

Cultural Care and Inviting Practices: Teacher perspectives on the influence of care and equity in an urban elementary school

Dr. Eva J. Allen, Pittsburgh Public School District and Duquesne University
Dr. Anne Marie FitzGerald, Duquesne University

Abstract

The study investigates the perspectives of five educators on the influence of cultural care and invitational education (IE) through qualitative participatory action research (PAR). Invitational education is a theoretical framework that facilitates a positive learning environment and encourages individuals to reach their unlimited potential. Like IE, cultural care is a theory of practice that uses a social-emotional approach for school improvement. However, cultural care considers race and culture as fundamental to promoting outcomes for all students. In connection to IE, cultural care is a strengths-based approach to encourage and produce positive outcomes and promotes a strong consideration to race and culture. The study examined teacher practices and perceptions to evaluate the influence of invitational practices and cultural care. Data were analyzed through two theoretical frameworks, invitational education and culturally responsive pedagogy. Themes were derived from analyses of data collected through interviews pre- and post-intervention implementation, recorded observation notes, and artifacts. Findings indicated that inviting practices and cultural care positively influenced the climate of the learning environment, affirmed the importance of teachers listening to students with intentionality, and highlighted the need for educators to recognize students' basic and academic needs. These needs acknowledged student presence, behavior, and growth from a strengths-based approach. The participant educators reported a shift towards a positive learning environment. Recommendations for practice include establishing site-based equity teams and implementing professional learning communities to enhance teachers' professional development.

Keywords: invitational education, culturally responsive pedagogy, cultural care, school climate

Introduction

The School Climate

The 2016 United States (U.S.) Presidential Election exposed a deeply divided nation. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a nonpartisan civil rights organization dedicated to fighting for social justice and against hate and bigotry (Costello, 2016a). In 2016, SPLC conducted a convenience survey of approximately 2,000 K–12 teachers in the United States regarding the effects of the election in the nation's classrooms. The results of the survey illustrated how the current hostile sociopolitical tone of the U.S. has spilled over into classrooms.

The SPLC's report indicated that 67% of students, mainly immigrants and American-born students of color, expressed uncertainty and distress concerning the results of the election, fearing what might happen to their families (Costello, 2016a, 2016b). More than half of the teacher

respondents reported seeing an increase in hostility and “uncivil political discourse” (Costello, 2016a, p. 4) among students, which adversely effected teacher practice. This study considered how these negative effects influence student success and the social-emotional condition within the learning environment.

School climate has a powerful influence on the lives of teachers, staff, students, and families (National School Climate Center, 2012). Research correlated the social-emotional conditions of the learning environment with levels in teacher capacity, attrition rates, social-emotional health, student engagement, success and achievement, graduation rates, and risk-prevention (Cohen, 2010; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Noguera, 2003). School climate impacts social, emotional, and academic successes or failures (A+ Schools, 2014, 2015, 2016; Cohen, 2006, 2010; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Kane & Cantrell, 2010; Markow et al., 2013; National School Climate Center, 2012). Thus, addressing school climate is an important factor in successful school reform.

A Matter of Social Justice

In the context of education, extensive inequities remain among African American, Latino, and White students, despite laws and policies created to address and eradicate imbalances. The historic U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), began the process of providing equality in educational institutions for all students regardless of ethnicity or culture. Critical race theorists frequently refer to the Supreme Court’s decision on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* as a prime example of interest convergence (Bell, 1980), whereby the anti-segregation laws in education were created to improve foreign policy relationships in the U.S., benefiting the White majority and only secondarily appeasing Black interests (Ladson-Billings, 1998). While subsequent de-segregation laws were implemented 6 decades ago, inequities in resources, access, and opportunities, remain prevalent (Gorski, 2013; Kozol, 1991), creating a ripple-effect of injustices throughout numerous social contexts.

The effects of these inequities continue to be evident in the disproportionate levels of poverty, incarceration, and graduation rates, standardized assessment data, and enrollment in accelerated learning programs or secondary education for African Americans and Latinos compared to the White majority (Gorski, 2013; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2006; Lewis et al., 2012; Milner, 2016; Noguera, 2003). These imbalances result in inequities that impact adult outcomes and the ability to contribute to society.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the influence of inviting practices and cultural care upon educators’ practices and perceptions within an urban elementary school. The study was based on the premise that teachers implementing interventions based on IE theory would create a caring learning environment based on culturally responsive practices. The 5 educators contributing to this study participated in a professional learning community (PLC) that focused on equity and incorporated the elements of Invitational Education (IE) into their practices. The commitment of the participants in this study included building authentic relationships, enhancing practice, and encouraging a positive school climate based on the intentional elements of care, optimism, respect, and trust: I-CORT (Purkey & Novak, 2016). IE can be described as a collection of assumptions based on social cognitive theory and a democratic ethos (Purkey, 1992). IE provided a means to invite people purposefully by intentionally encouraging them to realize their

unlimited potential in all aspects in life (Purkey & Novak, 2016). Culturally responsive pedagogy is a theory of practice that argues for teachers to take into account how student culture and ethnicity vary and to plan learning experiences that will draw upon students' diverse knowledge and strengths. The professional learning community (PLC) synthesized complementary elements of these theories to create a conceptual framework. To do this, the PLC developed a theory of practice that included acknowledging one's own identity as an educator and respecting, valuing, and embracing the culture of the student from a strengths-based perspective. The framework acknowledged the centrality of race as an integral part of culture and identity. Therefore, this study's primary research question asked, "How do teachers perceive the influences of cultural care and inviting practices on their relationships with students of color?" The researchers' believed educators who intentionally used interventions based on IE practices and cultural care facilitated positive teacher-student relationships and built teacher capacity, which expanded benefits to multiple areas of the learning environment.

Conceptual Frameworks

Teachers are the greatest contributors to student academic success (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Hattie, 2012; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Mounting evidence demonstrated that culturally responsive pedagogies correlate with more positive student academic achievement, motivation, social-emotional disposition, and effort (Delpit, 2006; Esposito & Swain, 2009; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 2000, 2006a, 2006; Milner, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Milner & Tenore, 2010). A growing body of research further describes increased self-efficacy, intelligence beliefs and performance; creating, sustaining, and enhancing positive environments in relation to implementation of IE practices (Hossein et al., 2011; Lee, 2012; Pajares, 1994; Purkey, 1992; Purkey & Aspy, 2003; Purkey & Novak, 2015, 2016; Schmidt, 2007). Despite a connection between culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and IE practices, few studies have examined the utilization of both frameworks. This paper acknowledges that IE theory does not sufficiently consider the race of students or teachers, while CRP considers race and culture as a core of its ideology.

As Milner (2015) noted, despite the efforts to deliver instruction in a safe space during professional development and in educational preparation, discussions about race and culture often resulted in silenced dialogue. Researchers were encouraged to engage in self-reflection to gain deeper awareness of critical consciousness and extended a call to action for teachers to explore and learn together in cohorts to transform practice (Milner, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Furthermore, Duncan-Andrade (2007) believed, "Measuring an equitable education requires greater attention to qualitative evaluation" (p. 618). This research addressed gaps in current knowledge, thereby contributing to the body of research that specifically connects IE and CRP. Specifically, this research responded to Milner's (2015) suggestions to transform practice, and responded to the call for teacher voice and collaborative learning networks as an integral component of qualitative research for school improvement.

The Interconnectedness of IE and Cultural Responsiveness

In part, the strategic project utilized elements of the theoretical frameworks of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and Invitational Education (IE). IE offered a framework to begin the

process of creating or enhancing a positive, inviting learning environment while fostering educational resilience and achievement. This was particularly significant in urban settings that often face obstacles such as inequities in funds and resources, poverty, lack of resources, and high teacher attrition rates (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Gomez et. al, 2004; Gorski, 2013; Karpinski, 2012; Kozol, 1991; Markow et al., 2013). IE recognizes 5 Domains: People, places, policies, programs, and processes, that comprise “everyone and everything in an organization” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. vii).

In culturally responsive teaching, social interactions in the learning environment foster positive teacher-student relationships and promote self-worth through a sense of psychological safety where students feel comfortable and supported (Ladson-Billings, 2009), while being held to high standards of excellence (Duncan-Andrade, 2006, 2007, 2009; Gay, 2010; Milner, 2010a, 2010b). These characteristics of CRP parallel the ideology of IE.

Initial discussions about race in the classroom considered the influential work of Delpit (2006) and seminal work by Ladson-Billings (1995a, 2009), which examined the practices of successful teachers of African American children and helped embed the term, culturally relevant practices within educational discourse. Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) theorized and identified three tenets of culturally relevant practices: (a) academic achievement, (b) cultural competence, and (c) sociopolitical critique (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006, 2009). Teachers who implemented culturally relevant practices successfully created an environment of warmth whereby students thrived on positive attention, ultimately “choosing academic excellence” (p. 161). Teachers who use culturally responsive practices (CRP) recognize, respect, and value students as individuals and validate their importance with genuine appreciation (Gay, 2010). Again, all key characteristics of CRP: care, respect, and trust, align with the I-CORT elements Invitational Education theory and practice.

Cultural Care as a Theoretical Framework

Noddings (2012) defined *care* as based on a bilateral relationship between the cared and the care-giver, but did not address race or culture as part of the definition. Valenzuela (1999) conducted a 3-year ethnographic investigation of academic achievement and schooling orientations of Mexican-American students and Mexican immigrants at a high school in Houston, Texas. Through examination of field notes, a reoccurring theme of care emerged, leading to deeper examination of the use and definitions of *caring* or *cariño* as part of effective teacher practice. In connection with efficacy, a study by Lewis et al. (2012) examined the relationship of care on Latino student self-efficacy in mathematics. *Care* was defined as “the ability to listen to, empathize with, and be moved by the plight or feelings of the other person” (Lewis et al., 2012, p. 3).

From the definitions described in previous research on care (Duncan-Andrade, 2006, 2007, 2009; Lewis et al, 2012; Noddings, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999) the theory of *cultural care* developed. This study utilized cultural care as a theory of practice, defined as verbal or nonverbal gestures that display a person’s genuine interest in another person’s social, emotional, mental, and physical well-being; while simultaneously recognizing and acknowledging race and culture as a significant part of a person’s identity. As noted in Figure 1 below, I-CORT elements emphasized by IE theory drive a cultural care perspective that includes respecting, valuing, and embracing culture based on values and strengths.

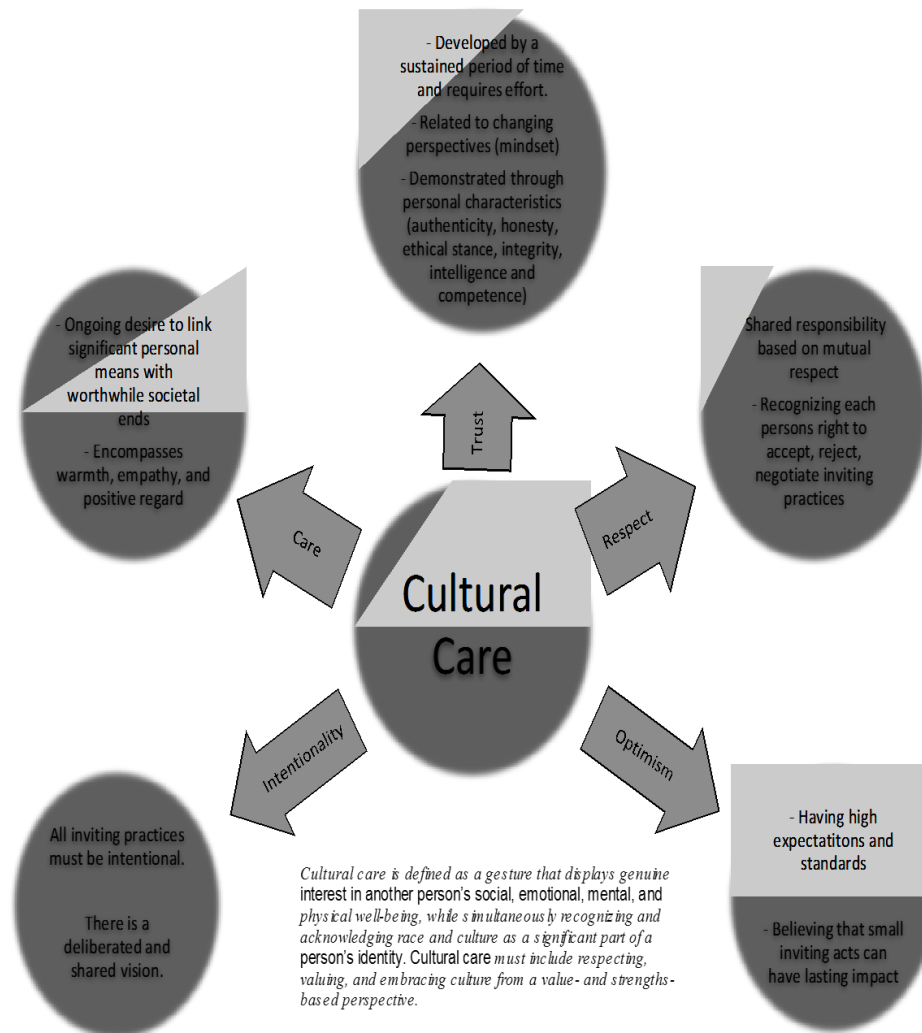


Figure 1. Elements of invitational education (I-CORT) with cultural care as a driver. Adapted from *Fundamentals of Invitational Education* (2nd ed), by W.W. Purkey & J.M. Novak, 2016, Greensboro, NC: International Alliance for Invitational Education.

Using IE and Cultural Care to Address Matters of Inequity, Race, and Culture in Educational Research

Invitational Education (IE) theory and practices positively contributed to educational research during the last 25 years. However, few studies specifically examined the synthesis between IE and culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy (CRP). Reed (1996) suggested using IE to address prejudices but her consideration was not specific to culturally responsive pedagogy. Reed (1996) further proposed using IE theory with Haberman's (1994) five-step approach to engage educators in recognition of and reflection upon their prejudices and biases. Although race and culture are evident in Reed's (1996) study, the topic differed from race and culture of the student as outlined by Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) and subsequent researchers.

In one of few studies that indirectly connected culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy to IE theory and practices, Usher and Pajares (2006) drew attention to the relationship of self-efficacy and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). Usher and Pajares (2006) commented on undertones of CRP in their results, when referring to the variables of race and social persuasions. Of importance to this study, one of their results revealed that African American students responded more strongly to positive verbal persuasions than did White students (Usher & Pajares, 2006). The data strongly supported the argument for researchers and educators in highly diverse settings to consider the influence of IE theory as a part of practice. The findings in the cited scholarly works have important consequences for conducting research on inviting practices that promote student growth in achievement, provided those practices are conducted through a lens of cultural care.

Dr. John Schmidt, a former Executive Director for the International Alliance for Invitational Education (IAIE), issued a call to action for educational research to address the void in research surrounding invitational education viewed through a culturally responsive lens (2007). Schmidt reiterated Pajares's argument (1994, 2001) for examining diverse population in studies involving IE to assist in building connections and relationships and further suggested shifting focus from a defensive deficit lens to one that embraces the richness of positive relationships that provide fulfillment, empowerment, and encouragement. Additionally, scholars (Duncan-Andrade, 2006, 2007, Ladson-Billings, 2014; Milner, 2016; Noguera, 2003) appealed to educational researchers to consider further examination of CRP topics such as race, diversity, and culture, through empirical research. Cultural care provides a framework to examine CRP topics using an inviting and strengths-based approach.

Methods

Participants

Researchers obtained informed consent from five educator-participants. These educators agreed to participate in the research project based on their interest and commitment to the Professional Learning Community (PLC) that focused upon care and equity. The researchers assigned pseudonyms to each participant. The researchers maintained the participants' confidentiality by using these pseudonyms to label electronic files and data. According to the district's educator evaluation system, the participants were highly qualified in their teaching practices. The participants included,

- A female social worker/developmental advisor of African-American descent given the pseudonym: Mrs. Washington.
- A male learning-support teacher of African-American descent: Mr. Wolfe.
- A female fifth-grade mathematics teacher of European descent with four biracial sons: Mrs. Anderson.
- An untenured learning-support teacher with less than 3 years of teaching experience who identifies as White: Ms. Paul.
- A female second-grade teacher who identifies as White with three biracial sons: The researcher, serving as a participant observer.

Role of the Researcher Participant and PLC Convener

As a participant observer, the researcher invited and engaged educators to take action, utilizing inviting practices and cultural care to:

- (a) better understand perspectives of effective teachers;
- (b) build teacher capacity involving equitable practices;
- (c) assist in the formation of positive relationships;
- (d) develop a greater cultural competence; and
- (e) encourage reflective practices involving matters of social justice related to racism, culture, perceptions, beliefs, and equity.

In developing an intervention for school improvement, the PLC utilized a PDSA cycle as outlined in improvement inquiry (Bryk et al., 2015). Activities conducted in the PLC concentrated on promoting a positive learning environment based on cultural care, driven by the elements of IE theory: Intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT). The research supported the ideals of IE theory in concert with key characteristics of CRP to promote a positive school climate and student learning.

The educators participated in the PLC that functioned in ways consistent with the principles underlying the Carnegie Foundation's model for networked improvement communities or NICs (Bryk et al., 2015; LeMahieu et al., 2017; Mintrop, 2016). To develop the educators' cultural competence and reflective social justice practices related to racism, equity, perceptions, and beliefs, the participants were intentionally invited to engage in professional development and participation by choice (Milner, 2007, 2015). In combination with the theoretical frameworks that allow for building collective capacity and addressing school climate, action research (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) proved an apt methodology for introducing cultural care as a means for school improvement. The educator participants freely consented to be a part of the collaborative action for school improvement.

Context

At the time of the study, a K–5 urban elementary school called Freedom Elementary School (pseudonym, hereinafter Freedom), was part of the Lower Western Pennsylvania School District (pseudonym, LWPSD). Freedom, a Spanish magnet school, served 432 students. The students came from neighborhoods in a city within Pennsylvania. Students were selected for enrollment in Freedom through an application and lottery system. The district provided transportation for students outside of a one-mile radius. Student demographics were 71% African-American, 15% Caucasian, 33% multiracial, 3% Asian, and 3% Hispanic (LWPSD, 2016). Teacher demographics were 83% female and 17% male. Of the female teachers, 80% identified as White, 10% as African-American, and 10% as Hispanic/Latino. Half of the male teachers at Freedom identified as White or of European descent, and half were African-American.

Background

As evidenced by results of existing survey data, the work of the PLC took place in a work environment considered less than positive. In the context of this study, the school staff and PLC participants later discussed the results from a district survey and the inviting school survey (Smith, 2015). The results of these school climate surveys follow.

Teaching and Learning Conditions (TLC) survey. Considering the implications of school culture and climate on the learning environment, the LWPSD developed a survey to assess teaching and learning conditions and to provide data for district and school-wide improvement

(LWPSD, 2013). Results of Freedom's TLC Survey showed a stark and continuous decline from 2014 to 2016 in the overall conditions of the learning environment. During the 2014-2015 academic year, 140 of the 149 items (94%) under the eight constructs showed a decline in favorability. The two constructs that showed the greatest decline in satisfaction were managing student behavior and school leadership. Data from 2015-2016 TLC Survey revealed an inhospitable learning environment. Less than half (49%) of the teachers and staff agreed that Freedom was a good place to work. In addition, data from the state's standardized test ranked Freedom fourth highest in disproportionality in overall achievement in the LWPSD at the elementary level (LWPSD, 2016). Data reflected a decline in student performance levels, an increase in absenteeism, and declines in teacher, parent, and staff satisfaction over 3 consecutive years at Freedom (A+ Schools, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Inviting School Survey-Revised. Under suggestion by the leadership and administrative team as part of normal data-driven practice, the Inviting School Survey-Revised (ISS-R) (Smith, 2015) was administered to conduct quantitative analysis of the school climate. The ISS-R provides school communities with a user-friendly, theoretically grounded, empirically-based instrument to evaluate schools for future development as it identifies areas of strength and weakness in a school's climate (Smith, 2015). The survey was administered at the conclusion of the 2015-2016 academic year. Twenty-six out of a potential 35 participants (74%) responded to the survey. Of the 26 respondents, 23 satisfactorily completed the ISS-R, including 17 teachers and 6 support staff. According to the ISS-R, Freedom's overall climate favorability score was 64 percent. Subscales ranged from 57% (Program) to 74% (Policy). The ISS-R results were shared with Freedom staff and faculty during the first 2016-2017 PLC meeting. Typically, the initial PLC meeting provides context to the current year's work.

Design of the Study

This participatory action research study framed the problem of practice as a matter of social justice and, in part, utilized elements of the interrelated theoretical frameworks of IE (Pajares, 1994; Purkey, 1992; Purkey & Novak, 2016), CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Milner, 2010a) and elements of improvement inquiry and intervention design (Bryk et al., 2015; Mintrop, 2016). The current study utilized a "method of inquiry . . . [guiding] rapid learning" (Mintrop, 2016, p. 14). The success of the "Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle" for sustaining school reform initiatives (Davenport & Anderson, 2002, p. 34) inspired subsequent reform studies seeking to build upon prior knowledge and understanding (Bryk et al., 2015). Action research models that build upon the PDSA cycle include the Invitational Education Helix that uses 12 steps. Helix steps "are divided into three phases of commitment from occasional interest to systemic interest, to pervasive interest. Within each phase are four repeating knowledge points: awareness, understanding, application, and adoption" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 39).

Data Sources

Data collected from the participants included pre- and post-intervention semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and artifact examination. Artifacts included notes from school-related events: PTO, PSCC, and committee meetings as well as items generated for professional development and training workshops. Materials such as PowerPoint presentations, video presentations, and handouts, were archived as digital or hard copy files. Additional

qualitative evidence was collected by the PLC through a deliberate democratic approach guided by cultural care and the I-CORT elements of IE theory and practices (Purkey & Novak, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews elicited data from the study's participants and offered flexibility with questions and opportunities for clarification and understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each teacher participant was interviewed prior to and following the intervention to provide a baseline for reflection on changes in practice and to engage participants as part of the planning in the intervention process. Post-intervention interviews were conducted to gain participant perspectives on the influence of the 7-week intervention and a semester of participation in the PLC. Based on the work of the PLC, participants decided to implement a Kindness Campaign with students. Each participant committed to recognizing students' positive behavior verbally and in writing and then acknowledging students' behaviors publically by displaying compliments and kind words in three designated areas in the school. At the same time, participants continued to learn professionally by engaging in weekly discussions and reflections, not only on the intervention, but also on topics involving race, culture, and equity. See appendix A for a full description of weekly PLC topics of discussion and activities. The interview questions underwent peer review. Following review of the questions, pilot interviews were conducted with two scholarly practitioners. The questions were designed to assess the impact of participation in six key areas:

- (a) teacher practice;
- (b) interactions;
- (c) climate of the learning environment;
- (d) teacher-student relationships;
- (e) student behaviors; and
- (f) student academics.

The interviews began with participants describing their personal background and experience in education, familiarity with and knowledge of CRP, and perspectives on care as part of their practice. The article was specific to data on the influence of inviting practices, cultural care, and equitable impact upon school climate and the learning environment.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed for common themes using a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to collect and examine data involving inductive and comparative procedures to gain conceptual characteristics of theory and to generate findings (Glaser, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first researcher transcribed interviews. An open coding system was used to analyze and identify common themes (Merriam, 1998, 2002; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Data were coded using a combination of *a priori* codes derived from the theoretical frameworks and emergent themes. A codebook was created of *a priori* analytical codes that were "compatible with the study's purpose and theoretical frameworks" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 212). Peer review encouraged suggestions for additional codes or removal of codes.

Limitations

The study took place in a Pennsylvania public-school district where the first researcher worked for more than 18 years, possibly creating bias by favoring one district school compared to

another. Furthermore, the principal investigator and participant researcher was the only person to conduct the voice-recorded interviews, opening the door to subjective interpretation in the field notes. Another limitation of the study relates to interpretation of the outcomes, due to the principal investigator's active participation as the lead facilitator in the PLC. Finally, the research study was modest and therefore cannot be generalizable to other populations.

Validity and Reliability

Third-party peer review of emergent themes from coded interviews, with a minimum of 85% code agreement, was conducted to reach inter-rater reliability. Further, to support reliability, the principal investigator created an audit trail. To adjust for limitations and to optimize transferability, reliability, credibility, and validity, member checks were conducted for clarification, elaboration, and respondent validation. Member checks were conducted with all teacher participants on the interview data and observation notes. Participants were provided an electronic copy of their individual responses and researcher's notes in a chart format. Participants were offered an opportunity to review significant findings during a 10-day timeframe for any potential misinterpretation. All 5 participants communicated and verified the information as accurate.

Findings

This study's primary research question asked, "How do teachers perceive the influences of cultural care and inviting practices on their relationships with students of color?" Analysis of post-intervention data revealed three key findings. First, participants discussed the importance of race when demonstrating care and showing concern for student needs and well-being. Second, teachers reported that recognizing student race and culture when expressing care influenced the educators' behavior management approaches and student behaviors. Specifically, participants reported an improvement in student behaviors, both academically and socially. Third, educators perceived that the first two findings contributed to an overall improvement in the learning environment and school climate.

Finding 1: The Importance of Race in Demonstrating Care and Concern

All 5 participants stated that they considered race and culture when demonstrating care toward students. From this finding, two sub-themes emerged. First, by acknowledging students' race and culture, teachers perceived that they connected more effectively with individual students *and* created a more inclusive and welcoming classroom community. Second, when participants recognized students' culture and race, they acknowledged an increase in their own self-awareness of how they engaged with students, especially students of color.

Acknowledging students' race and culture as a vehicle to build connections. Two participant responses (Mrs. Washington and Mrs. Anderson) indicated their interest in their students' cultural perspectives and backgrounds to offer enrichment and an opportunity to connect personally and provide a student-centered learning experience.

Mrs. Washington expressed the importance of acknowledging variance in races and cultures from a strengths-based approach, and she viewed the differences in race or culture as an opportunity to gain understanding and teacher growth. "I just felt like they can teach us about who they are and about their backgrounds."

Ms. Paul's perspective also included the position of a student-centered approach for mutual benefit of student and child. She recounted how one of her students taught the other children about

his experiences in going back to visit the country where he was born. This student helped his peers recognize cultural differences and similarities. In turn, Ms. Paul recognized how the student's behavior improved, how his time on task improved, and how his academic results began to improve as a result. Post-intervention, PLC participants continued to discuss student learning and academics in greater depth and to note improved academic performance.

Teacher self-awareness. Two participants, Mr. Wolfe and Ms. Paul, indicated an increased level of self-awareness related to race. Both reported that they considered how students could potentially perceive their approaches. Mr. Wolfe explained that he considered how well he knew the students prior to deciding how to engage with them. He took into account the depth and quality of the existing relationship between him and the student, as well as the race of the student, before deciding upon how he would interact with the student and demonstrate care. Mr. Wolfe also described presenting himself as a whole person, rather than as simply a teacher who enforced rules.

When asked whether she considered race and culture when showing her students that she cared about them, Ms. Paul confirmed that she reflected on race and culture and did so with an awareness of potential bias. She shared her prior experiences in professional work settings and her perception that young children who attend day care are exposed to racial stereotyping and bias even before entering a formal school setting.

Overall, participants agreed that their participation in the PLC had benefitted them as educators in developing a greater sense of social interactions, increased self-awareness, and engaging in reflective practices that are typically associated with promoting student growth and achievement.

Finding 2: Teacher Behavior Management Approaches and Student Behaviors

Participants reported that recognizing student race and culture influenced the educator behavior management approaches and student behaviors. Ms. Paul recounted an instance in which a student who was exhibiting many off-task and disruptive behaviors demonstrated improvement in time-on-task, a lessening of disruptive behaviors, and an increase in academic growth when given an opportunity to share aspects of his culture. Additionally, Mr. Wolfe noted it was important to have established a positive relationship. He maintained that his being a teacher of color was a strength when managing student behaviors. Based on an established relationship, Mr. Wolfe recalled his approach and responses to an interaction between a Caucasian teacher and a student of color who was visibly upset. Because Mr. Wolfe had developed a trusting relationship with the student, he was able to address, redirect, and diffuse a situation while comforting a child who was visibly upset.

Finding 3: Improved Learning Environment and School Climate

Two participants described a calmer tone in the building and linked the change to the interactions prior to the start of the day. Mr. Wolfe perceived that the beginning of the day and transition times throughout the day were calmer. He attributed this improvement to inviting practices. Mrs. Anderson perceived a greater self-awareness of her tone and increased verbal engagement with students at the beginning of the school day. She saw a positive effect on student dispositions and perceived that caring practices improved her students' learning environment. Ms. Paul reported a noticeable change in the tone of her classroom during lessons where she conducted small group instruction. She attributed the shifts to her more intentional and positive mindset, which in turn resulted in a more positive learning environment for the students.

By specifically filtering their verbal engagement through a mindset based on cultural care and intentional invitations, Ms. Paul and Mrs. Anderson saw improvement in school climate. Researcher's notes also recorded the expansion of inviting practices and cultural care with the inclusion of parental involvement. These displayed the improved collaborative approaches to school improvement and inviting practices exhibited by multiple stakeholders.

In summary, findings revealed the importance of teachers' recognizing the race of students when demonstrating care. In turn, this recognition influenced the educators' behavior management approaches as participants reported improved academic and social behavior in students. Third, educators perceived an overall improvement in student learning environment and school climate. Readers interested in transcribed interviews should directly contact the authors.

Discussion of Findings

This study's significant findings related to school climate provided evidence of the positive influence of inviting practices and cultural care. IE offered a framework to begin the process of creating or enhancing a positive, intentionally inviting learning environment, while fostering educational resilience and achievement (Purkey & Novak, 2015, 2016). All participants reported an increase in mindfulness regarding how to empower a positive tone for the day through interactions with students. Most participants perceived classroom and hallway transitions that could be disruptive were now smoother. After engaging in the PLC, based on equity and care, participants reported a shift toward a more positive learning environment. Following implementation of the intervention, two participants specifically used the term "calmer" in their descriptions.

These findings are important for several reasons. First, the literature indicated educational climates optimal for learning must be inviting and generate an atmosphere of care and trust (Cornelius-White, 2007; Hattie, 2012; Pajares, 1994; Purkey, 1992; Purkey & Novak, 2016). Second, teachers that invite students into learning through intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (Cornelius-White, 2007; Hattie, 2012; Lee, 2012; Purkey, 1992; Purkey & Aspy, 2003; Purkey & Novak, 2015, 2016; Schmidt, 2007) promote realization of personal potential (Purkey & Novak, 2016). These findings could also reinforce the substantial body of educational research associated with CRP whereby a family-like atmosphere will allow students to thrive based on positive attention and opportunities for academic success (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2010a, 2010b).

Significance of Recognizing Race and Culture

Important to the researcher's own theory of cultural care, the findings showed that participants indicated a shift in mindset that was genuine, intentional, positive, and reflective of their own race, along with the students' diverse races and cultures. Interventions based on cultural care were driven by the IE elements: Intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT) as an intervention for school improvement, while utilizing a PDSA cycle outlined in improvement inquiry (Bryk et al., 2015). These interventions included attention to deliberate verbal interactions (greetings, compliments, encouragement, exchanges of nonacademic information, social conversations) between themselves and students that intentionally invited positive relationships.

Positive verbal messages, also referred to as inviting messages (Edwards, 2010) that acknowledged, recognized, and valued a student's presence, feelings, and behaviors, created an environment based on mutual respect and ultimately influenced behavior management and

academics. This was consistent with the literature that showed the ideals of invitational education, along with key characteristics of CRP, resulted in a positive school climate and student learning.

Considering Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, teachers must meet a child's physiological safety, love, and esteem needs as a prerequisite to addressing academic achievement. Attention to student needs were evident in the teacher-educator approach to developing positive teacher-student relationships and demonstrating genuine care, leading to student successes, as seen in this study.

Educators in this study reported that they modeled intentional and thoughtful gestures of care toward students, which students replicated in return. The teachers who demonstrated care and concern for their students provided a sense of psychological safety and acknowledged a genuine interest in the student physical and emotional well-being. These social exchanges reinforced development of an atmosphere grounded in trust and respect, which were optimal for student learning.

CRP practices utilized social interactions in learning environments to foster positive relationships. Relationships based on social awareness and positive social interactions were positively correlated in research studies and the literature on cultural relevance (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, 2009; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2010a). The positive relationships facilitated after this study's interventions promoted student growth and achievement for students of color impacted by this study.

Influence on Student Social and Academic Behaviors.

Intentional invitations that others send to students about their behaviors played an important role in the optimal climate, student motivation, confidence, and beliefs in their capabilities (Usher & Pajares, 2006). As in the earlier study, teachers participating in this study agreed that invitations that others send to students about their behavior played an important role in improved student motivation, confidence, and beliefs in their capabilities. The educator assessments of recognizing race and culture from a strengths-based approach positively influenced student social and academic behaviors. The finding also supported existing literature that correlated perceived self-efficacy with student behavior and academics. Teachers reported that when they employed culturally caring practices, students demonstrated an increase in effort, motivation, and positive disposition in subjects or tasks that were often difficult.

One participant recounted an increase in the letter grade of one student. The participant researcher reported an increase in proficiency levels for oral reading fluency. Mr. Wolfe reported a decrease in avoidance behaviors such as playing with objects, asking to leave the room, putting one's head down, intentional delaying completion of a task, etc... These were observable changes in student self-efficacy in larger mainstream classrooms and even more evident during small group lessons. Mr. Wolf observed students being recognized more often for positive effort and quality of work by teachers who were not part of the PLC or the study.

Self-awareness of One's Own Race

Teachers in this study indicated that they had become more aware of their own race. They had developed a deeper understanding of how to interact with students, especially prior to an established relationship and advocated a strengths-based perspective regarding differences in culture. They agreed that positively recognizing student race and culture encouraged relationships, influenced teacher practice, provided opportunities to develop connections, and influenced future

interactions with students. Two participants said that acknowledging similarities and differences in race and culture as part of regular practice, improved student-centered learning, resulting in an increase in student effort and interest, and greater time on task. Three participants reported that they put themselves in the student's place to respect perspectives from multiple contexts.

Influence on Teacher Practice

All study participants reported a shift to a more positive mindset and a more cognizant perspective of student perceptions, lessons, curriculum, and behavior management approaches. All participants indicated a greater awareness across multiple settings and contexts. Data analysis revealed that all educators revealed a heightened consciousness of their initial interactions between themselves and students. They also had greater levels of intentionality in seeking positive student behaviors and character traits, as well as recognizing and acknowledging students, both socially and academically.

In addition to experiencing a shift to a more positive mindset, the members of the PLC reported an intentional and increased focus on student needs. There was an increase in overall self-awareness and social awareness of race, equity, and relationships outside the work environment. Significant findings specified an increase in self-awareness about word choice, intentional approach, and engagement. These were identified as benefits of member involvement in the PLC. These findings concurred with previous research on the positive impact of social-emotional learning programs for improving social-emotional skills, attitudes, and outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

The significant findings of this study showed the impact of IE (Purkey & Novak, 2016) and cultural care as an intervention under the umbrella of social-emotional learning programs (Durlak et al., 2011). This study's findings were associated with increased student academic performance, reduced aggression and emotional distress, increased helping behaviors in school, and improved attitudes toward self and others reported in previous studies (Durlak et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2012; Schmidt, 2007; Usher & Pajares, 2006). The current findings were especially notable when considering equity, disproportionality in discipline, and reported gaps in achievement.

Implications

The significant findings from this study had implications for district policy on professional development and teacher practices. The findings from this study supported the 2015 national policy, *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). The policy includes action to build on assets and indicators of successes in existing programs. Interventions that have been demonstrated to be successful are emerging on multiple levels of governance (local, state, and district) as part of ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The significant findings also supported the ESSA by addressing school climate as a matter of social justice and a strategic priority for school improvement at district, state, and national levels (Pennsylvania Department of Education [PDE], 2015). It was critical to note, that it was necessary for administration and leadership to have a transparent, shared vision alongside teachers and staff. Without the presence of invested and effective leadership that promotes a positive school climate, models professional respect, and acknowledges, values, and respects all stakeholders, any school improvement efforts will fall short of success.

The PLC focused on shared and collaborative decision-making, engaging teachers in reflective practices, and promoting positive relationships through inviting practices and cultural care that intentionally promoted positive mindsets framed by I-CORT elements. The small-group

collaborative and shared decision-making aspects of PD were supported robustly by educational research on PLCs (Cooter, 2003a, 2003b; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hynds et al., 2016; Owen, 2014, 2015; Rivkin et al., 2005). The benefits for teacher growth and student learning were clear.

Recommendations

The significant findings indicated that inviting practices and cultural care: positively influenced the climate of the learning environment; affirmed the importance of teachers listening to students with intentionality; and highlighted the need for educators to recognize student basic and academic needs, and acknowledge student presence, behavior, and growth from a strengths-based approach. The findings of this study supported existing research about the importance of the role of the teacher in establishing a positive learning environment and implementing inviting practices (Purkey & Novak, 2016) where open dialogue and discussions occur, while simultaneously recognizing, acknowledging, and valuing race and culture.

Recommendations from this study included implementing and supporting small PLCs for race- and equity-related PD at the earliest point of entry. The findings presented an opportunity to conduct PD through PLCs, allowing teachers to develop a greater self-awareness of their own race and the race of their students in an inviting safe space from a strengths-based perspective. Small, safe settings would include opportunities to:

- (a) enhance or improve practice;
- (b) provide educators with skills, knowledge, and a foundation to engage in productive dialogue with students and other educators on difficult topics;
- (c) develop awareness of biases, stereotyping, and systematic and existential racism to address disproportionate data and racial disparities;
- (d) promote student awareness and cultural competence, and
- (e) provide a platform to promote positive educator-student relationships.

Additionally establishing site-based equity teams would utilize skilled experts for comprehensive, whole-staff PD and individual support as needed. The specialist, who must also possess strong leadership skills and a broad knowledge base on race- and equity-related topics, can assist in facilitation of staff development and school wide improvement, and provide resources for building cultural competence. Strong evidence in research on the positive impact of building teacher capacity in urban settings (Cooter, 2003a, 2003b) supports this recommendation. Lastly, developing leadership capacity via school partnerships (Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2008, 2012) would positively impact student growth and achievement.

Conclusions

The conducted study was an endeavor to improve the learning environment and student outcomes in an urban elementary school. The purpose of the research was to improve and enhance collaborative practices by encouraging a positive school climate based on intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT). The participants in this study engaged in robust conversations concerning equity and incorporated reflective strategies to build cultural competence for improving practice. This required dedication and commitment.

The theory of cultural care provided educators a practical framework that promoted self-awareness of the significance of our actions that embody genuine care for educational success. It can be nearly impossible to teach someone *how* to care, but as transformative leaders, educators

have the responsibility to reflect on, demonstrate, and model care. Educators must establish meaningful relationships through intentionally inviting practices and cultural care that facilitate positive outcomes. There is no greater responsibility in education, than providing children with support in learning environments where children spend so much time.

Through thoughtful conversations, the teacher-educators participating in this study illustrated the positive influences of interventions based on cultural care and intentionally inviting practices on multiple areas of the learning environment. This study offered insights regarding the influence of a grassroots effort to build formative relationships, encompassed various aspects of educational reform, and suggested a context in which it can be achieved. In the words of James Comer, “No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship” (2001, p. 30).

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To contact the authors:

Dr. Eva J. Allen
Learning Environment Specialist, Pittsburgh Public Schools
341 S. Bellefield Ave. - Room 467
Pittsburgh, PA 15235
412-519-9006 (cell)
allene1@duq.edu

Dr. Anne Marie FitzGerald
Duquesne University, 412A Canevin Hall
600 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA, 15282
412-396-2592
fitzger3@duq.edu