

NAVIGATING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN A HIGH-STAKES TESTING  
ENVIRONMENT: CRITICALLY AWARE TEACHERS COMMITTED TO  
TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Rosario Hutchings, titled *Navigating Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in a High-stakes Testing Environment: Critically aware teachers committed to transformative education in the classroom* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers using culturally responsive instructional practices negotiate a high-stakes testing environment (HSTE). Culturally responsive pedagogy, an asset-based approach to improving student outcomes for marginalized students of color, has been established as an effective means of closing the ‘opportunity gap.’ However, HSTEs can undermine these efforts by distorting the curriculum to focus on discrete skills development based on standardized testing. This focus can lower the expectations for student learning and disproportionality exacerbate inequitable learning conditions for traditionally marginalized students of color. In contrast, teachers who are Critically Aware work towards a transformative education using the following methods: the ongoing effort to instructionally integrate students’ cultural knowledge; teacher attention to the effects of explicit and implicit bias; the ongoing efforts to affirm students' academic and ethnic identities; and teacher heightened awareness of issues of social justice. I explored how Critically Aware teachers can navigate the demands of using culturally responsive pedagogy within a HSTE while providing a rigorous, transformative education. Findings from this study revealed two main themes. First, ambivalence for HSTEs affected the ways teachers navigated their instructional context. Second, teacher commitment to CR pedagogy protected classroom instruction from potential curriculum interruptions that arose from HSTE. Findings from this study can help identify teacher practices, models of instruction, and how teacher commitments can inform teacher training and professional development.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

In the advent of a worldwide pandemic, this study was conducted when students were returning to school from a year of schooling that relied heavily on remote learning programs. Ineffectively, these programs did not ameliorate the significant gaps accrued during stay-at-home learning (Duckworth et al., 2021). As a researcher and a mentor teacher, I was a witness to the stress and trauma affecting students and teachers. To make up for the learning losses students experienced during the pandemic, districts recommitted to on-online learning programs for use as an intervention, review, and to monitor progress. I felt the frustration of teachers who had to deal with their trauma and students, particularly vulnerable populations like English Language Learners, students with special needs, and low SES students. Reliance on these programs served to dehumanize students and saddle them with low levels of learning and expectations for students' success. However, in spaces where competent teachers are committed to teaching with humanity and love, students feel heard, seen, and validated. In these classrooms where culturally responsive pedagogy and practice was operationalized with commitment, students thrive because learning centers around them.

Currently, teachers unfamiliar with critical or culturally responsive pedagogy may impose a dominant view of schooling to prefer a White, male, able-bodied, monied, and heteronormative student (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). These teachers may consciously or unconsciously invoke unresponsive rules and procedures to marginalized students of color, thus upholding the cycle of underperformance from the uncritical response in Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice (Darder, 2015). In her critique of Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice, Darder posits that both conservative and liberal views of education impose a deficit

model of educating students of color (p. 4). She identifies five ways in which Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice reproduces inequality in education. They are meritocracy, intelligence testing, tracking and ability grouping, teacher expectations, and curriculum. The result is a disparate outcome for students of color. In comparison, students of color are groomed to follow the rules, whereas middle-class students are exposed to higher depths of knowledge and personal involvement with the curriculum (Anyon, 1980). The purpose of culturally responsive education (CRE) is to address these traditional barriers to student achievement.

However, some school districts and states are using culturally responsive or culturally sustaining frameworks to meet the needs of these growing populations. CRE pedagogy works to alleviate the disconnect between teachers and students, as well as teachers and communities, that adversely affects student learning outcomes. Hence, CRE studies have shown to raise student outcomes such as dropout rates, attendance, grades, and achievement scores on high-stakes tests (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; López, 2017). Ultimately, CRE pedagogy is a proven method to bring about equitable outcomes for students of color who become marginalized through Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice (Darder, 2015).

Culturally Responsive (CR) pedagogy requires teachers to change their behaviors and commitments to privilege the experiences of historically marginalized students to have meaningful access to quality education. Gay (2013) defines Culturally Responsive Education as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay 2013, p. 49-50). Culturally responsive pedagogy evolved from the multicultural education paradigm (Banks, 1999). Bank’s multicultural education model proposes four stages of cultural responsiveness: Contributions, Additive, Transformation, and Social Action. From this model,

CR pedagogy evolves to include Transformation and Social action as part of the characteristics. Ladson-Billings' germinal article, *Toward A Critical Race Theory in Education* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), on Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) changed the teacher stance and practice paradigm. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) centered on race as the first factor in educational emancipation. CRE prioritizes academic success, maintains cultural competence, and develops a critical consciousness (Harmon, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Similarly, Culturally Responsive pedagogy prioritizes these characteristics in the focus of teaching practices to engage students of color in rigorous educational pursuits (Gay, 2018).

### **Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Education**

Gay (2018) describe Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipating (p. 39). She describes these tenets.

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 uses ways of knowing, understanding, and representing various ethnic and cultural groups in teaching academic subjects, processes, and skills. It cultivates cooperation, collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility for learning among students and between students and teachers. It incorporates high- status, accurate cultural knowledge about different ethnic groups into all subjects and skills taught. (p. 43)

More specifically, Hammond (2014) defines CR pedagogy within the scientific learning context. She describes CR as using cultural knowledge as a scaffold to allow students to process

information. At the same time, the teacher builds connections with students and provides a safe space to show learning (p. 23). Two very different descriptions, which define either the experience of the student or the practices of the teacher. Succinctly, Hammond elucidates what is happening in the brain in a culturally responsive classroom, while Gay is delineating a comprehensive examination of what is required of the teacher to make information processing happen. What is present in all definitions is the importance of building connections with students to create safe spaces for learning (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Moreover, the use of culture to engage and bring visibility to student lived experiences engage students with the curriculum. Ladson-Billings (2009) uses the term cultural referents to center African American knowledge as a vehicle for developing skills and reframing deficit attitudes. Thus, cultural referents position African American students in positions of power emotionally, socially, and politically (p. 20). Suitably, cultural referents are used to plan instruction, engage students, and differentiate student production. This includes having texts that represent the cultural identities of students, especially minority students who are often invisible or overlooked in the classical canon and history texts. These cultural referents work as counterstories to offset the impact of teacher deficit mindsets and racialized experiences of minority students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Richards, Brown, and Forde (2007) define culturally responsive pedagogy as “culturally supported, learner-centered context, whereby the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement” (p. 64). They include three dimensions of CR- institutional, personal and structural. By framing CR pedagogy in this measure, they expand the scope of what it means to be CR beyond the classroom. On an institutional level, school leaders must look at the structure of the school itself and how learning is organized, review

policy and procedures to create cultural congruity with the learners, and most importantly the effort of the school to create community involvement, reversing the expectation that community and families must find ways to become involved with the school, (Richards, et al. p 64). At a personal level, teachers reflect deeply on their own beliefs to confront their biases. In doing so, teachers can avoid microaggressions against their students, avoiding the stereotype threat phenomena (Steele, 2011; Sue et al., 2007). Lastly, the reflective processes at the personal and structural levels of the school should inform and improve student achievement through CR teaching practices. Culturally relevant pedagogy is important in centering cultural referents as a basis for creating connections between students and academics. Using culturally relevant texts, materials, and topics is a responsive strategy to engage all learners, specifically minoritized students of color (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Culturally responsive pedagogy, although distinguishable from Culturally Relevant Education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and Culturally Sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), are considered asset-based pedagogies. Regardless of the positioning of responsiveness, relevancy, or sustainability, these asset-based pedagogies hold high expectations, include cultural referents, and preserve cultural identity as essential to educational transformation and student achievement.

This study is part of a larger study examining curiosity and self-direction in CR classrooms. I focus on CR teachers navigating district imperatives that may conflict with CR pedagogy for two reasons. The scope of the study is limited to understanding how teaching practices for transformative education conflict with the imperatives of schooling in a High Stakes Testing Environment (HSTE). Teachers in this study have access to training, mentor support, and resources to engage with CR practices in their classrooms. By focusing on teaching practices, I can explore how CR is operationalized in the classroom. Secondly, the teachers in this study

have access to a framework specific to culturally responsive practices called SPARKS. It stands for student-centered instruction, positive learning communities, academic and ethnic identity development, rigor through critical thinking integration, knowledge co-construction, and social justice/civic engagement (See [Appendix B](#)). The district manual for culturally responsive teaching describes the SPARKS framework as “an asset-based approach that validates and affirms students’ social, emotional, cultural, linguistic, and intellectual assets.” In this case, CR pedagogy and the SPARKS framework for culturally responsive teaching practices provide specific parameters to explore the conflicting imperatives of employing CR pedagogy for transformative learning while adhering to the mandates of preparing students for high stakes tests (HST). Further, tenets of the framework position teachers to be aware of racialized spaces in teaching and learning as well as the importance of utilizing relevant and critical material in student engagement and transformation. For instance, social justice is one of the tenets, as well as ethnic identity development and co-construction of knowledge. These tenets may address identities specific to students and their families as they navigate racialized spaces. Culturally relevant education (CRE) teachers would leverage these student assets to explore these identities through curriculum and instruction thereby building student academic identities as they gain exposure and mastery over content standards. It is important to distinguish that cultural relevance plays a significant role in culturally responsive teaching practices. CRE teachers using CR practices will leverage student identities in engaging and validating historically minoritized and racialized student populations.

### ***Teacher Critical Awareness***

Teacher Critical Awareness (López 2017) is a necessary condition for teachers to implement CR pedagogy effectively. There must be a critical awareness to position teachers to

resist deficit thinking and transform student learning experiences (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Valenzuela, 2010). Using this definition (López, 2017), a Critically Aware teacher includes four elements:

- The ongoing effort to instructionally integrate students' cultural knowledge
- Teacher attention to the effects of explicit and implicit bias
- The ongoing efforts to affirm students' academic and ethnic identities
- Teacher heightened awareness of issues of social justice

Further, using critical pedagogy requires instruction to demonstrate authentic caring, teacher-student reciprocity, and critical analysis of students' lived experiences, all within an Asset-Based approach to instruction (Gorski, 2011; Valenzuela, 2010). Lastly, Critically Aware teachers use asset-based instruction to center instruction around student lived experiences. In doing so, the teacher positions students to use their identities to develop academic identity. In this manner, teachers assess student achievement and student experience towards learning as a humanizing endeavor.

### ***A Culturally Responsive Framework for Teaching***

As stated earlier, the district adopted the SPARKS framework for culturally responsive instruction, anchored by the six tenets of CR instruction, based on a previous framework (Gonzalez, 2020). The SPARKS framework for culturally responsive instruction is an evidence-based approach used to create strong Tier 1 or classroom level instruction conditions. The district created the framework in response to federal de-segregation mandates to improve Latinx and African-American educational outcomes. This framework was an adaptation of tenets already in use by the former department of culturally relevant education. The SPARKS framework expanded to include asset-based approaches for all students while specifically addressing the two



demographics stated in the district unitary status plan for desegregation. Implementation of these tenets opens the opportunity gap (Milner, 2012) for all students.

Inherent in the implementation of the SPARKS framework is the breakdown of hierarchical, traditional forms in the delivery of instruction. Reciprocity, knowledge co-creation, and dialogue are key characteristics of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018). This reframing requires a shift from banking education, in which students are seen as empty vessels that must be filled with information within an ahistorical and apolitical context (Freire 2018, p.75). This form of instruction and assessment is an end in itself and reflects the hegemonic biases that privilege white, middle-class instruction. For marginalized students, this type of instruction and assessment has consistently shown gaps between White students and students of color (Barshay, 2018). However, such measures, including the National Educational Assessment Progress (NEAP), state-mandated tests, and other high-stakes tests, are used to show growth for educational programs, including those that center on CR instruction and any other form of Asset-based pedagogy. It is therefore worth noting that the link between student achievement on high-stakes tests (HST) and CR pedagogy should be clear to CR teachers, their administration, and the community.

### **The Role of High Stakes Tests in Education**

High-Stakes testing, as described by Au (2007), is part of policy design that links the results of standardized tests to consequences that place schools in hierarchies of “good” and “bad”. Using Bishop’s characteristics of “Curriculum-based External Exit Examinations” to define high-stakes testing. Zwier et al. (2020) identify the indicators as the following,

- (1) the exam produces signals of student achievement that have real

consequences for students, (2) student achievement is defined relative to an external standard, (3) the exam is organized by discipline, (4) it signals multiple levels of achievement in the subject (not pass/fail), and (5) it is administered to almost all secondary school students.(p. 418)

Referring to the real consequences of the indicators, the results of high-stakes tests affect grade promotion, high school graduation, and the categorization of schools, teachers, principals, and students. Because results are reported to the public, they can stigmatize school districts, schools, teachers, and most importantly, students.

### ***History of High-stakes Testing***

The progenitors of high-stakes testing can be traced back a hundred years, but a concerted effort for education reform and accountability emerged with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. With the advent of the Cold War and the Space Race, demands were made for greater scrutiny of the quality of education and attention to students who are disadvantaged (Nichols & Berliner 2007, p. 3). Student scores were tied to graduation, but there were no consequences for teachers or schools. In 1983, the Nation at Risk report from the National Commission on Education called for a drastic improvement to minimum competency standards to raise the rigorous standards and accountability measures. Overall, fear of a global decline in academic standings created a nationwide panic to address the shortcomings outlined in the report (Amrein & Berliner 2002, p. 4). The consequences resulted in teacher and school accountability, adopting a business model by introducing sanctions and incentives to raise test scores. Amrein & Berliner (2002) note that “ at this time, in contradiction to all the rhetoric, the research informs us that states that have implemented high-stakes testing policies have fared

worse on independent measures of academic achievement than have states with no or low stakes testing programs. The research also informs us that high-stakes testing policies have had a disproportionately negative impact on students from racial minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds” (p. 11). The assumptions were in the adequacy and appropriateness of assessing curriculum, equitable testing, and that the results are objective with little regard to the intrinsic motivation and social context of the students taking these tests.

With the advent of the standards movement, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB) required states to develop their academic standards and testing systems to meet Adequate Yearly Progress. By the 2014-2015 school year, schools were to meet 100% proficiency. Despite modest gains in math and no improvement in reading, NCLB would not meet this goal. In their study Dee & Jacob (2011) report that

NCLB’s contributions to math achievement appear more modest when benchmarked to the legislation’s ambitious requirement of universal proficiency by 2014. For example, NCLB increased grade 4 math proficiency by nearly 27 percent. Nonetheless, more than 60 percent of fourth graders still fail to meet the math proficiency standard defined by NAEP (p. 442).

States that did not comply with NCLB were at risk of losing significant Title I funding. The rewards and sanctions model resulted in the public shaming of schools by posting scores and giving grades to schools. In spite of not meeting 100% proficiency, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (2015) added the caveat of annual meaningful differentiation, which included subgroups as part of the grade report for each school, including each major racial and ethnic group, economically disadvantaged students as compared to students who are not economically

disadvantaged, children with disabilities as compared to children without disabilities, English proficiency status, gender, and migrant status,(Penuel, et al., 2016, p. 58). In this reiteration of the ESEA of 1965, the purpose of the law was to close the achievement gap under ESSA.

Teachers were no longer evaluated under student testing outcomes. Moreover, schools now must include one additional indicator of school quality or student success such as student engagement, educator engagement, postsecondary readiness, school climate and safety, and access to and completion of advanced coursework (Penuel et al., 2016, p.2).

High-stakes testing overall stems from the conservative neoliberal aim to produce a marketized era of consumers of education. The democratic ideals of education as a public good are undermined by the neoliberal ideals of competition for a market good for all consumers without questioning the systemic barriers that marginalized students of color face in Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice schooling (Darder 2015; Giroux, 2010). The race to close the achievement gap confounds efforts to improve equity in education because curriculum and instruction become truncated to promote test scores. Emler et al. (2019) describe the effects of high-stakes testing on the profession of teaching as a distortion of education, exacerbating inequity and injustice, demoralization of professionals, ethical corruption, and stifling innovation in education. For students of color, it further promotes low-level, low-engaging, non-responsive efforts to improve test scores (Milner, 2012).

### ***High Stakes Testing Embedded into the Schooling Experience***

Extant literature indicates various deleterious effects of HST on teachers and students, and curriculum (Au, 2010; Darder, 2015; Dee & Jacob, 2011; Emler et al., 2019; Gunzenhuaser, 2006; Jones et al., 1999, Minarechová, 2012, Nichols & Berliner, 2007). However, teachers cannot escape the reality of teaching in an HSTE. As part of the tenets of culturally relevant

pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1995) includes access to competence in the dominant culture, which includes HST. The role of HST, though ubiquitous, is not monolithic. Purposes for HST vary and so should the conversations about them. HST allows for a single look at all students, in a given moment, for the purposes of getting a baseline for student ranking at local, state, and national levels (Sloane & Kelly, 2003). Although potentially harmful to student self-identity if they are labeled as failing, the outcome of these labels is that these students become visible indicators to their teachers and schools of how to adapt their instruction. The ESSA Act (2015) now requires schools to identify subgroups for meaningful differentiation. This exposure benefits vulnerable populations that may go underserved in schools. For instance, English proficiency status, or migrant status, would now be a subgroup that would be represented in the school data reports. As well, state reports on proficiency growth during the pandemic year 2020-2021 warn that proficiency scores could not be used to evaluate a program but did identify the most impacted groups (Arizona State Board of Education 2021, Using Data to Support Success for Arizona Students: Assessing COVID-19 Impact on Student Learning, p.2) . The report expressed the need to understand the depth of learning loss, particularly for disparate populations. In this Order, the State Board of Education (Board) has been directed to utilize statewide assessment. Without HST, these subjects, grades, and populations would not be recognized nor evaluated as a group. Even under the most impacted conditions, HST data may help inform post-pandemic policy and focus on future instruction. Consequently, CR teachers cannot avert their responsibility to look at the trends and markers affecting their students' progress.

Culturally responsive teachers provide a commitment to a pedagogy that has proven to be effective for marginalized students of color. Yet, districts mandate teachers to change their methods to account for HST. How they accomplish this is the work of this study.

### *The District High Stakes Testing Environment*

In referencing the district schedule for HST, there is a consistent schedule of testing throughout the year. According to the district assessment schedule, figure 1 ([See Appendix A](#)), there is a HST scheduled for every month of the school year except for the month of May. These HSTs included quarterly benchmark tests, the ACT for 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grade and the pre-ACT test for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students (ACT ASPIRE), and the district pre-test and post-test. Teachers were participants at three High Schools. Teacher observations were limited to CRC courses specific to the Mexican American experience. These courses were limited to the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. In the district there is a difference in HSTE dependent on grade level and subjects. For instance, 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students had no testing, while 11<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students had to take the benchmark tests, the pre and post-tests, the ACT test, and the State tests. Additionally, 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students took the ACT Aspire test instead of the ACT. While 9<sup>th</sup> grade was not included in the study, participants still had to plan for it if they taught 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Figure 2 ([See Appendix A](#)) shows the district model of how assessments should be paced throughout the year, including weekly common formative assessments. Preparation for these tests included using IXL online learning platforms for Math and Reading. District mandated students to take diagnostics for the IXL programs and be on for at least 15 minutes per week. Teachers participated in department data talks in professional learning communities, discussing test results for various assessments. Teachers met as a department at least once a week during school time. The amount of time attending to HST in the district is consistent and ever-present.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

I am a first-generation Chicana who has worked for more than twenty-five years in an educational setting in majority Hispanic Title I schools. I am a product of Title I schools, and as a bilingual speaker of Spanish, language plays a role in my identity. My research is also informed by Critical Race Theory, which investigates race and the intersectionality of race as part of the imperative in implementing Culturally Responsive practices. My position as a Culturally Responsive Master teacher places me as an insider. I believe teachers are at the center of policy implementation. My experience and expertise can be insightful for the complexity of analyses of data in CR instructional practices, but I must work to monitor reflexivity and reactivity between myself and the participants (Pillow, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite calls to promote student achievement for students of color through the use of culturally responsive pedagogy and critical pedagogy, teachers and administrators can struggle to understand why these approaches work or abandon them in response to high-stakes test preparation. Terms such as teacher expectations (López, 2017), high fidelity context (Dee & Penner, 2017), or strong tier 1 instruction (Gonzalez, 2020) may be nebulous to teachers and administrators in various facets of CR instruction. Their inability to connect culturally responsive pedagogy and student achievement to scores in high-stakes testing may inhibit the effective implementation of instruction. In effect, culturally responsive pedagogy improves educational outcomes for students of color yet teachers and school leaders struggle to explain why it is effective.

## **Research Questions**

This study explores the relationship between CR teachers and their implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy while also attending to high-stakes testing environments. The study aims to answer the questions:

- In what ways do teachers navigate teaching in a high-stakes testing environment while employing culturally responsive teaching practices to create student achievement?
- In which ways do teachers receive support using culturally responsive teaching practices?

## **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

Findings from this study will add to the extant literature on the effectiveness of CR pedagogy in improving student achievement for marginalized students of color. This study will take a nuanced approach to understand teacher perception relating to student achievement within the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy and high-stakes testing. Further analysis will contextualize how CR pedagogy is operationalized in a high-stakes testing environment (HSTE), and how teachers navigate CR pedagogy while preparing students to be competent in dominant forms of educational capital such as HST and test scores. Results will inform best practices for educational leadership regarding teacher support in classroom instruction and student achievement.



## **Assumptions and Limitations**

The use of the term students of color is an effort to foreclose a color-blind approach to educational reform. In this study, the school district must address mandates to improve student outcomes for African-American and Mexican-American students. The term students of color centers on race and racialized identities as the focus of student transformative education.

As a career teacher who has worked in the field of education for more than 30 years, my world view as an educator believes in a constructivist approach to learning, and the centrality of race and its intersections in uncovering barriers to the pernicious hold of historical ‘opportunity gaps’ (Milner, 2012) for students of color. The assumption is that education should remain a public good in the work of preparing students for a democratic society. It also assumes that part of this preparation entails using critical pedagogy to question, change, and improve communities for a more equitable and democratic future, especially for marginalized students of color. Efforts to improve the educational outcomes for historically underachieving students of color using asset-based pedagogies are moral imperatives for teachers who work in these spaces.

Some limitations of this study include the focus on teacher perceptions. This nuanced approach does not look at the broader context within which these teachers work. Working conditions, including school climate, school-community connections, and leadership styles, can affect how teachers receive support as practitioners of CR pedagogy. Although, understanding individual teacher perceptions can identify those practices that are effective and how they transfer to the general educational experience of the school site.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Implementation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Practice

The transformation from traditional American Pedagogy (Darder, 2015) to CR instruction can be challenging and complex without sound pedagogical foundation coupled with a critical lens. If there is not enough training, preservice or in-service, teachers may view CR instructional practices as another add-on to a multitude of other considerations needed to generate productive learning environments. Teachers who struggle with the implementation of CR pedagogy and practice may be hindered by racial and ethnic incongruence, bias, colorblind perspectives over multicultural perspectives, race consciousness, and deficit-minded instruction, (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gay, 2013, Valenzuela, 2010). Young (2010) found that the clash between traditional education and culturally relevant pedagogy was difficult. She states, “The participants in the present study, especially the newer teachers who were just becoming familiar with the curriculum, did in fact view culturally relevant pedagogy as a seemingly impossible task” (Young 2010, p.257). Though they valued student culture, they did not link this student asset to student achievement. Further, Lew & Nelson (2016) reported that teachers’ views of culturally responsive teaching were simplistic. They state, “It seems participants’ understanding about culturally responsive teaching was learning about other cultural traditions instead of pedagogy that can help student learning” (Lew & Nelson 2016, p. 9). This simplistic overview limits CR instructional practices to building cultural competence, and inclusion of diverse perspectives but is unconnected to the critical pedagogy, rigor, or student identity, which leads to student achievement (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Gay, 2013; Gorski, 2016). An example of this would be the Mayfield (2012) study of CR practices in a school closing the achievement gap. Mayfield documented CR practices in cultural competence, CR pedagogy, family and home connections,

Learning environment, collective beliefs, and CR leadership. However, the staff credited improved student progress to an ongoing discussion on race, but the focus group discussion revealed that teachers did not attribute CR practices as responsible for closing the opportunity gap. She states, “Staff did not attribute their ability to close the achievement gap to culturally responsive practices as the researcher predicted. They saw culturally responsive practices as important, but the leadership of the practices mattered more importantly. The review of data based on subgroups kept their attention laser-focused on student progress” (p. 177). One can infer that having critical discussions on race led to culturally relevant curriculum choices and commitment to race was a variable toward student progress, but teachers did not acknowledge the culturally responsive classroom strategies as a scaffold for engaging students with curriculum standards. They attributed their success to their focus on test scores. This disconnect shows the pedagogical distance between CR practices and what Darder (2012) calls Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice. Where the burden for learning is placed on CR teachers, Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice places students as the culprits or winners of high-stakes test scores. Darder (2015) states, “Rather than speaking of ‘high-risk’ students, it seems it would be more accurate to speak of ‘high risk’ institutions” (p. 4). Troubling and consistent remarks from teachers’ beliefs showed their inability to identify or connect CR practices to student achievement.

Sleeter (2012) posits that the marginalization of CR pedagogy and practice in schools is in part due to the oversimplification of teacher understanding of CR pedagogy. This oversimplification leads to ignoring the political analysis of structural inequalities to instead focus on the essentialization of culture through the representation of food, fun, and festival, further lowering expectations with no analysis of power relations (P. 569). Further, Samuels

(2018) found pre-service teachers had marginal knowledge of diverse cultures. Considering these conditions, the potential disconnect exacerbates the unlikelihood that teachers would be able to operationalize CR pedagogy. Moreover, teachers cited a lack of time and resources as barriers to implementing CR pedagogy. Young (2010) observes a teacher's response to lack of time, "You only have seventy minutes a day to teach math, and then they have to pass the test." In essence, they were asking the question, would the incorporation of culturally relevant pedagogy impede the student's mastery of math" (p. 254)? Similarly, Samuels (2018) noted that teachers were overwhelmed with the demand to "accommodate learning opportunities for all populations" (p.26). The pedagogical disconnect for teachers to link CR instruction and practices to student achievement was pronounced and shows a gap in training and development. To overcome these barriers, teachers need pre-service and in-service training and support. Inclusive, they need a critical lens to create opportunities for transformative education (Boyd & Meyers, 1988) using CR practices and pedagogy.

### ***Foundations of Critical Pedagogy***

In response to teaching in a high-stakes testing environment, critical pedagogy serves as a foundation for operationalizing culturally responsive teaching practices. Critically Aware teachers are conscious pedagogues who position education and learning as tools for empowerment and transformation (Boyd & Meyers, 1988). In an HSTE, schooling is seen in the context of a market and consumer good versus a public good (Giroux, 2011; Roach & Frank, 2018). The position of high-stakes learning, in contrast, sees the student as an object in which education is acted upon for the purpose of securing a job in the future. In a neoliberal context, Giroux states,

Teachers are reduced to the status of technicians, removed from having control over their classrooms or school governance structures. Teaching to the test and the corporatization of education becomes a way of ‘taming’ students and invoking modes of corporate governance in which public school teachers become deskilled and an increasing number of higher education faculty are reduced to part-time positions, constituting the new subaltern class of academic labor. (p. 715)

The same neoliberal tactics that objectify students, in turn, objectify teachers. Hence, humanizing teachers as well as students is key in countering the objectified and amorphous space of high-stakes testing environments (Bartolome, 1994; Freire, 2018; Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Gonzalez, 2017). Critically Aware teachers know that positive student-teacher relationships are central to creating an environment for critical studies. As Duncan-Andrade (2009), states, “At the end of the day, effective teaching depends most heavily on one thing; deep and caring relationships”(p. 191). It is because of this caring environment, that Freire (2018) challenges educational hierarchies by introducing problem-posing education as a foil to the banking system of education.

In the banking system of education, Freire describes students as “containers” or “receptacles of information, usually given to them through lectures. Students become objects which contain information that is deemed important by the dominant culture, and the meeker students are the better they are at containing information (p. 72). Freire (2018) posits,

The more completely the majority adapts to the purposes which the dominant minority prescribes for them, (thereby depriving them of the right to their own purposes) the more easily the minority can continue to prescribe. The theory and practice of banking education serve this end quite efficiently.(p. 76)

Indeed, efficiency is paramount in the marketization of Neoliberal practices of education (Roach & Frank, 2018). They use the banking method in order to market learning into small discreet learning skills that can be tested. The scores of these tests, in turn, hold value or stigmatize schools, teachers, students, parents, and communities. It comes full circle the next year with little or unsustainable growth. In turn, what is produced is what Golann (2015) refers to as worker learners, in which students of color are trained to follow directions to show achievement. In contrast, Paris (2012) describes these deficit ideologies and policies which use “decontextualized language and literacy programs in poor communities of color”, a disruption and ever-present effort to create Culturally Sustaining communities of learning (p. 95). Further, Duncan-Andrade comments.

From child psychology to pedagogical theory to cognitive theory, our most basic understanding of the necessary conditions for learning suggest that positive self-identity, a sense of purpose, and hope are critical prerequisites for achievement. The test score fetish of the high-stakes era has turned us away from prioritizing these measures of effective teaching, even though gains in these areas are the key to raising test scores. (p. 635)

In positioning education as a consumable over the public good, the imperatives of high-stakes testing obfuscate and overlook critical pedagogies which effectively and paradoxically raise test scores. Hammond (2021) expresses concern with the disproportionate number of students of color who are still underachieving even though science has proven that all students have the capacity to learn. She states

A key fear I have is that many educators will want to decontextualize the science of learning and development and make its application color-blind to the

point that it does not help the neediest students. It is important for all those promoting these implications to be able to articulate their centrality to the quest for educational equity. (p.151)

Critically Aware teachers would be able to articulate this centrality because they are positioned to employ CR practices in a critical context. Neoliberal policies of banking education disenfranchise students and their communities from rigorous learning opportunities by placing students in educational contexts where they are objectified through high-stakes testing environments. These conditions result in disconnected lessons based on standards using worksheets that teach low-level thinking.

Critically Aware teachers use their students' assets to frame the learning environment (López, 2017). They build students' critical consciousness to explore or 'name their world' and work to change society for the better. In this context, critical pedagogy is crucial in producing education as a public good in a strong democratic society. Mayo (2015) elaborates on critical pedagogy as a "relationship of education and power" (p. 131). Mayo speaks to the Gramscian theory of hegemony in using critical pedagogy to disrupt the educational practices that serve to condition subaltern groups to accept oppressive rules and practices of being marginalized by the dominant group. In defining the work of critical pedagogy, Mayo includes five imperatives:

- Create new forms of knowing, place emphasis on dismantling disciplinary divisions, and creating interdisciplinary knowledge.
- Pose questions concerning relations between margins and centers of power in schools, universities, and throughout society as a whole.

- Encourage readings of history as part of a political pedagogical project that tackles issues of power and identity in connection with questions of social class, ‘race’/ethnicity, gender, and colonialism.
- Refute the distinction between ‘high’ and low culture with a view to developing a curriculum that connects with people’s life-worlds and everyday cultural narratives and gradually moves beyond that.
- Give importance to a language of ethics throughout the educational process (Adapted from Giroux 2011, p. 132).

The incorporation of critical pedagogy in CR teaching practices incorporates these imperatives to begin to challenge and disrupt hierarchies that disenfranchise students who do not or will not learn under white, middle, class standards of education. In this manner, Critically Aware teachers understand the barriers that students are subjected to and explicitly plan to mediate or neutralize them. In one example Duncan-Andrade (2007) relates how an effective teacher employs critical pedagogy to teach a scripted literacy program that was neither relevant nor responsive.

According to Andrade, Mr. Veracruz changed the intended assignment of the scripted program to write a persuasive letter and instead assigned students to identify an issue of concern at school and write a letter to the principal, (p. 626). This required students to “name their world”, and critique power relations. They were able to extend their knowledge, create new forms of learning, and center learning around their identities while flattening hierarchies of learning. In turn, students extended their analysis to think of how their issues may also be issues of other students in other schools. One student was able to read her letter to the superintendent to expose how substitute teachers were mistreating students. Andrade summarizes these effective teachers as able to “build intellectually rigorous lessons that are relevant to the real and immediate



conditions of their students' lives so that students can think and respond critically for themselves. They share with students their hope that they will become agents of change which are too few today (Duncan-Andrade 2007, p. 627). Freire (2018) refers to this type of education as problem-posing. In opposition to the banking model of education, Freire (2018) states that in problem-posing education students begin to 'read their world' and think critically about the way they exist in that world. Critically Aware teachers position students to become subjective users of knowledge instead of objective 'containers' of standards-based lessons deposited by teachers. Freire (2018) states, "Problem posing education affirms men and women as being in the process of becoming" ( p. 84). In this sense, Critically Aware teachers use critical pedagogy to frame culturally responsive education. In a CR classroom, problem-posing education allows a transformative process to use student assets and lived experiences to close the opportunity gap. Inherent in a critical CR classroom is access to standards without making them the only goal. Using problem-posing education is an iterative process that continually provides a rigorous curriculum for students of color who may have gaps in their skill set due to repeated exposure to poor teaching or no access to higher levels of knowledge. On the contrary, banking education ensures that students never work their way out of any opportunity gap because it ensures that schooling is an action done to them passively, rather than a tool students use to read the world and change it. Teaching in a high-stakes testing environment requires teachers to work against the low expectations and the objectification of student achievement produced in an HSTE.

### **The Centrality of Race**

Including race as part of student identity opens the curriculum to include racialized student lived experiences. These experiences are assets that are leveraged to inform and engage instruction. For students, their racialized experiences are not ignored in daily life; therefore,

ignoring these experiences in schooling becomes a form of erasure. For ethnic studies courses such as those studied here, CRT offers a way to explore and empower students to transform their educational experiences through the lens of race and ethnicity. As such, Critical Race Theory will inform how the theoretical framework of the study will contextualize CR classes and instructional pedagogy. Critical Race Theory stems from Critical Legal Studies, the analysis of the failure of Civil Rights legislation to effect significant change for African Americans, and other people of color. The centrality of race is used as a construct to analyze persistent and pernicious barriers to equality for students of color.

The work of CRT is transdisciplinary and crosses the intersectionality of multiple identities. Remunerations of critical studies have expanded to Black Feminism and Feminist.Critical studies (Crenshaw, 1989), LatCrit ( Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), Tribal Crit (Brayboy, 2005), etc. Each theory re-contextualizes critical studies to define the inequalities particular to different identities. However, many of these theories have similar tenets to CRT. Ladson-Billings (2019) states, “Despite scientific refutation of race as a legitimate biological concept and attempts to marginalize race in much of the public (political) discourse, race continues to be a powerful social construct and signifier” (p. 8). Hammond (2021) questions the persistent lack of success for students of color even though scientific research has proved that there are no racial factors that inhibit how the brain works. Yet, the gap in test scores persists between White and Hispanic or White and African American students of color (Barshay, 2018). It is therefore salient to look at the centrality of race in researching student achievement while attending to the intersectionality of students of color.

In their revisiting of CRT, Dixson and Rousseau (2014) use Carbado’s frame to postulate eight CRT tenets. They are:

CRT refutes meritocracy and the belief that individual agency is solely responsible for personal gains and success.

CRT challenges the dominant narrative that is ahistorical and colorblind

CRT posits that race is endemic and socially constructed

CRT posits that racism is intersectional

CRT calls attention to discursive frames used to perpetuate inequality for people of color such as colorblindness, reverse discrimination, merit, citizenship, language, etc.

CRT is both pragmatic and idealistic (p. 34).

These tenets inform the complexity and rootedness of race in the formation of structures of inequality for students of color.

CRT pragmatic and idealistic imperatives are useful in analyzing teacher critical awareness around the operationalization of CR in a high-stakes testing environment. Although acknowledging racism as endemic, CRT seeks to disrupt, resist and transform societal inequalities brought about by racist ideals. This moral imperative is not only idealistic, but it positions practitioners of CRT to take action through social justice, counter stories, truth-telling of historical events, and representations of contributions from students of color. In doing so, CR practitioners use CRT to take a critical stance in their work. For example, Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) use CRT pedagogy to create a framework for repositioning student learners at various stages of resistance. The goal is to push students toward transformational resistance that requires a critical approach and student agency to confront the intersections of inequity. In particular, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identify five CRT signifiers in which students can challenge: assumptions of objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity, (p. 313). This critical approach requires that CR practitioners have a

sound pedagogical understanding of the importance of CRT in framing a transformative and emancipatory education.

A second way CRT informs educational pedagogy is using the counter story. Using counter-stories are powerful tools of resistance for teachers, students, and scholars to use against hegemonic barriers that students of color encounter in the everyday experiences of schooling. Darder (2015) names a few of these barriers in her description of Tradition American Pedagogy and Practice. These include meritocracy, which she defines as “an educational practice whereby the talented are chosen and move ahead based on their achievement. The talented, for the most part, are members of the dominant culture whose values comprise the very foundations that inform the knowledge and skills a student must possess or achieve to be designated as an individual who merits reward” (Darder 2015, p. 12). The counter story can challenge this assumption by centering the lived experiences of marginalized students of color in such a manner that provides access to academic purpose, representation, a challenge to hegemony in education, succor, and healing centering on student identity as a force to counter bias and erasure. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define the counter-story as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 32). The counter-story used as a personal narrative is a powerful tool in CR instruction and practice to give voice to students who have been underserved with little access to rigorous and meaningful construction of knowledge. Testimonios, a form of narrative, serve as personal counterstories to document students' experiences of color to name and confront systems of racial oppression and erasure, as with

Montoya's (1994) experience as part of a stigmatized group navigating Harvard Law School. Montoya uses her family history and the asset of a Spanish language speaker to confront cultural erasure. By centering counter-stories on lived experiences, students can connect the assets from home and community to school. This positions students in an asset-based frame where teachers can capitalize on student assets to make significant educational gains.

The counter-story, used as a composite story to show data and research, can serve CR practitioners as models to contextualize and interpret data. Brayboy (2005) posits that stories are not separate from theory, and therefore "legitimate sources of data and ways of being" (p. 430). Composite stories have been used to disrupt the deficit portrayal of students of color and under-researched topics that challenge deficit portrayals as part of the diaspora of students of color experiences (Bell, 1999; Delgado, 1989; Milner & Howard, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Derrick Bell's theory of Interest Convergence (1980) proposes that no significant change can happen in addressing racism and inequality unless there is some benefit to the dominant class in power, White people. His example in the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v Board of Education Topeka Kansas* (1954) shows Interest-convergence in the form of the threat of losing reputation and standing in the world during the Cold War against Communism. Furthermore, African American veterans returning from WWII suffered violence and racism when they returned and demanded equal justice, (P. 524). The United States could not emerge as a world leader if African Americans lived under Jim Crow laws and the threat of violence. The theory of interest convergence may help contextualize why CR practices are neither fully embraced, nor fully understood despite research and monies dedicated to its fruitful practice. For instance, Critically Aware teachers work to dismantle biases that may harm student-teacher relations or inhibit access to rigorous CR instruction. If a teacher does not believe in structural racism, or that

racial bias exists, they cannot operationalize critical pedagogy. They would use color-blind approaches with educational pedagogy which continue to erase, harm or impose curriculum violence, upon students (Brown & Brown, 2010). This interest convergence comes with the summer of protest against the brutal murder of George Floyd by a police officer. Suddenly, teachers came back in the Fall ready to speak about racial issues and inequality surrounding police violence. Principals would contact our department and ask about how to handle teaching controversial subjects of race and inequality. How would they safely teach these topics?

Currently, our nation is once again grappling with the issue of interest convergence. With the historical Covid-19 pandemic as a background, people marched in protest. At the same time, conservative efforts by governors are passing ‘anti-CRT’ laws (Greene, 2022). These laws are meant to maintain the hegemony of Whiteness as the property of schooling (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Teachers, as always, are positioned to make a difference towards a more equitable society by using CRT to create equitable spaces for learning. Consequently, the role of culturally responsive teacher commitment may inhibit the effects of interest convergence in how they operate in an HSTE.

### **Culturally Responsive Practices within a High-stakes Testing Environment**

Critically Aware teachers must find ways to reconcile working in an HSTE while maintaining a sound pedagogy of CR teaching practices. Zoch (2017) posits, “It is important to take into account the context in which teaching occurs to remind us teaching is not just about teaching; it also involves maneuvering and negotiating a highly politicized terrain” (p. 630). Self-awareness plays a role in how teachers can maneuver between an HSTE and being culturally responsive and culturally sustaining. In her ethnographic study of four literacy teachers, Zoch (2017) noted that they disagreed with the administration’s decision to focus on

test preparation from the beginning of the school year. Students were expected to work independently in workbooks on discrete skills for test preparation. In contrast, the teachers chose to use culturally sustaining practices while “providing access to dominant cultural competence, [HST]” (p. 616). Here, access to dominant cultural competence includes HST. Zoch’s findings show that CR teachers met the objectives of the curriculum without using worksheets. They chose to anchor the curriculum in culturally relevant materials and discussions that met the learning goals of tests. Teachers also created a link between what they were learning and how it was tested. Discussion and readings were based on student identity and issues that were relevant to them. Despite the administration relying on discrete skills development in isolation of student lived experience, these four teachers had the self-efficacy and the experience to rely on the culturally sustaining pedagogy and culturally responsive practices to address HST goals.

Critically Aware teachers have the added duty to find ways to overcome the negative effects of HST on students and guard their classroom environments as sanctuaries of learning. Zoch suggests that as a methodology, it is beneficial to include the participants and co-researchers to uncover and understand deeply the ways in which teachers sustain themselves and their students in HSTE. Additionally, Gunzenhauser (2003) offers suggestions on how to respond to HSTE by finding alternative methods of assessment that reflect the school’s philosophies: engaging in higher-order concepts, refraining from spending money on extrinsic methods of motivation such as pep rallies, and trophies, engaging with the standards, not the test preparation, and take community responsibility for all students, (p. 57). Alternatively, Gunzenhuaser (2006) also proposes exposing how students are normalized, or objectified, through the process of high-stakes testing. These are ways in which teachers and other educational leaders can maneuver CR pedagogy within an HSTE. There is hope that more conversation and action between teachers

and leaders can improve the relationship of respecting teachers as professionals while working to close the opportunity gap.

### ***Working in a High-Stakes Testing Environment***

High-stakes testing environments present a challenging space for teachers, especially critically Aware teachers using culturally responsive practices to engage students in the schooling and learning process. For students of color in Title I schools, a high-stakes testing environment exacerbates already existing inequities. Emler et al. (2019) states,

The policies prescribed to close the gap did not work to close the gap in test scores but resulted in narrowed curriculum, distorted instruction, and demoralized educators. But the damage has been worse for disadvantaged children: curriculum narrowing, instructional distortion, demoralization, and corruption scandals happened more frequently in schools of disadvantaged students. (p. 289)

The implications for teachers in Title I schools means they must navigate the district mandates of HSTs while retaining their professionalism and use of CR pedagogy to position students as subjective participants in their own learning. High-stakes testing environments can demoralize and corrupt the teacher's efficacy as a professional. In particular, HSTEs erode the learning environment in three ways. First, and most importantly, HSTEs change the relationship between student and learning and student and teacher. By focusing on student scores, students become the object of education instead of the subject of their own learning. Students are valued by their test scores, in contrast to utilizing education as a tool and process to prepare to live in a pluralistic democratic society. Second, HSTEs truncate the curriculum to focus on heavily tested items, to the extent that these tested items are to be covered in non-tested classrooms. Third, by focusing on high-stakes test-taking mandates, educational leaders abandon sound and proven pedagogy to



raise those same test scores. The test becomes the end goal, and as a result, time, resources, and attention revolve around the test with little to no monitoring of proven methods of students' learning such as CR teaching.

### **The Project of Testing**

I once had a central district leader come to our school site to talk to us about test scores. The one take away from this meeting was his statement about test scores, "They're the only game in town". By using this phrase, this leader who represents the district's philosophy, was putting forth a philosophy that Gunzenhauser (2003), refers to as "Default Philosophy". Effectively shutting down alternate conversations about assessment and student learning, this leader weaponized the test scores to evaluate principals, teachers, students, and schools. Consequently, growth models, or analyses of formative assessments that may capture student achievement in a different modality would be dismissed.

Default philosophy is enacted when critical conversations about learning and knowledge are replaced by conversations about test scores. The narrowing of the curriculum to include only what will raise test scores replaces sound research-based pedagogy for improving student achievement. The high-stakes tests become imperative for the school. As stated by Gunzenhauser (2006), "The examination thus affects a reversal of power relations—the measurement supplants the self, and measuring becomes the project of the school" (p. 251). Significant consequences include prioritizing test scores over student needs (Minarechová, 2012; Polesel et al., 2012). Philosophical shifts foreclose sound constructivist pedagogy in preference to banking education (Freire, 2018). This pedagogical shift exacerbates inequitable learning environments. Targeted underperforming students are more likely to receive rote learning on discrete skills over project-

based and inquiry learning (Au, 2020). Effectively, students of color become widgets in the systemic maneuvering of policy and funding via HST.

### ***High Stakes Testing and Curriculum***

Extant literature revealed a significant effect on the curriculum from HST. HST limited the curriculum to focus on tested items, truncating the curriculum to tested standards only (Au, 2007; Gunzenhauser, 2003; Jones et al., 1999; and Minarechová, 2012). Au states, “The structure of knowledge itself is also changed to meet the test-based norms: Content is increasingly taught in isolated pieces and often learned only within the context of the tests themselves” (Au, 2007 p. 263). The narrowing of the curriculum to “teach to the test” meant that subjects and methods were left off the curriculum. Minarechová (2012) states,

High-stakes testing interferes with teaching and learning. Under high-stakes testing, the way students are taught is changing along with the methods used and the way in which teachers approach instruction. Creative interdisciplinary activities and project-based investigations are being left out. (pp. 91-92)

This curtailing of the curriculum places teachers in a position to teach to the test. There is less autonomy, and more time spent on teaching discrete skills to raise test scores. It is in this vein that the role of schooling places an emphasis on the test over student needs such as building a sense of belonging and attending to student identity through ethnic identity development. These are also markers that lead to student achievement across not only human measures but HST.

### ***Test Preparation***

Another common theme among HSTE is the phenomenon of the amount of time spent on test preparation (Au, 2007; Jones et al, 1999; Minarechová, 2012; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Polesel et al, 2012). The Jones et al. study (1999) reported survey results that 80% of teachers spent 20% of total teaching time on test preparation for end-of-grade tests. Further, teachers were expected to stop teaching non-tested subjects as they got closer to the HST testing date. In one example, teachers stopped teaching science using hands-on instruction, and instead taught using worksheets and choral reading (Jones et al., 1999). Au (2007), in this case, there is no construction of knowledge, which is the antithesis to culturally responsive pedagogy. In a constructivist view, these are pedagogically unsound teaching practices. The quandary teachers must negotiate in having to implement CR pedagogy in a High-stakes testing environment is an important factor in understanding the relationship between student achievement and CR instruction. Au (2007) found that knowledge was fragmented into small pieces to fit the test-taking parameters. He states, “such fragmentation manifested in the teaching of content in small, individuated, and isolated test-size pieces, as well as teaching in direct relation to the tests rather than in relation to other subject matter knowledge” (Au, 2007 p. 262). Moreover, his meta-synthesis found a predominance of teacher-centered instruction and curriculum contraction accounted for 70.3% of the studies he reviewed, while student-centered pedagogy accounted for 16.7%. This finding, though not surprising, is foretelling of the type of learning that is prominent, banking education. Banking education is teacher-centered and lecture-based. Although high-stakes testing largely influences curriculum to narrow for “the test”, there were six studies in his meta-synthesis that utilized a student-centered curriculum. For teachers who employ CR practices, there is hope for documenting alternative ways of thriving in an HSTE.

### *Navigating a High Stakes Testing Environment*

In the struggle to maintain focus on culturally responsive teaching, Critically Aware teachers must find ways to reconcile these two disparate pedagogical stances on student achievement. Ladson-Billings (1995) stipulates that student achievement must be part of culturally relevant education, specifically student achievement on HST. She declares, “Whether or not scholars can agree on the significance of standardized tests, their meaning in the real world serves to rank and characterize both schools and individuals” (Ladson-Billings 1995, p. 475). As part of the reality of the mechanisms of schooling, she recognizes and compels teachers to attend to student achievement. Although HSTs are imperfect markers for learning, they cannot go ignored. In this sense, student achievement is part of gaining access to dominant culture opportunities (Paris 2012, p. 95). Ladson-Billings sees this as part of the “Ethic of Personal Accountability.” She describes teachers committed to a culturally relevant education as defying administrative imperatives to protect their positionalities, or, in one case, working within the system to ask for permission to use culturally relevant practices in conjunction with literacy and numeracy programs that deconstruct learning into discrete skills. In her example, one of the teachers petitioned the school board to use an experimental program that aligned with her pedagogical beliefs instead of the reading program mandated by the district. She provided research to support her program and was approved to use culturally relevant pedagogy in her classroom instruction. In operationalizing Ladson-Billings’ Ethic of Personal Accountability, teachers maintain their culturally relevant commitments to their classrooms while attending to HST scores. When CR pedagogy is used with attention and planning, test scores will improve (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; López, 2017). What is not evident is how CR teachers, if at all, use HST and maneuver in an HSTE to improve student achievement.

## Theoretical Framework

For this study I will be using the SPARKS framework for Culturally Responsive (CR) instructional practices as a framework for defining and speaking about Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gonzalez, 2020) The SPARKS framework uses six tenets to ground the CR pedagogy for addressing the consistent and inequitable learning outcomes for students of color, especially those attending Title I schools. Further, teachers who teach in Title I schools are called to change pedagogical practices to center instruction around the assets and culture of the students (Gay 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Paris 2012). Using this framework, a Critically Aware teacher can improve student outcomes for students of color. Further, a critically aware teacher in will navigate an HSTE to assure student achievement using CR practices. This level of analysis also positions teachers as the expert, an asset-based approach to transformational leadership.

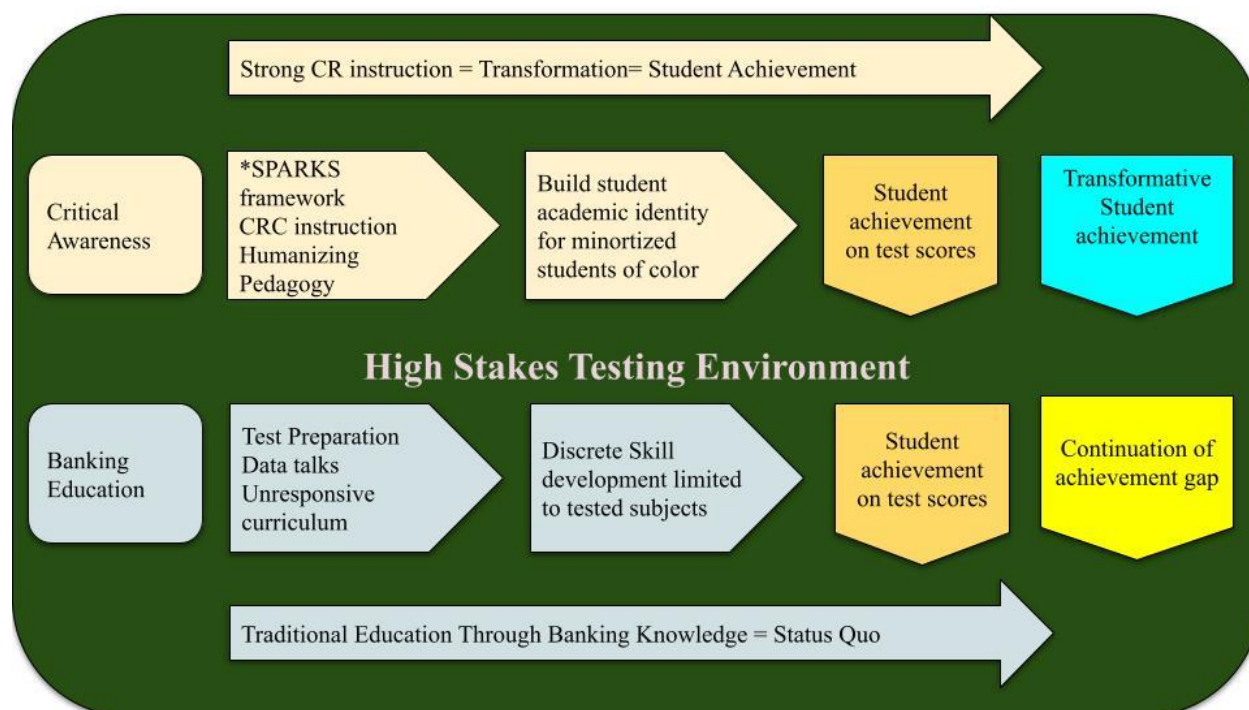
Critical Race theory is used in conjunction with the SPARKS framework to address race as a mitigating factor in student achievement (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Critically Aware teachers use counterstories to disrupt deficit mindsets and barriers which contribute to consistent underperformance in HST (Barshay, 2018). CRT works in tandem with CR pedagogy to inform how to operationalize the SPARKS framework to work towards providing an emancipatory and liberatory education that leads to student transformation.

CRC teachers with high critical awareness will be able to articulate how CR pedagogy is related to student achievement, even in a high-stakes testing environment ([See figure 2](#)). Despite the amount of professional development and support offered, it is not clear if CR teachers at different stages of critical awareness are able to reconcile using CR pedagogy to affect student achievement within the context of heeding to directives of test preparation. CR teachers with

high critical awareness are aware of the adverse effects of a high-stakes testing environment. A critically Aware teacher will be able to use transformative methods of instruction to improve student outcomes, specifically using the tenets of the SPARKS framework to engage students of color. Figure B, shows how a CR teacher with critical awareness is likely to transform their students through CR practices. In particular, the tenet of Academic Identity and Ethnic Identity Development from the SPARKS framework is key. The production and evidence of accessing content standards using CR pedagogy which includes problem-posing education (Freire, 2018) or the use of counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) will be evident.

#### Figure 4

*Teacher Critical Awareness related to the Effects of Culturally Responsive Instruction on Student Achievement in a High-Stakes Testing Environment (HSTE)*



*Note.* \*SPARKS is a framework for operationalizing culturally responsive pedagogy.

### Chapter 3: Methods

This is a case study of five teachers who are assigned to teach at least one culturally relevant course. A case study would be the appropriate method to study how teachers navigate HSTE while maintaining a commitment to CR courses. It allows for the study of this issue in an in-depth and contextualized space where the possibility of what we think we know about culturally responsive pedagogy and instruction in HST environments can reveal unexpected findings (Bhattacharya, 2017; Yin 2014). The purpose is to explore how each participant critically negotiates teaching with culturally responsive pedagogy while attending to the directives of an HSTE. In this case, the classroom becomes a bounded perimeter where tensions between teaching imperatives may coincide and collide in the same space. Critically Aware teachers using dialogic/problem-posing strategies whose goal is to provide a transformational and liberatory education contend with edicts from central administration, focusing on test scores as a marker of student achievement. Both the teacher's and central administrator's goal is to provide a rigorous and equitable education, however, both are competing for class time in addressing test preparation and raising HST scores using two disparate pedagogies for learning, CR and Banking education through Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice.

What is not clear is the relationship between these two imperatives, and how the differences between these two imperatives are navigated by each participant. The case study provides a nuanced approach to exploring how individualized each participant enacts CR pedagogy in an HSTE (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Yin, 2014). Therefore, the study seeks answers to the research question:

- In which ways do teachers navigate teaching in a high-stakes testing environment while employing culturally responsive teaching practices to support student achievement?
- In which ways do teachers receive support using culturally responsive teaching practices?

As stated earlier, participants use a critical lens to implement the CR framework known as SPARKS (see [Appendix B](#)). As part of the data collection, the framework will be instrumental in establishing markers for the identification of culturally responsive classroom practices (Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2014; Harmon, 2012). Correspondingly, CRT will inform how cultural relevance is established, and how the participants position themselves to address deficit mindsets that have historically affected students of color in the schooling system (Bell; 1999; Brayboy, 2005; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; López, 2017). In this bounded space, it is inherent that the participants are not neutral subjects in navigating an HSTE. It is therefore important that the reflexivity of the participants and the researcher be heightened to check for bias and reactivity, but also to be used as a reference point. Pointedly, the study is exploring how two divergent approaches to schooling interact and find commonalities that inform practices to improve student achievement (Pillow, 2010). The biases and positionalities of the participants will inform how they navigate HSTE. As an insider, I have an awareness of this tension throughout the length and breadth of this study.



## Setting

The study takes place in a school district based in the Southwestern United States. The schools will be known as Mesquite High School, Huerta High School, and Metro High School. These names are pseudonyms and do not represent any high school by any of these names. The three high schools are designated Title I schools with all schools averaging higher concentrations of Hispanic students as compared to the district average (See [Table 1](#)). All participants indicated they taught classes in which the Latino demographic made up at least half the class but not every student.

No school grade is available for the high schools because of the Covid-19 pandemic. State impact reports for the school year 2020-2021 identified the Covid-19 pandemic had a large impact on Hispanic, Black, and Native American students' English/Language Arts while having a severe impact on Mathematics, (Arizona State Board of Education, 2021). Additionally, ELL and high poverty populations were the most affected by the Covid 19 pandemic. This school district had some of the lowest percentages of student testing rates. Two of the high schools, Huerta and Mesquite, scored in the bottom 25th percentile of high schools for all traditional 9-12 schools while Metro high school scored in the bottom 50th. Huerta High School has the highest concentration of Hispanic students with 89% of the population Hispanic, significantly above the district average. It had a slightly higher average than the district for ELL students. It was also the lowest-scoring school of the three high schools for state proficiency scores in 2020-2021. Given the information from the state impact report, this district was heavily impacted in terms of proficiency scores due to adverse effects on Hispanic, African American, Native American and ELL populations. However, the report stated it was not advisable to evaluate any teacher or

school using this report because of the disruption to the learning environment during the pandemic.

**Table 1**

*2021-2022 Student Demographics on the Hundredth Day of Enrollment.*

District/school enrollment	white/Anglo	African American	Hispanic	Native American	Asian American	Multiracial	ELL
District	19%	6%	65%	4%	2%	4%	11.01%
Mesquite/Cholla	8%	3%	81%	6%	>1%	>2%	10.31%
Metro/Tucson	15%	6%	70%	4%	1.5%	3.5%	8.93%
Huerta/Pueblo	3%	1%	89%	6%	>1%	>1%	11.68%

All teachers in this district are expected to use culturally responsive instructional practices using the SPARKS framework (see [Appendix B](#)). Although those teachers assigned a culturally relevant course have access to training, mentorship, and resources specific to culturally relevant and culturally responsive instruction, not all teachers avail themselves of the training opportunities. What is clear is the commitment of this district to define protocols and frameworks to institute equitable learning experiences for all students.

The district spent a significant amount of time, funding, and resources to steer the district towards a culturally responsive theoretical framework in order to improve tier 1, or classroom instruction. District-wide training has been implemented in stages to prepare teachers and staff to take a Culturally Responsive stance in educating all students in the district. In the 2017-18 school year, teachers received four professional development sessions to build critical awareness using Asset-Based Pedagogy (López, 2017). District-wide training on Restorative Practices provided to

all teachers in the 2018-2019 school year. In an effort to support an asset-based environment and disrupt the disproportionate effect of punitive discipline on students of color, the district adopted a restorative practices model (Zehr, 2015) to mediate student behavior and decrease the amount of out-of-class time due to student exclusion from the classroom learning environment. In the 2018-2019 school year, the district utilized the trainer of trainer's model to disseminate instructional practices for a culturally responsive curriculum in math, science, language arts, social studies, and elective courses. In the 2019-2020 school year district-wide professional development on Coaching for SPARKS. Potentially, all Tier I instructional teachers received a total of 16 hours of professional development in building critical awareness, restorative practices, and SPARKS implementation. Subsequently, new teachers receive training in CR pedagogy in their first year through and induction that includes CR practices . Additionally, a department dedicated to CR pedagogy directed resources of mentor teachers and training. Culturally Relevant Course (CRC) teachers in this study worked in conjunction with a mentor who observes their classrooms two-four times a month. Duties of the mentor teacher include lesson modeling, co-teaching, classroom observation and feedback, resource development, help with lesson planning, and providing materials and curriculum. Further, CRC teachers were selected in part because they participated in four-hour monthly Tier I training in CR instruction. After four years, these teachers aged out of Tier I training. Lastly, an advanced Tier II training was created for the experienced CR teachers who needed to be challenged with theory. These sessions were held once a month in a two-hour session to discuss theory and practice. Tier II training is by invitation only. CRC Teachers were invited by their mentors who had a consistent and high degree of SPARKS implementation and critical awareness. With such extensive investment in time and training, this is a salient moment to study how CRC teachers use CR pedagogy and Critical

Awareness works to improve student outcomes in a high-stakes testing environment. Notably, participants in this study do not attend Tier I training because they have aged out or have advanced enough in their pedagogy and practice.

### *Participants*

The case study centers on a purposeful sample of five participants currently teaching culturally relevant courses in English or History in grades ranging from 10th through 12th grade in three different high schools. Students enrolled in the CR courses in the SY 2021-2022 who consented totaled 180. All teachers identified as Mexican-American or Chicano. Education levels among the participants ranged from a Ph.D. to a teacher with an emergency credential. Years of experience varied as well with the range spanning 28+ years to 2 years. These teachers were chosen because they demonstrate traits of critical awareness as well as a practitioners of CR pedagogy and CRT (See [Table 2](#)). Tenets of Critical Awareness are represented within the SPARKS framework.

Table 2

#### *Participant Use of SPARKS Framework for CR Practices, CRE, and CRT*

Tenet	Che	Marta	Hope	Antonio	Mercedes
Student - Centered instruction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Positive Learning community	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Academic Identity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rigor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Know-ledge co- construction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social Justice oriented	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community engagement		✓	✓		✓
Counter stories	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Culturally Relevant Texts	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Use of Cultural Referents	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Resistance to Interest Convergence	✓	✓			✓
Intersectionality	✓	✓	✓		

Hope has taken courses like CRC courses as a high school student. She has been a teacher at Mesquite High School for 6 years. Mesquite High School has a concentration of 81% demographic of Hispanic students. She teaches two courses in culturally relevant English courses for Latino students.

Antonio is a former student of a CRC course in the district. He has three years of teaching experience at Metro High School. Metro High School is the largest of the high schools and has a 70% concentration of Hispanic students, slightly higher than the district average. He teaches two courses in 12th grade English CRC Mexican American perspective. He is teaching with an emergency credential and is working toward his Master's degree in education with a teaching credential.

Mercedes is a former student of a CRC class in the district. She has recently begun her teaching career with two years of teaching at Huerta High School. She teaches four English CR Mexican American perspective courses in 9th and 10th grade. She is the only teacher in the district teaching a CRC course in the 9th grade.

Che is the most veteran teacher with 28 years of teaching experience with the district. He currently teaches at Metro High. He is also a trainer of trainers in providing professional development for the other four participants of this study. Che teaches three 11th grade CR History Mexican-American perspective.

Marta is a former student of CRC courses in the district. She has been teaching for five years at Huerta High School and is currently working towards her Ph. D. in education. She teaches two English CR Mexican American perspective courses for the 11th and 12th grades.

Table 3  
Participant Descriptives

Participant/ location	Self- identification	Grade levels taught	Highest level of education	Years of teaching experience in the district
Hope Mesquite High School	Mexican- American or Chicano	11th CRC English 10th Grade English	BA Spanish BA English	6
Antonio Metro High school	Mexican- American or Chicano	9th grade English  12th grade CRC Eng	BA in MAS minor in English	3
Mercedes Huerta High	Mexican- American or	9th and 10th CRC English	BA education emphasis in	2

School	Chicano	MA perspective	Community Ed	
Che Metro High School	Mexican-American or Chicano	11th grade CRC History 12th grade CRC MA History	Ph.D. Education	28
Marta Huerta High School	Mexican-American or Chicano	11th and 12th English	Doctoral Candidate in Education	5

### Data Collection

Data was collected in the 2021-2022 school year. Collected data was part of a larger study which included classroom observations, teacher interviews, focus groups, teacher questionnaires, student interviews, field notes, and memos. Research assistants for the larger study used cameras and recorders to capture classroom observations. I recorded and observed three different lessons in Antonio's classroom and Che's classroom. Due to block scheduling at Metro High, recordings for each lesson occurred during two consecutive days for one period each day in Antonio's class, totaling two periods. For Che's classroom, three different lesson plans were recorded for two consecutive days each, with two periods on one day and one period on the next day. All audio and video were transcribed and coded.

Classroom observations for Hope and Marta were conducted by two different research assistants. Three different research assistants, including myself, were responsible for gathering consent forms, teacher interviews, observations, and transcribing them. I was responsible for the teachers at Metro High School, Antonio, and Che. Each participant at Metro High School had six days of observations for three different lesson plans. The teachers at Mesquite High School and

Huerta High had two days of observations on two different lessons. A total of 12 observations or audio recordings were transcribed and coded.

### *Student Participants*

There were 180 student participants who turned in signed consent forms. Their grades ranged from 10th to 12th grade. Once classroom observations were complete student interviews occurred in February through May of 2022. Students were selected by teachers who perceived them to have the most growth in critical thinking. A total of 19 student interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. Interviews lasted between eight and twenty-five minutes.

### *Interviews*

The study included three types of interviews, individual teacher interviews (See [Appendix C](#)), a focus group interview (See [Appendix D](#)), and student interviews (See [Appendix E](#)) All interviews were conducted in the SY 2021-2022. Student interviews were conducted at the school sites. Focus group and individual teacher interviews were conducted over the Zoom video conferencing platform. All interviews were semi-structured and used open-ended questions (Seidman, 2006). Video of the interviews was transcribed, except for two participants. As part of the larger study, participants were assigned to different research assistants. The researcher read and observed interviews and classroom observations through transcription and video for Marta, Mercedes, and Hope. The researcher was able to interview Hope, Che, and Antonio using the zoom platform. The research assistants for Mercedes and Marta verbally asked them the questions and wrote out the answers. Teachers participated in a focus group as part of their professional development. Questions were open-ended and the interviews were semi-structured.



As part of the larger study, the focus group centered around dialogic teaching and student curiosity. The purpose of the focus group was to find similarities and differences in how the participants use critical discussion to promote students' creativity. Included was a question on how the participants felt supported by their peers, mentors, and administration. The last question was specific to exploring how they negotiate teacher effectiveness while functioning under a HSTE. The focus questions were open-ended and general to elicit differentiated as well as common experiences in their responses, (See [Appendix D](#)). Student interviews were semi-structured, and the questions were open-ended about their experiences in their CRC courses. There was a total of 18 student interviews out of a total of 180 students who were participants in the study, (See [Appendix E](#)). Students were chosen by their teachers, as examples of growth and criticality.

### ***Memos and Field Notes***

I compiled memos after every classroom observation at Metro High and after viewing and reading transcripts for participants at Huerta High School and Mesquite High School. Field notes were limited to Metro High School and occasions where I am in contact with the other three participants, such as during professional development, teacher interviews, and member checking with the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

To address my role as an insider mentor teacher, I used a hybrid method of inductive and deductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The approach helped me to distance myself by using inductive coding for the first round of open coding. This distance was important because I use the SPARKS framework daily to mentor and evaluate CR instruction. Beginning

with inductive coding was useful in checking my bias toward the participants' instructional choices, how they responded to interview questions, and the focus group discussion (Thomas, 2006). It also helped with looking for various data that captured the subtlety of HSTE phenomenon. Maxwell (2013) states, "I treat analysis as part of the design ... as something that must be designed" (p. 104). Using the inductive approach helped guide the design of the study by using open coding as soon as I collected the data. Regular and consistent coding assisted in the analysis and design of the study. For instance, initial classroom recordings revealed little evidence of participant and students' interaction with HST and the HSTE. From there, I designed focus group questions to elicit a more complete picture of how teachers navigate an HSTE. I then followed up with member checks.

Classroom observations did reveal a consistent use of CR instruction. I used deductive coding stems from the six tenets of the culturally responsive theoretical framework of SPARKS and the tenets of CRT to code for specific teacher behavior (Hyde, 2000). The deductive coding helped define the CR experiences of classroom transformative education. Additionally, I was looking for evidence of critical dialogue around the levels of consciousness (Freire, 2020). Additionally, deductive coding helped to identify markers of CR instruction and teacher critical awareness in teacher and student interviews.

The researcher first began with open coding. After I gathered the data and cleaned the transcripts, I used open coding with a constant comparative analysis to gather emic perspectives of participants teaching practices and pedagogy (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Merriam 1998). In conjunction, open coding helped to juxtapose etic perspectives of participant teaching practices through the lens of a mentor, teacher, and coach. This process aimed to explore how the participants perceived their teaching environment relating to test preparation in an HSTE.

Moreover, my etic perspective as an insider checks how the students are accessing tested reading and writing standards while using culturally responsive pedagogy. As part of the coding process, the SPARKS framework informed how culturally responsive practices were evident in the study and how the learning standards to be tested were apparent in the lesson. The deductive method helped accrue rich data on the CR pedagogy practices observed and noted by the participants.

Matrices captured comparisons and identified categories, subcategories, and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used open coding to organize information into broad categories. Comparisons with field notes and memos gathered during the 2021-2022 school year help confirm the categories. I compared each participant's observation and interviews and placed them into subcategories until patterns, clustered themes emerged, and finally, first-order themes. These themes are explored and discussed in the findings.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Building trustworthiness into the study's design included creating data collection measures and analyses that were as consistent and accurate as possible. Attention to reliability and validity occurred throughout the entirety of the study. As part of the audit trail, a research database of transcripts, videos, and notes are available for others to assess or possibly replicate the study.

Cresswell and Miller (2000) define validity as "how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (p.124). Establishing validity for this study involved employing several methods, including using multiple sources of evidence, establishing a chain of evidence, and having peer researchers review data and findings. Internal validity is established by using rich descriptions for explanation building and pattern matching (Yin, 2014). The use of the focus group helped to triangulate data between

observations and interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Triangulation between data sources were frequent and followed up my member checks when needed. Comparing different sources created a redundancy that helped verify emerging themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Triangulation also helped view how different participants experience different themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, member checks of participants carried out throughout the study on responses helped to clarify any misrepresentation of data, (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For instance, initial teacher interviews and classroom observations confirmed teachers' stance that HST did not influence their instruction, yet the district assessment calendar and the assessment model framework (See [Appendix A](#)) indicate that there exists a consistent and prevalent HSTE at the school sites. It was implausible that there would be no effect of HST on instruction. Focus group interviews and member checking verified that they did have to interact with an HSTE and it did affect their instruction. Denzin and Lincoln, (2013) point out that "triangulation helps to identify different realities" (p. 454). In this case, participants' beliefs about HST were relative to what was expected from them, and what other teachers were doing in their classrooms. Triangulation was important in ferreting out the nuance of teacher bias and teacher beliefs about HST.

Reliability safeguards were put in place to address possible distortions created by bias and reactivity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I mitigated the potential effects of reactivity caused by my interactions with the participants. A prolonged engagement in the field, observation, and data gathering allowed me to filter out the possible reactivity impacts. Attention over time also helped me address researcher bias in mitigating the effects of the influence of the first impression (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Over time, I made comparisons and contrasts using field notes and memos. I was aware of their reactivity and bias and worked to mitigate their effect on inferences of data findings (Merriam, 1992). I debriefed with fellow graduate research assistants, the

research coordinator, and a committee member. Additional debriefing occurred with a professional peer not involved with the study. Lastly, my job duties included access to research sites, mainly Metro High. To distinguish between my work as a mentor teacher and my work as a researcher, I made appointments with the participants before I entered the classrooms for observations or interviews.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The findings of this study point to the ways in which culturally responsive teachers navigate a High-stakes testing environment. In this study, participants taught culturally relevant courses from a Mexican American perspective. How they were affected by HSTE was not dissimilar from what the literature revealed about general teaching experiences in an HSTE (Au, 2007; Jones et al., 1999; Polesel et al., 2012). Still, there were markedly different approaches to teaching in these spaces. First, the findings show that CR teachers teaching CR courses see their commitment as Critically Aware teachers foundational to their teaching. In protecting this space, they found that an HSTE detracted from student learning. Second, despite the participants' ambivalence towards HST, they did attend to it in various ways. In some ways, these two findings show disparate stances in assessing student achievement. However, HSTs are unavoidable in the context of schooling, and finding ways to understand how these two stances can inform student achievement will be significant in supporting and continuing culturally relevant courses, such as ethnic studies. These two findings are described in detail in this section along with examples and quotations from all teacher participants. An additional theme of teacher support with CR pedagogy in classroom instruction was salient enough to inform the study on the possibilities of forming a bridge between the two educational stances. Further explanation in the analysis of the participant descriptions of working in HSTE is revealed in classroom observation, interviews, and memos.

First, I will address the first research question:

In what ways do teachers navigate teaching in a high-stakes testing environment while employing culturally responsive teaching practices to create student achievement?

The phenomena of culturally responsive practices are first established and discussed before moving to navigate an HSTE.

### **Commitment as Critically Aware Teachers to CR Courses is Foundational**

Participants viewed their commitment as Critically Aware teachers foundational to their teaching (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2013;Valenzuela, 2010).Participants were selected as part of a larger study on promoting creativity through critical discussion because of their critical stance and strong CRE. Along with the SPARKS framework, they used Freiere’s (2018) three levels of critical consciousness: magical, naive, and critical thinking (Gonzalez, 2017). In his words he explains,

Three fluid categories of consciousness are metacognitive processes, which facilitate structural or systemic analysis of a given issue or problem. The most common, naïve consciousness, is a byproduct of the dominant ideology and is the default state of cognition. I refer to this state of cognition as lazy thinking, for it requires minimal analysis and a “commonsense” rationale to solve issues or problems. Social justice (change) is impossible as the victim (person or group) is blamed and the real source of the problem is never identified and thus remains unchallenged. A magical consciousness focuses the analysis outside the person, but the issue or problem is attributed to “God’s will” (i.e., religion) or bad fortune. (p.143)

He describes Magical consciousness as having not agency for change.

Like naive consciousness, social justice (i.e., change) is an impossibility in magical consciousness. Here, the belief that things are outside of one’s control prevents agency. Finally, critical consciousness centers analysis on how an issue or problem is addressed.

The locus of control is the system or structure as the source or root cause. Social justice is a possibility in this consciousness because the root of the problem is identified. Absent a critically conscious state of cognition, love of the world and of people is an impossibility. (p. 143)

Teacher professional development for the larger study centered around the levels of consciousness and critical studies. Teacher interviews included questions about critical consciousness. All participants' instruction consistently analyzes topics and issues at a systemic level. Gonzalez (2017) refers to this as the third level of consciousness, critical. In an interview, the participant Che's describes critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018) as, "fundamental to teaching, specifically in a CR class. I think it becomes paramount that as CR teachers, that is an integral part of their pedagogical approach." He further states,

It allows the students to humanize each other. And by that, it allows my students to humanize others, their colleagues, and their peers by moving away from a blame culture or a naive consciousness and centering their analysis in a structural or systemic type of you know, critique. And so, it allows for a richer, more robust discussion on the elements that are creating that.

As part of the SPARKS framework for culturally responsive learning, this approach met the tenet of academic identity development. This approach enabled participants to build student identity through critical dialogue and student production around topics that are relevant to students. As the schools studied included higher than average Hispanic populations for the district, these courses were particularly formed to address this student population.



### *Using a Critical Lens to Ground Culturally Responsive Learning*

Teachers of these courses used texts from Mexican American perspectives and were often paired with other texts depicting events that were relevant at the moment. For instance, Hope shared that she used district curriculum maps and board-approved texts with a Mexican-American perspective that are specifically used for CRC classes. Additionally, she paired the curriculum-adopted texts with current texts that were relevant to the issues of that time. All participants either stated this same approach to teaching or were observed in class pairing multiple culturally relevant texts to address current topics. Field notes reported how Antonio related that he amended his beginning of the year text selection to include, Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir, *Between the World and Me*, because of the civil unrest that students experienced during the summer of George Floyd's murder by police. In another example, he also pairs the immigrant epic novel, *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The attention to relevant text selection was consistent for all participants.

In these courses, all participant teachers used both the SPARKS framework for culturally responsive instruction and the levels of consciousness to frame a lens for discussion and dialogue. In doing so, the frames provide a scaffold for critical analysis of the topics at hand. Antonio is purposeful in using both frameworks, SPARKS and The Level of Consciousness, with culturally relevant texts to demonstrate how he engages students. He stated from the focus group discussion,

I find something that doesn't look like it's a systemic issue and try to point out the problem in it in the text that we're going over. So, lack of I guess, identifying with it, or like connecting themselves to it, like that's not my problem you know, like what do we care about like immigrants or something like that, like it doesn't relate to them. But, more often than not, a lot of the students in this class come from immigrant parents, right?

Some of them are even first, most of them are probably first generation. I don't know that sense of like that problem is also yours, you know?

Here Antonio is using the levels of consciousness to elevate the critical dialogue about systemic issues by trying to humanize the analysis to include student family experiences. All teachers expressed that students struggled to move from naive thinking to critical thinking. By relating these two texts, Antonio is trying to contextualize systemic inequities for students by situating the issues through their own lived experiences. This process was also observed and noted by the other participants. In the teacher interview, Mercedes makes similar remarks. She states, "Some students will think nothing is wrong. They have been so programmed into thinking nothing is wrong and desensitized. They see questioning as disrespect." Mercedes pushes students to move into critical consciousness, challenging them to "think deeper and more outside of the classroom." They have been challenged to think deeper and think more outside of the classroom.

Che acknowledged that students were in different processes of moving away from naive thinking to critical thinking. He described it as cyclical. In classroom observations, I noted that Che sets a routine for his students' analysis. Students know what to expect as they walk into the room, what they will see on the board, and how to write formally. Also, students use a model for writing a one-paragraph essay (See [Appendix F](#)). Moreover, field notes and student artifacts verified the work students produced from these routines (See [Appendix F](#)). Students had written down the frame for writing and responding to the texts in their work journals. These were daily writings, and subsequent writing in their work journals revealed what students understood and what gaps appeared in their learning. Some responses followed the frame but were more coherent than other examples, while other examples were well developed. Che refers to the

frame as an American discourse pattern (Montano-Harmon, 1991). By using these routines and models of thinking and writing, Che scaffolds for students to stay at the critical thinking level of consciousness (Gonzalez, 2017).

Marta noted that she was using the levels of consciousness to understand her students better. It gives them a frame for responding to discussion and “labeling things.” She described the process as answering the “so what” of an issue or concept. Hope addressed how her students are using the levels of consciousness to think critically, and she pointed to a project called Unjust Deaths. She began by using the Black Lives Matter freedom movement to explore the idea and expand it to other areas such as missing and murdered indigenous women, deaths of migrant workers crossing the border into the United States, and unarmed civilians dying in gun violence, among other topics. She describes the project,

“They look at like why this is happening, look at and what can we do to change it. And when we're looking at Día de Los Muertos, it's also, how do we honor these deaths that have happened and justly? So, that's one way that they look at the systems that are happening and what's creating that inequity.”

These Critically Aware teachers all display a focus on contextualizing student work in Freire’s (2018) critical consciousness to look at systems of oppression. Further, they also plan for ways to address factors of schooling that create inequalities. They showed purposeful ways of addressing the racialized spaces that students navigate.

### ***Attending to Reading, Writing, and Speaking & Listening Standards.***

In the teacher interviews, the participants expressed the purpose of learning was to inform and prepare students to navigate the world outside the classroom. Antonio referred to Freire’s concept of

‘reading the world’ to describe how students can navigate the world with a critical lens. In this concept, students already come with knowledge of reading since reading implies “a previous reading of the world” (Freire, 1985) This leads to transforming the world through praxis. Marta described it as a way to “empower youth, contribute to the world in a way that few people do by planting seeds for the wellbeing of our communities.” The data indicated all participants showed a strong sense of protecting the classroom space as a community where students develop academic identities by exploring and critiquing culturally relevant issues through dialogue, reading, and writing. In all observations, these reading, writing, and speaking standards were evident in the tasks students engaged with and the products they created. Each participant displayed a level of high expectations along with CR practices. As a group, they looked to growth in assessing student progress, but to what extent can they assess student progress if they are not explicitly looking at standards? Instead, the participants argued that centering students' sense of belonging and centering academic work around culturally relevant texts build the academic identity needed to do well on tests. It is here where teachers focus their instruction. What is unclear is how aware teachers were of attending to the standards of reading, writing, and listening, and to what extent does prioritizing human measures (Gonzalez, 2017) create opportunities for teachers to reflect on how well their lessons align with the standards?

Participants of the study held similar pedagogical stances on education, but their experiences as teachers and students varied. For instance, four of the five participants took similar classes in high school to the classes they teach. The fifth teacher, Che, had more than 20 years of teaching similar courses before he became a CRC teacher for History. Despite their similar experiences, their teaching experiences varied, and it was reflected in the classroom observations. This variety affected how well they were able to sustain CR practices in classroom instruction. In a classroom observation, Antonio chose to use an advanced organizer to set an expectation of student engagement and monitor student comprehension and progress. He decided to use this approach after he finished the same lesson the day before. He knew I was coming to

video the class and decided to change his questioning technique. The effect was more discussion occurred in the class because students could write and reflect on a topic before the discussion. On the other hand, Che used a highly structured process for students to annotate and write. He used the same model of writing every day. Student access to reading and writing was daily and iterative. Likewise, Marta used a highly structured protocol for discussion when she held Pláticas, or Socratic Seminars. Purposeful planning and using structures to scaffold instruction resulted in direct access to the learning standards. Exploring this gap may lead to a pathway to understanding the effect culturally responsive practices have on student achievement and how they function in an HSTE.

### ***CR Teachers Make Personal Commitments to Student Success***

As critically aware teachers, the participants' commitment to culturally responsive teaching with a critical lens was evident in how they viewed their students. All observations of teacher classroom lessons showed evidence of positive learning communities. Students displayed respectful behavior towards one another. Students consistently listened when others were speaking. In a year of emerging behavior disruptions from students returning to school from online learning due to the pandemic (Jacobsohn, 2021), no such behaviors manifested in any the recorded classroom observations. Insofar as this tenet's effect in the SPARKS framework, these critically aware teachers went beyond the scope of the tenet. They described their pedagogy as leading with love, commitment, and protection (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Valenzuela, 2010). Field notes, observations, and transcripts indicate teachers use encouraging home language use, such as referring to students as a Spanish endearment of *mijo* or *mija*. Stating that they do not want to impose themselves on their students, but they want their learning to come from them (the students) or having a school a reflection of what their home looks like. These are examples seen

and read in video and transcripts as well as observed and recorded in field notes. In this manner, teachers were able to build trust and help students offset the negative effects of microaggressions and gatekeeping that have historically been directed at students of color (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Darder, 2015). Che, who has been teaching for more than 30 years, states that his role is that of a loving parent to the students. Hope described her responsiveness to her students as building a community where everyone co-constructs knowledge and respects what each other has to say. While Marta describes love as being at the core of her instruction, Mercedes contextualized her relationship with her students as nurturing. In her critique of teaching to a test, she says,

They know that my focus is on their growth, not on their perfection, and I think that that's something that I can definitely say is different, and I think that's why a lot of them respond very well to what's happening in the classroom, and they're open to new ideas into learning because of that.

In her critique of teaching to a test, she goes on to say,

Teaching to a test is like teaching for an assessment. That's a lot of what I've seen and not so much focused on nurturing authentic learners. Now, I mean, I feel like if they're in a classroom where they're encouraged and they find it exciting to learn and to grow, it's inevitable for them to do well on those tests.

Antonio describes his classroom as a home. When asked why he became a culturally responsive teacher, he replied,

Education doesn't have to look like school: It can look like home, right? That's kind of what I would want to bring into the classroom, like a sense of belonging. Like, education

looks like you, right, and I think that's what I see. Our course is kind of promoting the idea that school, like, that education should look more like home instead of, you know, what we can think of is a traditional school.

Contextualizing students' positive learning community as a second home, full of love and the protection and pride of a parent, sets a stage for the social and emotional learning factors that lead to student belonging (Gay, G., 2013; Sue et al., 2007; Valenzuela, 2010). Inclusive, teachers recited the In Lak' ech poem (See [Appendix G](#)) used by Mercedes, Che, and Hope to foster a sense of belonging. The In'Lakech poem is used to foreground indigenous knowledge in creating a positive learning environment. Not to mention, Mercedes uses the indigenous Nahuatl framework, Nahui Olin, to foster student growth. When asked if students feel respected by their teacher, responses from student interviews included:

Luis: Yeah. Let me see. I do get to talk to him in class more than I would with other teachers. It does. I do feel like I'm a little bit, like closer to him, more connected to him than I would with other teachers. Now, not to say that my other teachers are bad or anything, but like, I do feel closer to Mr. Che than I would with other teachers.

Interviewer: And why do you think that it's different?

Luis: "Well, he definitely talks to us more than it would be the just like, oh, let's talk about this subject today. It's more heart to heart than it would be with other teachers."

A different student said,

Eugenia: Compared to other teachers, like, I feel like we didn't really have like, that, like, as much of a connection, as I do with Mr. Che. And I've only been in his class for about a few months. And, it just feels completely different, like, than other teachers.

Interviewer: Why, where were you before the few months?

Eugenia: I was here, but I had like American History. And, it was really different because I had like three different teachers because my teacher quit. And then we had a sub, and then he quit. And then we had another sub, but, um, I just feel like I have a better connection with him. I think he understands me more, like from my, I guess, minority standpoint, because he's, like, Chicano, and I'm, you know, yeah, we kind of have like a better understanding of each other.

In Mr. Antonio's class Jacob responded,

Oh, I love talking to Mr. Antonio. Yeah, he's a great teacher. I feel like he always listens. I like him and he always wants the class to like, give, like, their thoughts on what's happening, like, what we're talking about. [It's] an environment where everyone's like, able to talk, and everyone has the opportunity to talk.

Responses such as these were consistent in student interviews. Findings were constant and consistent throughout the teacher interviews, classroom observations, and student interviews that the participants went beyond establishing a positive learning community. They took a personal interest in the success of their students, and establishing a trusting relationship was fundamental to their classroom environment.



### *Accounting for a Racialized Student Population*

Participants consistently demonstrated an attentiveness to using culturally relevant texts as counterstories to offset microaggressions or gatekeeping that work as pushout factors for historically minoritized and racialized students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Examples show how students can choose topics that affect students of color, such as the Unjust Deaths project from Hope (See [Appendix H](#)). This project coincided with the Día de Los Muertos celebration. This is an indigenous Mexican celebration that honors family and friends that have passed away. Students chose a social justice issue, researched the issues, reported the consequences of the issue, suggested possible solutions to the issue, and commemorated the people who have died because of the issues. Students were able to confront difficult and possibly traumatic social justice issues in a productive environment that offered hope and paid respect to the people who died by building an alter for the ‘unjust deaths’ project. These counter-narratives, a type of counterstory, work to give voices to people’s untold stories and give visibility to the accomplishments and the plight of forgotten people while exposing students to rigor and access to content standards.

Antonio’s pairing of the book *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea with NAFTA is another example of teachers centering stories of migrants crossing into the southwest. As Antonio points out, immigration is relevant to most students because they are first-generation citizens to the United States. By centering these counter-narratives, students can disrupt negative stereotypes about their own identities that others may harbor against them. Examples of other types gatekeeping, which may interrupt learning, include addressing the intersectionalities of students in these courses. Marta and Hope both address patriarchy through their lessons. Marta conducted a Plática, also known as a form of Socratic Seminar, on the subject of patriarchy.

Students gathered in two circles, one on the inside and one on the outside. In the video, the students on the outside circle were assigned a person from the inside circle and were asked to take notes on their contributions to the Plática. The students in the inside circle have a text that they will be analyzing for meaning and application of themes and meaning. They have a 10 minutes to read over their notes and prepare for a discussion about the role of patriarchy in society.

By renaming the seminar using the Spanish word for conversation, she took the formality out of the dialogue format to signal that bilingual students, and English Language learners, are welcome to express themselves in either language. In doing so, she nullified the stigma that students feel speaking Spanish in an academic setting. Historically, programs meant to assimilate students, such as English-only programs, forbade the use of Spanish in the classroom, making this policy another push-out factor for Hispanic students (Hoffman, 2019). Although students spoke Spanish among their groups to prepare for the Plática, in neither of Marta's lessons did any student speak Spanish during the discussion. However, there are some students who do not speak Spanish. Marta underscored the importance of allowing students to have a voice in their learning process. In the focus group interview, she shared how she assesses student learning,

The conversations that they have in there is, it's just really beautiful, and I think it's that, right, it's a conversation, as opposed to 'I'm you know them telling each other, this is what I know and you're dumb or like those kinds of things.' It's um it's always, you know, this is what I think, and I really like what you, you know this other person was saying, and I think that for me, this is an achievement with my students.

During my observation, while recording lessons in Che's classroom, he explicitly confronts barriers and stereotypes that Hispanic students face in the schooling system. As part of their daily class assignment, he establishes routines and a writing framework for students (See Appendix F). He instructs students, "It is not okay [to] not write. Alright. I know, sometimes we have, you know, bad days. Right. And, and so that's okay. Every once in a while. Yeah, but we need to write every day." He expects all students to participate and write regardless of skill level. He further explains,

Everyone, by now should be an expert in writing like this, you should master it. Right? Because we've been doing this since August 2. Right? And y'all. You don't hurt me, right? When you don't write like this. Right? This is the American discourse pattern. It's expository. You state your argument, your claim, support it, concluded, y yah (all done), right. Right. And so, you're expected to write, alright, in this class. All right. Um, the other thing is, you know, bring in your out, you know, your prior knowledge, right? Anybody can do a great job of that, right. Do a great job of that right? And so and so do others. You're bringing your previous things that you learned, prior knowledge right into this, so into the classroom, is very important.

He views these actions as transformational resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). He explains it as the expectation that people think that Brown students do not speak, read or write. He ensures students have access to writing skills every day, in the same format, so students at different levels of mastery can have routine practice. Che refers to his frame for writing by reminding students of the steps in writing for argument. He reminds students, "State your argument, your claim, support it, conclude it, yah (all done)." Che Uses these skills with critical thinking as a way for students to resist stereotypes other teachers and school staff may have towards students

of color. Student transformational resistance allows students to recognize when teachers use deficit thinking, resulting in low expectations from their teachers (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). In addition, he starts the year by teaching various theories to inform critical thinking for various contexts including student transformational resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), hegemony (Gramsci, 2011), Settler Colonialism (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), Dubois' concept of double consciousness, and Anzaldua's (1987) theory of *Nepantla*. He states,

Challenges that I've found through the years in teaching the levels of consciousness and especially racialized students, I won't say minority but racialized students, they have seen how obvious these systems work, and so, many of my students are average, below average students, and so, our students engaged in any kind of conversation there in dialogue circles, and so, how they how promotes curiosity, I think because they're in dialogue circles and they're able to really discuss and co-construct [knowledge].

In this example, Che teaches advanced concepts that help students navigate racialized spaces. He notes that those students who are average and below-average and have been more aware of these racialized spaces are more likely to understand the levels of consciousness because they have been critical of their schooling before. In contrast, Che noted,

It's been my experience of students that have struggled with a critical or systemic analysis or generally speaking, I would say that they've been the students who are my AP advanced placement students have done. Well, they have a hard time critiquing the institution of schooling and really thrive and have an infinity for that critical conscious. Or students who are being affected let's say, for example, the schooling, the criminal system right and they see how it works, and so they have a very it's easier for them.

The students who have succeeded in the system of schooling are less likely to critique it in comparison with those students who have struggled with the system of schooling. This is an example of how CRE and CR pedagogy becomes factor in creating equitable spaces for students of various skills and abilities. By combining culturally relevant texts, the SPARKS framework for culturally responsive teaching with the levels of consciousness (Freire, 2018), Che explicitly addresses the push-out factors that minoritized students experience in racialized spaces (Gorski, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Implicitly or explicitly, the participants demonstrated how the use of counterstories dispelled deficit thinking about student identity, centered student culture as an asset in instruction and centered on student identities and their families as a source of pride.

### **Ambivalence Towards High Stakes Testing Environments**

Teachers' use of a critical lens to prioritize human measures of student belonging, pride of family, and place as a precursor to student achievement were ambivalent towards using data from HST to inform instruction. The responses to HST by the participants varied, but all felt to the degree that overreliance on HST were an untrustworthy source in assessing student learning and student achievement. The teachers' purpose for teaching was to prepare students for the world by teaching them to critique the systems in which they function, such as systems of education, family, religion, health, and criminal justice. Accordingly, there was no consistent response in how participants viewed the effect of teaching in a HSTE. However, classroom observations, teacher interviews, and teacher focus groups did reveal some common experiences.

### ***HSTE Effect on CR Classrooms***

The data gathered showed that the grade level affected the teacher's view of HST. Senior students were not subject to taking district quarterly benchmarks or other HST. Teachers who

taught these grades stated in either focus groups or teacher interviews that they did not have to worry much about HST with their senior classes. Hope stated, “My seniors don't take district assessments, so I feel like I have more leeway, not that they shouldn't know.” All teachers administered at least one HST. This year, these courses are new to the district since CR courses were previously 11th and 12th-grade courses. These two teachers, Hope and Mercedes, were most vocal about the stress they felt surrounding HST data.

A second attribute seen in classroom observations, personal and focus group interviews exhibited little to no reference in the truncation of the curriculum, except for mandated use of computer learning programs, IXL, and occasional references to test performance. Regarding time, participants worried they did not have time to explore the topics covered in the classroom. Stress over time is also a common concern among all teachers about curriculum and test preparation (Au, 2007; Emler et al., 2019; Gunzenhauser, 2003). Participants incorporated highly leveraged learning standards into the CR lesson, so this is how they addressed standards in preparation for HST. Antonio describes his perspective as:

When we would go over like test scores, and I realized that oh yeah we do need to focus on like, how do you incorporate a quote, right, or stuff like that, like yeah, I guess that's useful, but I think it's more useful when like they're already invested in what's going on, instead of like how to do it right. I don't know it's going to connect to me somehow write some way, shape or form like it's going to relate to the student at least that's how I try to do it, and then the extra stuff, is just like, yeah, you learn how to use quotation marks, like great. So, I guess I do incorporate some of that stuff, but I don't want it to just be like I said, like some cold standard achievement kind of thing because I think it starts off by

having them invested in this stuff first and then trying to like jump through these hoops that the school is making us jump through.

Mercedes said something similar. She shared,

I've found, I've sought ways to like to use the curriculum and those like CFS (common formative assessments) to like, guide my teaching, but always making it a focus to turn that into culturally responsive perspectives because then I can do both.

These examples point to the uncompromising way that the participants viewed how they used CR practices to address standards, specifically standards as they applied to HST. Additionally, Mercedes pointed out that critical dialogue exposes students to multiple standards. She continues,

And sometimes, I'll be honest. There're certain things that, I'm like, students are going to learn that anyway, like. I don't know, I can't think of any off the top of my head, but through reading, right, through reading and critical dialogue, they'll learn those things anyway, so there are some things that I can skip over and then some things I can really focus on. I'm definitely still navigating those two worlds.

In navigating these two areas of CR instruction and HSTE, the participants did not truncate the curriculum to teach to the test. Instead, they used CR practices to optimize instruction to give students access to the learning standards.

Participants did not isolate standards as the object of learning. Critical dialogue allowed topics. These texts were often reflective of student identities and lived experiences, or they were academic articles that helped to address the racialized and the intersectionality of those spaces to nullify push-out factors that participants felt historically have negatively affected students of

color (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Darder, 2015, Valenzuela, 2010). In the process, observations of classroom dialogue revealed the standards themselves were limited to what the discussion produced. For instance, in the Plática, Marta's students were reading articles on patriarchy, and they each chose a 'golden line' that they thought was a salient point in the article. From recorded classroom observations, student responses to these questions were:

Anthony: My golden line is 'We just see and deal with the social roots and generate the nature that are the social problems that are reflected in the behavior of individuals. And we can't do this without realizing that we all participate in something larger than ourselves.' And that kind of goes along with S\_\_\_\_'s golden line, like a problem we're gonna work toward real change. It's confusing when you pair up and we're not really going to get to the main problem if we don't really understand what it is.

Ernesto: Um for number two I guess I kind [agree with how] the author wrote it to help us understand what patriarchy actually is. And that kind of goes back to like, if we're going to work for change is a confusion when you grow. And with this article, you just helping us clear the confusion. So, we can start working toward it the problem and how we could achieve a solution.

Lisa: For the second one, I think you wrote the defining feature actually, as to show us what patriarchy is and how we play a role in it.

Adriana: It just seems like an eye opener with like, all the examples they gave us and how we keep reading it, we're like, oh, like, I've seen this in person.



Linda: It's more of like, It's more of like, what the problem is and how he explains it, so we could like try to, like, not be part of the problem. [Does] that makes sense?

Susana: I felt like he wrote it, because like, so he can, like show us like, what it's really talking about what the meaning is, right? And he shows these examples and like, in how we see in the real world as well, too. So, we understand it more clearly. So, we don't have to do it either.

Raquel: I think the reason why he wrote it was to explain how it is in the world that we live in and how we're also involved within it. Like, how we are also part of it, and then it made us realize that, like, every, like, things we just daily, like are things that come or participate in this. I mean, it's all like I think we all agree that it's what society has created. I mean, we are people and we do what we're told, or what we've seen, so I'm pretty sure like all of us participate.

The dialogue shows a variety of depth of knowledge (Webb, 2002) that requires students to comprehend, summarize, evaluate, apply, and synthesize how patriarchy works in society. In the discussion, Lisa points out that the author writes the article so people can define it and understand it. This is a level 1 depth of knowledge, comprehension, and identification.

Simultaneously, Raquel is applying the concept to their own lived experiences, recognizing their complicity, upper level three and four depths of knowledge, application. The discussion covered a variety of levels of comprehension and application. The discussion surpasses a set standard of reading a text for comprehension. An HST question would be limited to a level 1 identification or inference, while students fluctuate between all levels within the Plática. Likewise, the writing

required further exploration of the role of patriarchy in society. It would require more than just making an argument. It would require the finesse of an expository academic essay. This analytical, rhetorical essay goes beyond tested standards or the type of writing a student might encounter in an advanced learning course. In addition, the complexity required to write about such topics as Settler Colonialism, Patriarchy, Racial bias, and Unjust Deaths also requires students to engage their own identities with these subjects. Antonio grapples with this when he says,

It's not like, y'all said, like, holistic right? It's just very cold. Like, we were trying to get all the freshmen to write the same way, which is kind of crazy. We're doing the whole, like, RACE format thing right, Answer, Cite, Explain.

Here Antonio is referring to the whole school site using the RACE (Restate Answer Cite Explain) format for citing textual evidence to speak and write arguments. It involves a formulaic process of writing where you restate the question, answer it, cite text evidence, and provide an explanation. This format would not capture the nuances of the discussion nor engender students to produce the complexity of their ideas in their writing. The richness of the discussion provided students with enough content because the dialogue assisted them in taking a position and using text evidence and their own personal experiences. For students with significant learning gaps, the RACE format provides an anchor in approaching citing evidence, but it lacks a sense of voice or a connection to why the subject matters. Citing more evidence does not make writing academic if the writer does not establish the purpose for writing nor why it is important. Teachers who limit themselves to the RACE format for writing also limit themselves to low expectations of writing and textual analysis. While this is acceptable for an HST, writing can become a discreet skill disconnected from students' sense of self or lived experiences. The standard of writing becomes

the only of learning, not the sense of student academic identity. As Antonio has shared, Teaching writing standards is more useful when students are engaged in the topic than how to cite correctly. Teaching beyond the standards is not unique to CR courses, but they were present in all CR courses. Unlike other courses which use advanced texts and upper levels of critical thinking and discussion, there are no requirements for taking a CRC class. There is no test or teacher recommendation needed. Therefore, teaching practices of culturally responsive strategies account for the variety of learners in the classroom. These common experiences affect how students access the learning standards, so these discussions deserve more attention.

### ***Disconnect Between HST and Instruction***

As reported earlier, participants had ambivalent relationships with HST and the work surrounding them. Yet, they eventually acknowledged that they use test data and test preparation in class. To what extent depended on each participant's view of HST? Table 4 (See [Appendix I](#)) shows which tests each teacher had to administer, how much time they spent on the IXL learning program, and how they discussed HST with their students. The table shows that the participants did take time to speak to their students about tests and test preparation.

Mercedes felt there was an undermining focus on testing. She says, “I feel like it's very test focused. We're like no, we need to practice how to test in order for them to be achievers whereas instead of, nurturing the environment in which they're learning, too I guess, will heal that kind of relationship that they already have with schooling.” Mercedes acknowledges that students come to her class with historical trauma related to schooling that requires her to reconnect her students to their learning. In her view, testing will not show true markers of learning unless teachers nurture the students' views of themselves as belonging and develop

student academic identity. Antonio felt similarly to Mercedes' idea that attending to student academic identity will raise test scores. He surmised,

Students aren't even motivated to take the test, and there are a lot of them right, so just if a student can leave this classroom feeling academic and feeling intelligent and educated, then I feel like that's already, you know, going to show. And really, any kind of tests are standardized tests because they're invested now.

Both Mercedes and Antonio address the view participants held about the role building academic identity has in raising standardized test scores.

Che considered assessment essential to teaching. He declared, "I would think it would be educational malpractice if we don't have tests, right, some form of assessment." Although, he prefaced this with the schooling system being an apparatus that works against minoritized students of color (Anyon, 1980; Darder 2015). In Che's view, HSTs are working to produce inequality. For Che, he circles back to the purpose of teaching. He posits,

It goes back to that first question that you asked me in regards to the, I think it was, the purpose of teaching. And that is, what I do know, that if students have a strong identity. and it's something that we work on at the beginning of the year, And, of course, there are empirical studies that support this, and that is that students that are comfortable with who they are, and have a strong sense of identity, ethnic identity, do well on those tests.

Singularly, Marta does not view HST as a marker of learning and focuses her instruction on developing critical thinking skills for building student academic identity. Her response is not to engage with an HSTE. Hope regards HST as just tests and not assessments. She felt conflicted about how she taught standards through rigor and critical thinking and how different these

standards looked on the test. In essence, when asked if directives about test preparation influenced their instruction, all participants were unwilling to teach directly to a test.

### *CR Teachers Engaging with HST*

The participants all express reticence towards HST, yet they did engage with the learning standards. Mercedes mentions covering standards through critical dialogue and culturally responsive teaching, “There’re some things [skills/ standards] that I can skip over and then some things I can really focus on.” Marta also refers to the task of teaching students skills step by step. These are explicit examples of the participants attending to the standards and tested items covered in HST.

Conversely, Marta’s approach to using HST scores is not to read them. She feels it creates a bias toward her students. She discloses,

Honestly like I’d rather, not look at the scores because I want to be able to like you know just clear out with the students and what they need and provide them with the resources that they need right there, and then just you know build on skills, step by step, as opposed to you know because they know how to bubble things in, right. They’ve known that all their life.

While she acknowledges that she does not use HST data to assess individual students, Marta assesses their skill levels the moment she receives them as her students. She is aware of the learning standards and the skills required to master the learning standards.

Hope uses data from test scores from specific tested items to review the standards with the students. She frames these discussions in group and community learning so students can keep the CR practices in place. She asserts,

I think one way, again, that I try to bring in my strengths and the data talks and the testing is that collaboration, working with each other, talking with each other and asking why did I get this wrong. And, it's helped me with my scores compared to colleagues that don't use culturally responsive practices, you know, but then again it gets back into that thing where I'm comparing scores, and so it's hard to bridge everything.

Hope's response reveals that she is trying to consolidate both pedagogical approaches of using banking education through HST and culturally responsive pedagogy. She shares her belief that her scores show growth, and she feels the stress of sharing her work in her PLC because the data talks. They can be contentious because they are used to compare individual teacher performance on student achievement. Hope acknowledges the institutional demands of HSTE, yet she does not feel she has a safe space to share how she uses CR strategies for student achievement in her PLC.

In reference to Antonio, he clearly acknowledges that he uses HST data to address standards. Antonio is looking at specific standards to address student proficiency. Field notes and member checks reflect his awareness of the discussions he is having in PLC about the standards. Here he is referring to citing textual evidence to support a claim.

Like, test taking conversations, all of these testing and conversations, some of that I can still like use. Like, it's not, I wouldn't say it's completely useless because, like, I can find a use for it somehow, even if I'm not, like, a test like driven teacher, right. I don't know, did you find this evidence that you that you pointed out? Does it, is it the best kind. Like, are you pointing out the best part in this in this paragraph or in this novel to answer this question? So, I guess some of that works, right.

He also mentions his use of formative assessments to gauge students' comprehension of a standard using online resources such as Common Lit and Red Ink. He states,

I might even give them my own like assessment on Red Ink or Common lit or something like that and see like Okay, the class can't figure out what evidence looks like in a text, so I would go based off of that data, use that.

Given that Antonio is replicating instances of HST in his class to inform, teach, and assess student proficiency, speaks to the necessity of reflecting on how aligned his curriculum is using dialogic teaching to tested learning standards. Further, his actions show that he is teaching to a standard that will be tested. The disconnect he has toward his identity as a CRC teacher in contrast to the banking education model used to increase HST scores highlights a need for further exploration of these two continuums.

Mercedes acknowledges that even though she feels conflicted about teaching to a test, there are benefits to testing well. She expresses,

I have had this like conflicting feeling about because I do, I think that it should all be like teaching to a test absolutely not, but I can also understand that, in some ways, you know, like, that students can benefit from their ability to test well in certain tests, because I know that there's certain scholarships offered through like ACT tests. Like I understand that, but I always have a difficult time now because of those limitations, and like kind of allowing them to coexist with my teaching.

Her ambivalence towards HSTE reveals a gap between pedagogical stances of teaching and learning. Her ability to communicate her students' growth as reflected through classroom performative assessments concerning HST would help her peers feel reconciled to teaching in an

HSTE. She shares that although her administrator leaves them to teach without interference, she does receive pushback from her peers about how the classes work, and if they are effective. More importantly, she wishes they could share what is going on in their classroom with others. She shares,

I think that he's [principal] very supportive, and he's very vocal about his support. But with us, and one thing that I would say is sometimes that's good in terms of like what we need to hear, but I also think that we need to be bold and brave enough to acknowledge that in the big conversation with others because I think it's very like you're doing a good job, great job, but then that's never brought up. Like how can we utilize some of these strategies within your classrooms to kind of change the, like, learning experience in other classrooms?

Similarly, Hope conveys her sentiments, “They [principal/Administration] don't come in and check on me all the time. And sometimes, I wish they did, so that they could see what we're doing because it's great stuff.” Here we see some missed opportunities to have rich discussions about how the CRC courses promote student achievement without banking education.

### **Teacher Support for Culturally Responsive Practices**

The gap between the two pedagogical stances negates the possibility of disrupting the cycle of inequality perpetuated by HSTE. The participants received little to no peer support and were left alone by their principals or administrators. All participants reported that they received the most support from the CR mentor teachers who helped them with resources and instructional strategies or from another CRC teacher. There may be an opportunity for CR mentors to help play a role in identifying the tensions between HSTE and culturally responsive teaching practices



enacted through a critical lens. Reconciling this tension may provide emotional support and destress CRC teachers in their commitment to teaching these courses. It may also serve as a bridge between the instructional coaches and administrators as a place of support for CRC teachers.

There were also signs of ambivalence when referring to data talks within peer groups. Participants reported different stress levels or productivity depending on the school site (See Table 5). While some felt the talks helped focus on the learning standards, others felt the discussions were contentious and accusatory. Others declined to engage and chose a different professional learning community centered around CR instruction. During data talks, department-level teachers met to discuss results from assessments such as common formative assessments, benchmarks, and IXL progress. These occurred at designated times allotted during school hours for department-level professional learning communities. Teachers felt pressure and stress from having to discuss data from HST that they felt did not correspond to their teaching or questioned the effectiveness of the data talk itself. Hope expressed that they compared data from school benchmark tests and ACT scores. She felt that these two tests did not correlate with one another enough to inform her instruction or to be able to evaluate student progress. Another example by Antonio points out the difference in HST tested standards and how teaching occurs in class. He observes,

If it [ student proficiency] doesn't translate, if that skill of like being able to hit that main idea [critical dialogue related to CR instruction] doesn't translate from that moment, into a standardized test, then I don't know, I think they still got it right, and they did it right there in front of me. Maybe there's something wrong with the test or the way that it's implemented, you know.

These two illustrations of the confusion felt by teachers about how data use informs their instruction underscores how their ambivalence created a disconnect between HST and their instruction. Further, Hope shared how data talks create a stressful working environment. She remarked,

We've also had moments where they compare a teacher, right, teacher with the names on there, and it's caused a lot of drama and hurt, and it's also stressful as an English teacher and [including] Math teachers. Those are the two tests. They make you feel like the whole world is on your shoulder, and I think one thing that's hard is, I feel sometimes like there's a disconnect with what we read and what's on the test.

These sentiments were also felt by Mercedes. She stated,

I think we are, definitely or our admin in our site is definitely, harming our students in the sense that they're pushing the teachers and stressing the importance of testing and testing well and, but giving us really nothing to get them to that point.

These feelings of frustration, confusion, or support (See Table 5) ranged from productive to contentious. Findings were tabulated through field notes, member checks, and focus group interviews. When CR teachers were able to reach out to their peers, they felt they had productive relationships. For Marta and Mercedes, they became a support system for each other, while Hope did not have many peers in her department that she could have supportive discussions. She sought support from a CR mentor who he regards as his peer. He mostly kept to himself. Marta and Mercedes found professional learning communities contentious and preferred to engage as little with them as possible. My field notes and the focus group discussions reported her frustrations with her peers as they tried to find ways to undermine their teaching. Mercedes

reported that while they were using discussion to elevate critical thinking skills, other teachers were focused on discreet skills and IXL learning programs. Che joined a professional learning community that was not on the same campus and focused on culturally responsive education. Che shared that the History department is moving toward common formative assessments and felt it would interfere with the class's creativity. Lastly, Antonio felt the professional learning community discussions were not very helpful because his content differed from the other English classes. However, they created common formative assessments in writing. Antonio found these helpful. He also confirmed that the English department focused only on writing for common formative assessments.

All teachers reported in their focus group discussions that their CR mentor teacher helped them with materials for the class and provided guidance for strategies and curriculum maps. Che does not have a mentor teacher assigned to him, but his peer is also a CR mentor teacher, and he says he helps him with ideas and materials. All participants reported that the administration did not assist with any form of support. Marta and Mercedes reported that the school principal was not obstructive and supported the school community outreach from both teachers.

**Table 5**

*Teacher view of efficacy from various school-wide instructional support systems.*

Participant	Peer to Peer discussions	Professional Learning community	CR Mentor	Administration
Che	productive	productive	productive	none
Marta	productive	contentious	productive	none
Hope	semi-productive	semi-contentious	productive	none
Antonio	productive	semi-productive	productive	none
Mercedes	productive	contentious	Productive	none

Support for participants was inconsistent. Conversations about data and standards regarding HST results were confounding, demoralizing, and viewed by some as harmful. These discussions served to make the participants more guarded about sharing among their peers. For other participants, they joined a PLC that was explicitly related to CR pedagogy, while another participant viewed conversations within their PLC as innocuous.

The outcomes of unclear purposes and improper comparison of data seem to undercut the primary function of using data-driven discussion (Emler et al., 2019) to support learning goals for the school. This experience may be an opportunity for teachers in this district to re-envision what these data talks should evoke in creating positive learning and teaching environments for students and staff. This may engender student achievement while maintaining a rigorous learning environment. This new vision should lead to better support for bridging an HSTE with CR practices.

Teachers show a solid commitment to maintaining a culturally relevant space in CR courses and a critical awareness of attending to the identities of their students. They all acknowledged that testing does not influence their instruction. Yet, observations, field notes, and member checking revealed that they do attend to the HST preparation by discussing testing purposes, reviewing test-taking strategies, and looking at data to inform instruction despite their ambivalence. Professional learning communities were problematic and sometimes contentious in discussing how data informs instruction. Even so, the data revealed that the participants were able to move their students towards a transformative education, but there existed a disconnect between their peers and support staff dedicated to banking education, which resulted in institutional resistance. This resistance created a gap between the two pedagogies of practice, problem-posing education (Freire, 2018) and Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice

(Darder, 2015). While the participants were dedicated to moving students toward a transformative space of learning, there seemed to be a disconnect on how to articulate the efficacy of CR instruction in improving scores on HST.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This study has explored how CR teachers navigate a high-stakes testing environment. What has come to light is that the participants are unique in their teaching styles while maintaining a commitment to CR practices in an HSTE. The study also illuminated how all teachers work towards creating meaningful learning experiences for their students with transformation in mind. Unsurprisingly, there was not a one size fits all outcome to navigating in this space. Although the theoretical framework reflected how CR teachers worked to protect their students and curriculum from the damaging effects of banking education for test preparation, it could also be noted that they also never meaningfully addressed opportunities to bridge this divide. CR pedagogy and banking education never truly engage each other, nor should they as HSTs are currently utilized (See [Figure 1](#)). There should be some way of speaking to student achievement that includes opportunities for data talks to encompass more than just HST scores. As this was not the case, it will be further explored in the recommendations and implications of the study. This study did find two compelling themes that can inform how to best support ethnic studies courses, like the courses taught by the participants. First, teachers consistently protected their classrooms from the intrusion of test preparation mandates disrupting their curriculum. As a result, many of the negative effects experienced by students in an HSTE were kept to a minimum, and teachers maintained a commitment to the spirit of CR courses. Second, the ambivalence the participants felt about test-taking did not exclude the teachers from the effects of operating in an HSTE.

### **Critical Teacher Commitment is a Key Attribute**

CR Teacher commitment was an important attribute that protected the learning environment from the negative effects of an HSTE while ensuring commitment to the CR pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Valenzuela, 2010). The SPARKS framework embeds a critical lens for CR practices. In my experience as a mentor, teachers without this commitment struggle to understand how CR practices are different or function to address outcomes for students of color. This attribute served as an asset-based pedagogy (López, 2017), humanized learning environment, and prioritized student identity as central to instruction (Bartolome, 1994; Freire, 2018; Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Gonzalez, M. 2017). The development of asset-based pedagogy required significant training and education to implement the pedagogy. Three of the four participants had experienced CRE instruction as students and as teachers. They also had consistent access to training for critical awareness and culturally relevant education.

As part of an asset-based pedagogy, teacher commitment referenced Freire's (2018) lens of critical consciousness to analyze culturally relevant texts and student lived experiences. All teachers expressed the importance of students' voices as an indicator that students are learning. Students were encouraged and expected to analyze text using a critical lens to promote student transformation. The participants expressed their hope that students would use these skills to transfer into the world. For the participants, student achievement exceeded the learning standards for HST. The implications of teacher commitment include the rigor involved in planning for instruction that has a high depth of knowledge in reading, writing, and speaking learning standards.

Students entering these courses come at various proficiency levels in writing, many below average and many with consistent negative schooling experiences. As these courses do not require a teacher recommendation, passing a test, or proficiency in HST scores, teachers understand that developing a sense of belonging is foundational to their learning experiences (Valenzuela, 2010). The SPARKS framework (See [Appendix B](#)) lists positive learning communities as one of the tenets with reciprocity and authentic caring (Valenzuela, 2010) to foster a safe place for learning. The classroom observations confirmed that teachers established positive learning communities. Indeed, participants went beyond the tenets and showed a personal commitment to student success. Participants spoke of the teacher-student relationship being more familial and building confidence and pride in the students' identities, families, and communities. The sense of belonging resonated throughout the study. It appeared in how teachers spoke of their students, in student interviews about how students felt about their teachers, and in observations where some teachers used "mijo/a" (an endearment equivalent to dear but translates to my daughter or my son) to address students. Establishing a sense of belonging was paramount in the CR courses. This phenomenon did not go unnoticed by me because after returning to in-person classes, many districts, including this one, struggled with behavior problems and learning gaps (Jacobsohn, 2021). Social-emotional learning strategies and practices were put in place to address the trauma experienced by everyone because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, as indicated by the state report on Covid (Arizona State Board of Education, 2021), Title I students were especially vulnerable to trauma and educational losses. Classroom observations and teacher responses exhibited none of the student disruptive behavior that many school districts experienced, including the one in the study. The potential impact for schools that can harness these participants' sense of belonging would save a large amount of funding



allocated to training and operationalizing classroom practices. Significantly, establishing a positive learning community goes beyond classroom management. Students felt heard, visible, and cared for in their CR classrooms. In turn, this buoyed the engagement in classroom instruction and learning outcomes.

Personal commitment to student success centered instruction around student identities. Capitalizing on student assets (López, 2017), teachers used culturally relevant texts, inquiry projects, and dialogic teaching to engage students in the “reading of the word and reading of the world” (Freire, 1985). In contrast, the literature exposed how an HSTE truncates curriculum to tested standards and teaches discrete skills disconnected from students’ lived experiences. The district used learning programs directed to use this method for all students. Still, the participant responses indicated they spent minimal time on them, not more than 30 minutes per week. Teachers’ inclination toward a transformative education insulated the learning environment and the curriculum from being disconnected from critical student exploration of the subject matter.

The disparity between these two pedagogies, banking education using Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice (Darder, 2015) and CR, revealed that the participants struggled to align classroom instruction with tested standards. Yet, participants engaged with the learning standards. For example, I refer to Hope’s project on Unjust Deaths. Joy addressed various learning standards in work leading to the completion of the project, but the prominent learning standard was the explanatory and informational standards on reading, writing, and speaking. Meanwhile, this project was able to capture all tenets of the SPARKS framework. The project was student-centered, included rigor and knowledge co-construction, and built student academic identity through ethnic identity development. Lastly, the project also addressed attention to social justice. The final presentation made it clear that all these components came together in a rigorous

project, including a depth of knowledge that goes beyond what could be captured in an HST. Participants were able to address the learning objectives without compromising the curriculum to banking education.

Implications for discussions on how the mastery of learning standards is transferred to the achievement of HST, coupled with discussion on student sense of belonging, require a more open yet detailed look at the learning process. Using professional learning communities to expand data talks beyond achievement scores would elucidate how teachers understand and assess student achievement. These shared discussions would shed light on how the continuum of the depth of knowledge related to how learning standards align with HST. A more comprehensive approach to data talks with a critical lens has the potential to help mitigate the stress experienced by teachers and students in HTSE while articulating how CRC courses promote student success.

### **Critical Conversations about High Stakes Testing Environments**

In pursuit of a critical CR pedagogy, participants showed little to no interest in engaging with data talks, as conversations with peers steered curricular instructional choices towards banking education. Data talks centered around the results of high-stakes tests and the standards. Although each participant handled the data talks differently, their responses ranged from polite indifference to frustration. While some of the discussions in their PLC meetings were contentious, others were semi-productive, or non-existent. The resulting contrast between critical, CR pedagogy and the Traditional American Pedagogy and Practice model of banking education creates an impediment for the CR teachers to hold productive critical conversations

about student achievement which acknowledges HST. Existing literature on Ethnic Studies courses like the CR course confirm student gains in human (Gonzalez, M., 2017) and HST measures (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; López, 2017), yet continued institutional resistance from peers, professional learning communities, and administration inhibits possible salient discussion that would position critical conversations towards addressing the opportunity gap.

The existing disconnect between the two pedagogies also puts constraints on student access to opportunities presented in the dominant culture, such as HST. As stated earlier, Che's students were presented Solórzano & Bernal's (2001) theory of student transformational resistance to contextualize HST. He encouraged students to prove deficit ideologies about students of color wrong by surpassing the expectation that they would not do well on HST. In this case, doing well on HST was a way to counter deficit narratives about students of color and in turn show student transformational resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Access to dominant cultural sources of capital like HST is part of the tenets of CRE, and CSP. Specifically, by acknowledging the realities of an HSTE, critically minded teachers respond to the role HST serves or detracts from student achievement. HST plays an enduring role in education, and critical conversations should work to build a bridge between these two disparate pedagogies.

Critical conversations about student achievement do not begin with HST scores. Rather, Critical conversations about student achievement begin when students enter a class where their voices are heard, validated, and the reciprocity between teachers and students works to build transformative educational experiences. Critical conversations about student achievement include building, monitoring, and assessing student academic identity through ethnic identity development, as well as the intersectionalities of these identities. They invite teachers to explore

how the Critically Aware teachers that enact CR pedagogy are connected to HST and HSTE. Most importantly, discussion around student achievement must include critical conversations about student transformational resistance and student transformation.

### **Effects of HSTE on CR Teachers**

Another revelation of the study was how the participants were affected by an HSTE regardless of their ambivalence. Two participants related how institutional resistance to these courses heightened contentious discussion about student achievement. In some instances, teachers felt guarded about engaging in these discussions with their PLC because they felt that other English teachers were trying to find fault with the instructional rigor of the CR courses. The irony was that one participant reported that the same teachers spent most of their time on computer learning programs, and rarely expected students to write full essays. For the teachers at Huerta High School, they felt their relationships with their colleagues were adversarial. They tried not to interact with the English department faculty. Mercedes chose to stay in her room and collaborate with Marta while spending little effort with her PLC. Marta decided to leave Huerta High School and pursue an advanced degree in higher education. She stated that she was tired of defending CR pedagogy. Mercedes left her position to work in higher education outside the teaching profession. Hope also shared that her peers at Mesquite High School questioned whether the CR classes were rigorous, despite having a district-sanctioned curriculum map with corresponding culturally relevant texts. Antonio felt that the talks were innocuous because a lot of what they discussed in the professional learning communities (PLC) did not apply to him because they were using different texts. When they did discuss student work, it revolved around the learning standards. However, he felt that not talking about why students were engaged with

the text was a missed opportunity. Che was the most experienced teacher and is considered a principal teacher. He understood the HSTE, and he was able to avoid PLC discussions by joining a different PLC based on CR pedagogy. He avoided common formative assessments because his content was different. However, Che did worry that his department was moving towards implementing common formative assessments. Regardless of whether teachers manifested their ambivalence toward HSTE, they were affected by it. In the case of Huerta High School, the lack of interest convergence on the part of the participants to amend their curriculum or collaborate with other faculty on HST protocols created a negative working environment. If teachers are recruited and developed for CR courses or other Ethnic Studies programs, a working understanding of how to dialogue about HST in the context of CR pedagogy should be included in training and mentor support. For instance, I observed rigorous attention to the learning standards. Comparing how students experience the learning standards in the two contrasting pedagogies may clarify this disconnect. Finding time for critical CR teachers to have these discussions with their CR peers can offer a place for renewal and validation. The participants did have access to this space at a district level but not at the site level. These critical conversations would also prepare teachers for contrary feedback about the validity of the courses from the teachers and administrators who do not understand their value.

### **Mentorship Support Should Be Specific to CR Courses**

In the district where the study took place, participants had access to mentor teachers to help them operationalize CR pedagogy and instruction. All participants noted that the CR mentor teachers were a large source of support. They were able to utilize curriculum maps designed for the courses as well as utilize culturally relevant texts provided by the CR department.

Participants could also discuss lessons and find new and different teaching strategies by

collaborating with their mentors. The findings of the study confirmed the array of teaching experience, knowledge, and skills each participant brought to their CR courses, just the same as other teaching experiences. The benefits of supporting CR courses can increase teacher retention and professional advancement. Without this support, developing teachers may lose interest in the CR courses. Teachers of these courses require a critical awareness to operationalize a critical CR pedagogy while also mastering the subject content and learning standards. Additionally, developing the skills to incorporate dialogic teaching requires careful planning and preparation. Mentor teachers can help model instruction and guide CR teachers to reflect on their teaching practices. Advantageously, this district is prepared for success and can provide a model for other districts to emulate. The potential for implementing a CR course, or other Ethnic Studies courses, will benefit from a defined framework, access to culturally relevant material, and models of instruction and practice. To end, mentor teachers can support Critically aware CR teachers in critical conversations about student achievement that includes HST. Districts may be unable to fund support for Critically Aware CR teachers through a CR mentor, but the support provided to Critically Aware CR teachers should be specific to CR courses. In this vein, with support, CR teachers may move towards finding constructive models of using HST data without compromising CR pedagogy and practice.

## **Recommendations**

Districts and school sites should consider critical teacher commitment as part of their hiring, training processes, and teacher selection for course programming. CR courses, like Ethnic Studies courses, provide a rich and varied learning experience for a school program, especially in its effort to expand the opportunity gap for students of color. Relatedly, educational leaders can

prioritize CR courses like advanced learning experiences such as Advanced Placement, Honors programs, and Inquiry Learning courses provided on a school campus. Training, resources, and staff selection are important choices in the success of these courses.

Districts and school sites should be purposeful in providing CR courses to increase equitable learning experiences for all students regardless of proficiency levels. CR courses include a variety of students at different proficiency levels because enrollment requires no test or recommendation. Hypothetically, these courses can ameliorate the problem of de facto leveled tracking. Finding teachers to operationalize CR courses requires training in critical pedagogies along with culturally relevant subject content knowledge. Critically aware teachers are difficult to find ready to step into these courses, as evidenced by the participants' experience. Three participants enrolled in CR courses as high school students, while one participant was an experienced teacher of the Ethnic Studies course. Districts committed to improving student outcomes for minoritized students of color should be conscious of developing and hiring teachers with the commitment to teach CR courses and other similar Ethnic Studies courses.

Secondly, critical conversations about student achievement should be comprehensive enough to include other factors that affect HST scores. These include students' sense of belonging in the school and classroom, access to learning standards that require higher depths of knowledge, attention to academic identity development, and selecting culturally relevant material for improved student engagement. Teachers and support staff spend much time and effort looking at quarterly benchmark scores and common formative assessments to gauge student proficiency for discreet skill development on learning standards. CR criteria listed above engage teachers in a more holistic view of schooling and learning. It takes investment and commitment from teachers to reflect and improve instruction that is humanizing to students, teachers, and the

classroom environment (Freire, 2018; Gonzalez, 2017). From this standpoint, critical conversations about student achievement address many other factors including social-emotional learning, school climate, and behavioral problems that disrupt the schooling and learning environment. Critical conversations about why these teachers did not struggle with classroom management, behavior, and engagement would benefit all teachers. Districts should prioritize time for teachers to have these conversations during school contract time.

Critical conversations include discussions about HST and its connection to learning standards in CR courses. Inclusive training around HST data analysis may help clarify how to interpret data ethically and correctly. Participants reported that some data talks included different tests that were not comparable. Teachers are navigating different types of HST for different purposes. Creating clear pathways to aligning how teachers discuss data that aligns with the goals of the district and the school improvement plan will facilitate critical conversations about instruction. Critical conversations around HST should also include purposeful conversations with students to clarify how HST scores are one of several markers to gauge student achievement. These conversations may reset the negative resistance for historically underperforming students towards HSTs.

Growth models of looking at data that may inform overall achievement of schools would combine HST scores with other markers that are comparable over time (Braden, 2007). Being responsible and ethical on how HST data are used to speak about student achievement should be informative but not punitive to the student or the teachers. These evaluation models have historically failed to contribute significantly to opening the opportunity gap or improving teacher efficacy (Barshay, 2018; Bleiberg, 2021). In the end, proven methods of student achievement



using CR pedagogy with Critically Aware teachers are cogent arguments worth having as part of critical conversations.

The last recommendation suggests districts and school sites ensure that proper resources are allocated to CR courses, like Ethnic Studies courses. Equally important to hiring for teacher criticality is to promote Critically Aware teachers to leadership positions who understand how to mentor and evaluate successful CR courses. Coaches or mentors serve an important role in attending to professional development for these specific CR teachers. Participants in this study are varied in their experience and skillsets as teachers and pedagogues. Creating spaces where like-minded teachers can reflect and collaborate on their teaching practices promotes retention and renewal for teachers. It is unfortunate that two of the participants left their teaching positions, and perhaps a more supportive environment would have halted their decision. CR education leaders can also facilitate critical conversations around HST and help clarify misunderstandings about CR courses. In turn, the institutional resistance to these courses can be redirected to the benefit of the school and the peace of mind of the teacher.

## **Implications**

This study took a nuanced approach to explore how teacher perceptions provided an understanding of the role CR courses, and similar Ethnic Studies courses play in navigating an HSTE. Findings indicate teacher ambivalence toward HSTE has unexpected consequences of bringing to light how teacher commitment plays a significant role in maintaining a CR educational program. It also exposed missed opportunities to have fruitful discussions about how the success of these programs can inform student achievement across the subject, grade level, and learning experiences. Alternate pathways of contextualizing the use of HST data to inform instruction are possible areas for future policy and practice. Implications for future research may

include exploring the efficacy of expanding critical conversations to include other markers of student achievement of school success when using data to evaluate students, teachers, schools, and school districts. Future research on the development of Critically Aware teachers may help inform hiring practices and professional development of CR teachers. The research adds to the extant literature on CR pedagogy and practice as well as the impetus to expand the use of transformative education to open the opportunity gap. Implications of this study can inform future research to create a policy to evaluate and transform tier I instruction and practice, inform best practices for pre-service teachers and improve the efficacy of school leadership.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The scope of the study was limited to the perceptions of teachers with a commitment to teaching CR courses. No observations or interviews extended beyond the participants' or student responses to interviews. The larger study chose participants identified by their department as committed CR teachers who exemplify CR practices in courses specifically dedicated to the Mexican-American perspectives. Hence, their teaching practices may not be generalizable to all courses, as ethnic studies courses are not always part of a school district's course offering. However, the specificity of this study does inform how CR teachers using asset-based pedagogies view and assess student learning in courses specifically directed to address student ethnic identity and achievement for students of color. These data may inform practices that may transfer to other courses. More discussion is needed to explore these findings.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not include teacher peers and the site administration as participants. Although these discussions would have been beneficial, they would move beyond the scope of the larger study. Additionally, the relevance of gathering data on the individual CR teacher responses about teaching in an HSTE is of interest and significant

to the maintenance and support of other ethnic study programs. Teachers who have the commitment and knowledge to step into these types of programs are few. Their set of skills requires much training and expertise. Therefore, the limitations of this study are the beginning of a larger discussion about student achievement.

Lastly, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the learning gaps created by the online classrooms were significant and included grade levels, subgroups, and subjects. HST scores were not reliable indicators of growth for students. The scores were used for overall trends but were not available for comparison between SY 2020-2021 and SY 2021-2022. Discussions about student achievement were limited to the personal knowledge and experiences of the participants. Further, HSTE was different for each grade level, so assessment using school benchmark tests would not have been consistent among the participants and their students.

## **Conclusion**

Extant literature confirms the success of CRC courses and similar Ethnic studies in pursuit of positive student outcomes for students of color. As interest in these courses expands to more districts as a method of addressing the consistent and historical failures of improving educational outcomes for students of color, finding Critically Aware teachers to fill these positions will be challenging. Understanding how an HSTE may contribute to the institutional resistance to CR pedagogy and the training and development of Critically Aware teachers may benefit the district in its attempt to retain highly skilled teachers. HSTE are ubiquitous spaces in American education. Teacher responses to these spaces can be stressful and impede the

implementation of evidence-based pedagogy with a proven record for gains in student achievement. What this study captured was the distinctive ways Critically Aware teachers maneuver these spaces. Each response was influenced by the school site, administration, peers, and teacher commitment. Critical conversations about the uniqueness of these spaces can add to the scholarship on how Ethnic studies courses and CR courses can add to the myriad of learning experiences offered in Title I schools. Critical conversations about how successful CR courses are connected to HST can build bridges between two disparate learning pedagogies while positioning Critically Aware teachers to take leadership roles in their schools to impart how CR, CRE, and CSP work to create transformative educational experiences to prepare students to change their communities for the better.

## Appendix A District Assessment Descriptives

**Figure 1**  
*District assessment schedule*

Unified School District																
2021-22 Assessment & Survey Calendar (G9-12)																
updated 5.17.2021																
Assessment	Grade(s)/Program	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May*	Method	Data Storage	For More Info		
Achieve 3000	3-12 (TWDL)	Aug 9 - Sept 24									May 2 - 20	Online	SchoolCity	Language Acquisition Department (LAD)		
ACT	11 (Cohort 2023)									Apr. 5-7 & 4/12-14		Online Student-TestNav; Staff-PAN	Pearson Access Next (PAN)	Assessment Resources		
ACT Aspire	9 (Cohort 2025)									Apr. 4 - 29		Online Student-TestNav; Staff-PAN	Pearson Access Next (PAN)	Assessment Resources		
Alternative State Assessments	3-8, 10 & 11 (students w/ qualifying IEPs)				Students loaded into testing system Nov. 30					Mar 14 - April 29 MSAA (Alternate Math, Reading, & Writing) & SAA (Alternate Science, Gr 5, 8 & 11)		Paper/Online	SchoolCity	Exceptional Education Dept.		
AP Testing	HS (AP)										May 2 - 13 (content specific days)	paper	College Board site	<a href="http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/exam/dates_fees/23307.html">http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/exam/dates_fees/23307.html</a>		
AZELLA	K-HS (EL)	July 22 - May 13 (Placement)			Oct. 11 - Dec. 10 Stand-Alone Field Test (SAFT); Gr. 1-12							Jan. 31 - March 18 (Spring Reassessment)		Paper/Online-TestNav IN PERSON	Pearson Access Next (PAN)	<a href="http://www.azed.gov/assessment/dtc/">http://www.azed.gov/assessment/dtc/</a>
AzSCI	5,8 and 11 (^*cohort 2023)									Tentative: Mar 21 - Apr 15		Online Student-TestNav; Staff-PAN	Pearson Access Next (PAN)	<a href="http://www.azed.gov/assessment/dtc/">http://www.azed.gov/assessment/dtc/</a>		
Civics (Graduation Requirement)	8-11; Gr. 12 Who have not passed already	MANDATORY WINDOW for 12th* graders yet to pass: Aug 23 - Nov 5 *All students labeled as 12th graders regardless of on track status must pass by Nov5				MANDATORY WINDOW: Students newly classified as 12th* graders yet to pass: Jan 3 - Mar 10 *All students labeled as 12th graders regardless of on track must pass by Mar 11					May 2-20 12th Grade Graduates Only	Online (School City)	SchoolCity	Assessment Resources		
CTE Technical Skill	10-12 (CTE Concentrators)	Concentrators: those in 2nd or 3rd year (depending on program) of same program.									Mar 22 - Apr 29 @ noon	Online IN PERSON	CTE	CTE Dept.		
ELD MS & HS Benchmarks	6-12 (ELD)		Sept 27 - Oct 22			Dec 6 - Jan 7		Feb 28 - Mar 25			May 9 - 26 (input by 5/27)	online and paper	SchoolCity	Language Acquisition Department (LAD)		
PSAT Testing	9-11			Oct 26								Paper	College Board site	<a href="http://www.collegereadiness.collegeboard.org">www.collegereadiness.collegeboard.org</a>		
Quarterly Benchmarks	2-11 (ELs exempt from ELA and Writing)		Quarter 1 (Q1) ELA, Math Sept 27 - Oct 7		Quarter 2 (Q2)* ELA, Writing, Math Nov 29 - Dec 16; (score writing by Jan 7) *Optional for NON-Compliance Reporting HIGH SCHOOLS		Score Writing by Jan 7	Quarter 3 (Q3) ELA, Math Feb 28 - Mar 10				Online (School City; ELA 2-5 on BU)	SchoolCity	Assessment Resources		
Student School Quality Survey (SQS)	K-12						Jan 10 - 21					Online (SC) Async OK	Web Data	District Assessment Resources		
Student Survey of Teachers (SST)	K-5 (All 6-12 (summit))				Nov 15 - 30							Online (SC) Async OK	Web Data	Assessment Resources		
Pre & Post Tests	Mandatory for 3-11 & 21st CCLC	PRE Test Aug. 23 - Sep. 3					POST Test Jan 31 - Feb 11					Online (School City)	SchoolCity	Assessment Resources		

See ALL tab for updates

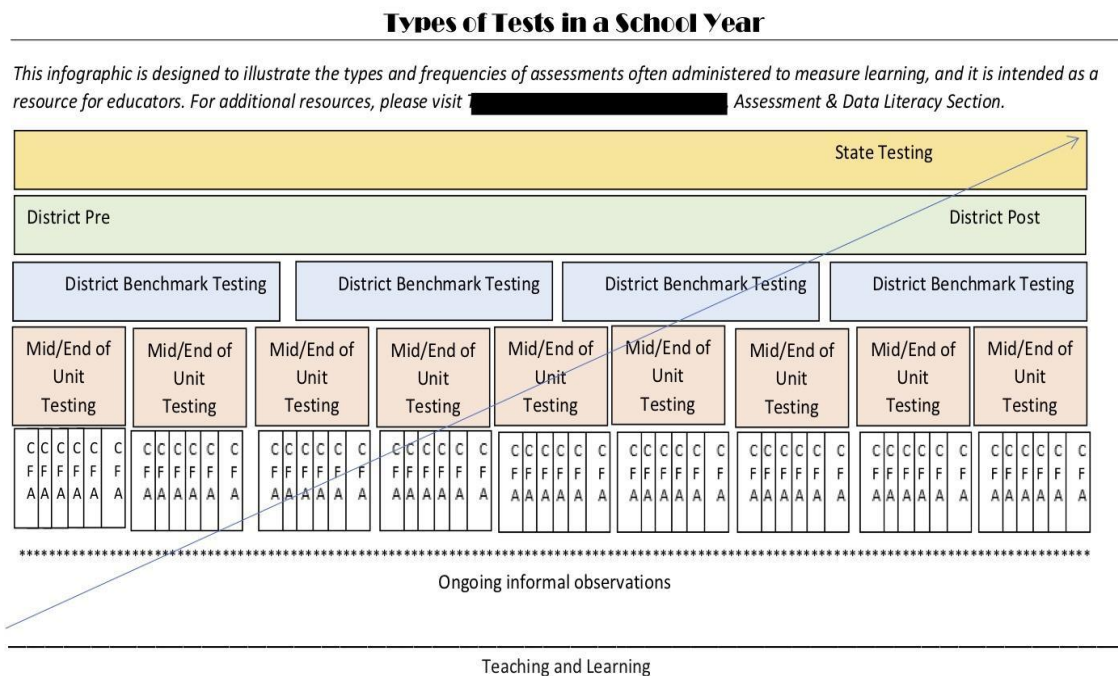
Questions? Please contact

\*All Assessments Used In Evaluations Must Be Completed Prior to May 1

Note. The sections in blue are the High Stakes tests administered by the participants in the study.

**Figure 2**

*District Model of Assessment*



**KEY**

*State Testing:* Summative Standards-Based Assessments of Standards-Based Learning completed annually

*District Pre and Post:* Standards/Skills-Based Assessments of Growth completed beginning & end of school year

*District Benchmark Testing:* Interim Standards- Based Assessments completed 3-4 times per school year (Summative & Formative properties)

*Mid/End of Unit Testing:* Curricular Resource-Based Assessments of Learning completed midway or to conclude a learning unit

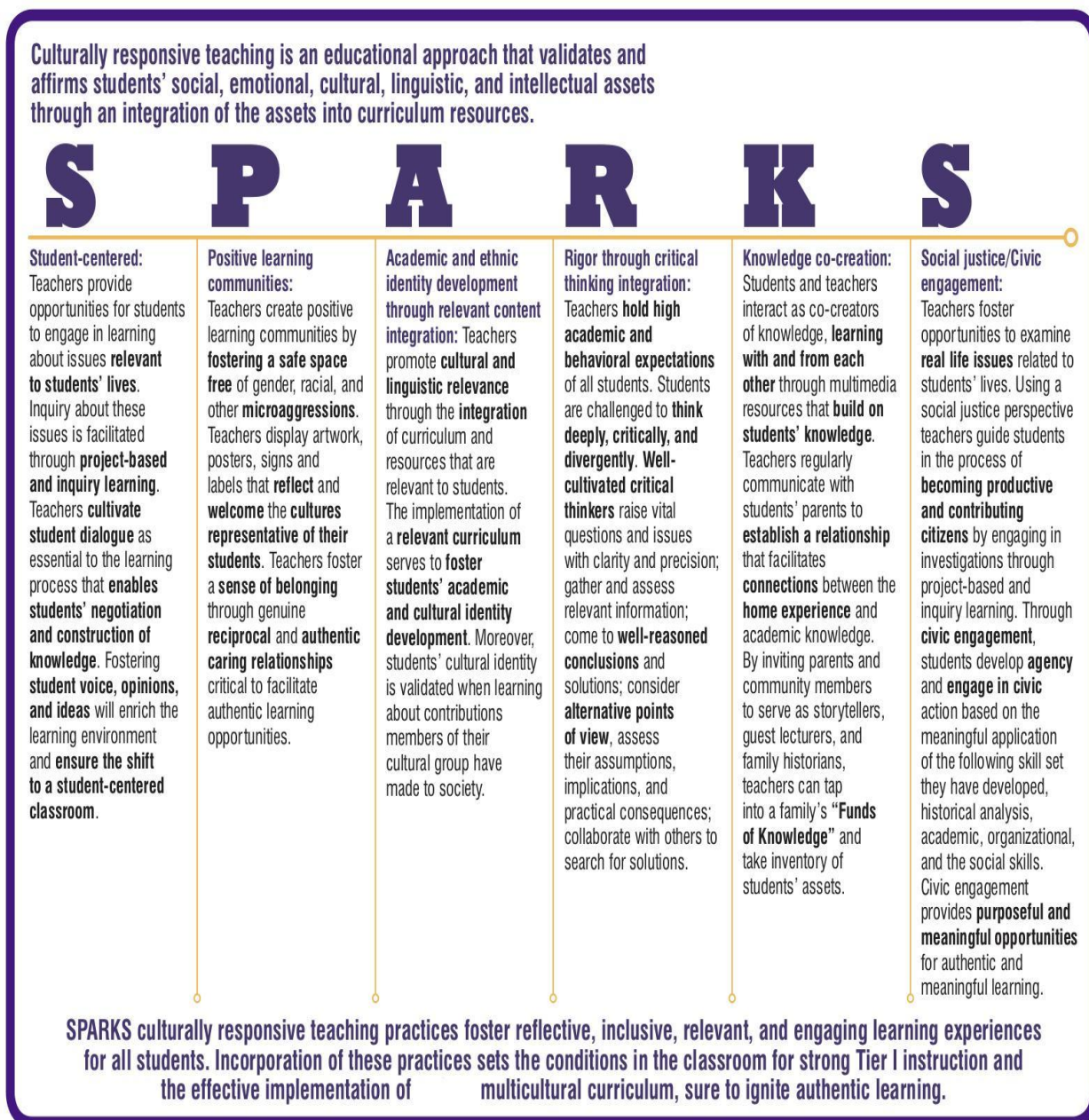
*CFA (Common Formative Assessment):* Standards-Based Assessments FOR Learning completed daily to biweekly with timely, constructive feedback

*Ongoing informal observations:* Formative Standards/Skills-Based Assessments FOR Learning completed informally multiple times daily

Appendix B  
Instructional Framework for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

**Figure 3**

SPARKS Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices



Appendix C  
2021-2022 Teacher Interview Questions

Name:  
School:  
Date:

1. What, in your view, is the purpose of teaching?
2. Why did you become a “Culturally Relevant Course” teacher?
3. Are you familiar with the Levels of Consciousness? If yes, how have they helped to structure discussions in your classes? OR (for year 2 teachers) How has your application of the levels changed since last year? If not, how do you structure discussions in your classes?
4. In what ways do students critique critical issues at the systemic level?
5. Elaborate on the challenges in engaging students in discussions about critical inequities.
6. In what ways is the Dialogic Teaching approach promoting students’ curiosity?
7. How is Dialogic Teaching fostering knowledge co-construction?
8. In what ways is Dialogic Teaching fostering student voice?
9. How are you selecting relevant texts?
10. Are there challenges to selecting relevant texts?
11. In what ways is students’ dialogue centered on challenging critical inequities?

The following questions are related to High stakes testing environments (HSTE)-

(HSTE) Learning which utilizes policy design to link standardized test scores to evaluate schools and students. Results are reported to the public (Au, 2007) HSTE include State mandated tests, benchmark tests, common formative assessments, and any instruction linked to test preparation.

12. In what ways do directives about test preparation influence your planning and delivery of instruction?
13. What are some of the obstacles that may keep you from implementing the SPARKS strategies, practices, or tenets?

Appendix D  
Teacher Focus Group Questions



1. How do you know what you're doing leads to student achievement.
2. Is there anything that stands out as unique or different about what you are doing, structurally that leads to student achievement.
3. What are the discussions you're having in your PLC or from your administration about student achievement.
4. In what ways are you receiving support from your colleagues or mentors or administration in regards to student achievement, CR pedagogy, assessment

In what ways are you maintaining a culturally responsive environment in a high stakes testing.

Appendix E  
Student Interview Questions

1. How is this course with \_\_\_\_\_ different from you other classes?
2. How do you feel in this class compared to others in terms of other students respecting our thought or opinions? How about your teacher?
3. In what ways do you see yourself or your experiences reflected in texts and assignments in this class?
4. Can you give an example of an assignment where you felt very connected, or invested in the material/assignment/topics?
5. What new understandings do you have you developed for yourself?
6. What goals do you have for yourself? In what ways has this course helped inform those goals? Did it change your goals?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add or share?

Appendix F  
American Discourse Pattern Frame

**Figure 5**

*Paragraph Frame for One paragraph Essay*



Oct.27, 2021

Happy Bday [redacted] 10/28  
Happy belated Bday [redacted] 7/10  
Happy belated Bday [redacted] 7/12

**American History**

- Write an academic 1 paragraph essay explain the meaning behind this historical image.

American Discourse Pattern

The historical image's message advances the idea \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ . Consider for instance, the image illustrates a \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ . Moreover, I've  
 learned \_\_\_\_\_ . Equally  
 Important, the image is \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ . All things considered \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 6**

## Student Artifact American Discourse Pattern One Paragraph Essay August 12, 2021

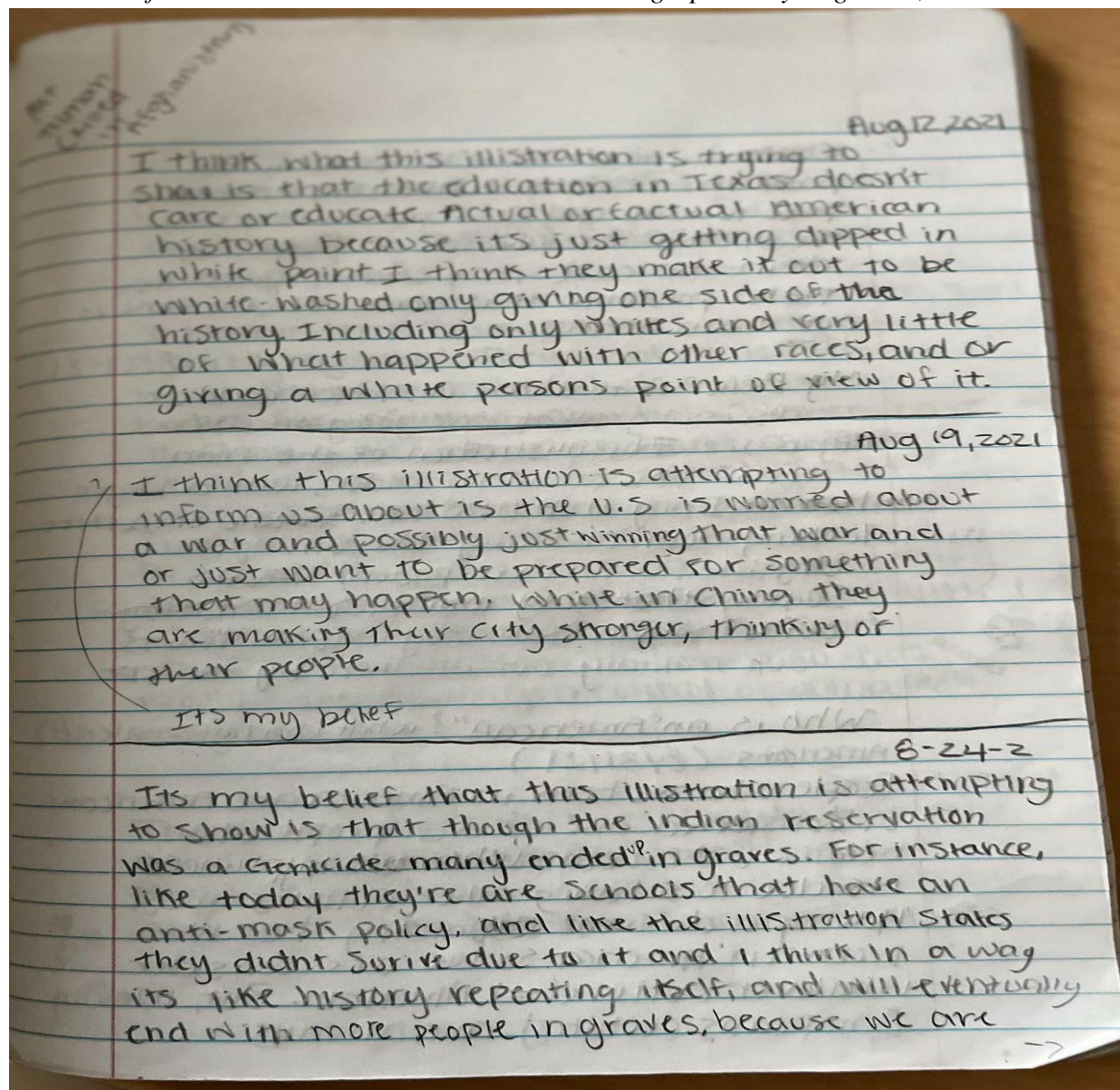


Figure 7



Student Artifact American Discourse Pattern One Paragraph Essay January 31, 2022

Bellwork 1/31/22

The current event advances the rate that political parties are taking on wearing masks at school. For instance, we see the left promoting wearing masks the right was as the child reads. Moreover, we see the right promoting wearing masks incorrectly. Additionally, the right is not only promoting it wrong, but also blocking the child's vision from reading books republicans have banned since it portrays more accurate history such as the book *Maus* which is german for mouse <sup>which was used in ww2</sup> and there is a Swastika on the cover. All things considered, the left is focused on public health and the right is focused on blocking knowledge they deem to be "unfit" for children.

Figure 8

Student Artifact American Discourse Pattern One Paragraph Essay April 4, 2022

Supported  
calling out  
children  
who were  
undocumented

Naive: Blame people for suffering  
Critical: How they should be treated  
Knowing whether or not it  
is right or wrong  
in cases.

4/4/20  
The political cartoon advances the idea of a trans woman being with someone in this case the beast from "Beauty and the Beast," and he looks as he is watching carefully and kind of embarrassed of who he is with. The beast looks ashamed. Considering that this is directed to the LGBTQ community, and ~~with~~ Disney with the laws they supported and agreed with. For instance, the political cartoon states "A tale as old as time," meaning to be alert to these types of things, and recognizing history. LGBTQ communities have dealt with discrimination and hatred for a long time and it needs and it is being attempted to normalize it.

Appendix G  
In Lak'ech Poem

In Lak'ech

Tú eres mi otro yo.

You are my other me.

Si te hago daño a ti,

If I do harm to you,

Me hago daño a mi mismo.

I do harm to myself. Si te amo y respeto,

If I love and respect you,

Me amo y respeto yo.

I love and respect myself.

-Luis Valdez



Appendix H  
Student Artifacts Unjust Project

Figure 9

*Unjust Deaths Project: Missing Indigenous Women*

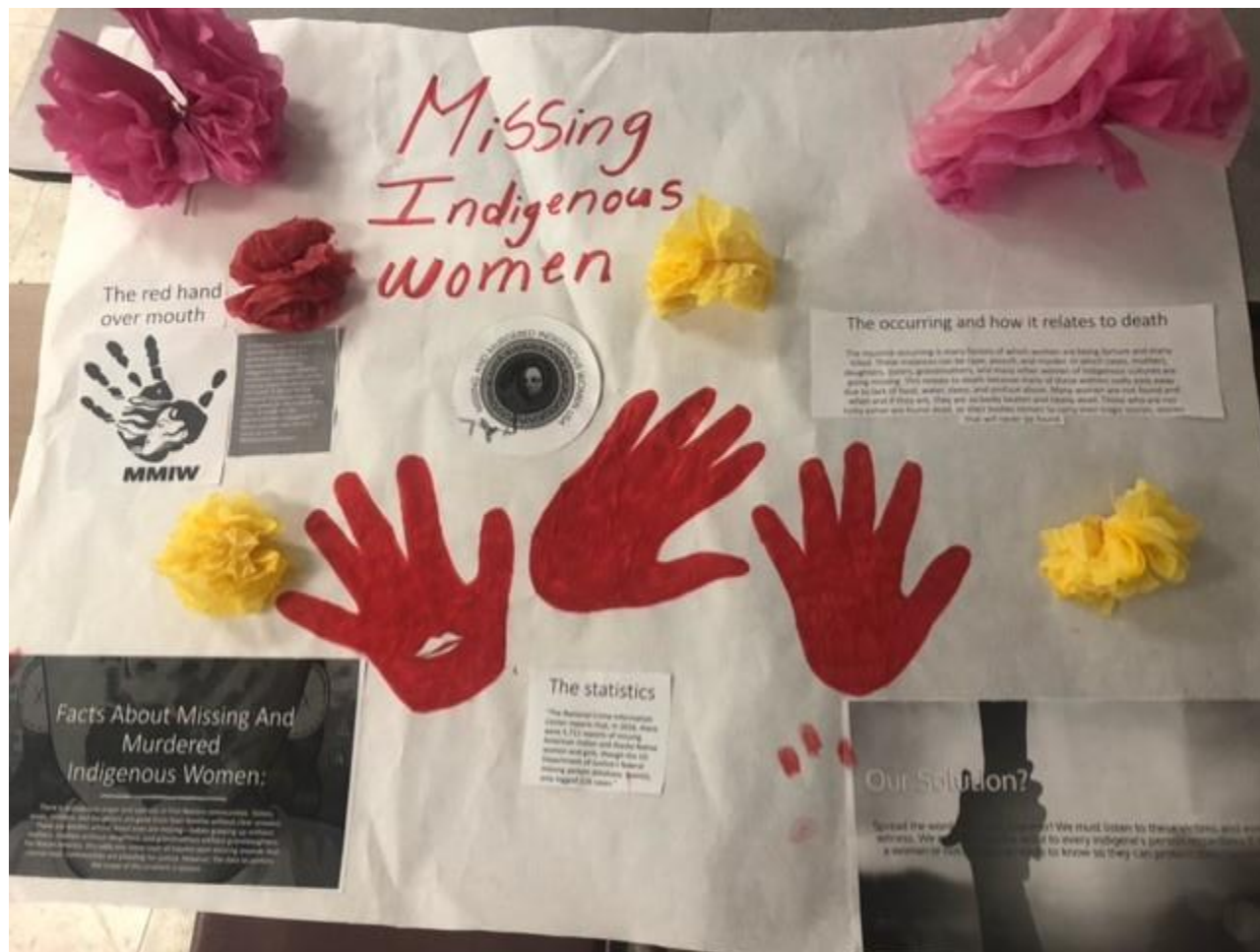


Figure 10



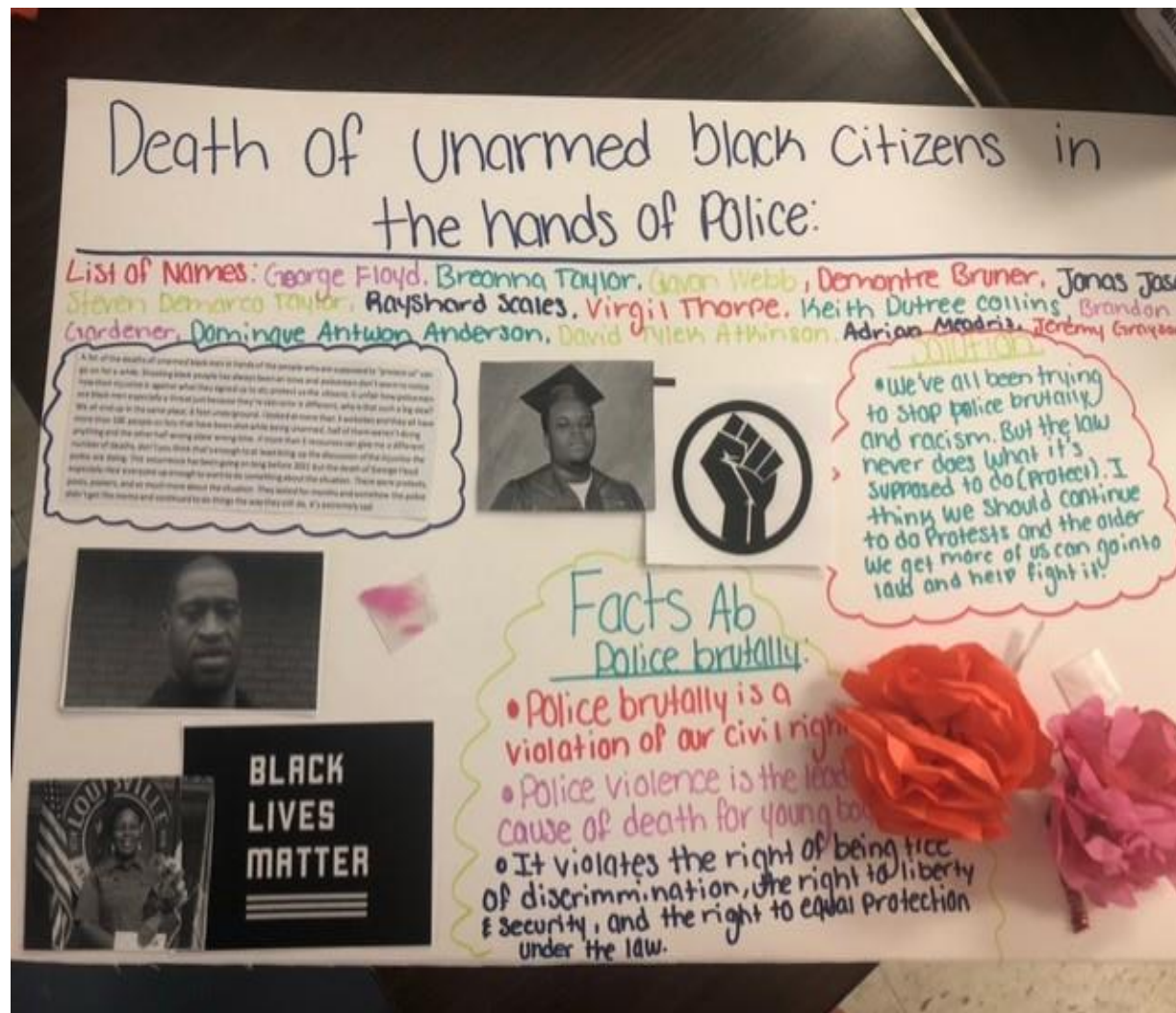
*Unjust Deaths Project: Deaths in the Desert*



*Note.* Students created an altar to honor the deaths of migrants who died crossing the desert.

Figure 11

Unjust Deaths Project: Death of Unarmed Black Citizens in the Hands of Police



Appendix I  
Participant Engagement with HST and HSTE

**Table 4**  
*Participant Engagement with HST and HTSE*

Participants	High Stakes Tests 2021-2022	Talks with students about HST	Time spent per week on standards-based learning programs
Che	ACT	Reviewing test taking strategies before the test. Remind students of transformational resistance	none
Marta	ACT Quarterly Benchmarks District Pre and Post tests	None	Less than 30 minutes per week
Hope	ACT Quarterly Benchmarks District Pre and Post tests	Review practice test questions with students for ACT Discuss the purpose of the test.	20 minutes per week
Antonio	ACT Quarterly Benchmarks District Pre and Post tests	Lesson on the format of the ACT Focusing on standards included in HST instead of test preparation.	30 minutes per week
Mercedes	ACT ACT Aspire Quarterly Benchmarks District Pre and Post tests	Reviewing test-taking strategies Review practice test questions Discuss the purpose of the test	Less than 30 minutes per week

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