefs and to be able to embrace that, that's kind of what makes a -- you know, the district, the United States, the whole world unique when people are able to do that.” (Mrs. Thomas Interview, 2015)*

*“Every day I'll ask (name of staff) about certain things with different cultures or I'll ask (another staff) about certain things with different cultures just to make sure that what I'm thinking is my expectation isn't actually being offensive or going against someone's cultural proficiency, or culture, or their home culture or their religious culture, or a culture from a different country and what's expected there.” (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)*

*“You get messages from home and you get different messages in school, and it's, it's always that pathway of not telling the students that this is how you should think, but opening them up to other experiences and other viewpoints so that they can start making the decisions on their own. Especially as they move towards middle school, high school, and college to be able to be open to other ideas. Not to discredit their parents, but in the United States, we have to work this way and*

*we have to be able to be understanding of each others' similarities and differences.”* (Mrs. Murphy Interview, 2015)

These three quotes offer understanding of how far the school has moved toward cultural proficiency. With cultural liaisons and teachers dedicated towards improving the culture of the school, genuine steps have been taken in the right direction. The complexity of an issue like cultural proficiency is unique to each school, neighborhood, and city. A focus on managing conflict, rather than ending it, provides a path toward accepting and valuing diversity. In the next section, I will examine how this path can be developed into a road leading to adaptation to diversity and the institutionalization of cultural knowledge.

### **Findings from Pre-Figured Coding**

The literature revealed five essential elements of cultural proficiency and six points along a cultural proficiency continuum (Nuri Robins et al., 2006; Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005; Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009). These eleven aspects of cultural proficiency were used as pre-figured codes to analyze the data and explore the experiences of the teachers, staff, and students in relation to cultural proficiency. First, I will examine the codes referring to the essential elements of cultural proficiency. A section exploring the codes referring to the cultural proficiency continuum will follow this.

### **Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency**

**Assessing culture.** Nuri Robins et al. (2006) include the following characteristics in their description of assessing culture: assessing one’s own culture; help students assess their cultures; and assessing the school culture. Furthermore, assessment of a culture

includes understanding outside perceptions. In order to become more culturally proficient, individuals and organizations must start with this step. All but one of the participants commented on this element, which suggests some progress toward, or effort to become more culturally proficient. Most of the participants who were faculty or staff indicated moments of experience that changed their perspectives and helped them become more aware of the differences in culture that exist between the teachers and staff and the students. This is an important reminder that change cannot be forced and is often initiated as an emotional response to an event. For example, Mrs. Jones explains,

*“And so we moved into—I stayed at my same high school, but I moved into a neighborhood closer to downtown, and a lot of my friends at my school were like, oh you're moving into the bad part of town. And, I thought it really changed my perspective that you know, I'm safe, I have always felt safe, I've always felt you know, like this is a picture of the world, this is what the world looks like. And, that I grew up in a school where the world doesn't look like that. And so, I think even in high school, my opinion of other parts of town started to change.”*

Other participants placed significance on working with colleagues and a culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

*“And so, I came not very prepared and it was more of a learn as I went. Last year was my first year getting to work with an ELL co-teacher, and I have learned a ton since then.”* (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

*“I think when I was working at an elementary school, it was, you know, I went from my small farm school where diversity was that your grandfather didn't farm the land to an elementary school where diversity was brand new immigrants and refugees and high poverty and all that kind of stuff. And so, I had to learn very early on that I had to seek out and learn for myself about how to do things.”* (Mrs. Murphy Interview, 2015)

These examples offer insight into what is necessary to transform a school in terms of cultural proficiency. However, they also imply that lack of experience is an obstacle. Members of the school are aware of this obstacle. Mrs. Thomas explained that, *“I try to get them to think about exposing yourself to as many of those different experiences as you can so that—because sometimes it's not even a perception or an engrained belief, it's just lack of experience.”* She continued by explaining how a lack of experience can cloud one's judgment, leading to a fear of the unknown. In her words, *“sometimes fear can be masked as hate.”*

Restating a claim that I made earlier, experience itself should not be given more weight than it deserves. It is the critical examination of an experience, when we challenge our beliefs and perspectives, through which we gain an awareness of another person's culture or life. Gary R. Howard (2006) focuses on the awareness rather than a true understanding because we can never know what we have never experienced. This awareness through the assessment of culture leads to empathy. Empathy allows us to feel with another person, but it “requires the suspension of assumptions, the letting go of ego, and the release of the privilege of non-engagement” (Howard, 2006, p. 77). It is our

shared experience of sadness and pain that drives our desire for change. Thus, a critical assessment of one's own culture, the differences of students' cultures, and the culture of the school becomes the cornerstone of cultural proficiency. It is what leads an organization to transform itself from the inside-out.

**Valuing diversity.** Valuing diversity does not mean acknowledging or accepting differences within the classroom. Instead, it is an intentional and proactive approach to instruction. Many participants described how they, or their teachers, organized classrooms in ways that valued diversity. Mr. Boyce presents an organizational approach to his classroom that exemplifies this essential element of cultural proficiency. As he states, *"I would say, it's not my classroom, it's not your classroom, it's our classroom. Let's work together."* His ideal promotes an inclusive environment in which everyone is valued, everyone will have the opportunity to learn from each other, and any success or failure will depend on each participant. Inclusion was an important goal specified by many participants. Teachers wanted all of their students to feel like an important and valued member of the classroom. This was done by using teaching materials that helped students see themselves in the curriculum. The newer textbooks have been created to accommodate a changing population with emphasis placed on ethnicity, gender, language, and culture. As Mrs. Harris explained, *"with our curriculum there's lots of informational texts and non-fiction. And the non-fiction texts with our New Wonders curriculum actually incorporates a lot of different cultures and languages from around the world."* When languages of her students are used, Mrs. Harris allows the students to teach their classmates the meaning of words and phrases. Teachers were always careful not to place an entire group on the shoulders of one student or force a student to share

something he or she did not want to. In science classes, sexism and racism are discussed by talking about groups that are missing from the books. The school tries to welcome it's diverse population by hanging the national flags for each country represented by a student in the main hallway. In addition, the library has begun to build a section of foreign language books and dual language books, both fiction and non-fiction. Like many schools, there are a number of after school clubs built on empowering youth and reinforcing pride in one's culture. This school goes further than some by offering a club that helps students explore and understand their identity. It started as a club for homosexual and transgender students, but has been opened up to explore all areas of identity.

The identity club represents a brave step toward inclusion that has been missing from curriculum and classrooms for far too long. However, it also reveals an ugly shadow that still hangs over secondary education. Whenever the topic of inclusion through culturally relevant curriculum was discussed, teachers focused on ethnicity, race, or gender. As Mrs. Harris pointed out, the new textbooks have begun to include multiple languages. However, even considering this aspect, textbooks are written to be sold to the widest population possible. As such, certain minority groups and their languages are creating a middle class where their culture or language has more worth or value than those of other minority groups. Once again, Mrs. Summers stands out for her critical development of curriculum that is by far more inclusive than any standardized curriculum. As Stephen J. Thornton argues, "The common failure even to mention the existence of lesbians and gay men (let alone bisexual and transgender persons) clearly clashes with gay matters today being a visible part of the public landscape in most of



America” (2013, p. 332). Thus Mrs. Summers’ class offers a little light in an area of darkness. In her words,

*“Or making sure that in my classroom, you know, when we talk about different artists then I'm including artists of color. I'm including women artists, I'm including artists who you know, may have some kind of disability. And then in my interactions with my students, being very aware of the society that they live in in their daily life is going to be very different than mine ... it's not a great feeling to just be like, oh, I can't be the president, there are no women presidents. Or, all the scientists we talk about, you know, are male White scientists. I guess, are there female? That kind of feeling is really terrible and I don't want that for my students. I want them to know that there are -- if you're a person of color, if you're transgender, if you whatever, there's a writer, there's a scientist, there's people out there and I want you to see that back. I want to see yourself represented in society. So, part of my job, what I'm doing, when I'm introducing art history, is definitely to be considerate of that.”*

The school’s endeavor to value diversity was noticed by the students interviewed. However, whether the students understood how the teachers genuinely felt or acted is not clear. Both quotes below establish an interpretation of caring teachers, however, in terms of cultural proficiency, they are unaware of the pedagogical approaches that teachers are using. In other words, the students are aware that something feels welcoming and inclusive, but they are unaware of how or why it is that way.

*“I mean, they're not rude about like you should be this way or that way.*

*They're not making them—forcing them to be something else. Like, they're not making fun of their culture or anything. They're supporting them.”* (Christy Dunn Interview, 2015)

*“I think they, the teachers interact just fine. I don't think they really care what color your skin is or what ethnicity you are, or what language you speak.”* (Bobby Harrison Interview, 2015)

The school has clearly made an effort to be welcoming of all students, and this is echoed throughout the district. However, there are issues in the school that are just as obvious as historical bias and discrimination. The majority of the teachers and staff at the school are White, there is a relatively high turnover rate for teachers and staff, and the school has a negative reputation throughout most of the city. The students rarely get to go on field trips, have social events like dances, or have assemblies. The hidden curriculum establishes an unequal environment on both the school level and the district level. These issues will be expanded when the cultural proficiency continuum is discussed later in this chapter.

**Managing dynamics of difference.** At the heart of this essential element is the understanding that “[c]onflict is a basic, natural aspect of life” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 145). The authors argue that conflict should not be avoided. Instead, it should be managed so that group problem solving and decision making can take place. Part of valuing diversity requires a more intensive management of conflict because you are

aware of more differences, which in turn leads to more issues (Nuri Robins et al., 2006). The authors have chosen to use “conflict management” rather than “conflict resolution” because the issues will not usually go away. Managing the dynamics of difference depends on an awareness and understanding of one’s own culture, the culture of the school, and the cultures of the students. It involves an approach to teaching that involves student collaboration and strong peer relationships. The experience gained by working together to complete a task or solve a problem opens a path toward acceptance and respect between peers. Cooperative and collaborative interactions between groups in a school are considered “conducive to moving toward cultural proficiency” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 154).

Of all the themes, this particular one was discussed the least. This may be a result of teachers grasping to maintain control over the students and the learning environment. It seems that for many teacher-participants, cultural proficiency in the classroom is reliant on what they can do. Paulo Freire (1996) criticized the traditional system of education as being oppressive. This “banking” concept of education places the teacher in a position of power, in which “the teacher teaches and the students are taught,” and “the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” (Freire, 1996, p. 54). The teachers at Northup Middle School frequently discussed a desire to reach every child and to make a difference in their lives. However, the structure of the classrooms, the school and classroom rules, and teaching methods observed in this study suggest that the focus was on teaching the required curriculum and avoiding conflict rather than cooperating or collaborating to manage it. For example, during my time at the school, I witnessed and intervened in multiple cases of bullying. The behavior was rarely addressed within the classroom.

Instead, guilty parties were called out of the room to talk with administration or counselors. Although this approach partially meets recommended strategies for managing classroom bullying (Crothers & Kolbert, 2008), other recommendations such as guidance lessons (videos, books, or student-led dramas) and cooperative learning activities were not always used, if ever. Even though the sixth grade faculty incorporated cooperative learning activities into all of their classes, observations in higher grades demonstrated a reluctance to incorporate them effectively. For example, on multiple occasions teachers gave in to students who refused to work with certain peers. In these cases, conflict was not managed, it was avoided. This avoidance also reinforced any real or perceived differences between the students, thus justifying the behavior. In most cases, it was a popular student who refused to work with a less popular student. By allowing the popular student to work with someone else, the actions of the popular student are legitimized. As a result, bullying may be seen by students as an acceptable method of dealing with differences. With bullying, the school missed an opportunity to help all of its students understand and manage the dynamics of difference.

Once again, there is a bright light within the school when it comes to managing the dynamics of difference. The sixth grade faculty collaborated to create a welcoming and effective learning environment in which the students build their community on three principles: be safe, be respectful, and be responsible. Although the three principles are promoted throughout the school, the systematic and consistent implementation in the classroom by the sixth grade faculty as a collective was unmatched. Classes were organized using Kagan's cooperative learning model. Following this model, student *"groups are set up in groups of four and they're set up academically where every table*

*group has a high, has a low, has a medium-high, and a medium-low*” (Mr. Boyce Interview, 2015). Working together and learning about each other were integral parts of every subject. They were explored through academic and non-academic activities. Students are taught life skills and are held accountable for their actions, and at the same time, the teachers are modeling the expected behaviors. For example, Mr. Boyce talked about the importance of apologizing to students when he made mistakes. He also makes an effort to remain calm even when an event may be stressful. He described his actions in more detail,

*“And then I always promise my students three things because math was always difficult for me. I say I'll never yell at you, I'll never make fun of you, but I will hold you accountable. And so building up that trust of it's okay and it's a safe environment to say I don't understand that math question. Can you help me with it again? Instead of, this is stupid, I don't get it. Let's stay calm, let's work together.”*

Spending time on relationship building and life skills education proved beneficial despite the class time diverted from the curriculum. Mr. Boyce’s approach, which was shared by the many of the sixth grade faculty, empowered students to take responsibility for their own learning and to recognize excuses. The success that the sixth grade found was not accidental. The participants attributed their success to training and intentional planning. Managing conflict requires critical reflection, or praxis, and intentional modifications based on the needs of the students. Managing the dynamics of difference may be one of the most difficult of the essential elements for many instructors to effectively apply.

Teachers must commit to research and planning. However, this essential element is necessary for any transformations that will take place within the school or the classroom, and it is the catalyst for the adaptation to diversity and the institutionalization of cultural proficiency.

**Adapting to diversity.** As Nuri Robins et al. (2006) explain, cultural proficiency is about a commitment to change. Cultural proficiency is a process and “each day you have to decide again whether this is what you want to do. It is a change of lifestyle in how you view the world around you” (p. 160). Once this commitment has been taken on by an individual or an organization, it must be met by a proactive effort to learn “what is necessary to deal with the issues caused by differences” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 49). The following quotes establish a commitment to change as proposed by the participants.

*“I think that the teachers are really trying to help the students work through that in their lives and because so many of our students do have maybe unique aspects to their identity development, being able to help them along that journey because especially in middle school we're not just subject teachers, we're life teachers.”*

(Mrs. Jones Interview, 2015)

*“Every day I'll ask staff about certain things with different cultures just to make sure that what I'm thinking—is my expectation isn't actually being offensive or going against someone's cultural proficiency, or culture, or their home culture or their religious culture, or a culture from a different country and what's expected there?”* (Mrs. Harris Interview, 2015)

*“Working with my ELL students, one of the things that I have done is—and have made it one of my counseling goals is to become more knowledgeable about Middle Eastern cultures for example because that was not an area—where I was from before, we didn't have any Middle Eastern kids at the time. I don't know if there are now, but we didn't. So, that was a piece where I felt lacking. So, I've been to several cultural events in the city like at Union College and other places and reading books. And so, trying to bring those pieces into my work.”* (Mrs. Keller Interview, 2015)

The decision to change had been taken on by many of the participants, just as the school and the district had decided that improving cultural proficiency was the goal. However, it is easy to choose a direction, but committing to change requires more effort. A teacher who exhibits this essential element would modify and enhance a class so that the material is learned with the students. The class would inform and empower learners. A teacher who is striving for cultural proficiency would need to be engaged in praxis, without it, change could not happen. Paulo Freire (2005) believed that education was an act of love and its role should be one of liberation and humanization. He argued that “[t]he oppressed need to develop the necessary critical tools that will enable them to read their world so they can apprehend the globality of their reality and choose what world they want for themselves” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 389). Participants shared similar examples of building their knowledge of students’ cultures and becoming more aware of the diverse needs in the class. For example, they endorsed reading about the cultures of students they are serving, talking to students, getting involved with parents, attending

trainings and workshops, and relying on the cultural liaisons that the district provides.

However, what the participants often failed to discuss was the importance of learning with students and providing students with the tools Freire believed were necessary.

Instead, teachers often relied on teaching students the cultural norms and values of the dominant group and promoted avoidance of conflict. As a result, students are not given the tools to choose the world they want for themselves, but they are given a choice of a path to success or a path toward failure.

When the school promotes a deficit view of various cultures, in which students need to be socialized or taught how to be responsible, the school conveys “the message that the students did not bring intellectual and social assets and capital to the learning environment” (Milner IV, 2010b, p. 68). As Nieto (1999) argued, when the cultural capital of the students is deemed detrimental to academic success, students may develop an oppositional identity to the dominant culture. In other words, faced with giving up their cultural identity for academic success, the students choose their family, friends, and values over academic success. Although the two do not need to be mutually exclusive, when a school rests on the cultural norms and values of the dominant group, they are often are.

Northup Middle School is clearly making an effort to improve its cultural proficiency. The faculty, administration, and staff share a concern for and dedication to the success of the students. Despite their efforts, many of the minority students exhibited a clear oppositional identity towards White teachers, especially White females, and the school. There are two issues at work here. First, by middle school, students have already developed preferences for teaching styles and personalities. Their experiences in and out



of school have influenced their attitudes toward education and its importance in their lives. Students whose poverty is generational may find the faculty and staff's claim that education is necessary for success in life laughable. For many of these students, their parents and grandparents attended the same middle school and lived in the same neighborhoods. The school system did nothing to improve their lives economically. If students have perceived their treatment in schools as unfair, they may be hesitant to trust teachers.

The curriculum at Northup Middle School at times attempts to be transformational, however, often remains additive when measured against Banks' model of curricula integration. For example, the eighth grade Social Studies curriculum invites students to become historians by allowing them to read historical documents from diverse perspectives, analyze them for validity and bias, and critically examine historical themes. Difficult topics such as slavery are examined honestly. This course straddles the line between additive and transformational. What holds this course back is the lack of connection and critical analysis of how history affects the modern era. Difficult themes are taught as a blemish on our history rather than having effects on our current society. Similarly, English classes read about the Holocaust, Japanese internment camps within the U.S., and other minority characters. The authors are as diverse as the topics, but the purpose for the readings is often unmentioned. It represents a passive rather than proactive approach to inclusion. In other words, "[t]hat which is safe, politically correct, and less controversial is more likely to be taught and discussed" (Banks, 2006; as cited in Milner IV, 2010b, p. 43).

Fortunately, Mrs. Summers Art class provides this research with an example of what a transformational and social action approach to instruction looks like. Not only are tough topics included throughout the entire class, students are given a chance to make artwork that represents their interests and values. Mrs. Summers tackles stereotypes, discrimination, and racism head on. In her interview (2015), she talked about not only engaging students with an understanding of obvious racism, which most are already aware of, but also discussing institutional racism. While discussing her social justice project she does with students, she explained this in greater detail.

*“But I wonder if they also understand sort of like institutional racism, structural racism, ways that policies and ways that our language and policies and rituals and everything can also lead to like oppressive systems. So I remember trying to talk about this like how are ways that not just individuals are racists, but institutions like schools, like the government, like the justice system, and then the ways that those systems interact with each other that perpetuate segregation, that perpetuate you know the fact that there are so many people of color in prison.”*

Her project starts with an examination of personal values and interests and then becomes social action through the creation of a political poster. Students *“picked a topic that they felt passionate about and then they had it, you know, came up with this is how I feel about it whether it was about domestic violence, the environment, costs in education, racism, and then they made an artwork about it”* (Mrs. Summers Interview, 2015). After the poster was finished, students were allowed to hang it up somewhere in the school.

Another project focused on animal cruelty. Students created a work of art and then sold it. The proceeds from the sale went to the local animal humane society. This class goes beyond teaching life skills and provides students with the tools to “make decisions on important social issues and *take action* to help solve some of the social ills and injustices in their school, community, and society” (Banks, 2006; as cited in Milner IV, 2010b, p. 43).

For Mrs. Summers, having complete control of curriculum development and the freedom to address social issues sets her class apart from other subjects. As she claimed, Art offers a sense of freedom that Math, Social Studies, English, and Science are not usually afforded. However, another aspect is at play here. Mrs. Summers trained and studied to be an artist and later decided to pursue teaching. She practiced social justice art and worked in the field before making the transition. Most content area instructors studied how to teach a subject without work in the field. This should not be a prerequisite for teaching, and realistically, it is not possible. However, her professional knowledge of art combined with knowledge of education theory and the freedom to create her own curriculum, provided her with the chance to transform the school culture. This also provides a strong argument opposed to standardized curriculum, especially where cultural proficiency is concerned. Unfortunately, one class or one teacher cannot completely change the culture of the school. This brings us to the last essential element of cultural proficiency: institutionalizing cultural knowledge.

**Institutionalizing cultural knowledge.** The final essential element may also be the most important. Necessary to the success of institutionalizing cultural knowledge is an awareness and understanding of the school’s culture and how people experience it.

With this knowledge, honest analysis and conversations must take place in order to transform the institution. Teachable moments “to share cultural knowledge about the instructors, their managers, the learners, and the communities from which they come” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 49) must not be avoided. The emphasis should be placed on becoming life long learners committed to principles of cultural proficiency while acknowledging that dynamic nature of the approach. This means that having success now does not equate to guaranteed success in the future. Failure to meet the needs of all students is inevitable, but not condemning. Conflict is a natural part of life, not evidence of incompetence.

The collaboration between the sixth grade faculty, the efforts of the counselors and cultural liaisons, and Mrs. Summers’ art class discussed above represent efforts to institutionalize cultural knowledge. However, outside of these examples, participants failed to discuss this essential element in the present tense. Participants seemed to be aware of the requirements of becoming culturally proficient and the characteristics missing from their school. As a result, most of the comments concerning this element were discussed during a hypothetical question. At the end of each interview, participants were asked how they would improve the school in regards to cultural proficiency if resources were of no concern. Often, answers suggested ways to change the school that would institutionalize cultural knowledge for students, teachers, and staff.

Seven participants brought up the need to have more speakers and assemblies for teachers and students. Participants argued that, “it’s essential that students see people and faces that look like them” (Mrs. Thomas Interview, 2015) and speakers can be as diverse as the student and teacher population, including White speakers. Students should be

taught that there are multiple definitions of success and having diverse speakers can illustrate this point while inspiring individuals to change. Furthermore, teachers and students alike notice the lack of assemblies. When students talk to friends or relatives from other schools that have multiple assemblies and school events, this becomes another form of inequality in education.

Participants also talked about how to improve cultural knowledge by having cultural events and even a cultural proficiency class. An important aspect of this is including it within school hours. Although any integration of culture, both inside and outside of normal school hours, is welcome, when it takes place during the school day it establishes more significance and validates the culture as being part of the school. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance of learning about the cultures of the community. Two participants explored ideas that would organize the school in a different way that would build a stronger connection to the community. Mrs. Walsh suggested that the school could become more of a community center where families could come in and take classes about technology, banking, health, and how to get started pursuing education. She also suggested that the school start a community garden. Mrs. Summers also suggested that the school should be more community oriented allowing at least three generations to interact within the same building. She was interested in bringing younger children and adults into the building and people from diverse backgrounds. Her goal was to change the belief that school is not real life; it's a place where teachers work and kids have to go during the day. Instead, she wants students and families "*to know that this is real life. Learning is real life and what you're doing matters.*" While these approaches to education seem unrealistic for the time being, they do advance an argument for

reconsidering the purpose and goals of education and reimagining the school. The ideas do reflect the goals and principles of cultural proficiency aimed at social action rather than social bandages.

This exploration of the cultural proficiency of a culturally and linguistically diverse school within a predominantly White school district would not be complete without also exploring where the school falls on the cultural proficiency continuum.

### **Cultural Proficiency Continuum**

Cultural proficiency is an approach that is defined as a process not a destination. Individuals and organizations are not static in their proficiency, thus is not possible to tie them down to one point on the spectrum. Instead, it is important to look at how a school or individual displays the different levels of the continuum. This allows for critical reflection and modification in an attempt to become better or more proficient. Northup Middle School and its local school district have much to take pride in, but they also have issues and obstacles limiting their development.

Fortunately for Northup Middle School, there was only one identified area or issue concerning cultural destructiveness, or “any policy, practice, or behavior that effectively eliminates all vestiges of other people’s cultures” (Nuri Robins, et al., p. 80). The school has opened its doors to all students without consideration of culture or limitations. Faculty and staff of the school have dedicated their time at the school to educating and improving the lives of their students. Multiple perspectives, cultures, and languages are part of the curriculum and are becoming more so each year. Unfortunately, there are elements of cultural incapacity, or the presumption that one culture is superior to others (Nuri Robins et al., 2006). The most obvious example of this is the seemingly

absence of homosexual and transgender inclusive materials. The school is not alone in this absence; heteronormativity is still considered legitimate and is promoted throughout the country (Thornton, 2013). Despite the influences of the homosexual and transgender communities, the topic is still considered taboo for middle school education. Two recent examples shed light on the lack of materials for this aspect of diversity. In 2014, a Nebraska school district made national headlines for its gender inclusive training. Instead of opening a discussion about gender identity, many news organizations and op-ed articles criticized the district for the suggested use of a classroom name like “purple penguins” instead of gender exclusive terms like “boys and girls” (Starnes, 2014, Maza, 2014). In the aftermath, a parent organization has been formed that is calling for full transparency from the district. Another concern being debated across the country is whether transgender students should be allowed to use the gender bathroom they identify with or if they must use the bathroom associated with their biological gender. While some states have already passed legislation supporting transgender identities, others have proposed legislation that rejects transgender identity or limits their access to public facilities (Guterman, 2015; Yan, 2013). These examples are particularly alarming because students are beginning to explore their identities at this age. Northrup Middle School had multiple students who identified themselves as homosexual or transgender, or somewhere along those areas of the fluid sexuality spectrum. What prevents this from being cultural destructiveness is the effort by teachers and staff to provide clubs and supplemental classroom materials that explore issues these individuals experience in schools.

As I have established earlier, the hidden curriculum of the school, which is represented by school policies and what is and is not taught as part of the curriculum, reinforces the values and norms of the dominant culture. Even the three tenets of the school, be safe, be responsible, and be respectful are developed under the values of the dominant group. These terms are unfixed depending on the culture and background of the person interpreting them. If a student helps another student answer a question, is it evidence of acting responsibly or of cheating? If the student refuses to help, is it disrespectful or responsible? Different cultures could answer these questions differently. If we say, “in America, this is considered cheating,” we are establishing a dominant belief that may not reflect the culture accurately. This distinction also establishes an in-group and out-group identification. What should be considered is that the out-group, or other, is still part of the community and as such, care and effort should be taken to bridge differences rather than demand assimilation. These presumptions influence the school in the next point on the continuum, cultural blindness.

When the dominant group holds the values and norms as expectations for all people, they are claiming that cultural differences are inconsequential. Nuri Robins et al. (2006) label this cultural blindness. It is often expressed as a lack of seeing color, only people. Even some of the most culturally proficient participants fell victim to this thinking. Their intentions are in the right place because they want to have high expectations for all students. They do not want to enable behaviors that could be damaging to the students’ school experiences. These are admirable qualities to be sure, but they are often paired with a declaration of colorblindness. Gary R. Howard (2006) argues that “the declaration of colorblindness assumes that we can erase our racial



categories, ignore differences, and thereby achieve an illusory state of sameness or equality” (p. 57). To a person who is accustomed to dominance, this can be relieving, but to a person whose skin tone is noticeably different from the dominant group, it can feel like a denial of his or her existence (Howard, 2006, p. 58). In the same way that a person may claim colorblindness, an individual could claim to not see culture, or deem it meaningless when it comes to education. In some ways, cultural blindness is similar to cultural incapacity. The main difference between the two seems to be an intentional effort to overcome differences by ignoring them. Instead of saying that a heterosexual identity is more appropriate than a homosexual one (cultural incapacity), we are saying that identity does not play a part in education, we all start from the same place (cultural blindness).

Even though teachers expressed this opinion, they may have misspoke. Their intention may have been to say that ethnicity or race plays no role in their decision to teach a student because they will teach any and every student who enters their classroom. For example, one teacher claimed, “*there are certain life expectations like the be safe, be responsible, be respectful. It does not matter what color you are, those are the life skills that you need*” (cultural incapacity, cultural blindness). However, the teacher later stated, “*We come from different cultures, we need to understand each other's cultures and be empathetic not sympathetic*” (cultural competence). Furthermore, the teacher’s effort to use cooperative and collaborative learning strategies promotes cultural proficiency. So, not only are individuals dynamic along the cultural proficiency continuum, they may be at more than one point simultaneously.

Questions about cultural proficiency brought responses from student participants that seemingly verified cultural blindness at the school. Bobby Harrison responded saying, *“I think they, the teachers interact just fine. I don't think they really care what color your skin is or what ethnicity you are, or what language you speak.”* This begs the questions, are teachers avoiding the topic of ethnicity and culture? Are students asked to think about their own cultures? Are teachers using culturally proficient strategies without specifically addressing culture (i.e. team-building activities)? Christy Dunn supported Bobby’s comment that presumes cultural blindness is an ideal quality when she said, *“I mean, everybody has their different ways and it doesn't really matter as long as you treat them with respect and show kindness and don't make fun of them.”* However, as comments from teachers have shown, kindness and respect are not always enough. She may have lacked the words to express her opinion clearly, but her quote posits an innocence that many teachers have already lost.

Moving past cultural blindness, we come to culture pre-competence on the continuum. This can be understood as having an understanding and awareness of difference, but recognizing that one’s “skills and practices are limited when interacting with other cultural groups” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 94). Having a large immigrant and refugee population at the school influenced the teachers. Three teachers explicitly discussed a desire to improve their instruction for English learners or an early difficulty working with that group of students. On the other hand, only two teachers commented on a desire or need to learn the languages of their students. This is another example of being culturally blind because the dominant group is unconscious of how their culture is forced on their students. Another teacher commented on her concern for working with students

who had been identified as special education students. She felt that she needed more experience and training to deal with the rising number of students in this group, which in some cases made up nearly half the class. Others discussed the identity perception gap when being called a racist or coming to terms with low test scores. As Mrs. Harris lamented after attending a district organized training, *“I think I wanted more out of it. I didn't want just that, I wanted a solution or things that I could do to help fix that and I didn't really get that.”* Teachers are frustrated because they are having issues in their classrooms and they want solutions. In addition, the school has implemented or piloted at least three behavior management and support systems in recent years. This implies that the school is looking to find something that works effectively for both students and teachers.

This stage of the continuum is inherently frustrating. In order to move beyond it, one needs to find success working with culturally and linguistically diverse students as well as students from the dominant culture and ethnicity. However, success with all students can be fleeting. What works for one teacher, may not work for another. What works for one class or student, may not work for another. Witnessing another teacher find success while you are struggling may be defeating. When much of a school is caught between pre-competence and competence, tensions rise, excuses are made, and the blame is projected outward. The literature (Nuri Robins et al., 2006; Lindsey, Roberts, & CampellJones, 2005; Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009) suggests that from this stage, an organization must look inward and commit to change. Brave and honest conversations must take place and all individuals need to be part of the exploration into becoming more culturally proficient. There must be recognition that answers will not

come from the outside. Training and workshops can be extremely helpful, providing the tools for success, but success depends on praxis. Each school, each class, and each individual will provide unique obstacles to cultural proficiency.

Cultural competence is defined by Nuri Robins et al. (2006) as “any policy, practice, or behavior that uses the essential elements of cultural proficiency as the standard for the individual or the organization” (p. 98). Individuals take on the responsibility of creating a learning environment that helps students realize their learning capacities. This means that the classroom and curriculum are additive to cultures that are different from an instructor’s. An instructor who is culturally competent would use multimodal strategies and would be critically reflective of instruction. For example, the sixth grade faculty’s collaboration using Kagan’s model of cooperative learning reflects the essential elements by promoting cooperation, collaboration, team-building, and learning about one’s peers. It also provided tools for problem-solving and developing skills needed to work in a diverse society. Mrs. Summers’ social justice art projects engaged students in cultural proficiency, identity development, and gave them the tools to take action and change things that they find important. Hanging flags in the hallway, dual language and foreign language books in the library, extracurricular clubs, and some textbooks indicate a desire to value the diversity at the school. For nearly every policy, practice, or behavior that could be deemed damaging to cultural proficiency, another reflects the school’s dedication to change. Unfortunately, most of the practices and behaviors observed in this study took place at the individual level or were limited to a small group of people. Northup Middle School seems to be confused about its identity and commitment to moving beyond cultural pre-competence. Many individuals remain

unaware that change is needed. For example, several participants expressed frustration with district trainings and workshops and held that against the district in its attempt to improve cultural proficiency. Others lamented that they wanted to learn how to teaching strategies that would reach all students. They compare successes of the past to current failures and project blame outward. Their frustration leads to cynicism, and they reject new approaches. Others are aware of the systems of oppression within the school and in society. They desire change and pursue knowledge that may offer insight to and understanding of their students' cultures. They supplement materials and create an environment in which they can learn with their students. Mrs. Summers' class and the sixth grade cooperative learning approach are two good examples of this. However, there are also limitations on what the school can do to become more culturally proficient. The direction to which the curriculum moves is often debated between politicians and the public. Middle school budgets do not offer the support for extracurricular activities, field trips, and assemblies that are available in high schools. Finally, the district must approve policies and rules before a school can implement them.

With all these obstacles, is cultural proficiency possible? The answer cannot be demarcated by a simple yes or no. The definition given by Nuri Robins et al. (2006) establishes cultural proficiency as a process rather than a destination. Cultures are dynamic and diverse over time and place. In this sense, one cannot truly become culturally proficient. On the other hand, the authors also claim that cultural proficiency is "a way of being" (p. 102). Thus, active engagement in the process would indicate becoming culturally proficient. This includes a life-long commitment to learning and studying the cultures of oneself, one's students, and one's school. Dedication must be

made to social justice and change. The final challenge is taking the step from a student of culture to an “informant to others about the cultural expectations of the environments that you do know well” (Nuri Robins et al., 2006, p. 102). At this particular school, cultural proficiency as a way of being is limited to individuals. These individuals are teachers, administrators, staff, and even students.

While some members of the school community remain stuck in cultural pre-competence, there is hope that change will eventually take place. Pre-service teacher education is improving. Teachers are entering classrooms with more training specifically aimed at meeting the diverse needs of their student populations, and more experience working with those populations. The district has taken an important first step by laying out a plan toward cultural proficiency. The main concern is whether or not the district is willing to take the necessary steps to fulfill its ambition. The district has failed to clearly communicate its definition of cultural proficiency, the purpose behind trainings and workshops, and its short-term and long-term goals. Even if these have been clearly explained to the administration of the school and the multicultural liaisons, there has been a breakdown somewhere between the district and the teachers. Enough teachers criticized district training and workshops to suggest they are not as effective and meaningful as intended.

Cultural proficiency is an approach that by definition produces results. If the results are lacking, if presumptions become obstacles to academic achievement, and if an assumption of rightness permeates among teachers, administrators, and staff of schools, then a commitment to change is merely wishful thinking.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **Limitations**

This research began with planning and gaining institutional review board approval. However, unexpected complications extended the process beyond the researchers expectations resulting in a delayed start to data collection. The resulting time restraints negatively effected the total number of participants, especially for students. As minors, recruitment of students took much longer than other participants because they needed to have multiple forms signed, including a parental or guardian consent document. Adding even more time to the process was the IRB's request to have a gatekeeper approach the students. Multiple days were lost due to delayed responses or issues of convenience. In addition, the original plan allowed for observations and interviews to take place on Fridays. The researcher had Fridays available for one semester, but during the second semester was required to work all five days at the school. With the delayed start, the researcher was not able to act as a non-participant observer and was instead forced to rely only on participant observations for in-class data collection. Non-participant observations may have opened the door to more detailed findings and better analysis of the data. Due to the delays, there were far too few student-participants, and no student-participants who identified themselves as belonging to a minority ethnic or racial group. An intended component of this research was the inclusion of multiple and diverse student voices. Without the student voices, the data primarily reflects one perspective. This was unquestionably the greatest limitation of this study. Also absent from the group of participants were the principal and vice principal of the

school. Multiple attempts were made to schedule interviews, but the nature of their job led to postponing the interviews beyond the scheduled time period for data collection. This was partially due to the time constraints. Although other high ranking administrators participated, their knowledge of the school's position on cultural proficiency and steps the district was taking towards its goal would have been beneficial. The lack of their involvement obstructed any true analysis concerning the cultural proficiency of the school and teacher training and education.

There were also limitations to the instruments used in this study. The questions were developed by the researcher without the use of a pilot study. A pilot study would have been beneficial for rephrasing and developing more effective questions. In addition, a written survey given prior to interviews may have led the researcher to a more diverse group of participants. Instead, those who seemed confident in their teaching or were interested in cultural proficiency volunteered. A survey may have piqued the interest of participants, both adult and student, who chose not to participate. Hindsight has illuminated missed opportunities during interviews, especially with non-teaching staff at the school.

Concerning teacher participants, one or two more interviews with teachers who do not identify as White American citizens would have only improved the data. The small population of participants does not affect the generalizability of the study because the aim was to explore the culture proficiency of a particular school, thus generalizability was never a goal. Instead, more participants would have provided a deeper understanding of school's cultural proficiency.



## **Future Research**

Research concerning cultural proficiency in schools is still in its infancy. Although multicultural education, cultural competence, and culturally relevant pedagogy are more established, cultural proficiency is limited to a handful of authors outside of the health profession. The primary researcher attempted to use a model of research that proposes equal status and privileges to all participants. However, more effort should have been given to involve all participants in the development stages of the research. Building on the knowledge gained from this study, the next stage should be based on the premise of social justice and social action. This focus would have the potential to create a more meaningful study. Similar to Mrs. Summers' art project, if the teachers and staff are more involved in the planning and development, they would be more likely to support it and buy-in to the results. An action research project lends itself well to experimenting and evaluating various teaching approaches. It is an act of praxis that could be complemented with journals written by teachers. With more participants, this type of research could offer more detailed and personal accounts of a transformation toward cultural proficiency. A longitudinal case study involving multiple student perspectives would offer a more accurate picture of identity development and their experiences at the school. It would also help identify policies and practices that are obstacles to cultural proficiency. Finally, if multiple cases were studied simultaneously, pictures of cultural proficiency would emerge from different types of schools (i.e. high-minority, low-minority, high poverty, low poverty, etc.). Instead of relying on one school at a particular moment in time to speak on behalf of all teachers and students, more voices, perspectives, and

policies would help build the body of knowledge needed to take on the transformations to culturally proficient schools.

### **Implications of the Study**

As mentioned in the School as a Case section of Chapter three, Northup Middle School's 56% minority student body validates the need to study cultural proficiency within a predominantly White school district. Gary R. Howard (2006) argues that "difference threatens dominance" (p. 57). Thus, any issues between teachers and students who are different would most likely increase in occurrence and strength if they were not addressed soon. A call to research began when the district decided that cultural proficiency was the path it would pursue. Choosing to align itself with an approach that only concerns itself with outcomes that are achieved, placed the bar high. With so little research on the topic, the district may have been too quick to take on the approach. The decision, albeit honorable, was similar to getting into a car without a roadmap. Approximately two years after the initial call to improve cultural proficiency, teachers and staff could not identify a consistent definition or course of action that the school or district intended to take. One participant who was aware of the district's course of action said that it was taking a top-down approach to improving cultural proficiency in which set time parameters were being used to measure where a person should be at a particular point in time. She even questioned whether sufficient time and energy were being used to help people progress along the continuum. Another participant questioned whether the district had the capacity to change.

The interviews established insight into the difficulties a district or school faces when committing to change. The biggest criticism to come from this study would be what

appears to be a lack of commitment to and understanding of the approach. First of all, improving cultural proficiency may be seen as a mandate from the district. As such, the decision to change is coming from the outside, which is incongruent with the approach. When a district criticizes its cultural proficiency, and most minorities attend two or three schools, it may seem like a personal attack on the teachers and staff of those schools. In addition, some participants expressed disappointment with district trainings and workshops. One negative experience makes it easy to discredit any future approaches. For example, one participant criticized the district for focusing too much on race. This was contradicted when the multicultural liaison claimed that the district had begun to use the term ethnicity. Furthermore, participants complained about how the district was at times unaware of its cultural blindness and distributed emails or videos that may have been offensive to some employees. Thus, an approach that comes from the district seems like a disservice to those who work daily in a culturally and linguistically diverse school.

My observations and suggestions for improvement based on my brief and narrow experiences with interviews and participant observation come from a perspective that desires change and applauds the commitment to cultural proficiency. The district has every right to mandate inclusion and care for all students and staff. Furthermore, the commitment to cultural proficiency is warranted. On the other hand, more time and effort is needed to understand the issues. For example, the district should conduct research that identifies issues faced at each school. Policies should be evaluated. Faculty, staff, students, and parents or guardians should all be given a chance to share their perspectives. Teachers need to be given the time and the tools to critically reflect on their lessons, values, and beliefs. They must learn about systems of oppression and dominance

in a way that fosters empathy rather than attacks behaviors and teaching strategies. At this point, the district as a whole should define cultural proficiency so that it is a consistent, more easily understood, and more accessible idea. From here, the schools should be given the authority to address their issues individually.

Some teachers commented on how some expectations were unrealistic and they desired solutions to their problems. Cultural proficiency is a process, and as such, trainings and workshops should be taught with this in mind. These events should provide teachers with the tools to assess the culture of their school, assess their own culture, and assess their students' cultures. As teachers move along the cultural proficiency continuum, trainings should recognize these changes and evolve with them. Strategies on managing conflict or for teaching English learners could be given. Other workshops could explore development of inclusive curriculum and supplemental materials. The interview with Mrs. Summers provided an illustration of how professional teachers can create a meaningful and engaging curriculum that is based on the guiding principles of cultural proficiency. It also makes a strong argument against standardizing curriculum. Northup Middle School had the highest student mobility rate in the district (District Statistical Handbook, 2014), however, Mrs. Summers never addressed this as an issue in terms of curriculum. One of the issues with becoming culturally proficient is that an organization like a school has certain expectations and obligations to the community. This means that if the local society objects to any goals, policies, or approaches, then attempts will fail. For example, the Nebraska school district which attempted to create a more inclusive environment by using gender neutral terms for students was criticized by the local and national media. If society demands a standardized curriculum, high-stakes

testing, and more time spent in STEM subjects, while also refusing to allow socially taboo subjects such as gender and sexual identity to be discussed in schools, then there is only so much that can be accomplished by the school.

Most participants reflected that the students of the school were not culturally proficient. A couple participants admitted that adults may be partially responsible for their lack of proficiency. As an insider in the school, I was able to see the students from another perspective because my time was spent working directly with the students during instruction. Some behaviors could be written off as merely reflecting a student's immaturity, but others characterized a need for cultural proficiency education. Students' behaviors and actions offered many teachable moments from making disparaging remarks to bullying that were mismanaged. Interviews with the sixth grade faculty indicated that non-academic activities produced positive effects toward classroom management and peer interaction. This suggests that students may need more time away from the academic curriculum to build better relationships with their peers and teachers. They should also be allowed time to explore their own cultures and identities. While certain themes may need to be addressed in content areas, Mrs. Summers' class posited that freedom of choice within some parameters fosters a more meaningful experience for the student.

Like any organization, this school presented examples of both sides of the cultural proficiency continuum. The complexity of cultural proficiency is greater than mere dynamic movement along the continuum. As demonstrated by more than one participant, an individual can simultaneously exhibit evidence of various points along the continuum. The complexity requires an equally complex approach consisting of much time, energy,

and resources. Even the seemingly solid foundation of the purpose of schooling may need to be reexamined. The district has already begun to experiment with connecting schools to community gyms. However, like many aspects of this study, the amount of effort and time given for such endeavors must be questioned. Is enough being done?

Finally, dominance is established on the assumption of rightness (Howard, 2006). While much of the content in schools has become more inclusive, the cultures of many groups are still avoided or deemed inferior. The use of languages other than English is still discouraged in schools. When a student's success relies on his or her assimilation to the dominant culture, a true existence is denied. Generational exposure to poverty and discrimination contradicts the message of success through education that schools promote. As long as inequities exist within society, academic achievement and socioeconomic gaps will persist. The achievement gap will widen, the educational debt will rise, and those who are not part of the dominant group will continue to be oppressed. The assumption of rightness is reinforced when disadvantaged groups fail. Those who do not adopt the dominant culture are seen as outsiders to the community. However, Paulo Freire (1996) eloquently refutes this idea.

The truth is that the oppressed are not "marginals," are not people living "outside" society. They have always been "inside"---inside the structure that made them "beings for others." The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves." (p. 55)

The responsibility of social change should not rest solely on the shoulders of the school system, but the school offers a platform for promoting social justice, cultural proficiency,

and change. However, public schools are limited in what they can do because of financial limitations, social expectations, and legal responsibilities.

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## Appendix A



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

### Parent/Guardian Informed Consent Document

You are invited to permit your child to participate in this research study. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether or not to allow your child to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

#### **Title of Research:**

Cultural Proficiency in a Diverse Middle School

#### **Purpose of Research:**

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the current state of cultural proficiency in a diverse middle school. Your child must be a registered 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade student at [REDACTED] Middle School, and he/she must have attended the school for at least 1 year to participate in this research.

#### **Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require participation in an interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. Your child will be asked to share his/her experiences as a student in a culturally and linguistically diverse middle school. Participation will take place after school and in the school unless another preferred location is requested. The interview will be audio-recorded. There is a chance that your child will be asked to participate in a shorter follow-up interview in order to clarify or further explain information discussed.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

#### **Benefits:**

The results of this study will be used to increase understanding about students' and teachers' experiences, especially concerning cultural proficiency, in a diverse middle school. It may also aid teachers and policy makers to provide improved classes and services for all students.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Your child's responses to this interview will be kept confidential. Any information obtained during this study that could identify him/her will be kept strictly confidential, and will only be seen by the investigator. An alias will be used in any published form of this study.

#### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research at anytime by contacting Jared Peo (402-840-1819), email: [jaredpeo@hotmail.com](mailto:jaredpeo@hotmail.com). If you would like to speak to someone else, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6965 or [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu).

#### **Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or [REDACTED], or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.





**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:** You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this research study. His/her participation in the interview certifies that you have decided to allow participation having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this informed consent form to keep.

**DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT:**  
**YOU ARE VOLUNTARILY MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE CERTIFIES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE INFORMATION PRESENTED. YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM TO KEEP.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

☐

Checking the box indicates that you will allow the interview to be recorded.

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

*Jared Peo, MA student, Principal Investigator 402-840-1819*

*Theresa Catalano, Adviser 402-472-2229*

## Appendix B



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

### Child Assent Document

You are invited to participate in this research study. You are being asked to participate because you are a registered 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade student at [REDACTED] Middle School and have been attending the school for at least 1 year.

#### **Title of Research:**

Cultural Proficiency in a Diverse Middle School

#### **Purpose of Research:**

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the current state of cultural proficiency in a diverse middle school. You must be a 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade student at [REDACTED] Middle School and have attended the school for at least 1 year to participate in this research.

#### **Procedures:**

If you participate in this study, you will do an interview lasting about 30-60 minutes. You will be asked to share your experiences as a student in a middle school which has students of many different backgrounds. Interviews will take place after school and in the school unless another preferred location is requested. The interview will be audio-recorded. There is a chance that you will be asked to participate in a shorter follow-up interview in order to further explain information you talked about.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks with this research.

#### **Benefits:**

The results of this study will be used to increase understanding about students' and teachers' experiences at a diverse middle school. It may also help teachers and policy makers to provide better classes and services for all students.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Your responses to this interview will be kept confidential. Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential, and will only be seen by the investigator. An alias will be used in any published form of this study.

#### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research at anytime by contacting Jared Peo(402-840-1819), email: [jaredpeo@hotmail.com](mailto:jaredpeo@hotmail.com). If you would like to speak to someone else, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6965 or [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu).

#### **Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or drop out of the study at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and [REDACTED] or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. In addition, your grades will not be affected by your decision to participate or not to participate.

Your parents/guardians will also be asked to give their permission for you to participate



in this study. Please talk this over with them before you decide whether or not to participate. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You can stop the interview at any time. If you have any questions, please ask one of the researchers.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:** You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your participation in the interview certifies that you have decided to allow participation having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this informed assent form to keep.

**IF YOU SIGN THIS FORM, IT MEANS THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE AND HAVE READ EVERYTHING THAT IS ON THIS FORM. YOU AND YOUR PARENTS WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator  
(after reviewing document with participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

***Name and Phone number of investigator(s)***

*Jared Peo, MA student, Principal Investigator 402-840-1819*

*Theresa Catalano, Adviser 402-472-2229*

## Appendix C



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

### Teacher Informed Consent Document

#### **Title of Research:**

Cultural Proficiency in a Diverse Middle School

#### **Purpose of Research:**

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the current state of cultural proficiency in a diverse middle school. You must be a teacher at [REDACTED] Middle School to participate in this study.

#### **Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require participation in 1 interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes each. You will be asked to share your experiences as a teacher in a culturally and linguistically diverse middle school. Participation will take place outside of school hours and in the school unless another preferred location is requested. The interview will be audio-recorded. There is a chance that you will be asked to participate in a shorter follow-up interview in order to clarify or further explain information discussed. In addition, you may be asked provide educational materials and teaching journals (optional) as secondary forms of data collection.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

#### **Benefits:**

The results of this study will be used to increase understanding about students' and teachers' experiences, especially concerning cultural proficiency, in a diverse middle school. It may also aid teachers and policy makers to provide improved classes and services for all students.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Your responses to this interview will be kept confidential. Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential, and will only be seen by the investigator. An alias will be used in any published form of this study.

#### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research at anytime by contacting Jared Peo(402-840-1819), email: [jaredpeo@hotmail.com](mailto:jaredpeo@hotmail.com). If you would like to speak to someone else, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6965 or [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu).

#### **Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or [REDACTED] or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Signature or Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

☐

Checking the box indicates that you will allow the interview to be recorded.

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

Jared Peo, MA student, Principal Investigator 402-840-1819

Theresa Catalano, Adviser 402-472-2229

## Appendix D



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

### Staff Informed Consent Document

#### **Title of Research:**

Cultural Proficiency in a Diverse Middle School

#### **Purpose of Research:**

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the current state of cultural proficiency in a diverse middle school. You must be a staff member of [REDACTED] Middle School or [REDACTED] to participate in this study.

#### **Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require participation in one interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. You will be asked to share your experiences as a staff member in a culturally and linguistically diverse middle school. Participation will take place outside of school hours and in the school unless another preferred location is requested. The interview will be audio-recorded. There is a chance that you will be asked to participate in a shorter follow-up interview in order to clarify or further explain information discussed.

#### **Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

#### **Benefits:**

The results of this study will be used to increase understanding about students' and teachers' experiences, especially concerning cultural proficiency, in a diverse middle school. It may also aid teachers and policy makers to provide improved classes and services for all students.

#### **Confidentiality:**

Your responses to this interview will be kept confidential. Any information obtained during this study that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential, and will only be seen by the investigator. An alias will be used in any published form of this study.

#### **Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research at anytime by contacting Jared Peo(402-840-1819), email: [jaredpeo@hotmail.com](mailto:jaredpeo@hotmail.com). If you would like to speak to someone else, please call the Research Compliance Services Office at 402-472-6965 or [irb@unl.edu](mailto:irb@unl.edu).

#### **Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or [REDACTED] or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

***Signature or Participant:***

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Signature of Participant

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Date

☐

Checking the box indicates that you will allow the interview to be recorded.

***Name and Phone number of investigator(s)***

*Jared Peo, MA student, Principal Investigator 402-840-1819*

*Theresa Catalano, Adviser 402-472-2229*

## Appendix E

### OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

**Date:**  
**Time:**  
**Location:**  
**Class:**  
**Teacher:**  
**Total Students:**

What I saw, heard	Comments, reactions, questions



## Appendix F

### Faculty Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:	Male/Female
Date:	Age:
Location:	Pseudonym:
Interviewee:	Years Teaching:

1. How would you describe your ethnicity?
2. Tell me about your education experience.
3. Tell me about your pre-service and teaching experience.
4. How did you feel when you were assigned to Culler?
5. Were you prepared to teach at such a culturally and linguistically diverse school?  
Do you feel that your education and teaching history helped or hindered your ability to teach here? Explain.
6. How would you define cultural proficiency?
7. Do you think you promote cultural proficiency in your classrooms? If so, how do you do this? If not, why do you think that is?
8. What has helped you improve your cultural proficiency?
9. Tell me about individuals that were difficult to work with.  
What do you think were the issues?
10. Tell me about a lesson that you believe was “successful”.  
Why did things go so well?
11. In general, are your students culturally proficient?
12. Do you think in general, teachers and administrators/staff at Culler promote cultural proficiency? If so, how? Be specific.
13. If you had the resources, how would you improve the school in regards to cultural proficiency?
14. What advice would you give new teachers to Culler Middle School to help them prepare to work in culturally diverse classrooms or with students who have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds?

## Appendix G

### Staff Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:	Male/Female
Date:	Age:
Location:	Pseudonym:
Interviewee:	Years working at Culler/LPS:

1. How would you describe your ethnicity?
2. Can you tell me if the school (or district) has done anything to promote cultural proficiency for both school staff and students? If they have, please describe what has been done.
3. How important is cultural proficiency to this school (or district)?
4. How would you describe the cultural proficiency of your school (or district, but specifically Culler)?
5. In what ways have you found success in promoting cultural proficiency?
6. Have there been any obstacles to promoting and improving cultural proficiency?
7. What advice would you give new teachers to Culler Middle School to help them prepare to work in culturally diverse classrooms or with students who have different cultural or linguistic backgrounds?
8. What aspects of cultural proficiency do you hope students learn before leaving this school?
9. If you had the resources, is there anything in the school you would improve in regards to cultural proficiency?

## Appendix H

### Student Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:	Male/Female
Date:	Age:
Location:	Pseudonym:
Interviewee:	Ethnicity:
Grade:	Country of Birth:
First Language:	

1. Tell me about your experience as a student attending a culturally and linguistically diverse school. (NOTE: May need to define this for some participants).
2. Do you feel like a valued member of the school? Explain.
3. How have teachers or staff helped you find success in your classes?  
What do you think are the qualities of a good teacher?
4. Is there something else you think could teachers (or staff) do to help you find success in school?
5. How well do you think the staff and teachers at your school interact with students who have different cultures or backgrounds?
6. Could the school do anything to improve those relationships?
7. Tell me about a class in which the teacher respected your cultural or linguistic background. Please, do not identify the teacher by name.
8. Tell me about a class in which the teacher did not respect your cultural or linguistic background, or that of another student you know. Please, do not identify the teacher by name.
9. How would you describe your experience with classmates who have different cultural backgrounds?
10. Could anything be done to improve those relationships?
11. If you could change something about this school, what would you change?
12. What do you think teachers should know before they start teaching at this school?