High School Teachers’ Approaches toward Canonical Literature in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

by
Carly Ferguson

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Education
(Honors Scholar)

Presented June 13, 2017
Commencement June 2018
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Carly Ferguson for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English and Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Education presented on June 13, 2017. Title: High School Teachers’ Approaches toward Canonical Literature in Culturally Diverse Classrooms.

Abstract approved: ____________________________________________________________

Soria Colomer

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to address the disconnect in high school classrooms between traditionally taught, canonical texts and the increasingly diverse population of students reading them through the framework of culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2010). Open-ended interviews were utilized to document the teaching practices of five high school English language arts teachers in western Oregon, and data analysis began during the transcription process. From their interview responses, it was evident that teachers were ultimately not being culturally responsive as their pedagogical approaches toward the literature they were teaching lacked intentionality. The findings also suggested that the disconnect was primarily not a result of what was being taught (the texts themselves), but rather how these texts were being taught. Professional development (PD) and the presentation of the term “culturally responsive teaching,” the school district’s PD theme for the studied school year, was identified as the limiting factor to becoming more culturally responsive, suggesting that improvements in PD that prioritized the inclusion of teacher voice and experience would foster the future success of culturally responsive teaching.

Key Words: culturally responsive teaching, canonical literature, multicultural education, high school, English language arts

Corresponding e-mail address: fergucar@oregonstate.edu
High School Teachers’ Approaches toward Canonical Literature in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

by
Carly Ferguson

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Education
(Honors Scholar)

Presented June 13, 2017
Commencement June 2018
Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English and Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in Education project of Carly Ferguson presented on June 13, 2017.

APPROVED:

Soria Colomer, Mentor, representing Department of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (College of Education)

Anita Helle, Committee Member, representing School of Writing, Literature, and Film

Tim Jensen, Committee Member, representing School of Writing, Literature, and Film

Toni Doolen, Dean, Oregon State University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Carly Ferguson, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for my mentor, Dr. Soria Colomer. Her guidance, patience, and bright attitude made our meetings to discuss my thesis (and every other topic under the sun) stand out as some of my best academic experiences at Oregon State. I couldn’t have asked for a more wonderful, supportive mentor during this process, and cannot express how fortunate I feel to have had the opportunity to learn so much from Dr. Colomer.

I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Anita Helle and Dr. Tim Jensen, for their willingness and enthusiasm in jumping into this project. The fantastic courses I had the opportunity to take with them greatly inspired me in this project, and I am so appreciative of all that they do.

Finally, all my love and thanks goes to my family and friends—for absolutely everything.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**  
1

**Theoretical Framework**

- Culturally Responsive Teaching  2
- Canonical Literature  9

**Methodology**  
10

**Findings**  
13

- Individual Perspectives of Culturally Responsive Teaching  14
- Teachers’ Understanding of Culturally Responsive Teaching  17
- Teachers’ Understanding of Canonization  20
- Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching through Literature  21
- Lack of Female Voices in Curriculum  28
- Importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching  29
- Expectations for Different Student Demographics  31

**Discussion**

- Barriers to Culturally Responsive Teaching  34
- Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching  36
- Professional Development  37
- Limitations of Study and Implications for Further Study  38

**Conclusion**  
40

**References**  
42

**Appendix**  
44
Introduction

It is revealing enough that the latest data collected around the ten most frequently taught texts in United States high schools is now twenty-seven years old (Applebee, 1990). Even more revealing, however, is how relevant this booklist still is despite this significant gap in time. As Andrew Simmons (2016) points out in “Literature’s Emotional Lessons,” “1990 was a long time ago relatively speaking, but all but one of the [top ten most frequently taught] texts are still taught at my school today” (np). From a 1990 Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature study, the ten most commonly taught texts in public high schools, with substantial crossover for private and independent schools, will be familiar to most readers: William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*; Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Nathanael Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*; John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*; F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*; and finally, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*.

The demographic of students in our classrooms, however, has not stayed as stagnant, feeding into an increasingly growing disconnect between our classrooms’ texts and the students reading them. Across the United States, the “percentage of students enrolled who are White [was] projected to be less than 50 percent beginning in 2014 and is projected to continue to decline” (*The Condition of Education: Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools*, 2016). One hundred percent of these texts being taught to these students, though, are written by white authors, and all but one text by a male. These typical classroom texts—and the corresponding teaching practices used to approach them
—inarguably do not reflect our students’ demographics and their experiences resulting from these differing backgrounds. By failing to reflect our students in the literature we are teaching them, we are unnecessarily creating moments of disengagement for students with classroom content, as being able to perceive texts as relevant and meaningful to one’s own experiences can be considered key to successful student engagement with literature in English language arts (ELA) classrooms (Wilhelm, 2016, p. 87-88).

This study seeks to address the incompatibility between our students’ lived experiences and textual experiences by exploring individual teachers’ perceptions of literature and its pedagogy with the hope of determining patterns in teaching practices and ideologies in order to move toward educational practices that would ultimately allow students to more fully connect and engage with the texts we are teaching.

Theoretical Framework

Culturally Responsive Teaching

The theoretical framework used to approach this project and address this disconnect between English language arts curriculum and diverse student populations is culturally responsive teaching. While culturally responsive teaching is not the only framework for approaching questions of social justice and multiculturalism in education, it is an appropriate one as the explicit goals of culturally responsive pedagogy seek to address many of the overarching goals at the heart of multicultural and social justice-oriented education. The promotion of social justice within education can be broken down into four key facets:
• Challenging misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes

• Providing all students with the necessary material and emotional resources to learn

• Drawing on students’ talents and strengths to enhance their education

• Creating a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change. (Nieto, 2013, p. 21, 106)

The pedagogical framework of culturally responsive teaching can therefore be treated as the praxis intended to achieve these aspects of social justice through education.

It should be noted that culturally responsive teaching is also referred to as culturally relevant teaching by some scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1994) but will be referred to as “culturally responsive” for the purpose of this work. The popularization of the term “culturally relevant teaching” is primarily accredited to Gloria Ladson-Billings from her exploration of affirming cultural identity in multicultural education in *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As a pedagogical framework, culturally responsive teaching strives to incorporate students’ lived experiences and individual knowledges into classroom curriculum in order to improve their engagement with the content being taught while simultaneously honoring and affirming the cultural background of the student (Gay, 2010). In her seminal work, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, drawing off of Ladson-Billings and defining the term “culturally responsive,” Geneva Gay (2010) states that as a theoretical ideal:

Culturally responsive pedagogy simultaneously develops, along with academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence,
and exchange; community building and personal connections; individual self-worth and abilities; and an ethic of caring. It is a way of knowing, understanding, and representing various ethnic and cultural groups in teaching academic subjects, processes, and skills. (p. 45)

The definition that Gay provides in *Culturally Responsive Teaching* is expounded upon throughout her in-depth discussion of the necessity and implications of including student experience and voice within our classrooms. Gay emphasizes the importance of student storytelling, “culturally responsive caring,” and curriculum that is relevant to the varied lived experiences of learning populations, which establishes a foundation for culturally responsive practices to be applied by other educational researchers and theorists. For example, in “Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers: Rethinking the Curriculum,” Villegas and Lucas build on Ladson-Billings’ and Gay’s arguments in favor of culturally responsive teaching practices to outline six “strands” essential to being a culturally responsive educator:

- “Sociocultural consciousness,” or “an understanding that people’s ways of thinking, behaving, and being are deeply influenced by such factors as race/ethnicity, social class, and language”
- “An affirming attitude toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds”
- “Commitment and skills to act as agents of change,” which positions teaching as a tool of social justice
• “Constructivist views of learning,” or the recognition that “learning is a process by
which students generate meaning in response to new ideas […] and use their prior
knowledge and beliefs […] to make sense of the new input”

• “Learning about students,” with an emphasis on incorporating students’ “funds of
knowledge,” or skills, interests, and abilities developed outside of traditional
education settings (i.e. at home), as defined in “Funds of Knowledge for Teaching:
Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms” (Moll et al., 1992)

• “Culturally responsive teaching practices,” including designing lesson topics around
classroom interests, encouraging classroom discussions relevant to the students’ lives,
“drawing on the expertise of community members, including the children’s parents,
and facilitating critical thinking around the curriculum content itself” (Villegas and
Lucas 2002).

There is significant crossover between the essential aspects of culturally
responsive teaching defined by Villegas and Lucas and the eight tenets of culturally
relevant teaching established by Ladson-Billings in her work. These tenets are:

  • Communicating high expectations for the work and ability of all students
  • Reshaping curriculum, or having the flexibility to teach a range of texts
  • Including culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students by creating space both
    in the classroom and in the curriculum
  • Allowing for small-group instruction in order to privilege student voice
  • Similarly, allowing for student-controlled discourse to incorporate this student voice
• Acting in the role of a facilitator as a teacher, thereby giving students more agency in their own education

• Prioritizing cultural sensitivity

• Implementing intentional teaching methods that necessitate planning and reflection around one’s practices

These general aspects, strands, and tenets of culturally responsive teaching have been used in practice to connect students’ cultures and identities to classroom content in order to account for the relationship between cultural diversity and different learning styles or educational experiences. Areas of focus within this framework have appeared to explore the specific impact of dimensions of identity on educational success and approaches, including gender identity in the work of Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge’s *Weaving in the Women: Transforming the High School English Curriculum* (1993) and racial identity in Sonia Nieto’s *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds: Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Practices in U.S. Classrooms* (2013). As one such example of the many considerations of the research and studies around culturally responsive pedagogy, Nieto presents further work that draws on Gay’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching* to interview teachers who “thrive” in culturally diverse classrooms in order to document how they use culturally responsiveness in their teaching practices (Nieto, 2013). Nieto utilizes qualitative, open-ended interviews to highlight the individual perspectives of teachers in implementing values of culturally responsiveness. She also thoroughly theorizes the importance of professional development and the continuation of teachers’ learning, including “learning from students,” in order for
culturally responsive teaching to be effective in the classroom (Nieto, 2013). Similar to Ladson-Billings and Gay, Nieto defines culturally responsive teaching as “a mindset that respects and honors students’ cultures, experiences, and histories and finds ways to include them in the curriculum” and also a way of “connecting with students through shared identities and experiences” in order to thrive as a teacher and draw students further into the course curriculum (Nieto, 2013). Nieto (2013) differentiates “culturally responsive” from other key terms, stating:

Culturally competent’ refers to a teacher’s knowledge about their students’ cultures and experiences; ‘culturally responsive’ focuses on a teacher’s ability to behave in ways that respect and honor students’ cultures and experiences; and ‘culturally relevant’ generally refers to how the curriculum and pedagogy enacted by the teacher are meaningful for their students. (p. 137)

However, Nieto’s application of culturally responsive teaching is one of the few examples that occur within the past decade. The crux of the research around culturally responsive teaching primarily occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s, creating a dearth in recent publications. The general topic, though, has recently been revisited in the form of “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012). In “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” Paris (2012) revitalizes the goals behind culturally responsive pedagogy by introducing the concept of “culturally sustaining” in place of culturally responsive and argues:

The term culturally sustaining requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people
—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers.” (p. 95)

Paris pushes this argument forward by explicitly drawing on Ladson-Billing’s work in the 1990s when presenting, “What Are We Seeking to Sustain Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A Loving Critique Forward” (Paris & Alim, 2014). This piece proposes an expansion on the original intent of Ladson-Billings’ “culturally relevant pedagogy” that more accurately reflects the current effects of dominant culture on the implementation of culturally responsive (and culturally sustaining) practices. Even Ladson-Billings (2014) has returned to her original work around culturally relevant teaching, addressing the merits of culturally sustaining pedagogy and the need for these pedagogical practices to remain in flux. However, even with this theoretical resurrection of culturally responsive ideals, there is little continued research around the practice of these ideals within classrooms and teachers’ personal perspectives toward the application of culturally responsive teaching in a more modern scope. The research stemming from the past thirty years functions under the assumption that culturally responsive teaching would face resistance in its theory, but, regardless of its reception as an educational ideal, much more attention needs to be given to this theory’s actual practice to determine if it is being successfully implemented.
This study is concerned specifically with the teaching of canonical literature in high school classrooms, as canonical literature is both widely taught but also widely debated in its educational merits due to its homogenous demographic of authors. The definition of canonical literature itself is nebulous, making it obvious as to why there would be debates around this categorization in the first place. Bona and Mani (2006) provide a description that could approach a single definition of canonical literature, stating, “An author’s work must be more than fifty years old to be included on the list of books worthy to be read,” the list being Encyclopedia Britannica’s Readers’ Guide to the Great Books of the Western World (p. 2-3). Theoretically due to the time period that canonical works span, it should be noted that the canon greatly excludes female authors and authors of colors (Bona & Maini, 2006). Bona and Mani (2006) additionally argue that “canon debates are not meant to be resolved,” and therefore the purpose of placing the content stipulated by canonical literature within the framework of culturally responsive teaching is not to definitively state which texts should or should not be taught in high school classrooms. Rather, it is to investigate how these texts are being taught given the context of diverse learning communities.

Overall, the debate around canonical literature can be viewed within the framework of culturally responsive teaching in its acknowledgement of the exclusionary tendencies of academia while exploring the relationship between canonical works and more contemporary, increasingly multicultural literature. The interest in the intersection of multicultural literature and the canon has even been extended to argue that when
teaching novels, educators can take canonical literature that is typically taught through standard, non-multicultural, non-culturally responsive practices and refocus the text through a culturally responsive, multicultural lens (Kraus, 2006, p. 127). Kraus (2006) expands upon this idea further in “De-Centering the Canon: Understanding The Great Gatsby as an Ethnic Novel,” arguing, “Much of the canonical American literature—however we define the canon—is centrally concerned with categories of social difference” (p. 127). Therefore, the canon can be perceived as readily lending itself to interpretation in a culturally responsive manner or presented in a way that addresses these issues of social or cultural difference. However, Kraus (2006) does warn against looking at “ethnic” literature as something to tag on to “primary” literature, as well as warns against viewing culture as narrowly represented by a single author of color or a single lesson of a class—an issue that frequently arises in the question of marginalized voices in the teaching, and supplementing, of classically taught literature.

Methodology

In order to explore the perspectives of high school teachers toward teaching canonical literature in culturally diverse classrooms and the pedagogical approach of culturally responsive teaching, a qualitative study was conducted. The aim of this project was to address the research questions:

- Is literature being taught using culturally responsive pedagogy in high school classrooms?
- If not, why are culturally responsive practices not being implemented?
• What are teachers’ individual perspectives of culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogical approach?

Participants

Five high school English language arts teachers participated in this study. Their names and any potentially identifying information has been changed to protect their anonymity, and they will be referred to as Sydney, Martha, Anne, John, and Mike throughout this study. They have been working as English language arts teachers for varying ranges of time, with the most senior teacher having taught for twenty-eight years and the most inexperienced teacher having taught for ten years. As a department, they see students of all grades (9th through 12th) and skill levels. The literature-based courses they teach each year include Introduction to Literature, Honors Introduction to Literature, American Literature, Honors American Literature, AP English Literature, Contemporary Literature, World Literature, Honors World Literature, and ninth and tenth grade “Skills” Workshops (defined by the teachers as a class intended to help students who have been labeled as “at-risk” in developing their reading and writing skills to meet grade-level standards).

Context

The study took place at a high school in western Oregon after achieving IRB approval. The name of this high school has been changed in accordance with IRB stipulations for the sake of anonymity and will be signified as “West Meadow High
School” for the purpose of this study. Like many districts across the nation, the high school in this school district continues to see an increasing population of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In the 2014-2015 school year, the high school reported that 29% of their students self-identified as something other than white racially/ethnically and that twenty-nine different languages were spoken by their students. (Oregon Department of Education, 2015).

Data Collection

To document the teaching practices in the classrooms, I interviewed these five teachers working at West Meadow High. Each teacher was interviewed twice at the school during the fall of 2016—once before teaching a specific unit within their class and once after the completion of teaching this unit. Data collection consisted of open-ended, audio-recorded interviews and document analysis of unit lesson plans and materials such as handouts and worksheets that were given to the students to be used in-class for the unit. Audio recording was a requirement for these interviews. Lesson plans for the unit that fell between the two interviews were requested during the first set of interviews, but only one out of five of the participating teachers was able to provide a unit plan. The second round of interviews was conducted after the unit had been taught and addressed the teachers’ reflective thoughts on the unit. All interview questions were optional for the participant to answer [see Appendix].
Data Analysis

Data analysis began during the transcription process of the audio recordings as well as in reviewing any unit or lesson plans, handouts, and worksheets. A qualitative data analysis program, Dedoose, was used to code the interview transcripts. The eight tenets of culturally responsive teaching outlined by Ladson-Billings (1994) in defining this term were utilized to determine the preset codes for this data. As previously stated, these codes included “communication of high expectations,” “reshaping curriculum,” “inclusion of CLD students,” “small-group instruction,” “student-controlled discourse,” “teacher acting as facilitator,” “cultural sensitivity,” and “intentional teaching methods.”

Findings

Every participant interviewed during this project was already previously familiar with the term “culturally responsive teaching.” The school district designates an area of focus for their professional development (PD) each year, and, coincidentally, the 2016-2017 theme was “culturally responsive teaching.” I was unaware of the year’s PD theme when planning this study, and did not expect the participating teachers to be familiar with this concept; nevertheless, their individual perceptions regarding culturally responsive teaching were revealing of more general implications for the course of this pedagogy. In the following sections, I explore (1) teachers’ individual perspectives of culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogical approach, specifically as resulting from their PD; (2) whether literature was taught through a culturally responsive lens in high
school classrooms; and, (3) the impact of both implementing and not implementing culturally responsive practices during instruction.

**Individual Perspectives of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Perhaps most significant from the discovery that culturally responsive teaching was the focus of this year’s professional development within the school district is the attitude of the participants toward the topic of culturally responsive teaching. The sentiment that there was incongruity between the individual teachers’ definitions and the “professional definition” presented by the school administration was shared throughout the majority of participants (four out of five participants). The most definitive definition of culturally responsive teaching as it was explained to them in professional development was provided by Anne, who said, “They reminded us that these are students who really want to succeed, and there [are] barriers in place, and these are some of the things that we can do to help them cross those barriers without it seeming like we didn’t care about them.” The participating teachers all agreed that “culturally responsive teaching” as a keyword was “very loosely and unclearly defined,” “undefined or vaguely defined,” or “used carelessly” within the context of their professional development. Mike stated, “What culturally responsive means for me as an English teacher is not that clear,” emphasizing this confusion. The lack of specificity around this term within professional development also resulted in multiple participants reporting a lack of understanding of teaching methods or “concrete practices” that would correspond to culturally responsiveness, but they did also report a repeated desire for “information on specifics”
around these methods. The desire for concrete practices was clear in all interviews. Martha requested, “Let’s just do something and be consistent about it all the way through.” Mike wanted to know “a way you could teach that same lesson, modifying and adjusting it, to be more culturally responsive to particular students who are in your classroom.”

The only cited examples of “specific strategies” that they could identify within their professional development were limited to the teachers working in the ESL program at the high school presenting during the staff meetings. However, this focus of culturally responsive practices around working with only language-learning students is indicative of the perception that culturally responsiveness is applicable only for some student populations.

Also contributing to teachers’ attitudes around culturally responsive teaching was the perception of how the theory itself was being developed and moved toward the teachers. The discussion around culturally responsive teaching within the high school reflected discord between the presumed “theoretical” work at the district and university-level and the application of these theories in the high school. The opinions on the importance of theoretical work versus practice varied. Sydney felt that “part of the problem, the more veteran a teacher you are, the less you’ve been out in actual classes that relate to this topic, like colleges.” Martha, though, said, “You’ve got the culturally responsive thing going at [your university] because your teachers probably went to the same conferences that the district administrators all go to. So it’s whatever they’re interested in at the time. And it comes and goes, depending […] it will probably fade
pretty quickly.” Within this discord in presentation, all five participants referred to the term “culturally responsive teaching” as a “buzzword.” This perception of the term as a buzzword corresponded to the teachers viewing the focus on culturally responsive teaching within their district as a temporary aspect of their professional development. Mike stated, “There’s a lot of buzzwords that they talk about for a long time that go away after a year or two,” and added:

I don’t want to be cynical, but ‘culturally responsive’ seems like […] can I guarantee that it will be here next year or the year after? Or that it will be really clearly defined and we’ll agree on what that means? I don’t think that that’s going to happen.

Martha agreed, “It’s the hip word of the year […] we know it’s not going to stick around for very long,” and later expanded on this idea: “[Culturally responsive teaching] is the hip word of the year. Last year it was ‘equity.’” This self-described “grouchy” attitude stemming from the conversation around culturally responsive teaching within professional development was highly present, resulting in the participants sharing that they felt like, in these professional development meetings, “They were being told instead of asked;” “It was really just the tone;” “We felt like we were misunderstood;” “We were kind of being lectured about what we weren’t doing right with a group of students;” and, “[We were] scolded.”

Beyond this expressed attitude toward culturally responsive pedagogy, there was a notable desire to learn and an expressed interest in social justice-oriented education, but the majority of participants felt that they were lacking access to effective education on
culturally responsive teaching in professional development, moments of being unsure of the actual definition of culturally responsive teaching arose among the participants. Each participant addressed the question of what culturally responsive teaching means to them and described their own understanding of the concept.

Martha did not provide an exact definition, but did state, I think anyone who is a thoughtful teacher knows that they have to engage their students intellectually and on a
personal level” and later reiterated the importance of connecting to students “personally” in order for them to be willing to engage with the classroom content.

Although he did not include this as a specific definition of culturally responsive teaching, Mike expressed, “You want to have students be able to see themselves around your room.” He did state that culturally responsive teaching is when “you understand a different culture than the mainstream culture well enough to be able to respond to it and tailor an instruction and outcomes to that culture specifically,” but immediately added, “I don’t know how to do that. On teaching literature, he said he “tried to connect it to their lives” but was unsure of whether that made a difference in student engagement, and unsure if he had ever “done [culturally responsive teaching] correctly.” In this unsureness, he referenced having “blindspots” in his teaching practices that would prevent him from reflecting on whether or not his methods were culturally responsive at all.

Anne expressed, “Based on my own understanding of culturally responsive teaching, I certainly hope that it is something that I practiced, not just in this past unit but all the time. And yeah […] something that I strive to do, always with the realization that I can do better.” She included in defining culturally responsive teaching that she “look[s] at that term as being super broad, ‘culture.’”

Sydney provided a few different explanations of what culturally responsive teaching means to her. She said, “The whole ‘culturally responsive teaching’ is just another way to shape or think about that really important level of being a teacher, a kind of facilitator-person, not just a person’s class and the learning they give the class,” and
that culturally responsive teaching is “at the very basic, helping kids know, no matter what you’re teaching and they’re learning and how you’re living your life, we’ve moved into a world that’s got to be aware and that each person has a responsibility to be aware of [...] the different perspectives that people come from.” She later included, “The fact that it’s part of my thinking and part of what I want to do makes it easier to do.” She also added the importance of “being really cognizant about how you plan your lessons.”

John approximated culturally responsive teaching as “knowing your audience in the classroom and that some students may have cultural barriers to learning, whether it’s language or just not knowing how things work [...] or not knowing certain things historically [...] knowing what their barriers are and trying to find multiple ways of reaching them, and bringing in inclusive materials.” He added to this definition even further, saying:

I think it means that in every single aspect of my class, so, I mean, every little detail—from the way I set up my learning space, the way I manage my classroom, to the way that I interact with students, to the texts that I choose, to the way that I teach those texts—every single one of those things is going to strive to recognize and honor the self or the identity that my students understand themselves to be.

The attitude that culturally responsive teaching is inherent to “good” teaching was also present among the participating teachers but divided, as three out of five of these participants expressed this view. Sydney believed, “It’s just intrinsic to me; [culturally responsiveness] is coming through kind of intrinsically,” and Martha concurred, “If you’re a good teacher in a classroom, the first thing you’re going to do is find a way to
get a sense of what do your students know or what understandings are your students bringing with them into the classroom” and that she also doesn’t “sit down to deliberately do it. I just kind of integrate it into the classroom.”

*Teachers’ Understanding of Canonization*

Every participant understood canonical literature to be the classically taught texts that are typically taught with frequency in the average U.S. high school, although the question of the content of the American canon itself was only addressed by one participant. In responding to how the composition of the American canon and the tendency to teach canonical literature to high school students might impact teaching practices, John described:

Right, you can look through it and see that there are a lot of white guys in the canon but that is not necessarily representative of—or even close to representative of—human experience or the tradition of American society or the tradition of American literature if we’re working within that tradition. So how do we respond to that? There’s several ways to respond to it. One is to go back and recover texts that do exist that were written by underrepresented voices and find the value in them that is there but was not long recognized, and I think that’s part of it. Another part of it is to teach the process of canonization or have the discussion about the process of giving certain people the opportunity to write or articulate themselves in a public space was more available to some people than to others, and so obviously those voices are going to be overrepresented in the canon. We
probably lost a lot of opportunities to have a lot of voices represented simply
because certain groups of people didn’t have the opportunities in the writing
world that others did.

And so I guess the problem in teaching now is you don’t want to perpetuate those
kind of assumptions that are already worked in, even as you go back in and
rediscover texts that do exist; you’re still going to have those problematic societal
assumptions worked into the canon that exist, so how do you teach in such a way
that you don’t just perpetuate those assumptions? So, yeah, I hope that answers
the question, and that’s kind of what I mean when I talk about the assumptions
that are built into a text. And in our department or kind of in schools in general, I
think if you still walk through our book room, you’d see a lot of books that have
clearly been on the shelves for thirty or forty years, and you would see more
books now that you wouldn’t necessarily call canonical works. You would see
more books by women authors, you’d see more books by authors from different
ethnic groups, but you still would see an overall bias toward white, male authors
in the total texts that we have. So, again, I mean that’s a practical example of how
those assumptions exist in the books that we have in our book room. Now the
question is, as teachers, how do we teach in such a way that we don’t pass those
assumptions on, or that we name them and question them?
Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching through Literature

Despite the teachers’ attitudes toward the presentation of culturally responsive teaching, and even canonical literature, all five participants did rank themselves as the primary influence over choosing their curriculum when asked whether their classroom curriculum (such as the planned readings) was primarily influenced by themselves, by the school, by the school district, or by national standards, suggesting a strong perception of autonomy in shaping and reshaping curriculum. As John, responded, “Nobody’s going to tell me that I can’t teach [a book].” Sydney, like the other teachers, echoed this sentiment, stating that the school is “very, mostly open to teacher decision-making and teacher knowledge about what books [should be taught...] we don’t have a stringent process.” In addition to viewing themselves as the primary influence over their curriculum, each participant felt that they did have the ability to introduce new texts to their classroom.

While the effectiveness and the speed of the process of obtaining new texts to teach was not agreed upon, all participants noted feeling they had some ability to find money for books or the books themselves (such as copies sourced from the community) when necessary. “What’s available in the book-room,” or the resource room where all classroom sets of texts are kept for the school, was identified as the main potentially limiting factor in changing curriculum and was referenced by every participant as potentially limiting. Martha believed, “If I really don’t like a book, I don’t teach it. We’ve got enough selection down in the book-room that we can all avoid the things that don’t work for us,” and John noted, “I have a great deal of freedom in what I teach as long as I
can get the copies into the classroom. The book room is really the thing that is the limiting factor,” reflecting the department’s attitude toward both their autonomy in curriculum but the book-room as a primary influence.

This freedom in “reshaping curriculum,” a defining tenet of culturally responsive teaching, was evident in many of the teachers’ choices in addition to other culturally responsive curriculum decisions. In-class activities that were discussed by the participants as well as detailed in the in-class assignment prompts and worksheets that some participants provided included writing in personal journals; free-writes, pre-writes, or “quick writes to connect with the themes” before discussing a text; the inclusion of independent reading time and personal choice books; “think-pair-share” activities, or small discussion groups; documentaries and pop culture video clips to contextualize, politicize, and problematize issues such as race, gender, and class in historical literature (for example, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*); and finally, storytelling exercises to share cultural, traditional, or family stories. Most participants felt that “writing invites students to connect in a more personal way,” and every course included some type of writing activity that asked students to connect the themes of the literature to their own life experiences. Writing activities and other activities were repeatedly used to draw connections between real-world topics and canonical works like Thoreau’s *Walden* and short stories by Hawthorne.

The texts that the participants chose to pair with these activities have changed somewhat in response to shifting demographics but the literature has remained stagnant overall. Four out of the five teachers discussed “choosing texts and arranging texts” to
better reflect their student populations. One class was reading Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* instead of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a more contemporary substitution. Two classrooms have begun to annually teach Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, a novel about a young autistic boy, in response to a rising population of neuro-diverse students, or more specifically students on the autism spectrum. The inclusion of more texts by Latino authors, such as *Walking Stars: Stories of Magic and Culture* by Victor Villaseñor, *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea, and using Richard Blanco’s poetry to teach Walt Whitman has also occurred in response to a significantly growing population of Latino students within this school district. On teaching *Into the Beautiful North*, which is taught by multiple teachers, John said:

And so many of my Latino student […] their engagement definitely goes up when we read *Into the Beautiful North*. All of a sudden, they are experts in the classroom when it comes to interpreting these characters’ experiences, where often before, they have felt like they are not qualified to speak up and be interpreters of a text. They report feeling… I mean, they often […] make comments like, “It’s cool that we read this. It’s cool that we talked about immigration. It’s cool that we talked about…” Because they do come into these classrooms with this sense that these issues that affect their lives so profoundly are not appropriate to talk about in school or in classrooms. And so, you know, a text like *Into the Beautiful North* kind of deconstructs that idea and gives them
permission to talk about it so […] I mean, it’s powerful to see your own experience represented in art.

However, in responding to the growing Latino population within their school district, Sydney did state, “The migrant workers in Of Mice and Men are not literally shown as Mexican or immigrant, but it’s often that lower level of class,” indicating a lack of cultural sensitivity despite this curriculum flexibility.

Three classrooms will be teaching the novel The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead within the next year with the explicit goal of achieving a more culturally inclusive curriculum. As one of the teachers who will be using The Underground Railroad, Martha noted that she is “really thinking [she’s] probably going to ditch some of the traditional stuff and spend a lot more time on contemporary” to attempt to bring in a wider range of authorial voices and backgrounds. However, this reshaping of curriculum is in balance with the continuation of teaching classics but not necessarily outside of the reach of culturally responsive teaching, as Anne remarked, “I love teaching Shakespeare because I think that he’s relevant […] The language, the word choice, the rhythm of the language is all […] the psychology, the human psychology and behavior.”

In navigating the use of new classroom content, teachers did voice some hesitation around the best way to introduce the materials they were bringing in in response to students’ cultures. Anne believed:

You’ve got to be careful a little bit; you don’t want to do that kind of thing that looks like it’s forced. I feel like it’s really important that you don’t say, “Oh, I’m
going to teach a piece of Asian literature because I have Asians in my room, Asian people or something.” They know, sometimes, and it’s almost as offensive as not ever dealing with their culture at all, to make them feel like you want them to stand as the voice of their culture.

Sydney displayed a similar attitude, stating, “Now, you just [create curriculum] more by theme and by the power of what the literature has, and then highlight the things that [the students] might not be exposed to, rather than uploading it and saying, ‘We need to read all this from black people or whatever.’” She expressed this worry around culturally responsive materials appearing too “intentional” multiple times across the two interviews.

John expressed an opposing concern around bringing in new materials, voicing the idea of instead focusing on what could be taken out of the curriculum rather than added in. He said:

> Start with the assumption that literature is a powerful, transformative thing. That as long as your students are human then there will be something in literature that can speak to them, something that they can read that can speak to them. And then, how can I make my classroom a place where I, instead of thinking about adding a bunch of things all the time to help them, how can I maybe remove the things that get in the way of them having that experience?

These concerns expressed around the practice of balancing more culturally diverse materials with the traditionally taught texts became a pattern for the participants. Rather, there was concern expressed that the supplemental materials were either (a) not sufficient enough or (b) going to be perceived negatively by the students and therefore have a
detrimental impact overall. Mike shared, “When it comes to poetry, like little supplemental materials, we can really get a wide range; we can look at songs; we can look at a lot of different voices. But as far as the major texts, we’re still kind of white now […] I could see how that could be kind of obvious if you’re in the class.” Anne referred to using these supplemental materials as the practice of “tacking the [diverse authors] on at the end of the unit. Sydney also identified potential shortcomings of the supplementing approach, pondering, “If you’re pulling supplements in, have you missed the opportunity to target yet another potential kind of kid who needs another connection?” She displayed further apprehension around relying only on supplemental materials, adding, “For literature, it’s always […] there’s such a wealth out there, and if you put something else in, something else is going to have to come out.” The use of supplemental materials also presented the potential for pigeonholing cultures through a limitation of texts. Martha said, on her perception of culturally responsive teaching when having a class of mostly male students with only a few female students, “I tend to go for the books that kind of interest boys more, because generally—not to stereotype—but generally when you’ve only got three girls, you’ve often got kind of tomboy-type kind of girls, and they’ll be engaged in some of that stuff too.” She also added, “I’m always looking for sports books because the boys like to read about that,” indicating the potential for individual teachers’ presumptions to still influence curriculum choice.
Lack of Female Voices in Curriculum

There was a distinct lack of female authorial voices in the participants’ curricula. Three out of five participants explicitly asked for recommendations for female authors, and five out of five participants mentioned this lack of female authors in their own curriculum as being problematic. Mike was particularly vocal about this issue, disclosing, “There was one point in an Honors World Lit class where I made them get a novel from a woman because we hadn’t read that many. Martha echoed this need for a single novel by a woman, saying, “We’re really looking for a novel by a woman. We don’t have that in American Lit.” In exploring this topic, Mike also noted, “[The students] are studying history chronologically and […] there isn’t a lot there from women and people of color. We’ve read some, but the excerpts that they have don’t fit in with the larger themes that we’re writing essays about.” The interest in female authors in the curriculum was widespread, with Anne explaining: “Women have not worked their way into our curriculum nearly as much as you would think society has changed […] but curriculum hasn’t changed to reflect that at our school and in our district and my guess is widespread […] we need more women authors in our curriculum,” and Sydney stating, “I’m always trying to find books from a wider perspective than just white male […] They are almost all white men.” This emphasis on incorporating more female authors—with intersections with including more authors of colors—was agreed to be an important endeavor by the participants; Martha noted, “You try and balance male and female authors, different ethnicities. I mean, if you can balance everything then you’re much more likely to get each one of the kids [engaged] at some point.”
**Importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Three out of five participants mentioned the idea of “trust” as being key to successfully engaging students. They discussed the importance of building a “trusting relationship” between the student, the teacher, and/or the text being taught but did not address aspects of culture or identity in this sense of relationship-building. Class size, one of the tenets of culturally responsive teaching, was identified as a potentially limiting factor to building this “trusting relationship.” Class size was discussed in terms of getting to know students and student ability to participate in class and was perceived as too large by multiple participants. Mike summed this issue up, remarking, “You can be a lot more anonymous in a huge class.”

The participants from this department did not agree on whether culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogical approach was necessary to implement. John stated, on the question of whether culturally responsive practices were necessary, “There are certain populations in our school that have long been underserved, especially with regard to the many assumptions implicit in the texts that we teach, and it’s a long process to become aware of and address that problem, and I think we still have a long ways to go.” He later expanded: “It feels even more important to make sure schools are spaces where every kid that comes into feels safe and empowered to articulate their own sense of identity and their own sense of who they are,” and followed this with the idea, “I think it’s really important that students are able to show up and engage with the text and learn to use that text as a lens or as a framework through which to view their own life.” Finally, he voiced the belief that:
Creating a spot within a classroom for them to start articulating or start fleshing out that story that they’re telling themselves about their life and what role they play in it all of a sudden allows that story or that sense of themselves to come together in a classroom. I think that’s the first step toward helping students then see literature as a framework through which they might view their own lives [...] there has to be a space within the classroom to help them… to free them to tell their own story and to help them to tell their own story more, you know, articulate their own story more fully.

Sydney addressed the question of the relevance of culturally responsive teaching specifically as well, and she believed, “What’s good for anybody is good for everybody. What’s good for some students is good for all students, whether it’s branching out their perspective of different authors or different eras.”

However, Mike voiced, “I don’t know that there’s the clearest link between who the writer is and how well students respond to a text” and Martha stated, “We haven’t done a lot of sort of ‘me work’ with [this unit]. We do a lot of thinking about themselves, as a class, a kind of self-centered, so it doesn’t kill them to have to think about somebody else occasionally,” and later added, to the question of incorporating students’ experiences when teaching, “If you ask them their opinion, you’re getting their experience because the experience they’ve had [...] is actually quite limited if you’re fourteen in [West Meadow].”

While there was hesitation in response to the importance of “culturally responsiveness” as a specific key-term, four of the five participants did discuss the
importance of students “connecting” to texts. John felt that connecting the material to students’ lives was nearly essential for “the comprehension of a text.” Martha observed, “[Students] naturally gravitate toward the [texts] they can understand, that have some meaning to them and their lives.” Sydney talked about her practice of “hooking them with some relevance” since “they prefer or respond to books that feel [accessible] or real.” John agreed, “They typically really are enlivened by being able to see a text and by extension being able to see the world in a different way than they were before. And so when they can’t do that or struggle to do that, that’s the thing that causes the level of engagement or feeling of engagement at least to go down.” Anne echoed, “That’s what we all want in our books; we want to see ourselves.”

Expectations for Different Student Demographics

Within the debate around the relevance of culturally responsive practices being implemented, the teachers participating in this project also felt that culturally responsive teaching was targeted only toward diverse student populations rather than the school population as a whole. For example, John commented that the idea of culturally responsiveness “gets watered-down to […] our low SES [low socioeconomic status] kids, our minority kids.” The unclear definition of culturally responsive teaching also corresponds to an unclear definition of culture as a whole. Rather, several teachers felt that there was “not as much of a need for [culturally responsive teaching].” To illustrate their perceptions of culture, Sydney stated:
In the culture that we live in now, they’ve seen less angst in their growing up about color, so sometimes they think that when we feel like we have to place information in their lap that’s of color, they can’t figure out why it’s such a big deal. We project that it should be a big deal upon them.

She later added, expanding on her belief of whether culturally responsive teaching is a necessary practice, “I think students’ experiences are tending to become more and more narrow.”

Martha echoed this perspective when discussing the demographics of the students in her classes. When describing her understanding of a lack of cultural diversity at West Meadow High, she discussed a time period in which she believed there was an increase of black students being adopted into white homes. She then wondered, “And then the other question is how culturally diverse is [West Meadow High]? Or Oregon? […] How African American are you culturally if you’re adopted by a single white woman?”

John and Sydney, the two participants who primarily discussed the demographics of their courses, additionally both noted the disparity between the upper-level AP and honors classes and the “remedial,” skills-focused classes. John explained:

Latino students are underrepresented significantly in AP classes as a whole, and especially AP Lit classes […] On the whole, students who are living in poverty are also underrepresented in AP classes. And the inverse of that is that a regular-level class […] Latino students are going to be overrepresented, as are students in poverty.
John troubled this idea further within his own interview, asking of the students placed in the “remedial” courses:

Did you get placed in here because you need the skills, or because of a variety of things related to your culture, you didn’t have what you needed, or did someone just assume, which is the really unpalatable thing to think about.

Sydney agreed with this observation, stating, “In Skills, I’ll be honest, it’s usually a lot of kids with Hispanic heritage.” She also added, “It doesn’t seem right that by the time that kids get to [West Meadow High] that intervention classes in English and math are predominantly brown kids, but that’s the way it has been for a few years.”

Both of these participants exemplified the expectations for teaching practices with these students. Sydney most succinctly summarized the overall consensus on the students in the honors classes: “Honors kids are honors kids, it’s hard to really see much difference. They’re going to be engaged.” She also included the inverse of this in her interview, saying, “And for a skills level kid that’s not going to get to a lot of material as quickly that would be in a regular intro to lit class, that we would say are the classics or super important.”

Martha also briefly touched on this divide, demonstrating its deeper implications for teaching literature to a wide range of diverse learners:

Part of me really believes in laying down the canon […] but, on the other hand, if they're not reading… what’s the point? […] What is more important—to get them to become better readers and writers and does it matter what they’re reading so much, or to have them aware of the canon? And the problem is what happens, it’s
like the Honors kids read more of the canon so they get all of that, and the regular kids don’t, so in some ways we’re continuing this divide between the Honors kids getting the canon and all the traditional allusions and everything, and the regular kids reading the more contemporary stuff. […] It really does continue that separation between the two groups; it gives them less common information, so it’s a constant problem. It’s a huge question. But I tend to go with having them read books that will engage them and that they will then be able to say something about.

This idea that certain demographics are more likely to be engaged than others was displayed in how teachers were willing to approach their classrooms. Rather, the participants collectively expressed the perception that courses with larger populations of CLD students were less likely to receive more intentionally engaging teaching practices.

Discussion

Barriers to Culturally Responsive Teaching

From the participants’ descriptions of their teaching practices and individual perceptions of culturally responsive teaching, it is evident that literature is ultimately not being taught in a culturally responsive way in these high school ELA classrooms, and certainly not in a way that is as culturally responsively as it has presented itself as potentially being. As culturally responsive pedagogy—and even culturally sustaining pedagogy, the direction in which this theory is shifting—mandates intentional teaching practices in order to achieve its essential goals, the lack of intentionality from these
participants determines an overall lack of a culturally responsive mindset. It was noted that only one of the participants had a unit plan to provide, which detailed the learning outcomes and their implementation, suggesting the difficulty in reflecting on one’s own teaching practices without having a point of reference that a curricular plan could provide. While the participants felt that reflection and self-awareness around teaching methods was necessary in responding to student needs, and even the question of how deliberate one’s practices should be arose throughout the interviews, a lack of unit plans might suggest an obstacle to achieving this reflection. Beyond the unit plans, materials perceived by the participants as culturally responsive, which were all texts that had authors other than white and/or male, could still be taught in a manner that was not culturally responsive, emphasizing the importance of clearly communicating the intentionality behind this theory and practice.

The expectations for specific student demographics could also be considered as a factor in the lack of culturally responsive teaching practices. The participants categorized the “remedial,” skills-based classes as having the highest populations of racially diverse and neuro-diverse students but simultaneously expressed that these were the classes that had the least leeway for reshaping curriculum, putting these diverse learning groups at a disadvantage. Subsequently, the higher-level courses such as honors and AP classes were viewed by the participants as having populations of predominantly racially and socioeconomically privileged learners, but it was again noted that these were the classes that teachers felt students would always be engaged in and could employ more creative teaching practices. These approaches do not reflect the culturally responsive ideal of
communicating high expectations (even in being demonstrated through the willingness to be flexible with curriculum) for students, particularly students from underrepresented and underserved populations (Ladson-Billings, 1990). The teachers’ perspectives around who they’re teaching in addition to what and how they’re teaching are just as impactful to shaping pedagogical decisions, and working to understand and shift these expectations could help engage the students currently viewed as too difficult to engage.

**Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Despite the areas in which culturally responsive practices did not present themselves from a lack of intentional practices and expectations of students, data from these interviews indicate that it is possible to teach traditional, canonical texts in a culturally responsive manner. While this research does display an overall lack of culturally responsiveness being implemented, this is not to say that the participating teachers were consistently failing to incorporate their students’ interests, experiences, and cultures into the curriculum. As previously evidenced, every participant conveyed a strong belief in the importance of students connecting their own worlds to the textual worlds which they were reading. Rather, every participant felt that students being able to relate their own lives to the content was essential for promoting engagement.

Furthermore, the descriptions of curricula provided by participants and their interview responses indicate a trend toward increasingly culturally inclusive texts with authors of more diverse backgrounds than simply white male that could continue to be fostered in future years. Pairing supplemental materials written by authors from a range
of backgrounds with the traditionally taught canonical texts was one of the most consistently demonstrated ways of incorporating a wider representation of literature. However, from the concerns raised by participants’ around successfully introducing supplemental literature to their typically taught curriculum, we must address the question of supplemental materials paired with the canonical literature taught keeping marginalized voices at the margins of the curriculum. As Anne asked, is including a few non-white and/or non-male authors at the end of a unit, quite literally at the margins of the curriculum, really better than not including them at all? I argue that having a greater diversity of literature is certainly better than not having any diversity whatsoever, but agree that there is still much work to do as far as the implementation of this literature and the corresponding teaching practices are concerned. While this flexibility in curriculum and reshaping of curriculum suggests that culturally responsiveness is something teachers are receptive to and striving for, the overall lack of and concern around intentional methods still ultimately determines a problematic approach toward literature within these classrooms.

**Professional Development**

Of greatest significance from this research is the overarching attitude of the participating teachers toward the presentation of “culturally responsive teaching” within the context of their professional development. A lack of agreement on key-terms and the corresponding teaching practices is the greatest barrier preventing culturally responsive teaching from occurring even in situations where teachers are explicitly receptive to the
practices and eager to be more culturally responsive. The issue is not that these teachers do not see the merits of culturally responsive teaching practices. Rather, it is a fundamental misunderstanding around the term itself that is affecting this pedagogy. As evident from the participants’ focus on the presentation of “culturally responsive” in their professional development sessions, the term has become stigmatized and as a result its actual theoretical implications undermined. The attitudes of the participants toward culturally responsive teaching as an educational idea compared to the attitudes of the participants toward culturally responsive teaching as a subject within their professional development clearly shows that the issue lies in how this topic is being introduced in educational settings. However, this issue does imply hope for future study, as it has been shown that teachers are open to learning how to be more culturally responsive; they simply want to learn in a way that feels meaningful and applicable to their own experiences.

**Limitations of Study and Implications for Further Study**

The potential limitations of this study are primarily driven by the scope and size of the project. The sample size for this research was five participants, so it would be advantageous to include a larger sample size in further study in order to document and analyze a broader range of participant dispositions. The individual attitudes of the participants within this small sample size could also be distorted based on their school’s culture (such as teachers’ opinions influencing the answers of others) as data was collected from only one school’s language arts department. Furthermore, as this study
only focused on the perspectives of the participants as conveyed through their interviews, a more in-depth study that would expand upon teachers’ attitudes toward culturally responsive teaching could involve classroom and student observation. As the main limitation of this study was the number of participants and that this study took place in a single department, conducting further studies in a similar format would allow for even more educators’, and hopefully students’, voices to be collected around the subject.

Considering these participants all had such strong attitudes toward the subject of culturally responsive teaching—attitudes fostered by the professional development they had received (or as they felt, perhaps not received)—research centered around the process of developing the professional development practices themselves would be beneficial to more fully understand how these attitudes have developed. Within this research around professional development, the following could be prioritized:

- Examining the language used to present these subjects to support the future of culturally responsive teaching

- Presenting key concepts to teachers and the relationship between teachers and admin within professional development approaches/continuing education

- Establishing a working, concrete definition of culturally responsive teaching with clearly outlined corresponding teaching practices developed in collaboration with the teachers who will be implementing them

Finally, continued research into the best methods for professional development and continuation of teachers’ learning in order for culturally responsiveness to be effective in
classroom is necessary, as it is suggested by the intentional nature of culturally responsive teaching that comprehensive professional development to foster learning and introduce updated teaching practices is essential (Nieto, 2013).

**Conclusion**

When initially approaching this project, I was primarily concerned with the nature of canonical literature and the texts that were being taught. My focus on canonical literature led me to believe that canonical texts would not lend themselves to be taught in a culturally responsive way and that teaching practices within this theory would have to be paired with more contemporary, more culturally diverse texts. The overlap between the ongoing theoretical discussion around culturally responsive teaching and the canon debates indicated that high school teachers’ approaches toward canonical literature in culturally diverse classrooms would be an issue of what was being taught. However, as I have discussed, a much broader issue ended up not being what was taught but how it was taught. Based on what these participants demonstrated, it is just as feasible to teach a canonical work in a culturally responsive way as it to teach a novel penned by a multicultural author in a way that still creates a gap between the content and students’ experiences. The language in approaching the question of how these texts are being taught also becomes key to successfully incorporating this framework. The nebulous understanding of culturally responsive teaching has greatly fed into the difficulty implementing it as a pedagogical approach in high school classes. Somewhat unexpectedly, this project largely became a question of discourse. The overarching goal
of my research was to document the voices of these participating educators, but this method revealed the repeated sentiment that teachers feel they are voiceless in their own education.

Our classrooms are inarguably becoming increasingly diverse and our teaching practices must reflect this diversity. We can no longer talk about education without talking about multicultural education because we are a society of multicultural learners. Our students would be done a serious disservice if we were to blindly continue traditional teaching practices that fail to recognize the wide range of cultural backgrounds in our classrooms and the wealth of experiences and knowledge that these backgrounds offer. By applying the practices suggested in the theory of culturally responsive teaching to conventional subjects such as canonical literature, educators cannot only teach these subjects more effectively but also seize the opportunity to empower students through privileging their voices and experiences. However, this application has evidenced itself as requiring an approach on a much broader scale in changing how we facilitate this dialogue with teachers. In fact, there is a lot to be learned from Ladson-Billings’ and Gay’s ideals of culturally responsive teaching in how even teachers are responded to and taught. In drawing off of the essential foundation of culturally responsive pedagogy to view professional development and culturally responsive teaching as a teachable subject itself, perhaps there is something to be said for privileging our educators’ voices and experiences in order to successfully promote their learning, and thereby that of our students.
References


Appendix: Interview Guide Provided to Participants

Interview #1 (before participant’s unit of focus)

1. How long have you been teaching English at the high school level?
2. How long have you been working in this community?
3. Are there any books you typically teach every year? If so, which books? Are any of these books considered canonical?
4. In your opinion, is your classroom curriculum (such as the planned readings) primarily influenced by you, by the school, by the school district, or by national standards (such as Common Core curriculum)? Please explain.
5. Do you currently teach, or have you ever taught, any AP or IB classes? If yes, please describe how this has impacted your decisions for classroom curriculum and lesson plans.
6. In your teaching career, has the range of literature that is most commonly taught changed? If so, in what way has it changed?
7. Which readings are your favorites to teach? Why?
8. Which readings would you say your students prefer reading? Why?
9. Please describe what you believe to be one of the most important factors for engaging high school students with literature.
10. Are the terms “culturally responsive teaching” or “culturally relevant teaching” terms with which you are already familiar? If so, what do these terms mean to you as a teacher?
11. Could I please collect a unit plan for an upcoming unit that you will be teaching within the next month?

12. Thank you for your time and insights. Is there anything you would like to add?

**Interview #2 (after participant’s unit of focus)**

13. Do you believe your students can relate their own experiences to the experiences conveyed in the literature they read during this unit? Why/why not?

14. How would you describe student engagement during the unit? Please explain.

15. Were there aspects of this unit that focused on learning about and/or incorporating your students’ interests and experiences? Could you provide an example?

16. How important would you say this process (of learning about and/or incorporating your students’ interests and experiences) is to successfully teaching readings to your students? Why?

17. Is there anything you would change about the unit? If so, what would you change? For example, which readings would you have chosen to teach or not teach?

18. Do you change, or have you ever changed, your classroom readings depending on the demographic of students in your class? Why/why not? If you have, what effects have you noticed (if any)?

19. Would you say “culturally responsive teaching” is something that you practiced within the unit you just taught? Please explain why or why not.

20. Thank you for your time and insights. Is there anything you would like to add?