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The Influence of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Mississippi Public Schools to Improve Adolescent African American Males' Literacy Achievement

Shawnese Davis
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THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN MISSISSIPPI
PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE ADOLESCENT
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES'
LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT

by

Shawnese Davis

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Submitted to the Graduate School,
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and the Department of Educational Research and Administration
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ABSTRACT

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE ADOLESCENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES' LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT

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This study used a quantitative approach to measure Mississippi secondary teachers' understanding and their extent of using culturally relevant pedagogy to increase students' literacy performance, specifically African American males. The researcher identified school districts with 50% or more African American students. The data collected in this study was used to compare reading high growth (<70%) and low growth (>40%) school teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogical teaching approaches to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in their understanding and frequency of using culturally relevant pedagogy to increase students' reading performance. A 38-statement survey instrument was adapted from McKinley's *Strategies and Behaviors of Effective Teachers* to quantitatively assess teacher perceptions and barriers experienced with embedding culturally relevant pedagogy into their classroom instruction. Two 5-point scales ranging from unimportant to very important and never to always were used to rate specific culturally significant teaching practices and measure teachers' frequency of using culturally relevant strategies in their classroom. To test the hypotheses generated in this study, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine statistical significance.

The findings indicated that high and low performing school teachers reported that implementing nonverbal cues such as gestures and presentation style when communicating with students was the most important culturally relevant pedagogical practice for implementing in the classroom. But, technology was the most frequently used culturally relevant teaching approach that teachers used (n= 52) in almost all or in every class. The results from this study revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between high and low growth school teachers' responses in their understanding or use of culturally relevant pedagogy. Research findings showed that culturally relevant pedagogy is important for increasing minority students' achievement.

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends, I cannot begin to express how thankful I am for your reassurance, support, and love. You helped me in ways that were unimaginable so that I could accomplish this goal. To my parents, Melvin and Shirlean, thanks for your “whatever it takes” attitude and full support in everything that I have ever set out to do. Your prayers, faith, and guidance pushed me forward even when I felt like I could not take another step. To my brothers, LaRandus and Melvin, thanks for being my biggest fans, always cheering me on to victory while willing to share a helping hand or offering words of encouragement when things were not going as expected. Finally, a special thanks goes to my fiancé, Terrance. Thank you for standing by my side from the very beginning of this journey. Your patience, support, and unselfishness during this time showed your genuine love and care for me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AAM</i>	African American males
<i>CRT</i>	Critical Race Theory
<i>CRP</i>	Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Literacy is one of the most important skills that children need to acquire in order to be successful in school. However, adolescent illiteracy is at a level of crisis (Black, 2005). According to Snow and Biancarosa, as cited in Black (2005), graduate scholars from Harvard Graduate School of Education, “70 percent of older students require reading remediation. Many students can read words on a page but cannot comprehend what they’ve read” (p. 1). Reading ability and the desire to read varies significantly among different groups of children (Husband, 2012; Schwartz, 2002). Yet, one thing remains constant. Nearly nine million students are struggling readers and need teachers’ help in improving their reading performance (Black, 2005). To assist students teachers should incorporate a variety of approaches to take with their students. Kunjufu (2011) argued, “Reading is the most important subject in our schools, but the subject least understood by educators” (p. 81). Teachers and leaders must understand that students’ reading ability and their desire to read varies significantly among different children (Husband, 2012).

Whether intentional or not, there remains an academic achievement gap between American youth, specifically African Americans and Caucasian students (Robelen, 2013; Schott Foundation, 2012). This educational imbalance is commonly referred to as the academic achievement gap. It is vital that the achievement gap among students is narrowed because having a good education determines one’s potential for productivity in American society. When both race and gender are considered, African American males suffer most from the academic achievement gap. Even though African American males enter kindergarten being academically equivalent to their counterparts, they steadily fall

below grade level (Kunjufu, 2011; The Children's Aid Society, 2010). Many African American males struggle to meet and exceed grade level expectations, and they accomplish minimal academic gains through middle and high school. In 2013, only 10% of African American males scored proficient or above proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Robelen, 2013). Proficiency is measured by students' ability to master the content and skills of a desired grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Education is a framework for teaching literacy, numeracy, and citizenship. A quality education is one that prepares all Americans to become productive citizens. Historically, there is a limited group of students that have benefitted from having a public school education (Lewis, 2006; Robelen, 2013). Many K-12 public schools, particularly urban ones, are not equipped with the resources to fully prepare students to become educated even though education has been acknowledged as the gateway to the "American Dream."

Minority students, namely African Americans, are underperforming in public schools across the U.S. as measured by standardized tests in Reading, Language Arts, Science and Math (Mickelson & Greene, 2006). Lewis, Chance, & Moore (2014) conducted a study that measured U.S. students' reading performance based on their racial and ethnic differences; it revealed that African American students ranked last compared to their Caucasian and Asian counterparts. By 8th grade, Caucasian students are at least 2.5 grade levels ahead of African American students in Reading (Kitmitto & Bohrnstedt, 2015).

Causes of African American Achievement Gap

African American males are perceived as troubled. Therefore, they have been negatively labeled in schools and society rather than recognized for their diversity (Polite & Davis, 1999). Thus, the barriers that they face are immense. Many factors have been identified as barriers for African American males. However, scholars have opposing views of the causes of the achievement gap between African American males and their counterparts (Kunjufu, 2011; Lewis, Chance, & Moore, 2014; Tatum, 2005; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007). Some researchers suggest African American males' culture and environment contributes heavily to their academic achievement gap because it lowers their desire to reach academic success (Harris & Graves, 2010). According to Noguera (2003), since wealth is viewed as a predictor of student academic success, students who suffer the greatest in schools are from low-income families (Noguera, 2003).

Underperformance is not only restricted to African American low class students. When middle class African American males are compared to their peers, they also lag behind in grade point average and on standardized tests. Hence, African American family's wealth alone cannot be the predominant cause of African American males' academic underperformance (Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007).

Other researchers attribute many African American males' academic underperformance to their historical slavery experiences. They consider that the discriminatory effects from slavery have contributed to many African American males' negative perspectives regarding receiving an education (Beachum, 2010). Through the years, racial inequality has been institutionalized through the public education system. Some critics argue that African American males and females have been treated as

second-class citizens through segregated schools with inadequate resources (Jones-Wilson, 1996). According to Beachum (2010) and Jenkins (2006), during slavery non-Whites were considered genetically inferior and held lower levels of intellectual capacity than White citizens. Whites wanted to exclude African Americans from the education system because they were afraid that if they became educated they could become powerful and less compliant. Therefore, African American males did not reap the same educational benefits as their White counterparts. The deeply rooted discriminatory practices that African American males experienced have caused them to develop a negative attitude towards school (Gardner & Mayes, 2013). Their lack of opportunities, support, and guidance from school prohibited many African American families from obtaining advancement in education and careers. Therefore, many African American males have not witnessed the benefits from receiving a sound education.

African Americans males are lagging behind their ethnic peers across the academic spectra mainly because of the widening literacy achievement gap (Lewis, Chance & Moore 2014; Pershey, 2011; Tatum, 2009). This gap opens the door for other life misfortunes because it limits them from future academic advancement and career opportunities (Lindo, 2006). African American males reading achievement is low compared to other student groups, so it is important to identify ways to help struggling African American males with reading. Kunjufu (2011) asserted that 80% of African American males are placed in special education because they do not read at the same level as their peers. Thus, African American males have been identified as an “at risk” subgroup in American public schools. Multiple researchers have found that being both African American and male in American schools places one at a greater risk for receiving

school suspensions, placement in remedial courses, special education disproportionality, incarceration, contracting HIV and AIDS at faster rates, and death (Anderson & Sadler, 2007; The Children's Aid Society, 2010; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2009). On average, 70% of prisoners in the United States have scored in the lowest two reading levels under proficiency and do not read above a fourth-grade level (Lewis, Green, & Moore, 2014).

Only a small number of secondary schools with a large population of African American male students have been able to raise average achievement scores (Lindo, 2006). Moreover, Tatum (2009) explained, "These students will continue to underperform in school as they wait for educators to get it right" (p. 34). It is important to note that not all African American males are unsuccessful in reading and that there are successful African American male readers. These scholars believe that the emphasis should be centered on what makes them successful. Instead, the underperforming African American male group receives much scholarly attention (Lewis, Chance, & Moore, 2014; Odden & Wallace, 2003).

U. S. School's Accountability System

In the spirit of attempting to improve its education system for all students, the United States has implemented school accountability goals and procedures within the last 20 years. Its purpose is to ensure that the state and local school districts were providing quality instruction so that all students learn. Even though the United States public educational system has a primary focus to reach higher levels of student achievement for all students, the State of Mississippi is still seeking ways to reach the national average on standardized tests (Mississippi Public School Accountability Standards, 2014). However,

the test-driven approach to teaching has been deemed unsuccessful for both the state and nation. Low performing students continue to underperform. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2013) report card revealed a 30 percentage point gap between African American and Caucasian students' math and reading scores (Robelen, 2013). Then, about 50% of minority male students are expected to graduate high school on time (Achievement Gap, 2011).

According to Miller (2003), Tatum (2005), and Anderson & Sadler (2009), there have been few proven reading strategies, practices, or large-scale studies that exist to accelerate the academic development of minority students, specifically African American males. The limited minority presence in reading intervention experiences has contributed to the small reading achievement gains by African American students. In Lindo's (2006) meta-analysis study, he found that only 63 of 971 research articles across three prominent scholarly reading journals used at least 50% or more African American children participants in their study. Then only two of those articles composed of 85% or more African American students were used to conduct research in finding successful reading interventions. Therefore, it is evident that there is a lack of inclusiveness of African American males' experiences in finding effective strategies to support their reading improvement.

The U.S. legislation demonstrates the importance of reading through its efforts to produce a population with strong reading and writing skills that is inclusive of minority students. Yet, the gap persists, with little to no significant improvements resulting from years of educational reform (Madland & Bunker, 2011). The Equality of Educational Opportunity Report which was published in 1966 first documented the achievement gap

between racial/ethnic groups based on standardized test score data on the elementary and secondary levels (Lindo, 2006). This report revealed that African Americans and other minorities scored much lower than White and Asian Americans so the country needed to address more minority students' needs.

As a result, The *Elementary and Secondary Act* (ESEA) (1965) was passed to federally fund schools that served large numbers of disadvantaged students, who happened to be mostly underrepresented minorities such as African American males. After the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) continued to reveal achievement gaps among racial/ethnic groups among 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students in reading, math, science, and writing in different states, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published to reaffirm that U.S. education was continuing to deteriorate. Then federal and state legislators agreed that academic standards needed to be raised, and schools needed to be held more accountable for all students' achievement. Then, ESEA was reauthorized by the *Improving America's Schools Act* (1994), which provided more Title I funding to schools with many low-income families. Yet, one thing remained constant; minority students such as African American males still were not academically comparable to White American students.

In 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) was passed to lessen the academic achievement gap in reading and math between White and underrepresented students. The law mandated that all children—regardless of the conditions of their schools, the quality of their resources, and the preparation of their teachers—achieve at the same levels of proficiency on standardized tests of reading, writing, and mathematics (Ladson-Billings, 2011). To meet the challenging demands of this law, educators were expected to develop

and engage their students through more creative lessons to promote deeper thinking and promote more students' learning success. *No Child Left Behind* reform efforts were adopted from the National Reading Panel (2001). It is important to note that even though African American males' representation in the National Reading Panel report was not clearly explained; they may or may not have been adequately represented in the samples of reading interventions. Yet, *No Child Left Behind* adopted the following five essential reading components from the National Reading Panel: phonemic awareness (PA), phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. Currently, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2012), has placed stringent expectations on how teachers should include higher-order thinking skills across all content areas to identify main ideas, analyze cause-and effect relationships, and compare and contrast different viewpoints as an attempt to get students to become more engaged with text (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Instructional Practices that Motivate African American Male Learners

As previously mentioned there are many barriers to African American males' success, many of which are uncontrollable by educators; therefore, it is essential that these factors do not overshadow opportunities to optimize learning for school-aged African American males. These opportunities can be granted by examining teaching based practices that improve more African American males reading performance. When quality instructional practices are embedded with students' interest it motivates students to academically improve. Similarly, when African American males interest is sparked, they become more motivated to want to do well in content areas such as reading (Swanson & Deshler, 2003).

African American males need improved classroom practices that engage them individually rather than the test-driven instruction, memorization, and routine procedures commonly used. Some common research-based teaching practices that improve African American males reading skills include incorporating culturally relevant teaching, performance arts in Reading, technology-based classes, and cooperative learning (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 2005).

African American male students need exposure to instruction that offers cultural and gender congruity to make reading more personal for them (Ladson Billings, 2011; Husband, 2012; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2003). When teachers are empathetic to the needs of different cultures, their teaching practices are improved (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). This includes instructional relevancy, connectedness, and interest in their students' lives. Also, when teachers understand their African American male students' culture, they can alter teaching strategies to make connections with their students learning styles (Beachum, 2010; Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004). Educators may help them to become better problem solvers through building relationships with students.

Often reading is perceived as a method to receive information instead of a recreational activity. This idea helps explain why many boys lack motivation to want to read. The themes and characters types that they prefer to read that are more relevant to their personal lives are not typically available in their classrooms (Brozo, 2002; Husband, 2012). Therefore, they are unable to make textual connections that help them become more interested in the text. Interest is important for reading achievement because engagement has a positive relationship with minority students' who are academically at risk of failure learning outcomes (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

Ladson-Billings (1994) identified eight successful teachers of African American students to show that culturally relevant teaching is not about race, gender, or teaching style. She claimed that these teachers' effort to enhance each child's academic strength is what made them successful teachers. Culturally relevant teaching allows students to bring cultural and home experiences into the classroom rather than students being expected to act as empty vessels (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings (1994) also stated "culturally relevant teaching helps them to be where they need to be to participate fully and meaningfully in the construction of knowledge" (p. 130). Additionally, when more than 1,800 students participated in a survey to examine factors that motivated middle school boys to read, the results revealed that the students valued purpose, physical space to independently read, and a variety of text choices (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

Performance arts is another key instructional strategy to relate to African Americans students. Many African Americans favor movement as an instructional practice to support learning (Gay, 2000; Noguera, 2003). Even though they have a culture of expression, musical inclination, and movement that is deeply embedded into their cognition, research suggests that more advantaged, higher performing students are exposed to arts in education while marginalized groups, such as African American males, receive more content specific remediation in reading and math (Lorimer, 2011). Performance arts learning can lead to cognitive development and general reading improvements (Lewis, Chance, & Moore, 2014). Performance arts allow students learning experiences to become more meaningful and helps improve students' achievement (Lorimer, 2011).

Implementing technology has proven to be another effective way to improve education, yet teachers are not using it (Fogle, 2014). Schools with higher percentages of African American students often lack access to quality technology resources. Rather than schools attempting to solve this issue, African Americans have suffered from the schools' inability to provide the technology to meet these students' academic needs. Ford & Moore (2013) found that 61% of students in low-minority schools were given research-based assignments that required them to apply technology application and use computer resources compared to only 35% of students in high minority schools receiving the same type of computer instruction. Yet, "The Black man has been blamed for his high rate of unemployment because he has failed to prepare himself to compete in a technological society" (Blake & Darling, 1994, p. 405).

Cooperative learning has been defined as a successful teaching strategy and the most effective way to teach African American males. Taylor's (2005) qualitative study of African American middle school males, found that 6 of 15 African American middle school boys preferred working in groups. Students who are already academically underachieving benefit when they are heterogeneously grouped. For example, Slavin (1991) claimed, "The use of cooperative learning strategies results in improvements both in the achievement of students and the quality of their interpersonal relationships" (p. 73).

Cooperative learning allows groups of students with different ability levels to work together to improve on things they do not understand. It creates a safe and supported learning community for African American males during reading classes. African American children's love for engaging with people explains their preference in working collaboratively as their preferred learning style (Hale-Benson, 1989). They do

not feel threatened because norms are preset that all participants will work together as a support system (Wood & Jocius, 2013).

Theoretical Frameworks

The controversial causes of the achievement gap in the American educational system can be contributed to social and racial injustices, impact of community and parental involvement and its influence on students, as well as teacher and school practices. Critical race and culturally relevant pedagogy theories are used as frameworks to explain African American male students' need for an equitable education. Equity should not be confused with equality. While equality means to distribute resources evenly regardless of individual needs, equity allows students to receive the amount of resources they need to become most successful (Odden & Wallace, 2003). Since every student's educational ability is different, it is important to note that an uneven playing field exists in 21st century classrooms for minority students, English Language Learners, and special needs students (Carothers, 2008). In this context, equitable resources should be allocated in ways to meet individual students, particularly African American males specific learning needs.

Critical Race Theory

Because African Americans have a history of struggling to get ahead, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an appropriate framework to use for this study. Critical Race Theory's major tenets include interest convergence, whiteness as property, counter storytelling, and liberalism. These can be used to understand how racism influences schools' operations through funding, curriculum, assessments, and instructional strategies.

Critical Race Theory will be used as a framework in this study to understand how many U.S. schools' operations and staff are a part of a systemic prejudice towards African American males. The social environment that students come from largely determines the advantages and disadvantages that students receive in school. Since schools are a type of social institution, they are indirectly widening the achievement gap against African American students using "one size fits all" instructional and assessment methods. CRT explains not just how race and racism can be used to define and address educational problems (Williams, 2010), but it centralizes class and gender as important factors when analyzing African American males' underachievement. In "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," Charles (2008) illustrated inequality in American's schools by stating:

Poorer communities, which are typically inhabited by significantly larger percentages of Blacks and Latinos, generate a smaller tax base and the educational experiences at their schools are easily predictable. There is no question that this practice goes a long way towards perpetuating unequal educational experiences for students. (p. 65)

The practice that Charles (2008) describes relates to the limited funding allocated to certain school communities. The scarcity of teachers, technology, and other learning resources exposes the students to a poorer school experience in highly populated minority schools. This quote also exemplifies a component of critical race theory, Whiteness as property. Supporters of Whiteness as property claim that even though the legal discrimination was outlawed, race still matters. When race is not addressed, social realities become denied. Whiteness as property is explained as the colorblind perspective

in school curriculums. The colorblind perspective does not acknowledge racial differences among students, and does not attempt to discuss texts or the history of minority students. Like Charles (2008), Brown and Cooper (2011) said this “devalues the experiences and realities of students of color by denying that race preferences and racism exists” (p.69).

Unsurprisingly, critical race theorists believe that teachers and school leaders’ instructional decisions for African Americans labels them at a deficit. Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted that the instructional approaches for these students often involve remediation. Tatum (2008) argued that instructional practices needed to shift “beyond a cognitive focus to include a social, cultural, political, or economic focus” (p. 164). These researchers blame teacher approaches for students’ failure as opposed to blaming the students for lack of improvement (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tatum, 2005). Many of the laws have provided more privileges to citizens because they are White. To African Americans dismay, schools are no different. According to Bell (1980), schools’ aim at desegregation has only been advantageous to Whites because students of color do not receive equal school opportunities. They receive poor school quality, stagnant academic improvement, increased suspension, expulsion, referral into special education programs, and dropout rates. If Americans ignore the ideas of the critical race theory and continue to live in a “colorblind society,” it will be “problematic and potentially destructive” (Tatum, 1997, p. 22). Critical Race Theory is one framework that can be used to analyze educational equity, but another component is culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The demographics among school-aged populations are changing. There is a need in the educational system to ensure that all students achieve and to avoid cultural discontinuity (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2000; Tatum, 2005, Irvine 2001). Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which originated with Gloria Ladson-Billings, emphasizes meeting the needs of students from various cultures by valuing and implementing diversity into schools' curricula. CRP serves as a solution to schools' inequities exposed through CRT in this study. Like critical race theory, "CRP recognizes the value of lived experience by marginalized groups in understanding and making meaning of the world" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.159). If our nation really wants to make a meaningful educational impact on all students regardless of color, then learning needs to be inclusive for all students (Hyland, 2009). All students' academic needs can be addressed by ensuring that "(a) Students must receive academic success, (b) students must develop or maintain cultural competence (c) and students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 163).

Ladson-Billings (1998) argued that the curriculum used in public primary and secondary schools maintains a White supremacist master script known as storytelling. In this master script, Ladson-Billings argued that "African Americans are muted and erased when they challenge dominant culture authority and power" (p.161). Therefore, minority students are made to feel like failures that cannot rise above their immigration status. However, counter-storytelling is beneficial to many poor and people of color because it allows them to become empowered without diminishing their actual experiences. Counter stories challenge stereotypes held by Whites and give a voice to the marginalized groups

(Brown & Cooper, 2011). Counter stories allow African American students to learn more about marginalized people and to understand life from their perspective. Counter storytelling also enables Blacks to move beyond what Bell (1980) called the interest convergence principle because the students are allowed to experience minorities point of view. The idea behind the interest convergence principle is that Whites only support minority rights when it is to their own advantage (Charles, 2008; Bell 1980). Bell (1980) also contended that the fourteenth amendment alone would not provide racial equality for Blacks in any situation that would challenge the superiority of middle and upper class Whites. He continued that the fourteenth amendment ensures that court decisions will “secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class Whites” (p. 523). To further support his claim, Bell also noted the decision made by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board* 1954 was America’s way of obtaining third world countries respect in the Cold War.

Critical race theorists not only believe that curricula need to change, but also their rigor needs to improve too. As cited by Kozol (1991) in Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2009), “The curriculum [the White school] follows emphasizes critical thinking, reasoning and logic... Children also are designing their own galaxies...But what about the others? Aren’t there ten Black children in the school who could enjoy this also” (p. 23). This example demonstrates that African American students are presumed to be learning deficient (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings (2009). Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted that the instructional approaches for these students involve remediation. Then when teachers do not see positive gains after a strategy’s implementation, the students are blamed instead of the strategy being employed (Talyor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings,

2009). Tatum (2008) argued that instructional practices needed to shift “beyond a cognitive focus to include a social, cultural, political, or economic focus” (p. 164). These researchers blame teacher approaches for students’ failure as opposed to negatively labeling students (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tatum, 2005). However, these CRT researchers are continuing to investigate teachers’ level of quality and integrity towards teaching African American students.

Based on CRP theorists, teachers who really believe that all of their students can succeed demonstrate this idea by implementing quality instruction that contains authenticity in characters, settings, situations, or themes that students are interested in, and they set high classroom expectations so that there is a mutual appreciation for both the teacher’s and students’ cultural heritage (Gay, 2000). They teach students how to analyze and make connections between their neighborhoods and worldly issues to encourage academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is designed so that teachers’ behaviors focus on teaching to ensure all students learning needs are met (Brown & Shelly Cooper, 2011). It emphasizes cultures, languages, and experiences that diverse students bring into the classroom to increase their engagement and academic achievement (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Wood & Jocius 2013). Students need to learn how to generate knowledge and then apply that knowledge to real-world situations to obtain a deeper understanding (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). By implementing a culturally responsive approach to literacy, students can achieve academic excellence as well as cultural acceptance (Durden, 2008; Tatum, 2005).

Statement of Problem

African American male students' underperformance is an educational crisis (Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2012; Orfield; 2004; Tatum, 2005). Since having a poor-quality education is detrimental to one's future success, African American males need to improve academically. African American males' poor literacy skills exposes them to unemployment and unemployment leads to incarceration, poverty, or substance abuse. African American males have academically underperformed compared to their cohorts for many decades. According to Ladson Billings (2003), they seem to be learning less than they did a generation ago. Their inability as a group to meet proficiency and achievement goals on national and state exams set for all students supports their failing state. In Mississippi, during the 2011-2012 school year African American males lagged behind white males by almost 30% in graduation rate (Schott Foundation, 2010). Thus, African American males' rates of unemployment are extensive and high-end careers for this group are few (Nettles, Schwartz, & Wang, 2012). Rather than looking at what needs to be taught, the time has come to clarify how to teach using authentic literacy practices. Students can improve if teachers and school leaders work to improve instructional quality. As stated by Odden and Wallace (2003), "Improved classroom instruction is the prime factor to improve student achievement gains" (p. 64). Low academic achievement has lasting emotional, societal, and economic influences on the students and their communities.

The greatest issue is that too many African American males struggle with literacy. African American males' inability to perform on grade level at levels comparable to their white counterparts can be attributed to U.S. schools' deeply embedded systematic way of

teaching that extends beyond just a few schools and classrooms. Teachers need a critical understanding of the diverse cultures in their classrooms so that they can alter teaching strategies and make connections with their students (Beachum & McCray, 2004).

While many studies have revealed factors that could be used to improve African American males' students' performances, few have quantitatively measured teachers' instructional delivery and support to improve their reading achievement. So, more empirical data is needed to discern what practices teachers need to implement with fidelity to improve African American male students' overall reading academic achievement. Also, the barriers that are preventing teachers from implementing the instructional practices that literature has shown to be successful need to be identified.

The literature has presented a plethora of findings from studies with small sample sizes through qualitative methodology such as conducting interviews, observations, and case studies of a few young men to generalize what instructional practices work for this large group. Therefore, educators need evidence generated by more quantitative studies that account for a greater percentage of the adolescent African American males specific to the southern region. The National Center for Education Statistics revealed that African American males' underachievement is more prevalent in the South where the Black-White achievement gap is larger (Kitmitto & Bohrnstedt, 2015). In fact, the Mississippi Department of Education shows a 28% achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students on the end of year state tests. This gap is larger than any other disadvantaged subgroup in Mississippi. Additionally, "In 2016, half of all black students in Mississippi attended school in a district rated D or F based on Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP) tests; 86 percent of the students in those districts were black (Mannie,

2017, p. 2). According to Mannie (2017), a Mississippi superintendent argued, “In my opinion the way to close those gaps is not to focus specifically on the gap, but to make sure you have high standards and high expectations.” The literature presented served as a guide to further address the problem of implementing more cultural relevance into learning to ensure that all students academically improve.

Purpose of Study

This study examined teachers’ understanding and their extent to which they use culturally relevant pedagogy to increase literacy performance specifically for African American males in Mississippi schools. A secondary purpose was to understand teachers’ barriers that they have encountered when implementing culturally relevant pedagogy into their secondary classrooms. The results from this study will add to current limited research on the influence culturally relevant instruction has on African American males’ literacy in middle and high school. Even though as a group African American students are academically suffering prior to middle school, the gap increases by 8th grade which contributes to failing state exams, low graduation rates, limited job opportunities and resources that often leads to incarceration. African American males are almost twice as likely to drop out of school compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Casserly, 2009). It is my hope that the data will inform educational policymakers, administrators, and teachers about effective instructional practices that are associated with African American males’ academic achievement. Since there is little empirical evidence available that reveals practices that significantly improve the academic performance of adolescent African American males who struggle with reading, the information obtained from this

study provides school leaders with culturally relevant strategies that teachers suggested improve African American males' literacy achievement.

Justification

As schools are continuing to be evaluated, there is a continual gap between ethnic groups, particularly African American males and their peers. According to The Council of the Great City Schools, the southern region represents the largest area of the United States where fewer than 50% of African American males graduate from high school. Thus, many African American males, especially in the South, are faced with unpleasant academic experiences. Even though there are other factors that has been mentioned that influence students' academics, Tatum (2005) blames teachers' ability or lack thereof to instruct African American males for their academic disconnect. Even though there is no "right" way to fix the learning deficits, leadership styles, or instructional practices that exist in schools, all students need to be fully exposed to quality instruction.

For the academic achievement gap to narrow more positive teacher support is needed. Teachers' college preparation, personal views, and experiences are reflected through the methods teachers use to teach their students. Teachers need to understand and use instructional practices that can benefit all their students (Haddix, 2009; Vaughn, Wanzek, & Murray, 2012). Yet, Tatum (2005) argued that the strategies for improving African American males' literacy are limited, there is no clear definition of what literacy means for African American males, indecisiveness exists about how to provide effective reading instruction to students who struggle, and their culture's absence in current teaching practices are preventing African American males from reaching their fullest academic potential. Their improved instructional practices can lead to increased African

American males' literacy achievement. It is important to note that becoming literate is not only important for school for African American males, but also because it is a life skill that they will need for adulthood.

Thus, the researcher identified research based strategies to measure teachers' experiences with implementing culturally relevant pedagogy strategies to determine how well the strategies supported their students' learning. Also, the researcher allowed teachers' personal experiences to be shared that identified barriers to fully implementing cultural relevance into classrooms.

Research Questions

For secondary public school teachers who serve in predominantly African American schools in the state of Mississippi:

1. To what extent do teachers understand the concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy?
2. Is there a significant difference between teachers' understanding of concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in higher and lower reading performing districts?
3. To what extent do teachers report using culturally relevant pedagogy?
4. Is there a significant difference between teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy in higher and lower reading performing districts?
5. What barriers do teachers experience in using culturally relevant pedagogy?

Hypotheses

In order to examine teachers' understanding and their extent to which they use culturally relevant pedagogy to increase African American male students' literacy performance in Mississippi middle and high schools, the following hypothesis will be tested:

H₁: There will be a statistically significant difference between higher reading performing district teachers' understanding of concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy than lower reading performing districts.

H₂: There will be a statistically significant difference between higher reading performing district teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy than lower reading performing districts.

Delimitations

This study had several delimitations. First, the sample was drawn from Mississippi school districts with a student population of 50% or higher African American students. Participants of this study were limited to middle and high schools' teachers with very high (>70%) or low (<40%) reading proficiency scores on the end of year state assessment according to the Mississippi Department of Education. The relatively small sample size prevents the generalizability of the findings. Another delimitation was the data collection process and the hope that the information provided by the participants were accurate. The final delimitation was the amount of time given to collect data.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made prior to the study:

1. All participants would respond to all survey items honestly.

2. All participants were cleared by the State Department of Education to teach in their current positions.
3. Some participants are meeting adolescent African American males learning needs using culturally relevant teaching strategies in their classrooms despite their environmental inequalities at home.

Definition of Terms

Academic underperformance- students who are performing in the lowest quartile on state and/or national achievement assessments (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2012).

Academic literacy- “The process of figuring out how to read for knowledge that stays beyond the quiz into the next course and endures into the future” (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Klauda, 2012, p. 3).

Common Core State Standards- learning goals that establishes what students should know and be able to do at each grade level and it ensures that high school graduates are prepared to enter college or careers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015).

Critical Race Theory - a framework for analyzing racism by challenging laws and cultural deficits (Solarzano, 1997).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy- a teaching approach that recognizes and embraces students’ culture, experiences, and preferred performance styles to improve their intellectual, social, emotional, and political success (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Literacy- “A collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups by developing fluency with tools of technology; build

intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought; design and share information for global communities” (The National Council of Teachers of English as cited in Price, 2013, p.1)

No Child Left Behind - A law that was passed to hold states and schools to higher standards as well as measure their accountability using high stakes testing to monitor the educational gains of disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Teaching strategies- ways to present instructional materials, activities, and methodologies

Urban African American students- students who self-identify with an African origin that attend inner city- public schools

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the study. The problem, a need for more inclusive teaching practices to improve African American males’ literacy, was discussed followed by the purpose, research questions, and hypotheses. The definition of terms, delimitations, assumptions, and justifications were shared based on literature regarding the phenomenon of African American males’ academic underachievement. The chapter provided a historical background, provides research questions, and the theoretical framework through which the problem was examined.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Perspective

The history and experiences that African Americans have faced across many decades in the United States has been gruesome. Black indentured servants were forced into slavery. At this time, some Whites and Blacks were indentured servants until the Virginia court made a distinction between the different races of indentured servants. Jenkins (2006) and Ogbonna-Mcgruder, Armstrong, and Martin (2011) revealed that Blacks' servitude mentality started as a result of slavery after they arrived in Virginia in 1619. Beachum (2010) claimed, "Slavery was an evolutionary industry with an accompanying mentality of white superiority/black inferiority that employed physical intimidation and terror for financial gain and racial supremacy" (p. 65). Blacks were not allowed to communicate with their families, exercise their traditions, or learn how to read (Burrell & Walsh, 2001).

Jenkins (2006) and Burrell and Walsh (2001) declared that African Americans are the only ethnic group who came to the Colonies involuntarily. Africans were kidnapped from their native land to become slaves during the Atlantic slave trade in the 1600s. After being transported to the new world, Americans purchased them for economic and cheap labor needs (Daniel & Walker, 2014; Beachum, 2010). Africans faced the worst possible human conditions, which caused intimidation and fear among them.

African Americans continued to face oppression in several colonies, but it was most severe in South Carolina. Other colonies adopted practices from South Carolina. In 1740 during the South Carolina general assembly, the Negro Act was passed in response to the Stono Rebellion, slaves rebellious response to the slave codes that prohibited them

from assembling together or making any financial gains. The Stono Rebellion led to numerous deaths and destruction of properties (Jenkins, 2006). Then, the Negro Act evolved to replace slave codes. Jenkins (2006) affirmed, “Since the passing of the ‘Negro Act’ in the early 1800s, a notion of inferiority towards black males has been inherited throughout the years” (para.2). The Negro Act upheld African American inferiority by prohibiting Black slaves from becoming educated. The laws upheld illiteracy because legislators believed that if African Americans became literate then South Carolina’s power to control slaves would diminish. Also, slaves who were literate could potentially create false passes and manumission documents to free other slaves (Rasmussen, 2010). Manumission refers to different approaches that slave-owners took to free slaves depending on a society’s slave system (Rasmussen, 2010).

Post Slavery

Similarly, during the 19th and 20th centuries, Whites believed that non-Whites, particularly Blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, and even some Eastern Europeans were genetically inferior and possessed lower levels of intellectual capacity than Whites (Beachum, 2010; Jenkins 2006). Boykin and Noguera (2011) referred to this as eugenics- the science of genetic engineering. Supporters believed that procreation should occur by groups with superior intellect and physical abilities while inferior groups (minorities) should not be allowed to reproduce. The Euro-American worldview, which differed significantly from what the slaves were used to, shaped the conditioning of Black slaves into believing that they were inferior beings with no legal rights or political power. Jenkins noted, “The 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* case ruled that a slave, ex slave, or descendant of slaves could not be a citizen of the United States and that Congress cannot

prohibit slavery in the territories” (p.128). During this time when many Americans were prospering, African Americans were restrained by oppression. When President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation that freed slaves from servitude in 1863, southern states did not grant freedom. Thus, slaves weren’t fully freed until the 13th Amendment made slavery unconstitutional in 1865 (Rasmussen, 2010).

In 1865, the legislature granted African Americans freedom from slavery as a formal institution with the Emancipation Proclamation. Blacks were granted civil rights. African Americans began to feel a sense of hope about the possibility of a better future. They even wanted to learn how to read and write so they could gain full inclusiveness as an American citizen (Anderson, 1988). This period of African American freedom was short lived. White Southerners began to feel threatened. They no longer had cheap sources of labor and would have to compete for jobs. They did not support universal schooling, and fired laborers whose children attended schools (Anderson, 1988). The time that African American children could learn to read and write was limited because planters prevented them from going to school by forcing them to help with cropping on plantations. Their few human rights were soon taken away, and things were not much different from the way they had been in the mid-1800s (Ogbonna-Mcgruder, Armstrong, & Martin, 2011). Southern White Legislatures soon began to control Congress and passed the Compromise of 1877 which ended the Reconstruction era. Thus, oppression for African American people began again (Anderson, 1988).

Jim Crow Laws

Jim Crow Laws were passed in the Southern states in the early 1900s; it allowed legal segregation. These laws were passed based on White supremacists’ philosophical

beliefs that condemned Blacks to a lower status than White people. Since Jim Crow laws legalized segregation, Blacks and Whites were separated at churches, schools, jobs, hospitals, and other public places. Thus, African Americans had limited freedom or resources (Maloney, 2002). African Americans experience during this time was similar to that of former slaves. Maloney (2002) claimed a typical African American family at the start of the twentieth century lived and worked on a farm in the South, did not own their home, and were unlikely to have children in school. Therefore, during this time African Americans continued to struggle and received limited social or economic advancement.

Despite their hardships, learning was still a priority of African American people. African Americans fought to become educated regardless of the turmoil that they faced (Perry, 2003). The strong communities that housed African American schools in the South promoted academic achievement. Northern and Southern African Americans worked collaboratively to educate their people (Beachum, 2010). These Black educators showed dedication and provided support to their students (Beachum, McCray, & Perry, 2003). They helped students to thrive not only academically, but also prepared them for the world and encouraged them to dream of better futures (Beachum, 2010).

Modern Slavery

The ideas of inequality were reflected in public education. Discrimination was harmful because it decreased advanced societal opportunities as well increased the likelihood of poverty for many African American families. Resources were given to White schools that increased their teacher salaries and per-pupil funding and decreased class size. Black schools did not receive these benefits; in fact, their quality of education was declining (Jones-Wilson, 1996). African Americans in segregated schools faced

disadvantages such as poor teaching materials, building structures, and teacher resources in comparison to their White peers (Jones-Wilson, 1996). Even the textbooks portrayed biased representations against African Americans (Jones-Wilson, 1996). If Black children had access to books, they were handed down from White schools and were out-of-date and damaged. Frequently, Black schools were overcrowded, and all grades were together in one room.

The economy of the South declined due to the destruction of the cotton crop by boll weevils during the late 1910s. Along with poor weather, boll weevil infestations prompted many Americans to find work in the North. African Americans began to migrate north during the 1910s and 1920s (Maloney, 2002). Blacks moving to the North was beneficial for many Northern industries because they needed cheap laborers to meet the demand for their products. Unfortunately, many White Northerners did not want African Americans there. As the Black population increased, residential segregation occurred which led to school segregation because Whites wanted to uphold their superior status to African Americans. Since Whites and African Americans could not be legally segregated, whites moved to suburbs so that they did not have to live in the same communities as Black people. This became known as “White flight” (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005, p. 19). The racially segregated neighborhoods prevented African Americans from receiving the educational advancements due to the scarce resources and cultural relevancy available in their schools.

Maloney (2002) further asserted that Black workers only had access to a limited set of jobs and remained heavily concentrated in unskilled laborer positions. Tatum (2012) noted, “In the 19th century, African Americans practiced and learned literacy in

order to improve their social and economic status; strive for racial uplift; advance the economic, social, and political aims of the community; tear down the walls of discrimination; and advance human liberty” (p. 35). As a result of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, employment discrimination became outlawed and wages increased for African Americans (Maloney, 2002). As many African Americans finally gained a sense of hope and opportunity in the South, Northern migration became more stagnant.

Great Depression

Yet, African Americans efforts during the 19th century were short-lived due to the Great Depression. The Great Depression during the 20th century caused devastation to rich and poor people. Many Americans especially African Americans were left unemployed. They could not find jobs in either agriculture or industry. Black urban unemployment reached well over 50%, more than twice the rate of Whites since African Americans held mostly blue collar manufacturing jobs (Maloney, 2002; Trotter, 2014). Blacks were intimidated, attacked, and murdered to create job availability for Whites in different parts of the South. African Americans remained dependent on public service and relief programs. Trotter (2014) noted that at the end of the Depression, Whites returned to full-time employment during the late 1930s.

African American chances of accumulating wealth were few compared to the rate that Whites did. The southern Whites wanted to preserve their way of life through the use of Black Codes. In 1865, the Black Codes, which were instituted at the state and local level, denied African Americans the right to vote or to hold political office, made them ineligible to serve as jurors or testify in court, required them to use passes as they

traveled from one place to another, and impeded their freedom of assembly (Daniel & Walker, 2014; Gossett, 1997).

Desegregation

Education afforded to African Americans in the 20th century was inferior to their White counterparts (Jones-Wilson, 1996). The facilities, class sizes, and teacher quality were poor. States were still upholding *de jure* segregation on the standard of separate but equal. These segregation laws were meant to maintain slavery (Blanchett, 2009). The term was adopted by the Supreme Court's 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The most significant ruling on race and equal educational opportunities in the history of the United States Supreme Court was *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka* (1954). *Brown* was a consolidation of lawsuits in South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware (Jones-Wilson, 1996). Even though *Brown* theoretically created separate but equal school systems, the Courts could not uphold the status quo to remain in place. Separate educational facilities were not equal for all children, but the Supreme Court's lack of urgency to implement desegregation across the United States caused many African Americans students to continue to face adversity in schools. Finally, the Supreme Court ruled that *de jure* racial segregation of schools was unconstitutional in 1868. The Court based their ruling on the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Armstrong & Martin, 2011; Ogbonna-Mcgruder, Trotter, 2014).

The case of *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County Virginia* (1968) was the most significant case after *Brown's* ruling on school desegregation. It has been referred to as an extension of *Brown* because it required school boards to consolidate dual

schools and eliminate segregation in school operations such as faculty, staff, transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities (Page, 2013).

Accountability Movement

A new era of American history evolved that was dedicated to acquiring equal opportunities for all Americans known as the Civil Rights movement. Although the Civil Rights movement was beneficial to Black schools in the nation, it also helped the entire American education system (Daniel & Walker, 2014; Jones-Wilson, 1996). The 1964 Civil Rights Act was instrumental in the attempt to achieve equity in education. As highlighted in Daniel & Walker (2014), Titles IV-VII of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided federal assistance in desegregating public school systems, banned discrimination in federally assisted programs, and provided equal employment opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators.

These improvements began after the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) was passed. The purpose of ESEA was to help disadvantaged children, provide community libraries, promote educational change through the communities, and make state departments more accountable for the academic performance of all students. ESEA also allowed more federal involvement in public schools by distributing federal funds to schools and districts in need. Its goal was to provide equity so that everyone could be in a similar learning position regardless of the community in which they lived.

As an outgrowth of ESEA, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was first administered in the 1969 to assess students' academic progress in the United States. This national test identifies and tracks the achievement gap in reading and mathematics across states in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades (Daniel & Walker, 2014). Soon after

NAEP, “A Nation at Risk” was released. This report emphasized the lack of improvement in the United States education system by highlighting declining test scores among U.S. students, low teaching salaries, and poor teacher training programs that lead to a high turnover rate among educators. In addition to this, it also reported that other industrialized countries were threatening to pass America’s technology. Because the federal government was afraid that the educational system was declining, they decided to raise academic standards and hold schools more accountable. This eventually led to then President Clinton’s *Improving America’s School Act (IASA)* in 1994. This act was established because many underperforming students were still not achieving at high levels. IASA’s main purpose through Title I of the ESEA was to give money to schools with an excessive number of low-income families. Although the expectation was that this would help districts improve student performance, teachers and administrators realized that they needed more input on effective spending from the federal government because the money alone was not improving students’ academic performance. For example since the late 1990s, the academic achievement gap between minority and White students on standardized achievement tests has been quite stagnant even with receiving additional Title I funds (Madland & Bunker, 2011). During this time, 1 in 12 White high school students could read and comprehend rigorous text, while only 1 in 100 African American students could read nonfiction text for a purpose (Haycock, 2001).

Goals 2000, implemented by President Clinton’s administration was signed into law in 1994 to meet the nation’s educational needs. Its primary focus was for students to be able to compete academically in the global market and to rebuild America’s educational system by the year of 2000 (Riley, 1994). Goals 2000 allowed states to

receive grants to meet goals after six years of implementation. The goals that were set included: all children will start school ready to learn, the high school graduation rate will exceed 90%, students will be proficient in math, English, science, history, and geography, students will become first in the world in math and science, every adult will become literate and able to compete in a global economy, schools would be free of drugs and violence, and every school would promote partnerships to improve parental involvement and participation to support students' academic, emotional, and social growth (O'Brien, 1992). Goals 2000 provided federal funding to more than 30 states to assist school improvement without new state level mandates (Goals 2000, 1994). It presented a reform in federal education policy and its effect on student learning (Pearson, 2014).

Then, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* was mandated by all states to show their commitment to standards and evidence that all students were learning (Durden, 2008). It reestablished the ESEA and replaced IASA to focus on the student achievement of underperforming subgroups such as African American students. Regardless of the many reforms in education that have taken place, Jackson (2006) argued that “the system of education as we know it was not designed with minority groups in mind” (para. 5). According to some researchers (Daniels & Walker, 2014; Durden, 2008; Jackson, 2006), the high-stakes tests that were meant to improve educational practices have not performed as expected. Daniel and Walker (2014) stated, “NCLB is a colorblind policy. It acknowledges race, but has no mechanism to directly address it” (p. 265). The accountability measures of NCLB test all students in the same way without addressing systemic issues that cause many students to be left behind such as teacher perceptions of students, school climate, and pedagogy.

After these many reforms, NAEP scores still remained stagnant for many minority subgroups, and many States had different standards of measuring proficiency (Daniel & Walker, 2014). Therefore, teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders, came together to create the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to provide a clear framework and a national minimum standard to be upheld in all states for leveling the playing field for students to become college and career ready. CCSS initiative were adopted in 2009 by 44 of the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia at the state level to teach critical thinking across our nation. Until its development, states were using their individual learning standards that specified what skills students should be able to perform in 3rd-12th grade. However, the goal of CCSS was to prepare students with the skills they need to succeed in college, careers, and life by leveling the field for students across states. Still many students of color, including Black males, are not afforded the opportunity to apply higher-order thinking skills because they are taught from what Darling-Hammond (2007) called “test-like teaching” (p. 330). In these “test-like teaching” classes, teachers use tests to control how they teach literacy to students. They do so by using practice tests and sample items that are standard-based to deliver instruction rather than skill-based quality instruction. Skill-Based Instruction (2016) highlights reading, writing, and speaking in skill-based teaching to help students to become critical thinkers and retain content knowledge.

Ladson-Billings (2011), noted that high stakes testing is a forced way of teaching rather than teaching students in ways they prefer to learn. Many teachers have been forced to adopt test-driven instructional focused classrooms with struggling adolescent readers. The students still have not acquired many reading gains, nor have their test

scores improved since using the test-driven approach to teaching (Tatum, 2005). Even with the implementation of high stakes testing, the majority of American students have made little academic progress in K-12 reading, math, or science over the past 30 years (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Miller, 2003). In fact, poor academic performance has resulted in grade retention and students choosing to drop out of school (Ladson-Billings, 2011). She contends, “48% of our African American males are failing to graduate from high school” (p. 109).

Educators must understand that implementing instruction based on standards alone is not enough to meet the needs of African American males in the classroom (Wood & Jocius 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that “Black and Latino students perform substantially less well than their White counterparts” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p.7). This claim supports the idea that U.S. educators have put forth insufficient effort to combat the effects of segregation and provide equal educational opportunities.

Culturally Imbalanced Schools

Once the Black and White schools integrated African American children’s value of education began to decline due to instructional changes (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2007). The school culture and African American students’ culture is often incongruent. African American students often have trouble fitting into the dominant White cultural mainstream that is embedded in many United States schools. African American males have been forced into believing they are misfits in school (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2007). A recent study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that African American male achievement was lower in the urban South areas where the Black-White gap was wider in public schools (Kitmitto & Bohrnstedt, 2015). African

American students continue to lag behind their White counterparts because often they do not value or relate to the instructional content delivery as their White peers. Thus, Whites often isolate themselves to stay away from the poorer learning environments that are dominated by African American students. To further support the notion of school segregation, Kitmitto and Bohrnstedt's (2015) study emphasized that only 1% of White students attended schools with a population of 60% or more Black students. Therefore, a shift needs to occur in public schools to become more culturally inclusive of all students if there is any chance of closing the achievement gap.

According to McCray, Wright, & Beachum (2007), White teachers began to educate and administer African-American students following *Brown's* decision that declared segregation unconstitutional. However, the shift in new leadership was not a favorable one for many Black students. They felt like their Black teachers understood their culture, and encouraged them to overcome adversities in ways to which their new White teachers could not relate. It was problematic because the White, middle-class experiences that many teachers brought into their classes did not prepare them to educate the Black students that they taught. They did not replicate the academic and social preparation that students experienced before by their Black teachers (Beachum, 2010). White teachers could not understand the realities of their students such as lack of exposure to many places and things about which their teachers taught. This serves as a contributing factor to African American males being "under-served, under-educated, and over-stigmatized" (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 44). As additional support Jones-Wilson (1996) added:

There was an unintended assumption that black educational institutions were bereft of culture and quality and that black leadership had little to bring to the table. Therefore, all-black schools closed or downgraded to elementary schools or became schools for slow learners, African American teachers were fired or given nonproductive assignments, and African American principals were often demoted to assistant principals or even to maintenance workers. (p. 95)

It is clear that society has been unable to make long-lasting changes for the betterment of African Americans. The negligence of stakeholders continues to contribute to the achievement gap that is currently prevalent in schools. This is shown through schools' disaggregated data by subgroups. According to Zamani-Gallaher & Polite (2010), African American males only represent about 3.5% of the 8% total population of African American students in advanced placement classes, yet they dominate special education classes in urban schools. The report from the Schott Foundation (2012) emphasizes that in many school districts, African American boys who enter 9th grade do not graduate with their peers of other races (Gewertz, 2004). African American 12th grade males also perform lower on standardized tests than White American 8th grade males in Reading (Kitmitto &Bohrnstedt, 2015).

Boykin & Noguera (2011) suggested that the test scores display the lack of attention that poor and racial minority students have been receiving. Standardized test results are used to make important decisions about education (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009). These decisions have caused many states to add pressure on their school districts to seek ways to improve students' academic performance. Still, many African American students in urban public schools are failing to meet the proficiency

standard requirements set by federal education bills (Lee, 2006). Many authors like Alfred Tatum shared strategies for countering the failure and reducing the complacency about failure of minority students. Students do not engage and are not motivated to put great effort into things that they do not find authentic. Authentic learning takes place when students are able to make a connection between school content and real world issues that are relevant to their own lives (Authentic Learning, 2013).

These authors, like many other critics of No Child Left Behind, claim that the law was not designed to address the methods that are used to help children learn (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Kunjufu, 2002; Tatum, 2005). This is a critical part in educational reform. In order to improve the education system of the United States for all students, it is crucial that we “address the learning environment in classrooms and schools; the skills of teachers and the quality of instruction they provide; the specific learning and support strategies that are employed; and the support systems that are put in place outside of the classroom” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 141). African American male students need teachers who are highly committed and set high expectations to positively impact their learning (Kufunju, 2002; Tatum, 2005).

Theoretical Frameworks

The achievement gap is a multidimensional problem that can be reviewed through the lens of multiple causes, such as history of social and racial injustices, the impact of community and parental involvement on students, and teacher and school practices. Therefore, critical race and cultural relevant pedagogy theories are used as frameworks to explain the complexity of understanding the literacy deficit in people of color, particularly African Americans and their need for equity in schools.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged during the 1970s from a group of college professors in Critical Legal Studies and their students to enlighten the inequalities and racial hardships that people of color continued to face during the post-Civil Rights era (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Leonardo, 2013; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, along with other scholars and activists joined together to discuss their frustrations with the U.S. delay of racial reform after the Civil Rights era, and they began to analyze its legal system and seek new strategies for transforming racism (Bell, 1992). Critical race theorists stated that lawmakers should have balanced the injustices of the nation's status quo rather than upholding it (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). The basic tenets of CRT asserts that racism is permanently embedded in American life, challenges colorblindness in society by arguing that White elites only address racism for their own benefit, addresses the ideologies of knowledge by including people of color to eliminate culture deficit thinking, insists that laws are historically contextualized, attributes racism to all group's advantages and disadvantages, and commits to ending racial oppression in all forms (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009).

First, CRT argues that racism is normal in American society. It continues to elevate Whites but hinders other racial minorities. CRT invites non-Whites experiences to be shared as an integration into mainstream society through counter storytelling. This means that minority groups are allowed to retell their own stories of racism's effect on their lives. Through counter storytelling, people of color are relieved from the ridicule of White storytelling that upholds deficit thinking about their families and values. This

integration of ideas promote social justice for marginalized groups. Additionally, CRT critiques liberalism and its slow- paced practices that hinder people of color from gaining rights. Finally, CRT argues that mostly Whites, particularly women, have benefitted from civil rights by receiving the benefits of affirmative action which brings more financial gains to White homes (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

CRT's initial focus was on transforming race, racism, and politics. In 1994, Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced CRT into the field of education based on its tenets of exposing the social inequalities of racism and its role in our society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Since then, educational scholars have used CRT to critique school practices and inequities among American school-aged students. Racism is deeply rooted in schools. Bell (1980) claimed that schools' aim at desegregation has only been advantageous to Whites because students of color do not receive equal school opportunities. Instead, they experience poor school quality, stagnant academic improvement, increased suspension, expulsion, and referral into special education programs.

CRT has also been used as a tool to address the racist structures and practices that African American children experience through schools' curriculum, instructional delivery, class assignments, assessment, and school funding allocations. School systems have embedded hierarchical structures that centralizes race in how people relate to the world (Williams, 2010). Since its beginning, CRT has been used to understand how race and racism define and address educational problems, and it centralizes class and gender as important factors to consider when analyzing African American males' underachievement (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Williams, 2010). Howard (2008) argued, "many experiences and opportunities that young people encounter are shaped by racial

issues” (p. 956). Supporters of CRT credit White supremacy for controlling American society, and they want to challenge it by changing the law’s relationship with racial power, exposing racism in its many forms, including the ideas of White normativity and the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Towery, 2009). CRT was used in this study to reveal the deeply-rooted racial barriers that African Americans face in society. CRT’s intent is to unveil the minimal efforts being made to develop a diverse curriculum, expose low teacher expectations for minority students, and uncover the embedded racism in school practices and its structure.

Structural racism can be encompassed in these CRT themes: “Whiteness as property” (Harris, 1993), “color-blindness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Lawrence, 1995), and “the relationship of structural racism to stereotyping and racial micro aggressions” (Solórzano, 1998). Many of the laws have provided more privileges to citizens because they are White. Charles (2008) illustrated how difficult it is to redress racial inequalities in schools. In his book review of ‘Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,’ Charles (2008) illustrated inequality in American’s schools by stating:

Communities with pricier homes, and therefore a larger property tax base, have more resources to give their schools than do poorer communities. In this way, Whites, given that they control most of the wealth, live in more affluent communities and therefore enjoy public schools that possess more of those resources, human and otherwise, necessary for superior educational experiences. In fact, their wealth affords them the option of placing their children in private schools if they so choose, which can be funded with private resources. Poorer communities, which are typically inhabited by significantly larger percentages of

Blacks and Latinos, generate a smaller tax base and the educational experiences at their schools are easily predictable. There is no question that this practice goes a long way towards perpetuating unequal educational experiences for students. (p. 65).

This quote exemplifies a component of critical race theory, Whiteness as property. Supporters of the concept of Whiteness as property claim that even though the legal discrimination was outlawed, race still matters. If race is not addressed, many minority groups' life experiences remain untold. Whiteness as property is explained as the colorblind perspective presented in many schools' curricula. The colorblind perspective does not acknowledge racial differences among students, and does not attempt to discuss texts or the history of minority students. Similar to Charles (2008), Brown and Cooper (2011) claimed this "devalues the experiences and realities of students of color by denying that race preferences and racism exists" (p. 69).

Ladson-Billings (1998) argued that the curriculum used in public primary and secondary schools maintains a White supremacist master script known as storytelling. In this master script, Ladson-Billings argued that "African Americans are muted and erased when they challenge dominant culture authority and power" (p. 161). She mentioned that even though Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King demands for social justice reform were intentional, school curricula disempower their actions as a representation of menial significance. Therefore, minority students are made to feel like failures that cannot rise above their lower-class status (Ladson-Billings, 1998). However, counter-storytelling is beneficial to many poor and people of color because it allows them to become empowered without diminishing their actual experiences. Counter stories challenge

stereotypes held by Whites and give a voice to the marginalized groups (Brown & Cooper, 2011). Counter stories allow African Americans to learn more about marginalized people and to understand life from their own perspectives. This helps Blacks to move beyond what Bell (1980) called the interest convergence principle.

The idea behind the interest convergence principle is that Whites only support minority rights when it is to their own advantage (Bell 1980; Charles, 2008). Critical race theorists argued that White superiority is embedded even into Civil Rights laws (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Although at first glance people considered that Blacks and Whites were treated equally after the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, middle and upper class Whites in higher-ranked positions were not affected by African American Civil Rights gains (Bell, 1980). To further support his claim, Bell also noted the decision made by the Supreme Court in *Brown* 1954 was America's way of obtaining third world countries respect in the Cold War. Bell (1980) attributed America's success in the Cold War to African Americans help, so he feels that the Court awarded African Americans freedom for their dedication to their country.

Critical race theorists not only support changes to curriculum content, but also their rigor needs to increase. Kozol, 1991 (as cited in Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009) stated, "The curriculum [the White school] follows emphasizes critical thinking, reasoning and logic. . . Children also are designing their own galaxies . . . But what about the others? Aren't there ten Black children in the school who could enjoy this also" (p. 29). This quotation demonstrates that African American students are presumed to be learning deficient (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings (2009). Ladson-Billings (1998) asserted that the instructional approaches for these students often involve

remediation. Then when teachers do not see positive gains after a strategy's implementation, the students are blamed instead of the strategy (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Tatum (2008) argued that instructional practices needed to shift "beyond a cognitive focus to include a social, cultural, political, or economic focus" (p. 164). These researchers blame teacher approaches for students' failure as opposed to resorting to negatively labeling students (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tatum, 2005). However, these researchers are continuing to investigate teachers' level of quality and integrity towards teaching African American students.

In summary, Ladson-Billings (1998) suggested that when Black students are "in the classroom, a dysfunctional curriculum coupled with a lack of instructional innovation add up to poor performance on traditional assessment measures for African American male students" (p. 163). She indicates that even though the test reveals that the students may not know an answer to the question; the test does not measure what students can do. Unfortunately for disadvantaged students, the United States does not have a measure of knowledge for assessing student achievement that is sensitive to different cultural backgrounds. If Americans ignore the ideas of the critical race theory and continue to live in a "colorblind society," it will be "problematic and potentially destructive" (Tatum, 1997, p. 22).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Even though many of America's schools are consistently reproducing the White supremacy idea, the demographics among the school-aged population are changing. There is a need in the educational system to ensure that all students achieve and to avoid cultural discontinuity (Gay, 2000; Irvine 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Tatum, 2005).

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which originated with Gloria Ladson-Billings, emphasized meeting the needs of students from various cultures. Like critical race theory, “CRP recognizes the value of lived experience by marginalized groups in understanding and making meaning of the world” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 159). Culturally relevant pedagogy calls for teachers to have a sociocultural awareness when making instructional decisions in their classrooms. Ladson-Billings (1995) discussed in great detail teaching behaviors that will be used as a framework for implementing CRP. She argued that CRP proposes that “(a) Students must receive academic success, (b) students must develop or maintain cultural competence (c) and students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). She contended that African American students must learn if they will ever stand any chance of involvement in the U.S. democracy. To support this, during the 1960s civil rights battle, the classroom was a leading source of controversy due to its power to shift control from Whites to African Americans (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Teachers who implement culturally relevant instructional practices can use the counter storytelling critical race theory tenet to maximize student learning. If policymakers want school-aged children to make significant educational gains, schools have to adjust the curriculum and its purpose to include all students regardless of skin color. Students have a desire to feel socially or culturally accepted at school (Hyland, 2009). Similar to Ladson-Billings, Alfred Tatum (2005) stated, “Students’ opportunities to learn increase when teachers conduct lessons in a culturally responsive manner consistent with community values and norms for interaction” (p. 158). However, he then reminds us that every student learns differently even if they have similar cultural

experiences. For example, he believes that the curriculum that African American boys are exposed to needs to be infused with culturally relevant material. When students' culture is integrated with instruction, it allows students to make connections. This sparks their thinking and improves their verbal and written expression (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Based on CRP theorists, teachers who really believe that all their students can succeed demonstrate this idea by implementing quality instruction that contains authenticity in characters, settings, situations, or themes that students are interested in, and they set high classroom expectations so that there is a mutual appreciation for both the teachers' and students' cultural heritage (Gay, 2000). Authenticity means that students are able to make real connections to their neighborhoods, worldly issues, and life experiences in order to encourage academic achievement.

Culturally relevant pedagogical style is designed so that teachers' behaviors focus on teaching to ensure all students' learning needs are met (Brown & Shelly Cooper, 2011). It centers the cultures, languages, and experiences that diverse students bring into the classroom to increase their engagement and academic achievement (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Wood & Jocius 2013). Teachers who employ CRP allow students to express themselves by using their attitudes and behaviors to guide their teaching lessons (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wood & Jocius, 2013). Students need to learn how to generate knowledge and then apply that knowledge to real-world situations to obtain a deeper understanding of how school connects to life (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). By implementing a culturally responsive approach to literacy, students can achieve academic excellence as well as cultural acceptance (Durden, 2008; Tatum, 2005).

Culturally relevant pedagogy embraces the tenets of critical race theory as a responsive mechanism to academically advance children of color as opposed to focusing solely on the White majority in American schools. Racism has been embedded into American society, and because of it African Americans have a history of struggling to get ahead. Bell (1992), stated that racism is so ingrained that it is difficult to identify. Therefore, Critical Race Theory was an appropriate frame to address the need to unveil its many forms specifically in education, and culturally relevant pedagogy is a possible solution because it allows students to maintain their individuality. African Americans, especially males, voice have been overshadowed in education; therefore, I hope to recapture it by using the culturally relevant pedagogy frame to share strategies that improve Black males school and social experiences.

Issues that Influence African American Males' Literacy

The history of African Americans reveals that they have been subjected to inequality in the United States for the past several hundred years. As Husband (2012) stated, "Black boys are unique in that they're in two groups that have historically underachieved in reading- "black and boys" (p. 23). Just like with anything else there are exceptions, and some African American males continue to overcome disparities and obtain educational success. However, Jackson (2006) noted that the majority of African American males are not as fortunate to rise above the negative structural and social barriers that results from their race. Therefore, if educators want to significantly improve literacy so that more Black males can be afforded more opportunities in life, there are complex school and home factors that must be addressed.

School Factors

School factors such as assigning them to special education and remedial classes inappropriately and suspending or expelling African Americans from school regularly are some of the practices that contribute to African American males' underperformance. Consistent with this reality, Mickelson and Greene (2006) and Anderson, Howard, and Graham (2011) noted that on average, African American males score lower on benchmark tests and do not graduate from high school and college at the rate of their White counterparts. Previous literature identified social constructs from their home and environment such as oppression, poverty-stricken communities, uneducated parents, and self-identity as causes of African American males' low performance in school. It is important to understand that the issues are based on an average African American males' experience and cannot be generalizable to all Black males.

Allen (2014) claimed that contrary to what many people believe, African American males' disconnection with school does not start in high school. Their teachers stereotype them as unintelligent and label them as behavior problems at very early ages. Many teachers label the behavior of African American boys as aggressive, disrespectful, defiant, and intimidating even when it is not their intention to act out in undesirable manners (Husband, 2012). Often the consequences of their misconduct are harsher than other students' not because their infraction was worse, but because there is a cultural misunderstanding between school officials and these students. According to Codrington, 2012, teachers, intentionally or unintentionally, have been direct causes of African American males' underachievement.

In many instances, African American students, especially poorer students and families are surrounded by negativity from school officials because of the prejudice

against their African American dialect. Black students, especially males, are the most feared, least likely to be associated with, and effectively taught (Hare & Castenell, 1985; Jackson, 2006). This along with their manner of dress or walk has caused them to be negatively stereotyped, disciplined, and referred to special education (Harper & Davis, 2012).

Sometimes teachers do not realize the great impact they have on the students they teach. The single most effective chance of improving learning lies in the hands of teachers. Their instructional quality can greatly contribute to improving students' academic achievement. They must be consistently nurturing, supportive, and protective to teach many African American males. In Neece's (2004) study, 97% of students, African American males included, expressed their need to feel high expectations set by their teacher (Neece, 2004). Yet, it has been documented that teachers who teach African American males set lower educational goals for them regardless of their academic capability (Irving & Hudley, 2007; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007; Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010). Blake and Darling (1994) claimed that many African Americans are allowed to matriculate through high school and graduate without adequate reading and writing skills. Also, leading experts at a Howard University symposium identified "watered-down" instruction as a leading cause in African American males' underperformance (Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010). Seemingly, African American males adopt poor learning habits from their K-12 education. This includes completing minimal requirements for an assignment and using low critical thinking and processing skills (Kunjufu, 1985). Students' self-concepts are influenced by both verbal and nonverbal feedback from their teachers. As teachers' learning expectations for African

American males continue to decrease, their chances of being academically challenged increases. Thus Blake and Darling (1994) argued, “44% of all African American males are functional illiterates” (p. 405).

Kunjufu (1995) argued that Black students are not successful at high rates because the teaching force is mostly White. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) stated, 83.1% of K-12 public school teachers were White in 2008. In fact, this means that they make up a large portion of the teaching force, and White teachers are teaching the majority of Black males. Therefore, it is important that teachers develop strategies and form relationships with their African American male students so that these students can feel like they belong in the classroom and to provide more academic support for these students. In addition to setting high expectations, African American males need to see more role models in their schools. The lack of positive African American role models present in many United States public schools has affected African American males’ academic performance (Codrington, 2012; Gardner & Mayes, 2013; Kunjufu, 2011). Because White female teachers dominate the teaching population, classroom instruction is based on the White middle class education that has been passed on from generation to generation in American public schools. When African American males do not see others who look like themselves, they begin to feel like they do not belong in class and become disengaged in learning (Lewis, Chance, & Moore, 2014).

One way to solve this problem that has been suggested is to hire more teachers of color. Ladson-Billings (2011) refuted the idea by claiming that there is no literature that suggests grouping students and teachers of the same race will ensure academic

achievement. Therefore, it is important that educators, regardless of their race, focus on using effective strategies to meet all students' needs.

Harry and Anderson (1995) said, "teachers should not view differences as deficits, and that teachers should do more to recognize the talents possessed by African American students" (p. 11). Often it is hard for teachers to observe these talents because Black male students' sometimes portray an unwillingness to learn. Their unconcerned attitudes have caused teachers to lower their expectations for these students. They use lower-level texts and techniques such as worksheets rather than focusing on higher-level text that require deeper reading instructional strategies (Noguera, 2003). Also, when educators perceive African American males as struggling readers, their expectations often align with this assumption. Additionally, teachers view the students who come from poor families as traumatized. Therefore, they think that these students cannot learn, so they do not push them harder to excel (Wiltz, 2015).

Pre-service Training. Ladson-Billings (2011) asserted that teacher pre-service programs have not developed enough teachers who are willing to challenge the traditional ways of teaching to change it for diverse learners. If diverse students, such as African American males, are going to excel in large numbers, teachers must become knowledgeable of cultural and ethnic differences among students. In order to do so, teachers have to be sufficiently trained to meet the behavioral and educational needs of African American students (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012).

Teacher education programs have not emphasized preparing teachers for teaching students of various races. If teachers want to create a learning environment that is conducive for all learners, it is necessary that the programs address racial differences

between students and teachers Ladson-Billings (2011) asserted that often teacher education programs offer only a single multicultural or bilingual education course. One class is not enough for teachers to gain a deepened understanding of how to teach diverse learners and address the behaviors these students bring into the classroom. Because teachers have not been properly trained, their culture insensitivity and biased thinking surfaces in their classroom instruction (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012). This issue can be alleviated if teacher education programs adequately prepare students for urban teaching in substantive measures. For example, teacher education programs must do more to address classroom management in a way that teachers understand how to handle student behavior challenges, specifically those of African American male students who struggle with reading. Kunjufu (2005) argued that teacher preparation programs should focus on developing master teachers. These teachers are equipped with culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, have culturally appropriate behavioral expectations, and constantly seek to build relationships with all of their students to motivate them.

Disengagement. Another issue that has caused reading disparities for some African American males is their lack of engagement with curricula that does not speak to their cultural experience (Husband, 2012). Tatum (2006) stated, “Although curriculum is often a significant consideration for improving education outcomes for African American males, specific texts and text characteristics that should inform curriculum selection are strikingly absent” (p. 45). He also noted that curricula are “problematic” because they do not support teachers with reading-related tasks to engage Black males to meet four literacy needs: academic, cultural, emotional, and social. This means that African American males who struggle with reading are not engaged because they do not relate to

the material that is presented to them in many classes. They believe that the required reading materials do not reflect their lifestyles (hooks, 2004).

Kirkland (2011) noted the importance of curriculum for Black males. He focused on two problems with the current Common Core Standards in English and Language Arts. First, he said it does little to spark the interest of African American male readers. Secondly, he believed the standards lack social and culture relevancy. He claimed that based on their design these standards force teachers to teach to the whole group rather than offering differentiation for the different needs and interests of individual students in the classroom. Also, Mickelson & Greene (2006) asserted, “The lived culture and traditions of Blacks and other minorities, and of working-class and poor people, typically do not prepare them for the official curriculum, which tends to reflect elite White's stocks of knowledge, norms toward authority, and culture” (p. 38).

As an attempt to fix this problem, teachers should use culturally responsive literacy approaches that meet students’ cultural backgrounds (Irving & Hudley, 2005; Kirkland, 2011; Tatum 2006). Tatum (2006) argued that African American males, like everyone else, are disinterested in reading when texts lack authenticity. Likewise, Husband (2012) noted boys are interested in text that relate to their worldly issues which is why they prefer to read for practical, analytical, informational, and directional purposes. This idea further supports why Black boys are not as successful in reading in comparison to girls, because the text that interest boys in general is limited.

Culturally relevant text. According to Tatum (2006) for the past 30 years, there has been a problem with the text being “dis-abling” for African American males. It has been disabling because the text does not hold any cultural value to many Black males

lives. Tatum stated that the text issued to them does not meet the students' real-world realities; it only determines how well a student can master a reading skill or apply a reading strategy to the text. African American males need texts that are sensitive to their culture so that it enables them to increase their desire to read. Then, they will move beyond seeing the content of the text and begin to apply the skills and strategies to show a deeper understanding of its meaning when the text shows cultural relevance.

Discipline. African American males have also used misbehavior to disguise their literacy deficits. Noguera (2003) pointed out that even though students who are academically low and disassociated with learning are more likely to misbehave, educators and policy makers must remember to connect their school goals with appropriate discipline techniques (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Black male students are suspended or removed from the class as the most common disciplinary actions to give other students an opportunity to learn (Allen, 2014; Boykin & Ogbu, 2011; Jackson, 2006). Many scholars like Codrington and Fairchild (2012), Anderson, Howard and Graham (2007), and Husband (2012) argue that suspension is ineffective, and changes should be considered to keep more Black boys in school. African American male students are twice as likely to be referred for discipline at the elementary level and four times as likely in middle school (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006; Husband, 2012). However, suspension is not as common for their female counterparts or other ethnic groups. Suspensions from school negatively influence Blacks achievement because it limits their opportunities to learn inside the classroom, does not teach them appropriate behavior, and is stigmatizing.

Anderson, Howard, and Graham (2007) also studied this relationship. Based on their four-year study of 26 middle schools in southeastern United States they reported that as reading achievement increased, suspensions decreased. Furthermore, this study suggested that African American boys who were suspended or constantly expelled from school may never obtain the necessary skills to read proficiently. This raises the concern why students are not being kept in the classroom and taught how to read.

In many cases, students are given multiple opportunities to correct misbehaviors without being suspended from school. However, this is often not the case for African Americans, particularly males, who struggle with reading. Walker (2012) studied nine African American teenage males' perspective on home, school, and community settings upon their entrance into the juvenile justice system. One of the similarities between them was a negative schooling experience.

Before many students are expelled, they are dismissed to alternative school programs. The purpose of these programs is to provide different educational options to students who are unsuccessful in traditional educational settings. However, Walker (2012) noted that the alternative programs are constantly being considered as “dumping grounds” for students who cause repeated classroom disruptions (p. 237). Because African American male students are referred for in-school and out-of-school suspensions more than any other group, they are subsequently placed in these alternative settings that lack resources and support. This lack of support prevents students from making long-term behavior and academic changes.

Over identification in special education. The current form of Special Education evolved in 1975, when a federal law called the Education of all Handicapped Children

Act (EAHCA) was adopted. Its initial purpose was to provide more support for students with physical or mental challenges. There were few special education provisions available during this time, so this law was meant to serve as an extension to all children regardless of handicap in a nonbiased manner.

Minorities, especially African American males, who struggle with reading are frequently misidentified as learning disabled. This has caused them to become an over-identified population in special education (Carothers, 2008). Black students' over-identification in special education is supported by the historic case of *Larry P. et al. v. Wilson Riles et al.* (1986), a lawsuit filed against the San Francisco School District for placing five African American students in educable mentally retarded (EMR) classes based on the students' IQ test scores. The judge ruled that the IQ test was discriminatory (*Larry P.*, 1986; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Codrington & Fairchild 2012; Deveaux, 2013). The tests were banned by court order. Additionally, in 1982, a member a National Academy of Sciences panel identified that African American students were nationally overrepresented in EMR, and large school districts had increased numbers of disproportionate placement of minority groups in the program (Harry & Anderson, 1994). This suggests that biased referrals, testing, and placement processes were used as ways to categorize African Americans as intellectually inferior and to uphold the ideology of institutional racism (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Deveaux, 2013).

In 1990, EHA became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law required that all public schools assume responsibility for all individuals with disabilities. Stainback and Smith (1995) stated, "School systems could no longer exclude students suffering physical or intellectual handicaps, nor could they doom students to

inappropriate placements and inadequate curricula” (p.19). In order to address the overrepresentation of African American students and second language learners in special education, IDEA required that all testing instruments be nondiscriminatory (Deveaux, 2013).

Special education benefits students by allowing them to have additional support and services. However, scholars such as Harry & Anderson (1994) asserted that the inappropriateness in practices, assessment, and placements of students in special education, and the quality of instruction that occurs in the program leads to stigmatizing and marginalizing African American males. This causes special education to be seen as problematic. Not only are special education students held to lower academic standards by teachers, administrators, and their education community, Noguera (2003) claimed that students develop a low self-concept that persists. They develop deep psychological and self-esteem problems rather than feeling a sense of opportunity and desire to learn after special education placements.

Ladson-Billings (2011) and Blanchett (2009) noted that African-American and Latino school children are still being segregated in public schools through special education. Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Singh (1999) found there has been a disproportionately high number of African Americans in comparison to non-African Americans in special education. To add to this, Ramsey (2007) claims, “African American children comprise 17% of the US student population but constitute almost 40% of the students placed in a range of special education categories” (p. 17). Primarily, African American males have suffered academically from being separated and placed in special education classrooms.

According to Codrington and Fairchild (2012), the intensity of special education is detrimental because it causes students to miss high levels of instruction that they could receive in advanced placement courses. Too often teachers' biases cause Black males to become overrepresented in remedial and special education classes yet underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement courses (Allen, 2014). One cause that can be attributed to their misidentification is that many White teachers fear African American men and youth (Harry & Anderson, 1995). Stereotypical labels such as unintelligent and violent cause them to be negatively viewed by their teachers and people with power. According to Armstrong (1995), these biases can cause students to be labeled as mentally challenged or emotionally unstable. Additionally, many teacher preparation programs are not addressing the racial differences between students and teachers. Therefore, teachers are basing their special education referrals on their perception of whether a student is teachable (Kunjufu, 1995). hooks (2004) asserted "black males without class privilege have always been targeted for miseducation" (p. 34).

Research suggested that cultural disadvantage is another factor that contributes to African American students being placed in special education. They are more vulnerable to poor living and health conditions due to economic challenges. Therefore, many Black students do not receive the instructional support from their parents to help them improve their cognitive abilities (Cartledge & Dukes, 2008). This contributes to the misconception that Black males are uneducable.

Home and Environmental Factors

Some of the negative school influences such as teacher biases, student disengagement, and misbehaviors in class place Black males on a school to prison track

(Walker, 2012). Interestingly, African American males make up about 8.6 % of the nation's K-12 public school enrollment, but represent approximately 60% of incarcerated youth (Mickelson & Greene, 2006). African Americans are incarcerated at approximately 6 times the rate of Whites, and 2.5 more times than Hispanic males (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) argues that "Black males are put on a school-to-prison pipeline rather than school administrators finding ways to offset misconduct" (p. 322). African American adolescent males are consistently being excluded from school (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2006). Orfield (2004) argued, "When we see a problem as a serious threat, we don't wait until we have scientific proof about the solutions. We start experiments and try to figure out what works and how to refine our efforts" (p. 9). This means that rather than just acknowledging the issues that prevent African American males from becoming as successful as their other peers, educators need to find ways to help these students.

Socioeconomic instability often contributes to academic underachievement. This is supported by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data that show a correlation between low achievement levels and socioeconomic status. Survival is more of a concern of many African American students' parents than education is. Because they do not have the education to access high paying jobs, they must depend on their older children to work long hours to make sure that household needs are met. This causes harm to students' academic achievement because Black working-aged students neglect their schoolwork (Kunjufu, 2002).

Also, due to their economic challenges, urban African American students are forced to live in inadequate housing and government-assisted areas (Neely, 2003). Even though other ethnic groups reveal significant correlations between achievement and socioeconomic status, the negative impacts of lower economic statuses are experienced more often among African Americans such as poverty, incarceration, and unemployment (Mickelson & Greene, 2006). These unsafe neighborhoods that many African Americans live in serve as attractive areas for violence and criminal activities. These conditions hinder African American students' ability to perform at high levels in school.

Family structure. In addition to socioeconomic factors, family structure is a factor that is associated with academic achievement. Family is important because it provides a sense of belonging for children. According to Prager (2011), "Parents create connectivity by exposing children to varied experiences, expanding their knowledge and providing the interpretive framework for their ongoing learning" (p. 3). While it is beneficial to note that there are exceptions to any situation, the reality is that the achievement gap already exists before students start school. A researcher at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill found that Black children are behind and the gap widens by two years by the time they reach fifth grade (Prager, 2011).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), African American children living in a single-parent household has increased from 22% to 53% since 1960. Out of this total, 49.8% of these single parent kids live with their mother only. This has had a great impact on students' success because single mothers who must work may have few resources or time to assist students with assignments or encourage them to do well in school

(Mickelson & Greene, 2006). Therefore, parents' inability to support their children's schooling affects students' school performance (Toldson, 2008). Single-mother households have been a critical issue for Black children since the 1970s. Often times, because single mothers struggle, they move constantly seeking more affordable places to live or eventually move in with another family member for additional support (Toldson, 2008). Neely (2003) also blames children's frequent mobility as a direct cause of their risk of failure. Lang and Ford (1992), on the other hand, emphasized the lack of support in single-parent homes as the reason for African American students' low levels of success in secondary schools. The concepts that Lang and Ford (1992) and Neely (2003) proposed are in fact related to each other because research supports that there is an achievement gap between children in one- and two-parent households.

Self-Identification. African American males' self-perception is another factor that prevents African American males from achieving at the same level as female, White, and Asian counterparts. Media images of Black males with a successful education are limited. Therefore, many African American boys do not have strong Black male influences to identify with. Walker (2012) suggested that once African Americans began to get into trouble at school, they were always blamed for things that they did not do. The intolerance and lack of trust in African American male students by school authorities encourages Black male students to perceive themselves as troublemakers or misfits in school. Each Black male participant in Walker's study believed they were not accepted or desired in school by their teachers or administrators. Students who perceive themselves as incapable, lack self-confidence, or are unsatisfied with their school experiences are at greater risk of school disengagement (Pershey, 2011). The longer African American

males stay in school, the more their enthusiasm and educational achievement fades (Pershey, 2011).

Personal attitudes. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described an oppositional attitude that many African American males use to reject educational success. They view academic attainment as “acting white” (p. 177). This explains why many African American males develop poor attitudes and behavioral patterns that lead to academic underperformance. Black males feel that academic achievement and school involvement contradicts their affiliation with the African American community, and status is vital to Black males because status is associated with how masculine they perceive themselves to be (Lloyd, 2003). Their history, race, culture, and societal influences their masculinity. Lloyd (2003) noted that due to the aforementioned factors, African American males establish different methods of demonstrating masculinity much differently from the Euro-American standard of masculinity.

Peer influences. Cool pose is a concept derived by Majors and Billson (1992) defined African American masculinity as a defense to deal with the stress caused by racism and other harmful school and community experiences (p. 12). Cool pose allows African American males to fit into an environment that they do not feel they belong in due to stigmatization and rejection from others. Through cool pose, Black males display different styles of dress, communication, and walk to express with being young and Black (Hall, 2009; Mickelson & Greene, 2006). In addition to this aspect of cool pose, Cokley and Moore (2007) contended that young African American males use masculinity to build a sense of identity through activities that are nonacademic such as athletics and music. They are able to illustrate self-pride, strength, and control in ways that they feel

incapable of doing since they often lie in the shadows of the dominant class in academia. Majors and Billson (1992) asserted that cool pose allows African American men to build a sense of unity among them. It is important to note that some academically talented boys intentionally underachieve to become accepted by their peers. Hall (2009) explained, “The bright Black boy who is not athletic will be doomed to failure among peers and socially isolated; he will be labeled as White and will be accepted only if he is an athlete or decides to underachieve” (p. 536). Therefore, cool pose can be another hindrance for African Americans’ literacy success (Hall, 2009; Majors & Billson, 1992).

School Culture

Achievement tends to be lower in schools where poverty is concentrated and students are segregated. The only way to improve achievement and success is to pay attention to “resources and promising strategies that are aimed at breaking the predictable cycle of failure for African American males in school” (Cooper & Jordon, 2005, p. 5). School personnel’s beliefs and values should support the ultimate purpose of educational success—success in life. Therefore, academic achievement is a common goal of all schools.

To promote achievement, school administrators must adopt a curriculum that provides equal access for all students to achieve. According to Rolland (2011), student outcomes can be determined by several school-level constructs: climate, size, poverty, location, racial and gender labels, and students’ feeling of affiliation with the teacher. The administration, teachers, and students must work together cohesively to promote a positive and encouraging school climate.

National reading achievement data reflects that, as a group, African American males, especially in middle and high school are underperforming (Tatum, 2006). Therefore, educators must meet the specific needs of students, particularly African American males, to help more of them become successful learners. In their case study, Pressley, Raphael, Gallaher and DiBella (2004) found that African American students at St. Mel School succeeded in an academically focused environment with strong leadership, accountability, and orderliness. The culture at St. Mel led to their academic success. For example, all students were given an agenda. They were required to write down homework assignments. When homework was not completed, students were required to attend an afterschool homework club. Students were given review sheets, and sometimes they were quizzed right before a test to ensure that students understood the material that they were going to be tested on. Also, the school focused on student feedback so that students would not continue to make the same errors. Teachers were required to meet with students individually about their test scores, and review tests more than one time to make sure that students had enough chances to review the material. They created an enormous support network for struggling students. Students with Internet access were able to help one another with assignments through the homework helpline at night, peer tutors in the morning, at lunch, and in computer labs.

Home and School Unity

Home and school unity is essential to a student's success at school. Therefore, parental involvement is one factor that has been consistently related to high levels of academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005). Parental support is a key resource for student

achievement. Families can serve as support for schools' gains in establishing school rules, communicating with teachers, and participating in educational and sporting events.

Martin and Martin (2007) introduced an initiative called the Williamson Project in Youngstown, Ohio to include parents, community leaders, and school personnel in an effort to resolve discipline issues and promote academic achievement for African American students. The study was performed in an elementary school with the lowest performance ratings in the Youngstown City School System. Ninety-six percent of the student population was African American. The study's findings suggested that the number of students reading on grade-level from pre- to post- measurement increased 30% after the initiative. The researchers credit the students' achievement to redesigning the school environment to reflect the home environment and culture to which students can relate. Parents and community leaders helped to devise a model behavior plan based on character education traits. Meetings were held regularly for parents and teachers to meet with administrators about how to improve the school and address specific misbehaviors. Also the community was involved. A local church provided tutors and money for the program, and a car dealership paid for school assemblies and books for the students.

Parental Involvement. According to Jeynes (2005), the degree to which parents are involved in their children's schooling has been directly linked to positive educational outcomes. Parental involvement is a complex phrase that includes a variety of parental behaviors such as reading to children, attending school activities, and facilitating and volunteering in extracurricular activities (Jeynes, 2005; Martin & Martin, 2007). A study by Ferrar and Garlington (2007) found that young African American students believed "parents themselves had not been successful academically, and without a successful

academic background parents could not meet their students' needs" (para. 6). The study also noted that African American males are also often thought of primarily as athletes. Thus, students felt that their parents placed more emphasis on athletic achievement, and were more likely to attend a school athletic function than an academic function. This shows that schools must find creative ways to extend parental involvement outside of just sports events. Students need to see that academics is important to their parents so that it becomes more meaningful to them.

Many African American parents are not involved because they do feel like they have the political authority to address school issues. They feel like their voice is not valued by school personnel (Rolland, 2011). A way to foster more parental involvement is to establish mutual goals between home and school so that parental involvement can create a consistent learning environment away from school. This means that parents can serve as promoters of school.

Personal Relationships. Studies have suggested that a lack of positive role models, be it a parent or family member, religious advisor, or social advocate, can have a severe effect on African American male achievement (Kunjufu, 2005; Rolland, 2011). Establishing personal relationships through positive role models is detrimental to their lives. According to Williamson (2011), "the probability of an inner-city young Black male having a stable adult male role model in his life seems slim" (para. 4).

To counteract the lack of male role models at home, proper role models should be sought out by schools in the form of African American male teachers, especially during a child's formative years. At school, young men find very few adult men present (Kafele, 2012). According to the National Teacher Association, in 2013 males comprised 23.7%

of the national faculty population at public schools in 2013. Less than 2% of this male population is Black (Toldson, 2013). The shortage of African American male teachers influences African American male dropout rates and their general disinterest in secondary education (Williamson, 2011). The disconnectedness of teachers' instructional, curriculum, and communication styles do not mirror many African American males' lifestyle or culture and cause students' feeling to negatively shift. Ultimately, it causes many African American students to become disengaged with learning altogether.

Role Models in the Media. Professional Black males have been presented in the media and serve as role models to many adolescent Black male youths. Williamson (2011) stated that prominent images of African Americans presented in the media tend to be negative. This is similar to how Akins (2014) stated that the media portrays Black men as “rap artists who relentlessly flood communities with messages of disrespect, profanity, and gun violence” (para. 3). Their identification with artists who are considered to be cool in media fosters unrealistic realities for many Black boys. Then they are faced with the reality that they have not learned any skills to make a living for themselves or their family. Gaston (1986) pointed out that many Black males see high school as a step in the process of making it into the National Basketball Association (NBA) rather than a way of obtaining an education. Such negative perceptions unintentionally evolve as a common standard for all Black males. This is harmful to adolescent Black males who are already struggling to develop a positive self-concept.

Promoting Academic Success for all Students

It is no secret that reading is not considered a favorite of many students. According to Gambrell (2011), “In 2005, 73% of fourth graders on the NAEP did not list

reading as a favorite activity, read frequently for enjoyment, and 59% did not believe they learned very much when reading books” (p. 5). However, one of the causes of Black males’ underperformance is because the expectations set for them are often lower than for other students (Saravia-Shore, 2008). Often student achievement can be measured by the students’ perception of whether their teachers care about them. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers intentionally build a relationship with their students (Williamson, 2011). Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) claimed, “it’s easy to blame students’ poverty or special needs for failure, thus letting teachers off the hook for poor performance and setting lower expectations for achievement” (p. 21).

Promoting Teacher-Student Relationships

After examining the work of James Comer, Kent (2004) said, “the reason we learn has a lot to do with our past experience and our relationships with important others. We are motivated to learn out of relationships” (p. 8). Many urban, African American male adolescents are critical of an authoritarian figure. They are more likely to comply when there is a preexisting relationship formed between the student and teacher. They feel like they are disrespected if they are confronted about their behavior and sometimes respond defensively. Their negative response can be attributed to the history of poor treatment that African American males have been subjected to by authorities. It has led them to general mistrust. Therefore, a typical way of redirecting their misbehaviors is by establishing a relationship with African American male students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Wentzel (1997) noted three behaviors of caring teachers: modeling caring behavior for their students, engaging in conversations with students and setting high expectations for students to do their best. In her study of student motivation

in middle school, Wentzel (1997) found a significant relationship between caring by teachers and students' motivation to achieve.

Extrinsic Rewards

Many teachers offer extrinsic rewards or incentives to engage reluctant readers. Teachers should only use extrinsic rewards as an initial buy-in to motivate students to read. While teacher actions such as teacher praise and feedback can positively impact eventual intrinsic motivation in students, giving gold stars, points, candy, etc. has been found to increase short-term attention spans and decrease intrinsic motivation (Gambrell, 2011). Therefore, extrinsic rewards should be used conservatively. The ultimate goal of extrinsic rewards is to promote intrinsic motivation in students. Intrinsic rewards have more meaning and lasting values on student achievement. Guthrie and Davis (2003) noted that as students transition from elementary to middle school their intrinsic motivation to read lessens. They also found that higher achieving students can maintain their intrinsic motivation, but struggling readers cannot. Struggling readers display low levels of confidence in their reading ability. Therefore, they need to acquire satisfaction from others through tangible rewards and good grades to gain self-motivation.

Intrinsic Rewards

The results from the previously mentioned NAEP study showed that many students are not intrinsically motivated to read. Students who are intrinsically motivated show more academic success and better attitudes than extrinsically motivated students (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Von Secker, 2000). Guthrie and Wigfield (1997) found a positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and standardized reading comprehension test scores. Therefore, to become more successful, struggling readers have to develop

intrinsic motivation to engage in literacy activities. When more interesting reading materials are available for students, they may gain an intrinsic motivation to read.

Educators must show high levels of commitment and motivation towards all students. According to Gambrell (2011), when students practice reading it increases their ability to read. Students will practice if they are given a text that they find interesting. Then, they begin to become more confident readers and seek less satisfaction from teachers. This supports why classrooms should provide interesting reading materials to inspire students' intrinsic motivation to read. Teachers and school leaders must develop classrooms that promote intrinsic rewards for reading.

Academic Strategies

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reinforces schools' accountability for all students, including those who have historically underperformed, by issuing rewards and sanctions to school districts based on students' standardized test score performance. However, Darling-Hammond (2007) argued, "standards and tests alone will not improve schools or create educational opportunities where they do not now exist" (p. 325). To support this, she added that in 2003, after the state exit exams were implemented in Massachusetts, there was a large decline in the population of tenth grade African American and Latino students because they dropped out of school. Students were dropping out of school because they failed to pass the exams, which prevented them from graduating high school. Similarly, Sariva-Shore (2008) noted that after NCLB was passed, nationally more than one third of ninth and tenth grade students did not transition to the next grade level.

Despite some gains in reading for African American and Latino students, they still lag behind Asian and White students throughout the United States (Tatum, 2006). The NAEP reading scores show that in 2008 the reading gap for nine and thirteen-year-old-students had not diminished between Black and White students when compared to the 1988 reading gap (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Data from these high-stake tests reveal that minority subgroups, including students with learning disabilities; recent immigrants and English language learners; and many African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans underperformed (Boykin & Noguera, 2003). Their underperformance can be attributed in part to the inferior instruction that they receive in remedial reading groups (Saravia-Shore, 2008). Thus, meeting the learning needs of these students must be a priority of school districts if they are going to close the racial gaps in achievement. For example, teachers should adopt more student-centered approaches to learning. This will motivate students including African American males to want to learn, and potentially lead to improved student academic success (Husband, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

According to Darling-Hammond (2007), critical thinking and problem solving is the curriculum focus of most high-achieving nations. If United States students are going to compete globally, they have to be taught how to address difficult, real life issues across disciplines and how to express themselves through speaking and writing. Many schools are even placing at-risk students in two reading and math classes to prepare them for state tests rather than teaching them how to become critical thinkers (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). However, after spending all year preparing for the test, students do not improve because the tests are designed for students who are reading at the grade specific level. Unfortunately, these students do not receive any instruction in reading during the

test-prep classes. In *A Call for Change: Providing Solutions for Black Male Achievement*, Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios (2012) reported a model they used to conduct a study with 20 African American male participants based on the reading components established by the National Reading Panel. They found that:

- (a.) Teaching phonemic awareness (PA) to children significantly improves their reading more than instruction that lacks any attention to PA.
- (b.) Teaching systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through sixth grade and for children having difficulty learning to read.
- (c.) Providing fluency instruction has a significant and positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension across a range of grade levels.
- (d.) Providing vocabulary instruction leads to gains in comprehension, but methods must be appropriate to the age and ability of the reader
- (e.) Providing explicit or formal instruction in the application of comprehension strategies has been shown to be highly effective in enhancing understanding. (p. 22)

This issue is common in urban schools serving predominantly low-income students. Tatum (2006) asserted that even though there have been some solutions proposed to address their literacy needs, “most vulnerable African American adolescent males remain in public schools in which literacy instruction is not responsive to their needs” (p. 44). Implementing successful teaching strategies to guide reading instruction is beneficial for African American males. Thus, school personnel need to be provided with appropriate training on how to implement effective interventions and culturally relevant teaching strategies to meet African American males’ academic needs. The following sections illustrate strategies that are more inclusive of all students.

Active Reading

The literacy rate of Americans has not significantly improved over the past ten years (Western & Pettit, 2000; Toldson, 2008). Therefore, educators need to adopt different strategies to adjust classroom instruction so they can meet the students' diverse needs. Husband (2012) presented active reading as a strategy to engage African American males in reading. These strategies may include, but are not limited to, moving, rapping, singing, and performing events from a text to gain a better insight of its overall meaning. Active reading allows students to read with a purpose so that they can relate to the text.

Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction. Another practice described by Guthrie, Also, and Rinehart (1997) is a program called Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI). CORI was designed with all students, specifically adolescents, in mind because these students become disengaged with traditional methods of instruction. It is a hands-on type of learning. These thematic based units are designed to engage adolescents in exploring, questioning, and evaluating complex ideas. CORI allows students to be active participants, and its resources allow students to use self-directed learning. Fisher and Frey (2012) credited this program for reaching many adolescent males. Other researchers like Guthrie, Wigfield, and Von Secker (2000) found that students in CORI classes scored higher in reading motivation than traditional classrooms.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Instruction

Teachers should be aware of the personal and cultural experiences that students bring into the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2011). In order to do so, Osborne (1999) suggested that a broader multicultural school curriculum should be implemented with

more people of color's input. This would allow minorities, particularly African American males, to feel more included in classes. Multicultural education's present state contributes to diverse students' feelings of isolation (Major & Billings, 1992; Osborne, 1999). Often, multicultural curricula have been criticized for identifying different cultures separately from the main curriculum during isolated times such as Women's History Month, Black History Month, and Martin Luther King Day (Osborne, 1999).

Teachers' perceptions of minority students are usually obtained directly from what they observe from their students' actions during non-instructional time in class. Thus, teachers should use their observations to consider both culturally relevant curriculum and delivery methods to meet their students' needs. Students resist and fail to learn when the instructional approach that teachers use do not connect to the students' culture. Often, rather than using students' experiences to scaffold and support their instruction, teachers teach from curriculum that has embedded unequal social structures through the information, examples, and activities focused on White middle class values (Burke, Adler, & Linker, 2008). Yet, the curriculum should include appropriate resources that incorporate all cultures. Tatum (2005) believed that literacy teaching should "provide transformative ideas that have the potential to change these young men's lives, and it should superimpose ideas of meaningful living over feelings of surrender" (p. 84). Because many teachers are not using culturally relevant curricula, there is an imbalance of knowledge created for minority students.

Culturally Relevant Text

Quality teaching and texts are important components of literary advancement. African American males' underachievement is connected to their inability to relate to the

majority of literature that is presented to them (Husband, 2012; Tatum, 2005). Tatum (2005) argued for a comprehensive framework of literacy teaching for adolescent Black males that extends beyond research-based practices. Tatum (2006) also stated that the achievement gap will not lessen based on effective reading strategies or comprehensive literacy changes unless the curriculum is designed around more culturally meaningful text. He continued by claiming that many adolescent African American males do not read because they do not identify with the available text in a cultural or authentic way. Gambrell (2011) defined the motivation to read as “the likelihood of engaging in reading or choosing to read” (p. 5). Patterson (2012) claimed that African American adolescent males like to read text that displays their collective identity. This means that they enjoy reading text that reflects their group’s history and experiences.

Like Tatum, Husband (2012) suggested that teachers can increase active engagement by introducing texts that deal with issues of racism, classism, sexism, divorce, financial difficulties, and bullying to deal with the “real-life” issues that African American males prefer to read. By using culturally relevant text, students can relate to the presented text and make connections with how it really influences their lives. Like Tatum, other researchers also believed that African-American males need relevant text that relates to their culture in the classroom. Boykin and Noguera (2011) stated, “student motivation and the attitudes that students display toward learning profoundly affect patterns of achievement” (p. 33). It is necessary to note that the success of each strategy depends on teachers’ willingness to present a genuine interest and purposeful instruction towards African American males’ development.

Delivery Style

Students that are more social and economically privileged view their personal experiences through the textbooks, classroom instruction, films, television programs, and political figures because it reflects their community. However, students of color who live in poverty-stricken districts rarely encounter social or cultural recognition in their school experience and curriculum (Patterson, 2012; Tatum, 2005;). This causes students to feel that their life experiences are devalued and unimportant to their learning experiences. Therefore, he proposed a list of must-read text for Black males that would address their concerns and contribute to shaping their ideas and identities.

Performance Arts

According to Teel, Debruin-Parecki, & Covington (1998), African American students who came from low-income inner city areas and were labeled at risk became more cooperative, on task, and vocal when the teacher incorporated more innovative approaches to the content through simulation games, skits, creative projects, and book talks. Students who are in classes that implement arts into their core curriculum outperform their peers on reading assessments (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999). For example, 14 of 16 students passed a unit test with high scores and enjoyed reading the assigned literature, and 10 students' reading ability improved by including a literacy theatre project (Brinda, 2008). African American students love for movement within their culture can also be established through hip-hop centers in the classroom. Hip-hop centers allow teachers to interconnect with African American males' love for hip-hop culture with Language Arts (Kunjufu, 2011). Drama is another type of performance art that has been embedded into reading instruction. There was a positive relationship between reading

achievement and classroom drama in Hetland and Winners (2004) meta-analysis (as cited in Lewis, Chance, & Moore, 2014).

Hip-hop Pedagogy. Teachers should identify themselves as an important factor in changing African American male achievement. Their curriculum must be flexible enough so that all students understand core concepts. Students deserve to have interventions when they are introduced to something that they do not understand. Teachers that are having the greatest influence on their students' achievement present information by carefully planning its context, examining causes in conceptual gaps, and redesigning instruction to inspire students to participate in class. An example of an actual teaching method that teachers are using is hip-hop pedagogy. De Leon (2004) claimed, "Hip hop is the dominant language of youth culture, and those of us who work with young people need to speak their language" (p. 1). Hip-hop pedagogy allows students the opportunity to deconstruct and make meanings of things they do not understand while creating a sense of community in the classroom (Akom, 2009). This is a way that educators can use resources and focus on the strengths of Black male students and their communities to increase academic engagement and achievement.

Technology

The Cognition and Technology Group was credited for creating "anchored instruction" to help students acquire independent thinking and learning skills by using videodisk and computers to explore authentic tasks (Levine, 1994). But, lack of updated technology or teacher comfort with allowing students to explore using technology has caused it to become more as a reward rather than a resource for researching information. YouTube, a web based computer site, has been identified as one of the best educational

tools available (Kunjufu, 2011). Yet, it is often blocked and student access to it is prohibited.

Student Choice

Tatum (2006) believed that when African American adolescent males are presented with a text that they feel is powerful, it allows them to have meaningful and honest debates that are text-centered. Only then can they analyze the text from their individual realities. Teachers must also show constant awareness of textual variety across disciplines that can help prepare Black males for their adult life. In order to help teachers choose the right text to meet the needs of their students, Tatum (2006) set the following standards as criteria that all must-read texts should meet: excitement for both students and teachers, a roadmap with apprenticeship, cognitive challenging, and strategic for causing students to apply literacy skills.

Parker (2014) explored a students' choice approach to reading in his English classroom over a fourteen-month study. After fully implementing student choice in text selection and engagement practices, he found that his students began to take on new challenges by not only connecting with literature that they selected, but students were asking questions and engaging with literature. Before using student choice, Parker realized that struggling readers were disengaged and spent more time trying to figure out word meanings than understanding the overall meaning of content. One disengaged student said, "I like to read . . . the sports magazines, like the hockey magazines and stuff like that . . . I read the NHL stories and things my age" (p. 7). His words explain why teachers must balance texts that students must read with texts that keep their interest. Teachers must teach in a way that their students will learn.

Student-centered Learning

A teacher must ensure that students are engaged in the learning process.

According to Boykin and Noguera (2003), learning is “not simply measurable time on task or attending a lesson, but rather active engagement in academic tasks” (p. 42). If teachers want to improve the literacy of more African-American males, they will have to adapt a student-centered approach to learning. Student-centered learning requires teachers to focus on developing students’ academic skills, individual perception, consistency, positive expectations, and meaningful opportunities to directly involve students in learning. According to Husband (2012), “students benefit more often from instructional activities that are highly stimulating and arousing than from lecture style and teacher-centered activities where they function as passive receptacles of information” (p. 8). Teachers are more successful when they teach in ways that students like to learn.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning allows groups of students with different ability levels to work together to improve on things they do not understand. Thornhill (2006) revealed in his mixed method study that teachers use cooperative groups more frequently than other strategies to allow students to meet the expected outcome during learning activities. Cooperative learning allows African American males to feel supported and safe during reading classes. African American children’s love for engaging with people explains their preference in working collaboratively as their preferred learning style (Hale-Benson, 1989). They do not feel threatened because norms are preset that all participants will work together as a support system (Wood & Jocius, 2013).

When cooperative learning is incorporated with African American students' learning styles, they have shown more academic improvement. Neece (2004) found that 92% of African American students felt they needed to work in groups to achieve an academic goal successfully. To add to this, a qualitative study of 16 Mississippi African American males ages 8-13 revealed that cooperative learning was significant to their desire to learn (Wilson-Jones & Caston, 2004). Similarly, Wilson-Jones & Caston's (2004) study reported that African American males preferred cooperative learning with less interaction from their teacher. Nearly all the students in the study stated that they preferred to learn by working in groups to create projects with other students.

Due to the increased testing and other educational reforms, teachers have focused heavily on the technicality of reading rather than allowing students an opportunity to engage with a preferred text (Husband, 2012). Yet, many researchers have identified that African American males specifically need to feel like they are owners over the text selection process (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Von Secker, 2000; Parker, 2014). The academic strategies mentioned influences students to engage with content materials. When students are not engaged in a text, it prevents them from having any autonomy in their learning and causes students to misbehave (Day-Vines & Day-Hariston, 2005).

Behavior Strategies

Many African American students know the expectations of school rules and behaviors, but they do not follow them. This does not mean that their behaviors are causing them not to learn; sometimes the cultural misunderstandings between teachers and some African American male students' behaviors cause them to be suspended or expelled from school at higher rates than other subgroups. It is important to note here

that cultural misunderstandings between students and teachers are not the cause of all disciplinary situations. Regardless of the reason that students are suspended from school, they lose valuable class time that they cannot get back.

In 2000, African Americans made up 16.9% of the student population but accounted for 33.4% of all suspensions (Day-Vines & Day-Hariston, 2005). The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) reported that 20% of Black boys received out-of-school suspensions during their school career. When students are suspended from school, they are missing valuable reading instruction. When students continue to not practice reading skills, their achievement decreases.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support

To increase reading achievement in African American boys, schools should reform whole-school behavior systems (Husband, 2012). Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) is a tiered intervention program that schools can use to create positive behavior changes. This system serves as a behavior strategy that schools can use to support all students by teaching and rewarding students for meeting behavioral expectations inside and outside of the classroom. Day-Vines & Day-Hariston (2005) proposed implementing intervention goals that involved teaching students to set goals, identify strategies for implementing appropriate behaviors, discuss consequences for poor choices, and rewarding students for positive behaviors.

Response to Intervention

Since students are not the same, the instructional approach that educators take with them must be different. In education, the Response to Intervention (RTI) is the process that ensures that students have received alternate methods of instruction. When

implemented correctly, RTI helps teachers identify struggling learners and provides support for them (Brown-Chidsey, 2005). This is important because teachers do not have to wait long periods of time to address students' learning weaknesses before providing them with a formal method of help. Teachers can increase interventions as needed. As Proctor, Graves, and Esch (2012) noted, since research shows that African American students have trouble developing early reading skills, it is important that teachers create an atmosphere that is not academically frustrating. The RTI process helps to prevent students from becoming too frustrated. More specifically African American male students who feel frustrated will not complete assignments and may possibly display noncompliant behaviors. When students display these negative behaviors, it causes them to be disciplined or referred into special education (Codrington, 2012). In O'Conner's (2003) study, she found that after using RTI, at-risk students' performance increased and the referrals of students to special education decreased. RTI is beneficial to all students, especially those with learning difficulties, because it allows them to receive additional instruction without suffering from negative academic labels that often surface when students are placed in special education and remedial courses.

Chapter Summary

This literature review examined the challenges and persistent efforts of the United States education system to increase student achievement. In its span over the past hundreds of years, the literature reveals that the measures taken have made small positive impacts in reading for marginalized groups like adolescent African American male students. Educators and policy makers acknowledge that the academic achievement gap exists between races, but minimum school reform has taken place. However, old school

and classroom-based practices need to change to make learning more relevant and engaging for all students.

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter describes the methodological procedures that were used in this study. The following are discussed as it relates to the study: (a) the research design; (b) the participants; (c) the instrumentation; (d) research questions; (e) the procedures for data collection and analysis; and (f) the null hypotheses.

Purpose

The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate secondary school teachers from high and low performing school districts in Mississippi perceptions of their knowledge and use of culturally relevant pedagogy to increase adolescent African American males' academic success. School districts and teachers' understanding and use of culturally relevant teaching strategies were variables used in this study. Though barriers that prevent minority students' academic success have been thoroughly studied, this study adds to the literature on African American males' academic success by sharing instructional practices that support their educational achievement.

Research Design

A quantitative approach was utilized to examine the use of culturally relevant teaching practices to support students of schools that are predominantly African American, specifically males' literacy. For this study, predominantly or highly populated was defined as more than 50% of the district's student population is African American. Data were collected and analyzed by surveying teachers from nine schools across four different school districts in Mississippi. From this, teachers self-reported responses about their understanding and use of culturally relevant teaching were averaged and compared

based on whether they taught in a high or low reading performing school. The independent variables in this research study included school district (two levels: high and low reading performance). The following research questions guided this study:

Research Questions

For secondary public school teachers who serve in predominantly African American schools in the state of Mississippi:

1. To what extent do teachers understand the concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy?
2. Is there a significant difference between teachers' understanding of concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in higher and lower reading performing districts?
3. To what extent do teachers report using culturally relevant pedagogy?
4. Is there a significant difference between teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy in higher and lower reading performing districts?
5. What barriers do teachers experience in using culturally relevant pedagogy?

Participants

The participants for this study were secondary school teachers from Mississippi school districts with a high concentration (<50%) of African American students' population. The researcher used nonprobability sampling to select high and low reading performing districts according to the Mississippi Department of Education's 2014 Accountability Report on the website. High and low performing school districts were chosen to gain teachers' perspectives of working with African American students from diverse educational backgrounds. Nonprobability sampling relieves randomization or

chance from occurring because it allows for specific samples based on a set criteria to participate in a study. Since 2014, students in Mississippi have taken several different state assessments, namely the Mississippi Curriculum Tests 2nd edition, PARCC, and Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP) due to a change in the state academic standards which limited the amount of data available to the researcher to select participant samples. The accountability model changed within the last three years from 2013-2014 letter grades rankings, to the PARCC test 2014-2015, and most recently during the 2015-2016 school year it is called the Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP). Thus, middle and high schools were selected based on their 2014 Accountability Label ranking without a waiver. The waiver allowed districts to keep their 2013 scores if they were higher than the current year's scores because of the new assessment implemented across the state in 3rd through 8th grades for Reading and Math. Mississippi's 2014 assessment scores were used to select the participants. However, none of the participating districts used a waiver for the 2014 scores.

Six out of 151 school districts were identified to represent the population of high and low performing secondary schools in Mississippi. The researcher accessed Mississippi's State Department of Education website reports to secure a public record of the 2014 Mississippi Statewide Accountability System: District and School Performance Classifications Report. This report listed each of Mississippi's school districts alphabetically with their 2013 and 2014 official grade, total points, proficiency and growth scores in all tested areas. From this list, the research identified all schools with reading proficiency scores above 70% or below 40%. Then, each district's report card was accessed based on their website to determine whether they met the >50% African

American student population. Once the established criteria were met for a potential participating district, the researcher secured the names and email addresses of administrators for the district and building level administrators online. Once the information was obtained, the researcher emailed the administrators and asked for permission to contact school level administrators to survey teachers at their respective sites. Two of the six superintendents did not respond after the researcher contacted them several times via email and telephone. Each of the two districts would have represented a high and low reading performing district. Therefore, the researcher conducted the study with the participants from the other four remaining districts. Certified teachers were selected for the population because they are knowledgeable of the classroom strategies, practices and procedures, as well as the curriculum required by the state of Mississippi. Of the four participating districts, the researcher expected between 100-125 teachers to complete the survey. However, 69 educators returned their survey from the nine participating schools. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the district and school participants. For the purposes of the study, school districts are numerically ranked according to their reading proficiency average.

With the MS College and Career Readiness standards, literacy vital in all content areas not limited to elementary schools or only Language Arts classes. The participants all met the criteria of being secondary teachers who taught grades 6-12 from four predominantly African American school districts. The participants also met these criteria: (1) above 70% proficiency rate in reading to be considered high reading performance or below 40% reading proficiency score for low performing districts.

The intent of the researcher was to select participants that represent diverse areas of Mississippi yet met the established criteria to participate in the study. For example, district one, which represents a high reading performing district, is in the central metropolitan area of Mississippi, and it ranks in the top ten largest cities in the state with a population of approximately 25,000. Its demographics include 34% African Americans, 60% Whites, 4% Asian, and 2% from other races. According to the 2010 Census, district one's estimated median family income was \$60,161.00 with approximately 13.2% of residents living in poverty. The other highly ranked reading performing district two was situated farther north in Mississippi with a total population of approximately 7,000 citizens. District two's median household income was \$29,000 with 24.4% of the population living below poverty. Its demographic make-up includes, 52% African Americans, 45% Whites and 3% from other races.

Districts three and four, represented the low reading performing districts in this study. Although they were both more centrally located districts in Mississippi, these counties are farther south than Districts one and two. According to the 2010 Census, district three's estimated citizen population was 15,500 with a median family income of \$29,853.00 and 33.8% of people in poverty based on the 2010 Census Data. Of this population, 58% are African American, 39% White, and 3% other races. District four's citizens' population was about 4,500 with 26% of families living in poverty. Their racial make-up includes 75% African Americans, 18% Whites, and 7% others (Census, 2010).

District one's reading proficiency rate was 77.4% based on the 2014 Accountability Report and consistently received an A rating on the state's report card without a state waiver. The African American student population was 52% and 97% of its

teachers were titled highly qualified according to Mississippi's guidelines. The district reported a student's average ACT score of 21. After meeting the researcher's criteria, the district was selected to represent a high performing predominantly African American populated district in this study. Although district two's reading proficiency average was not >70%, as set by the researcher's criteria, it ranked second with 67% reading proficiency with 48% African American student population. The high school is recognized as a STAR school, and the middle school a Blue Ribbon School program which honors schools that have academically excelled or score significant growth in student achievement. Like district one, district two employed many highly-qualified teachers, 99.87%, and their schools ranked proficient on the end of year assessments. District two did not report an average ACT score, but the state's average is 18.6. The graduation rates of both high performing districts exceeded the state's average with about 85% graduation rate.

Districts three and four were chosen to represent the low performing districts with a reading proficiency level below 40%, 36.7% and 36.3% consecutively. Although both districts employed over 95% highly qualified teachers, their state's accountability label was D with a graduation rate just over 60%. The state's graduation average rate was 74.5% (Mississippi Public School Accountability Standards, 2014). Both districts reported an average ACT score of 16. Both districts' student population are predominantly African American, with District three being 89% and District four 94%. It is vital to look at the gap that continue to extend from elementary into secondary schools. According to the 2014 National Assessment of Education Progress, Mississippi's 4th grade reading average fell 7 points below the national average while the 8th grade reading

average was 12 points lower than the national average which showed that the gap continues to widen as students advance to higher grade levels.

Instrumentation

Previous studies found that embedding culturally relevant teaching strategies positively influenced minority students' academic performance (Hill, 2012; McKinley, 2004). For this study, data were collected to examine secondary teachers' perception of the effectiveness of understanding and using culturally relevant teaching strategies to improve African American male students' literacy achievement. Thus, McKinley's (2004) *Strategies and Behaviors of Effective Teachers* (Appendix A) was the instrument that the researcher adapted to gather information about the strategies and practices teachers used based on strategies in literature reviews on effective teaching.

Strategies and Behaviors of Effective Teachers

Strategies and Behaviors of Effective Teachers is McKinley's framework that includes components of effective teaching with 104 common strategies that teachers implement to meet African American students' needs. In his study, the researcher dissected, compared, analyzed patterns of teaching and learning that were implemented and reported by teachers and principals. These categories included Instruction: Curriculum & Instruction Design, Multicultural Approaches to Instruction, Student Teacher Interactions: Academic, Cultural Congruence in Instruction, Complexity of Instruction, Cooperative Group Instruction Strategies, Procedures for Rehearsal, Processing, and Transfer of New Concepts, Contextual Features and Classroom Environment, Classroom Management, Classroom Climate, and Classroom-based Assessment. However, for the purposes of this study, only two categories of the survey

instrument were examined: Multicultural Approaches to Instruction and Cultural Congruence in Instruction. The chosen two categories emphasize the influence that cultural relevance has on students' literacy achievement unlike the other categories of McKinley's instrument which focused on classroom climate, management, classroom curriculum design and assessment. None of these constructs applied to culturally related instruction which is the intended focus of research questions in this study. Teachers and principals rated the frequency and effectiveness of each strategy on a frequency scale. These categories were selected for this study's multiple case study design to understand teachers understanding and use of culturally relevant teaching to improve literacy.

Reliability

The reliability and validity of McKinley's instrument is based on six literature reviews on culturally responsive pedagogy and Wang and Walberg's comprehensive review of effective learning variables (McKinley, 2004). McKinley used two test-retest pilots to establish reliability. According to McKinley (2004), The researcher computed two internal consistency reliability estimates on 79 items for the Frequency of Use and Effectiveness with African American students scales on part 1 of the study survey: a split-half coefficient expressed as a Spearman-Brown corrected correlation and coefficient *alpha*. The coefficient alpha for the first and second half was .9888 and .9804. Then, for part 2 that included 29 cases on the Frequency of Use and Effectiveness with African American students the coefficient alpha for the first half was .9912 and .9277 for the second half (McKinley, 2004). Teacher strategies were used as constructs and if found significant were turned into variables to develop the survey and interview protocols. Two piloted surveys were conducted, and participants were chosen based on

their experience of working with high and low achieving minority students. Purposive sampling, along with detailed data collection were utilized to strengthen the level of trust from the data results in McKinley's study. The first pilot was conducted with 2 administrators and 12 teachers. A paired t test was used to determine variations of the mean followed by a second pilot test conducted over a three-week retest during a summer credit recovery program (McKinley, 2004). The researcher used the following three analyses to answer the research questions: multivariate analysis of variance, discriminant and classification analyses. For the open-ended questions on the survey, the researcher labeled and coded in NUD*IST software, giving a code for each category. The categories were analyzed for keywords to create themes.

McKinley (2004) noted, "Four of seven factors from the review controlled 73% of the 228 variables' variance in the teacher effectiveness review" (p. 99). McKinley triangulated the teacher and principal surveys with observations and interviews as means to gather information from various sources to validate the data. Then the researcher sought feedback from the principals and teachers about the accuracy of the questions, categories, and themes that evolved regarding teacher practices.

Similarly, to McKinley's, the researcher's survey instrument, *Culturally Relevant Survey*, measured the frequency of teachers' understanding of the importance of embedding culturally relevant instructional practices using a close response scale that ranged from 1= *unimportant*, to 5 = *very important* as a response format. The instrument also measured participants' use of culturally relevant instructional practices. By using a frequency scale that ranged from 1= *never* to 5 = *always*, participants answered specific questions that were aligned with research questions 1-4 to determine which culturally

relevant instructional practices secondary level teachers in high and low performing schools understand and use as effective instructional strategies to improve students, particularly African American males, reading performance. Research Question 5 was an open-ended developed question that allowed participants to share any barriers that they have experienced with using with culturally relevant teaching.

Questionnaires, a survey method, are beneficial because they can be responded to anonymously which allows the participants to be more honest in their response, provides immediate feedback, and determine characteristics of a population using a sample (Creswell, 1994). The survey results were used to examine teachers' awareness and use of culturally responsive teaching approaches in high and low performing urban secondary schools serving mostly African American male students to determine its influence on students' literacy success. The benefits of this quantitative method were its usefulness to describe a large population with a more accurate sample size, participants' ability to respond anonymously, and a broad variety of information was shared with controlled researcher bias from the survey. Due to the researcher's criteria and small sample size, the ability to generalize from this sample is limited. Creswell (1994) contended, "The researcher should remain distant and independent of that being researched" (p. 6). This allows the researcher to become more aware of a phenomenon.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher successfully completed CITI Common Course and Human Subjects Certificates to conduct investigations. Approval from The University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was provided to conduct the study. Approval to conduct the study was provided by the superintendent and principals

of all four participating schools (Appendix B). The research contacted two other school district superintendents (1 high performing, 1 low performing) who did not respond to email or return phone calls made to ask for permission. One of the participating school districts' building principal also did not return any phone calls or emails which prevented the researcher from collecting data from one of the participating district's schools. The researcher attributed the small sample size to the time of the school year the survey was administered because Mississippi's end of year state assessments were scheduled during the same semester. Nevertheless, the researcher emailed the questionnaire link to each participating school principal for distribution to teachers after district and building level administrator approvals were received. The email contained a short announcement outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality, and an anonymous link to the questionnaire in Qualtrics. Each principal sent the survey and forwarded the email sent to teachers regarding their encouragement of completing the survey. The questionnaire link was available to participants for six weeks. The researcher sent a reminder email to encourage more teacher participation to building administrators in weeks 3 and 5 before the link was closed.

After the questionnaires were returned to the researcher, the identified variables, teachers' frequency of use, and understanding were measured to test the hypotheses (Field, 2009). The researcher downloaded the questionnaire data from qualtrics into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Then the researcher examined the questionnaires for completeness and coded the data. The questionnaire provided one score by averaging the item responses. Data was disaggregated by each of the two independent variables and descriptive statistics, means and standard deviations

were generated. These variables rated how well teachers understood and used culturally relevant teaching strategies. The teacher samples were combined then equally divided into two groups, high and low reading performing districts. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) between group means test of statistical significance was conducted for research questions one and three to compare the means of the survey items for statistically significant differences between high and low performing school districts. The ANOVA test allowed the researcher to control for Type I error. Mean scores for individual districts were ranked for further details.

The hypotheses related to the research questions are:

H₁: There will be a statistically significant difference between higher reading performing district teachers' understanding of concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy than lower reading performing districts.

H₂: There will be a statistically significant difference between higher reading performing district teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy than lower reading performing districts.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the methodological procedures used for this study, to explain the sample selected, to describe the adapted instrument and data collected. Responses to the statements from the study's questionnaire provided demographic information for participants and allowed the researcher to explain the statistical tests used to analyze the research questions. The hypothesis was tested at .05 significance level.

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

Overview

With an increased focus on accountability through high stakes testing, there is continuous pressure on district and school leaders, teachers, and students to ensure that high academic achievement and growth is maintained of all students. Therefore, at the building level administrators and teachers must ensure that quality instruction is provided with instructional adjustments so that all students are successful. The purpose of this study was to compare Mississippi teachers, employed in high and low performing districts that are highly African American student populated, understanding and frequency of using concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy to improve students, particularly African American males, reading performance. Results of this study are presented in this chapter starting with an analysis of the participants' demographics followed by a statistical analysis of research questions. Lastly, the results from participants' open-ended responses regarding barriers they have experienced using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy will be shared. This chapter presents the findings from the collected data to assist with the discussion presented in Chapter V.

Descriptive Data on Participants

To protect participants' confidentiality, demographic questions were limited. Demographics were addressed through questions 1-4 on the instrument including their district employment, current content area taught, grade level, and years of teaching experience. A total of 69 of 125 expected surveys were received with some missing data. This constituted a 55% response rate for the survey. Based on the participants of this study, district three participation was the highest with 39% participants (N = 27), district

one 36% (N = 25), district two 14.5% (N = 10), and district four 10% (N = 7). For content area taught, most (N = 43, 62%) of the participants taught in tested subjects of Mathematics (N = 17, 26.1%), English (N = 15, 21.7%), Science (N = 8, 11.7%) and History (N = 3, 4.3%). The remainder of the participants were categorized as other, (N = 26, 37.7%). There were more middle than high school participating teachers (N = 32). Most participants reported that they taught all grades, 27.5% (N = 19). The years of teaching experience range pre-defined for this study was 1- 21+ years. Participants with 11-15 years of experience was most represented.

The study was delimited to teachers who taught grades 7-12 in Mississippi with a high concentration (>50%) African American student population and must be ranked high or low performing according to the guidelines set by the state of Mississippi Department of Education. The participants represented various districts in Mississippi, but mostly were centrally located in the state. The sample's demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
School District		
District One	25	36.2
District Two	10	14.5

District Three	27	39.1
District Four	7	10.1
Total	69	100.0
Content Taught		
Mathematics	17	24.6
Science	8	11.6
History	3	4.3
English	15	21.7
Other	26	37.7
Total	69	100.0
Grade Level		
7	18	26.1
8	14	20.3
9	8	11.6
10	4	5.8
11	3	4.3
12	3	4.3
Total	50	72.4
Years of Teaching Experience		
1-3	8	11.6
4-6	8	11.6
7-10	11	15.9

11-15	16	23.2
16-20	12	17.4
21+ Years	14	20.3
Total	69	100.0

Statistical Analysis

This section focuses on the quantitative results from analyzing relationships between high and low performing district teachers with their frequency of using and understanding culturally relevant pedagogy. The following analysis responds to the research questions quantitatively from the data collected from the survey. Responses were analyzed using SPSS software. Prior to asking participants to rate the importance and implementation of culturally relevant teaching strategies, the researcher asked participants to rate how often they used a variety of instructional strategies. Each of the strategies listed are components of culturally relevant teaching: student choice, hands-on activities such as manipulatives, technology, culturally relevant teaching/learning materials, cooperative learning, and real-world examples. The scale ranged from never to every class. While 16% of respondents never allowed student choice as an instructional strategy, 44% of respondents identified technology as an instructional strategy that they used every class (Table 2). Table 2 represents participants' self-reported average responses for identified instructional strategies related to implementing culturally relevant pedagogy.

Table 2

Frequency of Responses to Instructional Strategies

	Never		1-2 times a month		1-2 times a week		Almost every class		Every class		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	<hr/>		<hr/>		<hr/>		<hr/>		<hr/>		<hr/>	
Student choice	11	16	26	38	14	20	10	15	8	12	69	100
Hands-on activities	5	7	20	29	21	30	11	16	12	17	69	100
Technology	0	0	4	6	13	19	22	32	30	44	69	100
Culturally relevant materials	8	12	10	15	22	32	19	28	10	15	69	100
Cooperative learning	0	0	13	19	26	38	18	27	12	17	69	100
Real-world examples	0	0	2	3	16	23	27	39	24	35	69	100

For each of the research questions a statistical analysis was completed. SPSS was used to organize and analyze the data. The data was examined and the null hypothesis was tested using descriptive and inferential statistics with Alpha (α) set at .05 level. The research question and its procedures are presented. For secondary public school teachers who serve in predominantly African American schools in the state of Mississippi.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “To what extent do teachers understand the concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy?” Descriptive statistics were run based on the data to conceptualize teachers’ understanding of culturally relevant pedagogical strategies. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 11 teaching strategies to successfully implement culturally relevant teaching. Of the 69 respondents, teachers’ understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy practices averaged 4.2 out of 5 ($SD = .61$). This means that on a scale that ranged from 1-5 where 1= unimportant and 5= very important, participants, on average, reported that each of the selected eleven practices were important to successfully implement culturally relevant teaching in their classroom. For participants’ frequency of understanding the importance of each culturally relevant teaching practice see Appendix A1. On average, participants reported that incorporating nonverbal cues such as gestures, timing, walking, eye glance, dress, and presentation style when communicating with students was most important to successfully implement culturally relevant teaching in classrooms ($M = 4.49$) while demonstrating genuine and mutual respect for cultural diversity was ranked lowest ($M = 3.91$) and perceived as being moderately important. Additional results of individual means for ranking the importance of each culturally relevant teaching practice was illustrated below (Table 3).

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations in Descending Order for Importance of Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Strategies

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In the content area that you currently teach, how do you rate the following practices to successfully implement culturally relevant teaching:		

Incorporate nonverbal cues such as gestures, timing, walking, eye glance, dress, and presentation style when communicating with students	4.49	0.61
Understand the possible impact that racism has on students	4.36	0.77
Understand the role of one's own culture and how it affects communication with other cultural groups	4.30	0.75
Understand the role of cultural experiences on how students construct knowledge	4.29	0.79
Be aware of historical, cultural, social, ethnic, and linguistic differences	4.23	0.79
Recognize diverse cultural experiences	4.22	0.87
Select topics that represent a wide range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and language perspectives	4.19	0.79
Include the use of speech and expressions familiar to students	4.16	0.83
Incorporate information about students' families, cultures, and communities to connect to learning activities	4.12	0.74
Recognize the importance of using integrated and holistic, interdisciplinary lessons to teach concepts and skills	3.96	0.87
Show mutual and genuine respect for cultural diversity	3.91	0.79

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked, “Is there a significant difference between teachers’ understanding of concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy in higher and lower reading performing districts?” To address this question, participants were classified into one of two groups: high and low performing district. Levene’s Test was used to

measure equality of variances and variables were homogeneous across all groups. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run to test the means of the two groups. There was not a significant difference in teachers' understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy between higher and lower reading performing districts, $F(1, 67) = .16, p = .691$. The mean of higher performing districts was 4.17 ($SD = .67$) which is comparably close to the mean score of lower performing districts, which was 4.23 ($SD = .54$).

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked, "To what extent do teachers report using culturally relevant pedagogy?" Among the 67 valid cases, descriptive statistics were used to examine the extent that teachers implement culturally relevant pedagogy into their instruction. Questions eight through sixteen of the survey instrument asked respondents to rate their use of culturally relevant teaching practices in their instruction. The frequency scale ranged *never* to *always* based on their response. The mean for teachers use of culturally relevant teaching strategies were 3.80 ($SD = .70$). This shows that although teachers in high and low performing schools identified on average that all the practices were important components of culturally relevant pedagogy, they self-reported to use components of culturally relevant teaching only sometimes during their instruction (Table 4). For participants' frequency of use for each culturally relevant teaching practice see Appendix A2.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Frequency for Using Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In the content area that you currently teach, how frequently do you engage in the following culturally relevant teaching practices:		
Using a variety of instructional methods (e.g. class discussion, cooperative groups, alternate assessments)	4.22	0.81
Creating opportunities for students to use higher level thinking skills in reading discussion	4.21	0.83
Matching instructional strategies to students' abilities	4.00	0.80
Encouraging the sharing of personal and expressive stories related to content	3.91	0.99
Communicating acceptance of cultural and gender differences to students	3.88	1.03
Scaffolding instruction to link curriculum to students' culture, interests, experiences, and prior learning	3.87	0.92
Limiting lectures to 5-10 minutes and using examples or visuals for the remainder of class	3.81	0.91

Allowing students to express their sensory preferences (i.e. visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory)	3.79	0.93
Including factual information to refute misconceptions and prejudices about ethnic group members	3.79	1.12
Using cross curriculum lessons to teach concepts	3.79	0.96
Engaging all students using culturally relevant curriculum	3.76	1.10
Engaging students in project-based, contextual activities	3.69	0.93
Using concrete representations of concepts (i.e. manipulatives, models, and artifacts)	3.67	0.86
Using curriculum materials that reflect a wide range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and language perspectives	3.67	0.98
Providing instructional time to read a variety of texts	3.61	1.14
Using learning centers to express various ways of learning	2.97	1.18

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asked, “Is there a significant difference between teachers’ use of culturally relevant pedagogy in higher and lower reading performing districts?” A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated to determine if a significant difference existed between teachers’ use of culturally relevant teaching strategies in higher ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .72$) and lower ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .67$) reading performing districts. There was homogeneity of variance based on Levene’s test. The analysis revealed that there was not a significant difference, $F(1,65) = 1.29$, $p = .260$.

Research Question 5

Research Question 5 asked, “What barriers do teachers experience in using culturally relevant pedagogy?” Of the 69 surveys, 25 participants provided a response to survey question 9 which was open ended. The majority (16) of the respondents taught at high performing schools; meanwhile 9 respondents represented the low performing schools. Among the responses, common barriers that participants suggested included students’ limited exposure and insensitivity towards cultures other than their own, unnecessary for cultural relevance in teaching math and science, lack of planning time and resources to adequately prepare lessons. One participant from a high performing school explained, “I have a culturally diverse population of students. I don’t know if I fully understand all of their backgrounds and how to relate to their needs.” A different teacher from another high performing school stated,

Many of the African American young men complain a lot about the material being taught. They don’t understand corporate America. They don’t want to adapt

to society's views. Regardless of different ways to instruct a lesson, it has been difficult to reach many of the young black men on different subject matters.

Likewise, a respondent from a low performing school stated, "The students in this community have limited exposure when it comes to education. They only see what is in their immediate family. It is hard to offer instruction beyond their limited exposure. This supports teachers' frustration in both high and low performing schools with trying to meet different students' needs. To add to this, several teachers expressed their content area was nonconductive for implementing culturally relevant pedagogy. A high performing district teacher claimed, "I teach Math, which is relative to each culture in the same way." Another high performing district teacher stated, "I don't find much need for culturally relevant instructional practices in Science . . . As it is concept based, it is easily taught to real life and authentic situations. A different theme addressed by both high and low performing district teachers were the availability of resources, or lack thereof. While low performing school teachers argued, "The students do not do research outside of school nor do they have textbooks. It is difficult to give them an assignment for homework because they do not have resources." Likewise, another teacher claimed, "Resources," as a barrier to implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in their instruction. Interestingly, a respondent from a high performing school quoted, "I do not experience any barriers. The textbook that I use, *Collections*, is culturally diverse as well as the nonfiction books that I have purchased for my classroom library.

Chapter Summary

The results of the study showed there were no significant difference between teachers understanding and using culturally relevant pedagogical approaches between

teachers in predominantly African American high and low performing schools to improve students' literacy. Several interesting ideas were reported in the responses to the open-ended questions. The results of this quantitative data along with the open-ended survey question allowed certain themes to emerge that are discussed in Chapter V. Data analysis revealed there is no statistical significant difference between high and low performing group responses.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to compare teachers' understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and the extent to which they use culturally relevant teaching practices to increase students' literacy, particularly African American males. Secondary teachers were asked to complete the *Culturally Relevant Teaching Survey*, which generated quantitative data. This chapter provides a summary of the procedures, discusses the key findings and the limitations, and provides recommendations for practice and future research on implementing culturally relevant pedagogy to improve African American males' literacy achievement.

Summary of Procedures

This research study focused on secondary schools in southern Mississippi whose student enrollment was at least 50% African Americans that showed significantly higher (>70%) or lower (<40%) growth based on Mississippi's 2014 PARCC assessment. I realize the established criteria prevented many teachers in highly diverse schools from sharing their perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. I chose high and low reading performing schools to study to determine if teachers' instructional approaches were different based on the levels of learners they taught.

Sixty-nine 7-12 grade teachers, representing four school districts, completed and returned the surveys to make up the sample. The instrument, *Culturally Relevant Teaching Survey*, was an adapted tool derived from McKinley's *Strategies and Behaviors of Effective Teachers*. Both instruments were used to evaluate teachers' perception and use of culturally relevant teaching strategies. The original instrument was found to be

reliable and validated based on two test-retest pilots using participants that had experience with teaching high and low achieving minority students. Part I of the instrument asked participants for demographic information, and Part II contained 33 Likert-type and one open ended question. The open-ended question provided participants an opportunity to anonymously share their personal feelings, attitudes, and understanding of using culturally relevant teaching practices in the classroom by giving a voice to their responses. This study used a descriptive causal-comparative quantitative design. Data were input and analyzed using Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) to run descriptive and inferential statistics. The independent variables for the study was school district, and the dependent variables were understanding and use of teachers' frequency of implementing culturally relevant pedagogical strategies. These variables were tested using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to compare how both high and low performing district teachers perceived the importance and usefulness of culturally relevance.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study revealed teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of embedding cultural relevance into their instruction. Research questions 1 and 3 addressed teachers' understanding of the concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy, while research questions 2 and 4 addressed teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy. Research question 5 asked participants to identify the barriers that they have experienced with using culturally relevant pedagogy. A statistical analysis of the data collected from the nine middle and high schools were conducted with an alpha level set at .05. There were two hypotheses measured by analysis of variance (ANOVA) that

compared the differences between teachers at high and low performing school districts' understanding and their use of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Hypotheses

1. Higher performing district teachers understanding of concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy will be statistically higher than lower performing district teachers as measured by the *Culturally Relevant Survey*.
2. Higher performing district teachers' use of concepts and practices of culturally relevant pedagogy will be statistically higher than lower performing district teachers as measured by the *Culturally Relevant Survey*.

After conducting an ANOVA, no significant differences were found in teachers' understanding of specific strategies to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in high or low performing school districts. Therefore, null hypothesis one cannot be rejected. Similarly, the results from the ANOVA discovered that teachers in high and low performing schools self-reported similar responses of their frequency of using culturally relevant strategies to improve students' literacy. Thus, there were no significant differences in teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogical practices. Even though the sample size was sufficient, a larger sample may have produced different results that may be more generalizable to the overall population. The established criteria, >50% African American student population, high >70%, or low <40% reading proficiency scores, excluded many high performing schools across the state which could have altered the results. Thirty eight percent of the participants in the study taught a non-tested content area other than English, Math, Science, or History hence their perception of embedding cultural relevance may have differed from content area teachers. Also, many of the

participants had more than 10 years of teaching experience. Thus, their ideas and views of culturally relevant teaching may be more limited based on their previous educational experiences. However, as diversity increases in American schools so should the frequency of authentic learning practices become welcome into classrooms.

Discussion

Based on the literature, there appears to be a gap in the research that compares high and low performing school district teachers' understanding and use of culturally relevant pedagogy to improve students' academic achievement. This study contributes to the literature concerning culturally relevant pedagogy influence on African American males' literacy. The study's objective was to measure teachers' usage and understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy to support diversity in their classrooms.

This study is important because it shows that although both high and low performing teachers share similar views on culturally relevant pedagogy and use it in approximately the same ways, there is still an academic gap between their students' reading performance. It is helpful to note that there are many external factors such as students' socioeconomic status, parental education and involvement, and historical oppression that contributes to the academic performance gap, but the findings from this study reveal there are also internal factors that schools have not fully addressed that should be considered to ensure that all students obtain academic success. The results imply that although teachers in both high and low performing districts, in predominantly African American schools reported that they understand the impact of using culturally relevant pedagogy for minority students, they are not fully implementing it into their instruction. Teachers' lack of fully implementing culturally relevant pedagogy may

attribute to the gap in children of color learning at the rate that they could. The findings in this study were consistent with other literature conducted by Ladson-Billings (2011) and Noguera (2003), which also revealed that teachers' understanding and usage of teaching strategies influence students' literacy. Based on the participants' responses, they expressed that culturally relevant pedagogy is an important practice to assist with increasing students' literacy, but almost 60% of the participants reported that they are not using culturally relevant teaching strategies daily. Although teachers understand this concept according to their responses to question 8 from the *Culturally Relevant Survey* which asked teachers' how frequently they engaged in culturally relevant teaching practices, on average, teachers are implementing culturally relevant materials only about 1-2 times a week. Yet, on a scale of 1-5 they rated understanding the role of cultural experiences about how students construct knowledge as important (4.29 out of 5). Being that teachers believe that CRP is significant in increasing students' academic competence, it is crucial that they reflect on their teaching methods, practices, and use of culturally relevant materials to meet all students' learning needs. For example, during vocabulary instructional time, teachers should connect to their students' neighborhoods, hobbies, favorite musical groups, and sports teams to ensure that students are making connections between real life and subject area content.

Implications

As the United States classrooms continue to become more demographically diverse, teachers need to be equipped with different pedagogical approaches that are more culturally responsive to fit the learning needs of their students. Barriers that prevent African American males' educational success have been heavily researched with home

and school identified as contributing factors to their life outcomes. Yet, there is limited information about how culturally relevant pedagogy contributes to their success. Like research suggests, there are academic strategies that teachers need to adopt to adjust classroom instruction for diverse learners (Boykin & Noguera, 2003; Husband, 2012; Tatum, 2006). One suggested strategy is implementing culturally relevant pedagogy because it allows students to conceptualize information and make connections between their home and school experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Implications for Educational Policy

Although policy makers are limited in their ability to change students' social life experiences, they can make an educational impact on students' lives by providing additional methods for assessing students' content mastery and adding more diversity preparation course requirements for teacher licensure. When exploring assessments, leaders should be more sensitive to students' needs that represent a variety of students' backgrounds and life experiences. Not only that, but policy makers need to devise new educational policies that reduce the silent rote teaching of test preparation to address the minority student achievement gap through innovative learning concepts. The study revealed that hands-on instructional approaches were best practices for improving students' understanding. Thus, the way students learn and are assessed needs to be better aligned. This does not mean that standardized testing should be abolished, but the researcher is proposing that more multidimensional testing approaches should occur to ensure that students are growing at the expected rates such as oral and project based assessments. This means that students should be allowed different ways to demonstrate mastery of content in addition to standardized testing. They can use their own creativity

through oral, musical, and technological performances which are components of cultural relevant pedagogy that would allow students to feel that their own cultural behaviors and styles are recognized and valued.

Colleges and universities should redesign their in-service training programs to include culturally relevant pedagogy so that preservice teachers gain a better concept of the diversity across U.S. schools. This can be done by adding a multicultural class as a requirement in their plan of study that addresses diverse learning needs, social justice, and cultural sensitivity. Based on teachers' responses, they ranked "show mutual and genuine respect for cultural diversity" as the least most important strategy for implementing culturally relevant pedagogy which may influence their instructional approach and attitudes towards some learners. Thus, universities should partner with heavily populated minority K-12 schools and require preservice teachers to experience and observe a variety of learners needs.

Implications for Practice

As the United States continues to become more diverse, teachers need additional on the job training that supports them in adapting to their diversely populated classrooms. Based on the findings in this study and my experience as a teacher and academic coach, teachers need additional professional development on ways to reach culturally diverse learners. Thus, school leaders should create additional opportunities to train teachers on how to understand and provide additional academic support in predominately African American student populated schools. I suggest that administrators establish a culture of professional learning and collaboration by fully implementing professional learning communities (PLC's). I have found that PLC's create a sense of belonging and support

especially to new and struggling teachers. Because PLC's create opportunities for teachers to strengthen their teaching capacity, it also promotes increased student learning. Many participants in the study responded that a barrier to fully implementing culturally relevant pedagogy is lack of resources. By establishing PLC's, teachers are given the opportunity to share and learn from their peers. When PLC time is used effectively, teachers can share resources, instructional approaches, and best practices to maximize learning in their classrooms. PLC's will also allow teachers an opportunity to conduct videoed lesson studies on establishing cultural relevance into their classroom and have collaborative conversations about ideas and learn from their peers.

This study also revealed a need for more cultural sensitivity across content areas in schools. For example, a high performing school's science teacher stated, "I don't find much need for culturally relevant instructional practices in Science. As it is concept based, it is easily taught to real life and authentic situation. The only even remotely cultural problem I confront are some attitudes from students from backgrounds that parents are not both together and there are various people taking care of students." Likewise, a math teacher asserted, "I teach math, which is relative to each culture in the same way." An English teacher added, "My students have no tolerance for those who are not from their area. They have been taught no manners or love for those who are different from themselves. This makes it hard to discuss other cultures, since they laugh and make fun of the topics." These remarks imply the necessity to celebrate and expose staff and students to various cultures ways of life. School leaders can promote respect for diversity by celebrating differences through cultural festivals, monthly assembly programs, and diversity weeks across the school year. Promoting cultural proficiency in schools

embraces students' differences and invites students to learn about cultures other than their own.

Diversity in the Classroom

While it has been mentioned that there is a need for constant authenticity in schools' curriculum, text, and more student choice, this study found that teachers in both high and low performing schools incorporated technology most often and student choice least into their classroom instruction. Yet, both can stimulate instruction in combination for a culturally diverse classroom. When used appropriately, technology and student choice create opportunities for students to think independently and problem solve. These culturally relevant teaching approaches allow students to express themselves and make real life connections to their learning through self-exploration, critical thinking, and authentic engagement.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Technology

Researchers credit technology as a key strategy to culturally relevant teaching (Kunjufu, 2011; Levine, 1994). Likewise, the results from this study showed that technology was the highest ranked instructional strategy that teachers reported as using almost every class. Forty-four percent of participants noted that they used technology as an instructional strategy to conduct classroom assignments to increase students' literacy. However, the extent to which technology is used between high and low performing schools may differ.

According to research, some teachers are uncomfortable with allowing students to explore and use technology as an academic resource and are more comfortable using it as a reward or for remediation practice (Becker, 2001; Milner, 2010). The findings in this

study supported Becker's (2001) findings that, "Computer use in low-SES schools often involved traditional practices and beliefs about student learning, whereas computer use in high SES schools often reflected more constructivist and innovative teaching strategies" (p.55). Low performing district teachers in this study used technology for remediation rather than for teaching written expression skills and analyzing information that requires higher depths of understanding. One teacher stated, "They just don't understand it, regardless of different ways to instruct a lesson." To add to this, another teacher responded, "The textbook I use, *Collections*, is culturally diverse as well as the nonfiction books that I have purchased for my classroom library." On the other hand, a high performing school teacher mentioned, "Rosetta Stone is helpful. Google Translate is also helpful for improving my students' literacy." This research supports previous research (Becker, 2001; Levine, 1994), which stated that using technology as a research tool plays a critical role in increasing students' understanding for their academic success. Based on the findings of this study, technology is not used for maximizing cultural relevance across all content areas. Yet, technology can be used as an effective component of culturally relevant pedagogy because it allows teachers and students to connect to different cultures in schools. Since computers can generate a variety of information from online search engines on any content in a rapid manner, the researcher recommends that teachers allow students to research content specific topics that they are responsible for learning then evaluate their level of understanding using a reciprocal teaching approach. While reciprocal teaching allows students to demonstrate mastery of the content to their teacher and peers based on their own understanding, it also creates opportunities for teachers to address learning misconceptions throughout the lesson since the teacher can become

more mobile as the classroom facilitator. It also allows students the opportunities to present information based from their cultural viewpoints. This will allow students to become more self-dependent learners.

Student Choice

The focus of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is to bridge students' culture and course content so that they will not only have more relatable classroom experiences, but also feel empowered (Ladson-Billings, 2003). For CRP to benefit culturally sensitive students teaching should be student-centered so that students understand how the content information relates to their personal experiences. If students do not understand the relevance of what they are learning and are able to apply it to their own realities, they become disengaged with the lesson and increases the learning gaps. CRP creates more opportunities for embracing students' differences, so that all students feel like their lives and cultures are important. Then learning becomes meaningful. According to this study, 54% of teachers in high and low performing schools reported that they implement student choice less than 2 times a month in their classroom, 59% of teachers reported that they use culturally relevant materials less than 1-2 times a week, and 66% of teachers used hands-on activities less than 1-2 times a week. Yet, research suggests these are important strategies for implementing CRP (Husband, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tatum, 2005). When teachers' perception and frequency of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy is understood, diverse students' educational reality is revealed. Thus, students need to be given interest surveys at the beginning of the school year and used to for instructional planning. Based on their responses, teachers can create learning activities such as student choice boards that assesses content standards, while providing students with a choice.

Another factor that should be addressed based on this study's findings is the extent to which teachers plan for diversity in their classroom. According to research, gaps are forming before African American children enter school then it widens (Ladson-Billings, 2011). This implies that as students matriculate throughout elementary, middle, and high school there are limited instructional adjustments made to address cultural differences. This further supports a major implication that more culturally relevant pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning is needed particularly in predominately minority populated schools. Teachers should set a goal to incorporate more culturally relevant teaching strategies that validates students' values, prior experiences, and culture (Gay, 2000). School leaders can measure these goals by using a teacher observation checklist to conduct impromptu classroom walkthroughs that check for culturally relevant strategies. Also, school leaders should provide teachers with feedback on lesson plans to ensure that cultural relevance is addressed within their daily lessons. School administrators should encourage teachers to use a variety of instructional methods in their content delivery such as academic field trips and outdoor learning. It is important that the teacher create various learning experiences for disadvantaged students because school may be their only opportunity to witness experiences away from home. According to a low performing school teacher, "The students do not do research outside of school nor do they have textbooks. It is difficult to give them an assignment for homework because they do not have the resources to use at home." Thus, many disadvantaged students' exposure is limited to whatever they learn at school.

School and Community Partnerships

Since there are outside factors that affect students' achievement outside of school, it is important that schools, homes, and communities work together to establish a positive environment for underprivileged children (Kunjufu, 2002; Mickelson & Greene, 2006). Therefore, I recommend that district and school leaders form stronger partnerships with their communities. This will help them make effective decisions regarding students' educational needs based on the community's demographics, finances, and dynamics.

It is imperative that educators identify and circumvent issues that are hindrances to students' learning. It has been noted that when teachers can unify home and school through their instruction, students' academic performance is strengthened (Beachum & McCray, 2004; Tatum, 2008). This is needed particularly among the African American population where more than 50% of children live in single parent home where they are struggling to survive on limited resources (Toldson, 2008). The results from this study further supports the need for school and community partnerships based on the study's findings of students' lack of exposure to other cultures besides their own, resources at home, and incompleteness of homework assignments that prevents them from understanding many of the lessons presented in the classroom. School leaders should create more opportunities to host educational meetings and share resources in community places such as libraries, churches, and within the apartment complexes that their children live to maintain healthy relationships with the students and parents. Not only will this allow school leaders to become more sensitive to the environment that these students reside, but it creates multiple opportunities for parents to become involved through flexible scheduling.

Research continues to show that African American males are not academically improving, and the educational gap between African American males and other ethnic counterparts continue to widen (Ladson Billings, 2003; Schott Foundation, 2013). The findings from my research supported the importance that understanding culture has on students' academic outcomes. Educational policy makers, leaders, teachers and community members need to work together to implement the changes needed for academically at risk students. Through intentional positive interactions between teachers and parents, a foundation for culturally relevant pedagogical classroom practices will be built.

Implications for Future Research

Although research indicates that culturally relevant pedagogy influences African American students' achievement, I propose that a longitudinal study be conducted that directly measures cultural relevant pedagogy's relationship to high stakes testing (Toldson, 2008). There is limited research that shows African American students' progress on end of year assessments after culturally relevant pedagogical practices have been fully implemented in the classroom over the span of a school year. Next, many studies set criterion that contributed to small sample sizes, I recommend that broader criteria that includes elementary school teachers who teaches predominantly African American students be set to allow more participants to share their perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy particularly in the southern region of the United States where the African American student population is widespread. Also, expanding this to include more teachers could provide insight on whether culturally relevant pedagogy is understood or used more in elementary or secondary school levels. This may allow the

findings to become more generalizable to a larger population. I also propose that more research is conducted on the relationship between the extent to which teachers receive professional development on culturally relevant pedagogy and its influence on students' academic achievement. By creating more professional development, leaders allow teachers to develop new knowledge, strategies, and improve their practices for teaching students of various cultures.

Limitations

The following limitations were identified as possible restrictions in this study. Therefore, it may not be beneficial to generalize the findings to larger populations. The established criteria prevented many teachers in highly diverse schools from sharing their perceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. The first limitation was the criteria set for selection: schools had to have 50% or more African American students, higher than 70% proficiency on reading end of year assessments or lower than 40% reading proficiency to be labeled a low performing school located in Mississippi. As districts were identified that met these criteria, it was realized that majority of the predominantly African American schools were considered low performing while there were less than five districts with a high concentration of African American students with 70 or higher percentage reading scores. This directly affected the sample size for this study because there were limited participating districts available to represent the high performing schools which could have cause a disproportion in groups. Another limitation was the time in the school year in which the survey was disseminated. It was the Spring semester about two months prior to end of year state testing. This caused some district and building administrators to be hesitant to grant me permission to conduct the study. In fact,

one principal of a participating district, did not grant the researcher permission to distribute the questionnaire to the teachers which also contributed to the small sample size.

Summary

The goal of this study was to determine teachers' perceptions about the influence that culturally relevant pedagogy has on African American male students' literacy. A quantitative approach was taken in this study to allow many teachers to share their level of understanding and use of culturally relevant pedagogy to improve their students' academics. Many teachers expressed synonymously that implementing culturally relevant pedagogy was important, yet they infrequently embedded many of its constructs into their instruction. This shows that further work needs to be done to ensure that educators are aware and equipped with the expertise to ensure that culturally diverse students are benefitting from authentic learning opportunities.

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APPENDIX A – Frequency for Understanding and Using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Table A1.

Frequency of Understanding Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies

	Unimportant	%	Little Importance	%	Moderately Important	%	Important	%	Very Important	%	Total
In the content area that you currently teach, how do you rate the following practices to successfully implement culturally relevant teaching:											
Recognize diverse cultural experiences	1	1.4	1	1.4	11	15.9	25	36.2	31	44.9	69
Understand the role of cultural experiences on how students construct knowledge	0	0.0	1	1.4	11	15.9	24	34.8	33	47.8	69
Understand the possible impact that racism has on students	0	0.0	1	1.4	9	13.0	23	33.3	36	52.2	69
Understand the role of	0	0.0	1	1.4	9	13.0	27	39.1	32	46.4	69

one's own culture and how it affects communication with other cultural groups

Incorporate information about students' families, cultures, and communities to connect to learning activities	0	0.0	1	1.4	12	17.4	34	49.3	22	31.9	69
Recognize the importance of using integrated and holistic, interdisciplinary lessons to teach concepts and skills	0	0.0	4	5.8	15	21.7	30	43.5	20	29.0	69
Show mutual and genuine respect for cultural diversity	0	0.0	5	7.2	15	21.7	30	43.5	19	27.5	69
Be aware of historical, cultural, social, ethnic, and linguistic differences	0	0.0	2	2.9	9	13.0	29	42.0	29	42.0	69
Include the use of speech and expressions familiar to students	0	0.0	3	4.3	10	14.5	29	42.0	27	39.1	69
Incorporate nonverbal cues such as gestures,	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	5.8	27	39.1	38	55.1	69

timing, walking, eye
glance, dress, and
presentation style when
communicating with
students

Select topics that
represent a wide range of
racial, ethnic, cultural,
and language
perspectives

0 0.0 2 2.9 10 14.5 30 43.5 27 39.1 69

Table A2.

Frequency of Using Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies

Never	%	Rarely	%	Sometimes	%	Often	%	Always	%	Total
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In the content area that you
currently teach, how
frequently do you engage in
the following culturally
relevant teaching practices:

Communicating acceptance of cultural and gender differences to students	2	2.9	7	10.1	7	10.1	32	46.4	19	27.5	67
Using curriculum materials that reflect a wide range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and language perspectives	1	1.4	1	1.4	11	15.9	24	34.8	33	47.8	67
Including factual information to refute misconceptions and prejudices about ethnic group members	3	4.3	6	8.7	14	20.3	23	33.3	21	30.4	67
Encouraging the sharing of personal and expressive stories related to content	2	2.9	3	4.3	15	21.7	26	37.7	21	30.4	67
Creating opportunities for students to use higher level thinking skills in reading discussion	0	0.0	2	2.9	11	15.9	25	36.2	29	42.0	67
Providing instructional time to read a variety of texts	2	2.9	12	17.4	13	18.8	23	33.3	17	24.6	67
Engaging all students using culturally relevant curriculum	2	2.9	7	10.1	17	24.6	20	29.0	21	30.4	67
Using cross curriculum lessons to teach concepts	1	1.4	6	8.7	15	21.7	29	42.0	16	23.2	67

Engaging students in project-based, contextual activities	0	0.0	8	11.6	18	26.1	28	40.6	13	18.8	67
Scaffolding instruction to link curriculum to students' culture, interests, experiences, and prior learning	1	1.4	3	4.3	18	26.1	27	39.1	18	26.1	67
Using a variety of instructional methods (e.g. class discussion, cooperative groups, alternate assessments)	0	0.0	2	2.9	10	14.5	26	37.7	29	42.0	67
Allowing students to express their sensory preferences (i.e. visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory)	0	0.0	6	8.7	19	27.5	25	36.2	17	24.6	67
Limiting lectures to 5-10 minutes and using examples or visuals for the remainder of class	0	0.0	7	10.1	14	20.3	31	44.9	15	21.7	67
Using concrete representations of concepts (i.e. manipulatives, models, and artifacts)	0	0.0	6	8.7	21	30.4	29	42.0	11	15.9	67

Using learning centers to express various ways of learning	6	8.7	18	26.1	26	37.7	6	8.7	11	15.9	67
Matching instructional strategies to students' abilities	1	1.4	1	1.4	12	17.4	36	52.2	17	24.6	67

APPENDIX B - IRB Approval Letter



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17033001

PROJECT TITLE: The Influence of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Mississippi Public Schools to Improve Adolescent African American Males' Literacy Achievement

PROJECT TYPE: New Project

RESEARCHER(S): Shawnese Davis

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology

DEPARTMENT: Educational Studies and Research

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 03/30/2017 to 03/29/2018

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX C – Culturally Relevant Survey

Q1 Dear Potential Participant

I would like to ask you to consider participating in a study. The purpose of this study is to gather data on teachers' understanding and use of culturally relevant teaching to increase African American male students' literacy. Participating in this study will afford you the opportunity to reflect on your inclusiveness of all learners through your teaching practices. The study has the potential to affect educational practice and thereby be of benefit to children and society at large. Participation involves minimal anticipated risk. The questionnaire includes statements about culturally relevant teaching as well as basic demographic information. Completion of the questionnaire should take no more than 15-20 minutes. All data collected will be anonymous. Any information inadvertently obtained during this study will remain completely confidential. Participation in this project is completely voluntary. Please feel free to decline participation or to discontinue participation at any point without concern over penalty, prejudice, or any other negative consequence. Data will be aggregated and the results will be used for dissertation completion at the University of Southern Mississippi. Upon completion of data compilation, data bases will be deleted. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Lilian Hill, Ph.D.. If you have questions concerning this research, please contact her at 601- This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820. The respondent gives permission for this anonymous and confidential data to be

used for the purposes described above. To participate click the arrow below to proceed in completing the questionnaire.

Q2 What school district are you currently employed?

- Clinton
- Natchez
- Kosciusko
- Hazlehurst

Q3 Which content area do you currently teach?

- Mathematics
- Science
- History
- English
- Other

Q4 What grade level do you teach?

- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- All that apply

Q5 How many years of teaching experience do you have?

- 1-3
- 4-6
- 7-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21+ Years

Q6 How frequently do you use the following instructional strategies in your course to increase students' literacy?

	Never	1-2 times a month	1-2 times a week	Almost every class	Every class
1. Student Choice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Hands-on Activities (doing lab activities or using manipulatives)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Technology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Culturally Relevant Materials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Cooperative Learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Real-world Examples	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7 In the content area that you currently teach, how do you as a teacher rate the following practices to successfully implement culturally relevant teaching:

	Unimportant	Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
1. Recognize diverse cultural experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Understand the role of cultural experiences on how students construct knowledge.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Understand the possible impact that racism has on students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Understand the role of one's own culture and how it affects communication with other cultural groups.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Incorporate information about students' families, cultures, and communities to connect to learning activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Recognize the importance of using integrated and holistic, interdisciplinary lessons to teach concepts and skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

<p>7. Recognize the importance of using integrated and holistic, interdisciplinary lessons to teach concepts and skills.</p>	○	○	○	○	○
<p>8. Be aware of historical, cultural, social, ethnic, and linguistic differences</p>	○	○	○	○	○
<p>9. Include the use of speech and expressions familiar to students.</p>	○	○	○	○	○
<p>10. Incorporate nonverbal cues such as gestures, timing, walking, eye glance, dress, and presentation style when communicating with students.</p>	○	○	○	○	○
<p>11. Select topics that represent a wide range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and language perspectives.</p>	○	○	○	○	○

Q7 How frequently do you use the following instructional strategies in your course to increase students' literacy achievement?

	Never	1-2 times a month	1-2 times a week	Almost every class	Every class
1.Culturally Relevant Materials	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Hands-on Activities (doing lab activities or using manipulatives)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Technology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4.Student-choice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5.Cooperative Learning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6.Real-world Examples	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q8 What barriers do you encounter with implementing culturally relevant instructional practices in your classroom?

APPENDIX D – Permission to Use Instrument

8/22/2017

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APPENDIX E – Permission Letter for District Participation

February 06, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Shawnese Davis; I am a doctoral student in the Educational Research and Administration program at the University of Southern Mississippi. I am asking for your permission to participate in survey research for middle and high school teachers in your district. I am researching for my dissertation topic and wish to survey 7-12 grade teachers due to their students' performance on the Mississippi end of year state assessment. The title of the research that I am conducting is The Influence of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Mississippi Public Schools to Improve Adolescent African Americans Literacy Achievement. The purpose of my research is to examine teachers' understanding and their extent to which they use culturally relevant teaching practices. I also want to determine which instructional practices teachers currently use to improve literacy in their classrooms. I will be glad to give you additional information about my study. I look forward to your response. Thanks. This study has been approved by the IRB at the University of Southern Mississippi. If interested in participating in the study, please contact me by email at shawnese.davis@usm.edu.

Sincerely,

Shawnese Davis

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