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# Unheard Voices: Student Perceptions About Cultural Competence In The Independent School Classroom

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UNHEARD VOICES: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT CULTURAL COMPETENCE  
IN THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL CLASSROOM

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
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May 2019  
Educational Leadership

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COMPETENCE IN THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the perceptions of students of color about cultural competence in the independent school classroom. Current research defines the importance of cultural competence as a means to enhance engagement and feelings of acceptance. This study addressed research questions related to cultural competence in education which stemmed from perceptions of students of color that identified as Asian, Black, or Latino(a). The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine perceptions of students of color and gain a sense of their experiences in an independent school environment. Data was collected through a survey and interviews where personal stories were used to detect reoccurring themes. Identifying these perceptions was the key motivating factor in determining areas of strength and weakness in independent educational practice. In this study, four predetermined interconnecting themes of cultural competence were used as guides: 1) Awareness 2) Self-knowledge 3) Equity and Inclusion 4) Cultural Proficiency. These themes aided in understanding the outcomes of the qualitative inquiry from each interview. Findings from this research concluded the need for professional development in cultural competence endeavors within independent school environments. The goals of this research were to provide further information and investigation on cultural competence in independent school classrooms in efforts to continue the conversation on teaching and learning through best practices that benefit all students in the classroom.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
Educational Leadership

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by

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## DEDICATION

For my Emmanuel.

Without your love and support, none of this would be possible.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The term cultural competence, with origins in the health-care field, has recently been adopted in the field of education as a method to help educators work more effectively with diverse student populations (Jones & Nichols, 2013, p. 1). Cultural competence aids educators in working towards closing achievement gaps and is a key factor in enabling effective instruction with students from cultures other than their own (National Education Association, 2017). In education, cultural competence provides a platform for educators to create an environment that is respectful and reciprocal of ideas and content for all students within that classroom (National Education Association, 2017). Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes that come together in an organization that support effective work in cross-cultural situations (Harvard Catalyst, 2010, p. 1). This knowledge, set of behaviors, and attitudes when used in the classroom setting enhance student engagement and prepares students for life after school. This is illustrated in the work of Jones and Nichols (2013) who suggested that cultural competence is a skill school leaders and educators need to be equipped with to prepare students to work in increasingly diverse settings (p. 25). With the evolving demographics of our country, cultural competence has become an essential ingredient when it comes to creating a positive and inclusive school climate that fosters the skills and real-world readiness students need (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.). Moule (2012) defined cultural competence as the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than the teacher's by mastering awareness and sensitivities and skill sets that underlie effective cross-cultural teaching (p. 11). According to Cooper, He, and Levin (2011), cultural competence is a necessity in 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning. "Looking at data is not enough. We must know who our students are...educators need to develop critical cultural competence, a beyond-

knowledge understanding based on critical reflection of self, students, families, and communities” (Cooper et al., 2011, p. v). Research has established the importance of cultural competence to improving student achievement and as an asset to teaching and learning in classroom practices (*Hanover Research*, 2014, p. 3). Above all, culturally competent schools strive to promote a culture of inclusiveness and acceptance that values diversity (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 6).

The classroom experience is an integral component of education. It encompasses instructional practices, communication, connectivity, relationship-building, and culturally relevant pedagogy. “When examining the classroom experience, cultural competency equates to a teacher’s ability to successfully instruct and engage culturally different students” (Robinson, 2012, p. 4). Cultural competence is most directly impactful in the classroom environment, where educators employ their skills to work with diverse students (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 12). In matters of instructional practices, culturally competent teaching and learning facilitates critical reflection and engages students in self-awareness and reflection (Irish & Scrubb, 2012). In addition, communication plays a role in instructional practice in the culturally competent classroom environment. According to Morreale, Osborn, and Pearson (2000) communication is a large part of teaching and constitutes much of the success. “Competence in oral communication – in speaking and listening – is prerequisite to students’ academic, personal, and professional success in life” (p. 1). When it comes to communicating cross-culturally, it is important for both educator and student to connect for engagement and learning to occur. This connection is seen through the teacher-student relationship where there is a mutual respect and teachers are able to come up with the best and most effective teaching methods because they know their students well (Maison, 2017, para. 10). Moule (2012) discussed communication and cultural competence as the ability to effectively teach cross-culturally (p. 10). While instructional practices and

communication are key elements of the classroom experience, connectivity and relationship-building serve as foundational partnerships in cultural competence in the classroom experience. Hammond (2015) noted the importance of meaningful relationships and connectivity between student and teacher as the foundation of all social and cognitive endeavors (p. 73). “All human beings are hardwired for relationships” (Hammond, 2015, p. 73). Understanding all aspects of students helps teachers and students build the relationship necessary for academic achievement. Understanding students’ cultures enables this connectivity. It is imperative for teachers to familiarize themselves with a student’s culture so that behavior may be understood within its own cultural context (Moule, 2012, p. 16). When teachers understand their students’ culture, effective and inclusive curriculum planning can occur.

This understanding brings about the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy. The classroom experience has value in explaining differences in student outcomes when it comes to pedagogical educational processes and structures and can make a difference in student achievement (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 67). Culturally relevant pedagogy, a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1995, placed an emphasis on the needs of students from various cultures and is a way for schools to acknowledge the home-community culture of the students (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 67). Regarding the classroom experience, culturally relevant pedagogy allows for integration of cultural experiences, values, and understandings to take part in the teaching and learning environment (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 67). Instructional strategies, effective communication, relationships, and culturally sensitive curricula are critical to reach and teach all students through varied cultural lenses (Irish & Scrubb, 2012).

Independent schools are often noted as nonpublic institutions that are unaffiliated with any church or other agency (Kennedy, 2017). When public schools fail to help a child succeed and meet his or her potential, it is not uncommon for families to consider alternative options in



education as such as independent schools (Kennedy, 2017). As independent institutions are becoming more culturally diverse because of their student populations, the curriculum and instruction in some independent educational systems may lack culturally relevant content. This is in part because of the Eurocentrism in history and social studies that is already the norm (Washington, 2018). Eurocentrism in school environments is characterized by a lack of sensitivity in which teachers typically do not use culturally responsive teaching practices and the material used often does not represent individuals from diverse cultures (Savage, 2008, p. 1).

The author noted that the issue with a Eurocentric curriculum is that often the faces that students see in textbooks are those with whom they are unfamiliar (p. 8). Children are marginalized in classrooms that do not acknowledge their cultural values and beliefs (Gay, 2000). “The cultural awareness and skills that make people diversity competent are lacking today in a time when these qualities are most needed” (Hogan, 2013, p. 1). As a result, students often fail to see themselves in the curriculum, which hinders their ability to relate to content. The result of this lack of connection contributes to loss of focus and motivation. Washington (2018) wrote about the benefits of multicultural education. “Reading texts written by members of the ethnic groups that are underrepresented in school curricula improved the self-esteem of students of that ethnic group and caused all students to have a greater appreciation for cultural difference” (Washington, 2018, para. 13). Achievement and sense of self are at risk when students are unable to identify with the lessons presented to them. “Diversity in curricula is about more than just teaching a full view of history; it is proven to empower students of color” (Washington, 2018, para. 11). Culturally relevant pedagogy allows students the understanding that individually and collectively their voices are heard, that they matter, and that their presence and contributions are valued (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 73).

The aim of this research was to determine how cultural competence, when integrated in the classroom, can better serve all students by fostering improved relationships and creating a more inclusive and equitable community for more successful student outcomes. By reviewing the perceptions of students of color who identify themselves as either Asian, Black, or Latino(a) in an independent school, a better understanding of the lived experience itself could be acquired. Through understanding of these experiences, themes and trends were drawn upon to contrast with the predetermined themes in this study of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency. Outcomes from cultural competence may improve teacher and student relationships and cross-cultural understanding and could create an environment where multicultural learning is fostered. According to Hogan (2013) institutions cannot be culturally competent unless employees at every level develop cultural understanding and cultural competence (p. 2). When faculty and staff at every level develop this understanding, a movement towards a more equitable and inclusive environment formulates. Cultural competence can help educators' close achievement gaps through awareness of their own culture so that they may be effective with students from other cultures. Creating a more inclusive and equitable community within educational institutions promotes more successful student outcomes. According to the Michigan Department of Education (2016), when schools and leaders approach achievement gaps through the lens of cultural proficiency, they can delve into the underlying causes that may be unique for each demographic or cultural group. Creating an environment that would foster greater student engagement in classrooms ultimately benefits both educator and student. By understanding these underlying causes, school leaders can determine current practices and strategies to effectively support students, educators, families, and the community that is being served (Michigan Department of Education, 2016). Having a faculty that is culturally competent in their teaching connects students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance

styles to academic knowledge and intellectual tools in ways that legitimize what students know. Gay (2000) noted that embracing the sociocultural realities and histories of students through teaching enables students to learn and grow (p. 2). Cultural competence in education is imperative in an increasingly diverse world. Communities are changing. The diversity of the students is changing. Teaching practices cannot remain stagnant, nor can they continue to lack the attention to the many cultures that inhabit today's classrooms. For students to grow, educators too must grow.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem is that there is a lack of information about the experiences of students of color who identify themselves as Asian, Black or Latino(a) in independent schools in literature as it relates to cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy. Over the last 20 years, cultural competency work has flourished; however, education-based cultural competence literature has gained traction only recently (Robinson, 2012, p. 67). Perceptions from students of color about cultural competence in independent school environments are sparse in current research. Despite the shifts in demographic trends, there is very little motivational research that focuses on experiences of students of color (Kumar, Zusho, & Bondie, 2018, p. 78). In independent school environments socio-economic disparities may arise. These socio-economic differences can have an effect on students enrolled in independent schools (Connley, 2015). Independent school leaders need to have an awareness of cultural competency to support their students. Diversity happens when investments are made to create inclusive environments where sustainable relationships with diverse families of color are possible (Connley, 2015). In efforts to achieve this understanding, this study researched the perceptions students of color have about cultural competence in independent schools to help fill this void. The participants' experiences that were reflected in this study sought to add to the current research in education and cultural competence.

Through examination of the experiences, it was the hope of this research to better understand how instructional practice, communication, relationship-building, and culturally relevant pedagogy all played a role in the lived experience of students of color in independent schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand how students of color who identify themselves as Asian, Black, or Latino(a) perceive cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in the independent school setting. The focus of this study was on student perceptions of the practice of culturally responsive teaching and the effects of a culturally competent educator. Lee (2007) stated that “culturally responsive teaching helps to bridge different ways of knowing and engages students from non-dominant cultures” (p. 3). Lee (2007) continued, noting how “culturally responsive teaching creates these bridges and in doing so, offers the possibility for transformational knowledge that leads to socially responsible action” (p. 3). Through investigation of the effects of culturally responsive teaching, further knowledge about inclusivity in the educational environment could be obtained with qualitative anecdotal data. The results of this study sought to find a better understanding of the role of cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching that could influence best teaching and learning practices to aid in ensuring that all learners can be reached in the classroom.

### **Research Questions**

Understanding the framework for culturally responsive teaching and cultural competence will aid in its development and implementation in the independent school classroom. In addition, by examining student perceptions about their experiences in independent schools, the link between culture, classroom instruction, and engagement can be derived from evidence that cultural practices shape thinking processes, which serve as tools for learning within and outside of school (Hollins, 1999). Culturally responsive education recognizes, respects, and uses students'

identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning (Nieto, 2000). Essential questions surrounding cultural competence and the perceptions of students of color who identify themselves as either Asian, Black, or Latino(a) addressed the following:

1. What are the experiences of students of color in independent schools that reflect the level of proficiency in cultural competence and culturally relevant instruction of educators?
2. How does cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching aid historically underrepresented students of color?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was centered on the concepts of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency. All themes surrounded cultural competence, a phenomenon that was explored through the lens of students of color in independent schools. The focus was on students of color who identify as either Asian, Black, or Latino(a). These perceptions guided this study as the themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency were dissected through an adaptation from Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model where awareness and self-knowledge were perceived as processes one can go through in cultural competence development. Culturally responsive teaching and the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in curriculum was also examined as these are elements that are essential in cultural competence. Key factors in this study were the lived experiences of the participants. Through continued research in cultural competence, this study sought to unlock the benefit and success that cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching may bring to teaching and learning best practices in education.

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions within this study resided in the hopes that each student participant would be telling the truth and that they would have a genuine interest in the study. In addition, there was the belief that student participants had an investment in their education. It is believed that each student held a biased opinion about their community, education, and mission of the school. There was the expectation that students cared for the school and had a desire to help improve it through participation in this study. Finally, there was the notion that the input from student participants had merit and accepted that their reality was real. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) theorized that “Assumptions are so basic that, without them, the research problem itself could not exist” (p. 62). These assumptions were solely the researcher’s, and there existed a conjecture that each student’s experience was factual in his, her, or their own perception.

### **Limitations**

There were some limitations that illustrated considerations in this study that were measured. The limitations of this study stemmed from the number of willing participants that were able to be used, the amount of time dedicated to the study, and the fact that this study was limited to only one institution. Because participation was voluntary, the limits of the numbers of participants was dependent upon the number of students who chose to participate. Also, given the time constraints of the school year in relation to the research’s work timeline, further long-term investigation of the participants as they continue in school was desired, but was not applicable. Finally, the use of one independent institution limited some of the information in this study. The design of this study did not allow for administrative or educator input. This study did however include perceptions from current students of color in an independent school. These delimitations presented some limits in the scholarly research; however, they sought to not devalue the

importance of the impact of this work. The results of this study were generalizable for educators who teach in independent schools.

### **Scope of the Study**

Cultural competence was analyzed in this study. More specifically, the perceptions of students of color who identify themselves as Asian, Black, or Latino(a) in an independent school about cultural competence will be explored. The study consisted of the lived experiences of students of color in an independent school. Students of color in this research study represented students who identify as non-White. Through interviews, student perceptions and stories about their experiences in independent schools were collected and analyzed. The limits of the research resided in the sample size, time constraints, and geographic location of the research. A total of nine participants from grades nine through twelve were interviewed during the second trimester of the school year. These participants were enrolled in the same independent school, located in Texas. Selection of these participants was based on their years of attendance, their understanding and self-identification as a student of color, and their interest in participating in this study. High school-aged students were the focus of this study as they possessed a longer exposure to the school. A phenomenological research method was used for this study with emphasis on awareness and self-knowledge theories. In addition, themes surrounding equity and inclusion and cultural proficiency guided the study under the lens of cultural competence. The parameters under which this study operated were the effects of cultural competence on upper school students of color. Through the data collected from each participant's voice, patterns and themes acquired in each interview determined the role cultural competence played in the lived experience of students of color in independent schools.

## Significance

Understanding the perceptions of students of color about cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in the independent school settings was prominent in this study. The lack in information surrounding perceptions of students of color in literature presents a problem as it relates to understanding cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy. Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. (Ladson-Billings, 1994). With culture being at the forefront of teaching and learning, it is important for curriculum and instruction to be reflective of it. Kumar et al. (2018) suggested that culture is a construct that is not easily defined, despite general agreement with its importance, and it is the framework for all human life that consists of people using resources in their respective environments to achieve (p. 79). This study is significant because in today's growing and diverse communities in education, culture is at the core of learning as it is the way that every student makes sense of the world (Hammond, 2015, p. 22). It is the hope and goal of this research to provide valuable information for administrators and educators about diversity efforts in independent education.

## Definitions

A list of definitions is provided to highlight key terminology and concepts. For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were used:

**Achievement Gap.** The achievement gap in education refers to the disparity in academic performance between various groups of students. Often, it is the term used to describe the performance gaps between African-American and Hispanic students at the lower end of the performance scale, and their non-Hispanic white peers. The achievement gap also may refer to



the same disparity between students from low-income families and students from higher socioeconomic statuses (NEA, 2008).

**Cultural competence.** Cultural competence is a key factor in enabling educators to be effective with students from cultures different from their own. Cultural competence is having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about differences, and the ability to understand the differences that make each student unique. Understanding this informs and expands teaching practices in the culturally competent educator's classroom (NEA, 2017).

**Culturally responsive teaching (CRT).** Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that rests in the ideals of cultural competence and recognizes, responds to, and celebrates the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. CRT plays a role in communicating and receiving information and in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. Some characteristics of culturally responsive teaching are 1) positive perspective on parents and families, 2) communication of high expectations, 3) learning within the context of culture, 4) student-centered instruction, 5) culturally mediated instruction, 6) reshaping of the curriculum, and 7) teacher as facilitator (Education Alliance, 2018, para. 3).

**Community.** Within the educational environment, a community is an assemblage of the people intimately attached to a school – its teachers, administrators, students, and the students' families. This group of individuals work together along the premise of a shared mission statement and belief in similar core values and interests and share common beliefs for the success and security of the students they serve (Redding, 1991, p. 7-9).

**Cultural proficiency.** Cultural proficiency is a framework that promotes and affirms a diversity of perspectives, recognizing that everyone belongs to multiple demographic and cultural backgrounds (Michigan Department of Education, 2016).

**Culture.** Culture refers to a group of community which shares common experiences that shape the way its members understand the world. This also includes groups that we are born into, such as race, national origin, gender, class, or religion (Axner, n.d., para. 1).

**Independent school.** An independent school can be considered a private school and is not dependent upon the government. Independent schools have board of trustees that oversee the school's overall health, including finances, reputation, facilities, improvements, and other aspects of the school's success. Independent schools are accredited by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and they can create aspects of their organization on their own (Kennedy, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

While research on cultural competence in education has begun to cultivate, there still is a lack of information on the perceptions of cultural competence through the lens of the students who experience it. Specifically, there is little research on the lived experiences of students of color who identify themselves as Asian, Black or Latino(a) in independent school environments. The urgency for this study arose from the continued achievement gap amongst white students and students of color. "Diversity itself is not problematic, but white students and students of color do not have similar outcomes in schools" (Morley, 2006, p. 1). This study focused on the themes surrounding cultural competence. Awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency will serve as guides in the conceptual framework and will serve as key factors in understanding the perceptions of students of color in independent schools.

In Chapter 2, a closer look at the literature that defines the importance of cultural competence was examined. Foundational literature in addition to current literature was discussed and explored to further illustrate all aspects of cultural competence and the need for professional development among educators. The conceptual framework and themes presented in this chapter

were further investigated in chapter two as well. The third chapter presents the methodology that was used for this study, and the fourth chapter discussed the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data collected. The fifth chapter concluded with interpretation of the findings, the study's implications, recommendations, further studies, and conclusions.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study incorporated the topic of cultural competence. There are several overarching themes in cultural competence that will guide the research. Some of the first components of cultural competence are awareness and self-knowledge, as an educator's understanding of their own culture, in addition to others, widens the lens of the understanding of self and the students within the space of one's classroom. Equity and inclusion are natural components, aspects, and results from a culturally competent classroom. Cultural proficiency and a culturally responsive approach to teaching are also attributes of cultural competence. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of students of color who identify themselves as Asian, Black, or Latino(a) about cultural competence in independent schools. Significant changes are needed in the way African, Asian, Latino, and Native American students are taught in United States schools (Gay, 2010, p. xvii). Through examination of the experiences of students of color, a better understanding about the changes needed in the educational system could occur. This chapter explored the literature that framed the conceptual elements of cultural competence. These elements of cultural awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency are the theoretical parameters at which this study investigated when examining the experiences of students of color in independent schools. The research questions that were presented in this study were related to the perceptions of students of color about cultural competence in their independent school. Through the sharing of experiences, a reflection of the level of culturally relevant instruction and cultural competence of educators in their classrooms sought to be answered. In addition, the question of how cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching could aid students of color in the independent classroom helped build this

study. The rationale for the theme of cultural competence resided in teaching and learning best practices in independent school education. The hope was to provide insight and overview to this growing issue in education while proposing the need for additional research to be conducted. The desire was to also provide further understanding of the relationship between academic achievement and cultural competence in the classroom.

This chapter begins with a review of relevant research which includes prominent authors that contributed to the topic of cultural competence. In addition, further explanation of cultural competence in education and its components will be reviewed through the themes of awareness, self-knowledge and equity and inclusion. Culturally responsive teaching and cultural proficiency were presented as main components of cultural competence and provided insight towards the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom experience. A further discussion of cultural competence led into the issue of the achievement gap in education before the theoretical frameworks of the study were explained. Finally, this chapter will provide insight towards independent schools before moving on to the methods at which this research will use in the following chapter.

### **Review of Relevant Research**

To date, use of the concept of cultural competence in the context of research has been limited; however, with the rapid changes in the cultural diversity of the United States, it is anticipated that researchers will seek to better understand the role of racial and cultural differences among population groups (Harvard Catalyst, 2010, p. 5). Cultural competence research emerged as a solution to aiding educators with instructional practice within their diverse classroom environments. The goal of developing or enhancing educators' cultural competence is to impact instructional practices and to promote the achievement of students who are culturally,

ethnically, and linguistically diverse (Cooper, He, & Levin, 2011, p. 7). Successfully teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds involves more than just applying specialized teaching techniques (Hammond, 2015, p. 18). As classrooms become more diverse, cultural competence helps educators to be more effective with students from cultures that are different from their own. An effective and culturally competent education system must begin with unifying values about how to educate diverse communities (Moule, 2012, p. 13). This important research implemented by a few prominent authors has spearheaded a movement towards cultural competence.

### **Prominent Authors**

There are prominent authors, past and current, that have played an integral role in providing information on cultural competence. Perhaps one of the most notable authors and one that has laid the foundation for cultural competence is that of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995). In matters of cultural competence, Ladson-Billings (1995) suggested that culturally relevant teachers utilized students' culture as a vehicle for learning (p. 161). In addition, the pedagogy described was identified as *culturally relevant*, a term that was argued for its centrality in the academic success of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 159). Some of the more current research of Ladson-Billings (2009) noted the pedagogical practices of teachers who were successful with African American students. Cultural competence in the classroom was a common component of this success.

Geneva Gay (2010) also contributed much to the discussion of cultural competence. Gay (2010) described teaching as a personal endeavor and one that is best conveyed through personal stories (p. 215). Interpersonal relationships are at the core of much of the research in Gay's (2010) work. Students performed better in environments where they felt comfortable and valued

(p. 232). Connectivity in culturally responsive teaching is at the forefront of the work presented in Gay's (2010) research.

Both Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2010) discussed the significance of incorporating culture and culturally competent instruction in everyday teaching practices. Archambault (2015), acknowledged that self-knowledge and awareness were pinpointed as key components in moving towards cultural competence. Harding (2007) argued that gaining self-awareness helps educators notice diversity in the classroom and being self-aware allows educators to move forward in the process of cultural competence. Awareness and self-knowledge may be used as a foundation to better understand their own personal identity. Research provided by Archambault (2015) allowed readers and educators to explore elements of cultural competence to overcome assumptions, which in turn benefited the students. Cultural competence allows educators to understand and appreciate both their own backgrounds and those of others, including those vastly different from their own (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.). Archambault (2015) argued that differences encourage diversity of thought, which inspires students to think broadly. Furthermore, the research from both Harding (2007) and Archambault (2015) illustrated how behavior, belief, and attitudes all shape cultural competence. Cultural competence, a prominent theme among many authors, denoted an awareness of self and understanding and awareness of cultures different than one's own. Together these components work to create success in education. When educators utilize the aspects of cultural competence and develop these identities by becoming more reflective, understanding, and appreciative of their own and their students' cultural identities, a more inclusive classroom culture can be acquired (Kumar et al., 2018, p. 84).

## **Cultural Competence in Education**

Cultural competence is significant to the field of education because it allows educators to expand and grow in the classroom. It is a means for unleashing the higher learning potentials of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2010, p. 21). Developing a more culturally sensitive and aware curriculum in each subject, along with implementation of a more inclusive and equitable approach to teaching can close the achievement gap amongst marginalized students. Coggins and Campbell (2008) noted that the key to closing the achievement gap for minority students is to focus on cultural competence in curriculum and learning (p. 46). Placing students on an equal platform in the classroom enables education to be a key component in the lives of all students. The physical, mental and emotional aspects and well-being of a student are often met each day in the classroom for prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Cultural attributes of each student are also pertinent to reaching students. Through culturally competent instruction, the whole student can be met. While there is much international literature on cultural competence, there seems to be a lack of prominent information in the United States. Furthermore, there is a lack of information on student perceptions concerning the topic of cultural competence, especially in the independent school setting. While information and principles are frequently espoused in teacher education, there is a lack of research about cultural competence that enables educators to effectively teach diverse students in their classrooms (McAllister & Irvine, 2000, p. 3-4). “Students of color often perceive the campus climate more negatively than do their White counterparts” (Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012, p. 159).

## **Components of Cultural Competence**

Awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency are all components of cultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). In addition, culturally responsive



teaching and the use of a culturally responsive pedagogy also contribute to the components of cultural competence. Cultural competence begins with an awareness of a person's own cultural beliefs and practices. It recognizes that others believe in different realities and truths separate from their own. Cultural competence also implies that there is more than one way of doing the same thing in a right manner (Kohli, 2010). In a culturally competent classroom environment, all students can learn on an equal playing field, where understanding, awareness, and appreciation are at the core of teaching and learning. There is a need for implementing culturally appropriate services that is driven by the demographic realities of the United States (Kohli, 2010). As classrooms are becoming more diverse, teaching practices can no longer remain the same. This notion is illustrated through the foundational work of Cross (1988). Cultural competence in education is a movement that attempts to better serve minority student groups by building better relationships to help bridge the achievement gap (Cross, 1988). There are many components of cultural competence. Perhaps the most well-known, and the aspect of cultural competence that often instigates the process of becoming culturally competent, is awareness.

**Awareness.** Awareness was highlighted by Hammond (2015) as the first practice area of cultural competence. Awareness when it comes to successfully teaching students from culturally diverse backgrounds involves placing instruction within the larger sociopolitical context (p. 18). Hammond (2015) suggested that educators explore and develop their sociopolitical lens and consciousness through awareness that we live in a racialized society that gives unearned privilege to some while others experience unearned disadvantage due to race, gender, class, or language (p. 18). Stith-Williams and Haynes (2007) described awareness in education as an individual's willingness to confront her or his own attitudes, values, and biases that may influence the pedagogical process (p. 12). In addition, achieving awareness competencies means

that individuals will need to examine how they have obtained their attitudes and biases, how these biases impact the children they serve, and how they can eliminate those biases (Stith-Williams & Haynes, 2007, p. 12). Confrontation of these issues in the stage of awareness is integral to cultural competence (Stith-Williams & Haynes, 2007, p. 12). Hammond (2015) suggested that just as students need to have rich background for comprehension and problem solving, teachers need adequate background knowledge and usable information to know how to apply culturally responsive tools and strategies. Hammond (2015) continued to note that building background knowledge begins with becoming aware about the dimensions of culture as well as knowledgeable about the larger social, political, and economic conditions that create inequitable education outcomes.

In addition to awareness of how culture is constructed or the impact of larger social and political forces on learning, teachers must be aware of their beliefs regarding equity and culture (Hammond, 2015, p. 21-22). Awareness of self and having awareness for others outside of oneself are elements of being culturally competent that serve as a foundation for understanding this method of instruction. Jirwe, Gerrish, and Emami (2006) discussed the theoretical framework of awareness in their study on cultural competency in the medical field, concluding, “Awareness of the other is usually described as a parallel process to awareness regarding cultural values and beliefs” (p. 6). Cultural awareness requires self-knowledge and reflection. Becoming aware of personal cultural views, assumptions, attitudes and behaviors creates the ability to understand and identify one’s own beginnings as seen through the work of Hammond (2015). This in turn allows educators to understand and relate to others. In addition to awareness, self-knowledge, a form of reflection is a component of cultural competence that thematically helps to understand the broader scope of cultural competence.

**Self-knowledge.** Having a certain degree of understanding about oneself and a level of informed knowledge about oneself enables one to more clearly differentiate themselves from the rest of the world (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999, p. 210). Working towards understanding one's strengths and challenges regarding cultural competence comes from self-knowledge (Archambault, 2015). Furthermore, the author continued that this intent ensures that educators' understanding of their institutions and the way others within it embrace (or fail to embrace) diversity allows them to support students in their charge more effectively (p. 199). Archambault (2015) prefaced that understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions and adapting to diversity helps institutionalize cultural knowledge. Harding (2007) referenced in Archambault (2015) argued that gaining knowledge of self was just as important as understanding the students themselves (Archambault, 2015, p. 185). Ultimately, understanding one's experiences and bases of knowledge assist in moving toward cultural competence (p. 186). Reiche (2012) examined self-knowledge as a means to becoming culturally competent. "Understanding and becoming aware of one's own cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and judgements becomes central when we have to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds" (para. 5). Reiche (2012) explained the importance of this self-reflection and self-knowledge as imperative because these values and beliefs shape our perceptions and define the way we see the world (para. 5). It is important to examine diversity-related values and beliefs to recognize any deep-seated prejudices that may create barriers for teaching and learning (Klaiber & Vacin, n.d., para. 1).

**Equity and Inclusion.** Equity, another word for fairness, is an approach that recognizes that different people will need different amounts of support in order to overcome systemic barriers (OpenCon, 2017, p. 3). Inclusion takes equity one step further in that it is designed to create welcoming spaces, communities, events, or solutions for people from a wide range of

backgrounds (OpenCon, 2017). As prominent components in cultural competence, equity and inclusion represent themes that aid in successful classrooms. Inclusion is an active approach that is intentional and can aid in engagement in the classroom. Cultural competence for equity and inclusion represents the ability to thrive in culturally diverse environments by enacting a commitment to fairness and to the full participation of all members (Goodman, 2013). By viewing student perceptions about the role equity and inclusion play in education, a better understanding of cultural competence can be obtained. Salend (2008) specified that fostering equity was an integral part of creating an inclusive classroom (p. 134). When it comes to equitable and inclusive practices, actions such as avoiding grouping students based on gender and race, holding high expectations for all students, countering stereotypes, using textbooks, lessons, and teaching materials that include contributions of all groups, and learning about beliefs, traditions, and customs of all students in the classroom can all aid in creating a more inclusive environment (Salend, 2008, p. 134). Employing equitable and inclusive actions and processes in classroom behaviors can aid in creating environments conducive to learning for students of color.

**Cultural Proficiency.** Cultural proficiency is a mind-set, a worldview, and a way a person or an organization can respond, and plan for issues that arise in diverse environments (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 4). In education, cultural proficiency illustrates a competency in understanding the importance of effectively working with other cultures. Landa (2011) explained this competency and presented the theme of cultural proficiency in education in her work. The author termed cultural proficiency as referring broadly to the ability of educators who successfully serve children and youth from all the cultural backgrounds represented within the school population and those students who are growing up in non-dominant culture contexts

(Landa, 2011, p. 12). Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003) defined cultural proficiency as “recognizing the differences among students and families from different cultural groups...responding to those differences positively [and] being able to interact effectively in a range of cultural environments” as the three conditions of cultural competence (p. 12). Also, in the work shared by Lindsey, Roberts, and Campbell Jones (2005), cultural proficiency represents a more advanced state of cultural competence in which educators are not only able to effectively work with diverse populations but also believed that diversity adds positive value to the educational enterprise. The essential elements of cultural proficiency provided by Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2009) give insight towards the standards for individual values and behavior that are culturally proficient. Individuals who possess the ability to assess culture, value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, adapt to diversity, and institutionalize cultural knowledge are described as individuals who are culturally proficient (p. 7).

### **Cultural Competence in Independent Schools**

Considering issues of diversity should be an important part of continuing the growth in the understanding of cultural competence. Developing awareness and self-knowledge ultimately leads to a more culturally proficient and competent individual. While this research presents the benefits of what culturally responsive teaching and learning may bring as positive, there seems to be a need for further study of marginalized students in independent schools. Ohikuare (2013) wrote on the experiences of Idris Brewster and his friend, Seun Summers who entered kindergarten at a prestigious prep school in the late 1990s in New York City. The article, and later film, *American Promise*, followed these two young students from elementary all the way to their high school years and documented the trials and hardships they encountered as the only students of color in Dalton Private School in those twelve years. The cultural transition into

Independent school setting can be just as difficult for adults as it is for their children (Ohikuare, 2013). Cultural competence was explored through the eyes of the student in Ohikuare's (2013) research. Through personal accounts and qualitative anecdotal data, the damages of educators with closed eyes to diversity are portrayed. The issues of the achievement gap continue to be prevalent in public and private institutions today. Still, until recently, minority children who entered independent schools were not engaging with already-diverse environments as much as creating diversity simply by being present (Ohikuare, 2013).

Future studies of marginal groups in independent settings may ultimately aid in completing the research on cultural competency. It is the intention of this study to examine students' perceptions of the level of culturally competent instruction that they feel they received in their independent school environment, and the level of importance and validity that it holds for them. It is not enough to simply study the standardized test scores and dropout rates, as it is to collectively work to gain insight from these groups in all educational platforms. "It's not just about opening doors and creating a 'diverse' environment. It's about putting all the cards on the table about what it takes so that you're striving toward true equity in the educational journey" (Ohikuare, 2013, para. 38). Shunnarah (2008), an educator from the International Community School (I.C.S.), wrote on cultural competence in a New York Times article in the opinion pages. Shunnarah (2008) stated,

Developing cultural competence is a process of inner growth. In order for me to be as effective as possible with the students I work with, I must continuously engage in a process of self-reflection. To be able to know others...one must know the self. (para. 6)

Cultural competence is not something that necessarily can be learned or taught, but rather it is a process that educators can go through by way of self-exploration. Moule (2012) defined

cultural competence as a process where empathy can be developed to gain an appreciation for the life experiences of those who are culturally different for effective teaching (p. 6). Growth and a willingness to open mindsets or preconceived notions are starting points to building a more culturally competent mindset. In hindsight, the outcome of exposing oneself to new ideas in cultural competency is a stronger, more inclusive and equitable classroom environment for all students. At a deeper and foundational level of cultural competence, the need to teach all students successfully is connected to the ability to give each student value, regardless of differentiated circumstances (Moule, 2012).

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a means for unleashing the higher learning potentials of ethnically diverse students by cultivating their academic abilities (Gay, 2010). Thompson (2010) analyzed the inclusive nature of the students after each test with their classmates to explain the importance of CRT in education.

Sociometric questionnaires were used to collect data on mutual friendships.

Observations of students in lunchroom settings were also conducted. Findings from the sociometric questionnaire suggest that students with culturally competent teachers, also referred to as culturally responsive teachers in the literature, have broader and more diverse social networks than students in classrooms with not trained teachers...other than training in diversity issues, teachers in the two groups were very similar. (Thompson, 2010, p. 4-5)

CRT was designed to reach all students in a classroom. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, n.d.) stated that culturally competent educators recognize and respect the importance of the values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and parenting styles of the

children and families they serve (Thompson, 2010). Being aware of their own culture in addition to those of the students in their classroom enables culturally impactful teaching and learning practices to take place in otherwise traditional classroom instruction. Teaching from a multicultural perspective enables all learners to see themselves in the curriculum, creating motivated learners. Howard (2007) outlined five phases (as cited in Thompson, 2010) in which the professional development of CRT may benefit marginalized students. These five phases describe the building blocks needed to build cultural competence:

Phase 1. Building trust among stakeholders is critical to develop the positive climate essential for addressing the challenges ahead.

Phase 2. Engaging personal culture is important so that building authentic relationships across differences is possible.

Phase 3. Confronting issues of social dominance and social justice is necessary to create inclusive and equitable schools.

Phase 4. Transformation of instructional practices must occur so that the needs of diverse learners are met.

Phase 5. Engaging the entire school community so that all families feel welcome. (p. 12)

The phases contribute to the understanding and implementation of CRT in education.

Educator programs are ways teachers can become culturally competent to better serve their students in the classroom. Thompson (2010) described culturally relevant pedagogy as resting on three primary propositions: “Students must experience academic success, students must develop and maintain their cultural competence, and students must develop a critical consciousness to challenge the status quo” (p. 14). The work of Gay (2010) found that when instructional processes are consistent with cultural orientations, experiences, and learning styles of African,



Latino, Asian, and Native American students who have been marginalized, they show significant improvement in school. “It is important that all teachers, regardless of their ethnicity, be taught and held accountable for culturally responsive teaching for diverse students. All teachers must be prepared to teach all students in our increasingly diverse world” (Thompson, 2010, p. 15).

Hammond (2015) tackled culturally responsive teaching through neuroscience in efforts to explain the gap that occurs amongst dominant and marginal students. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, Hammond (2015) stated:

The chronic achievement gap in most American schools has created an epidemic of dependent learners unprepared to do the higher order of thinking, creative problem solving, and analytical reading and writing called for in the new Common Core Standards... Classroom studies document the fact that underserved English learners, poor students, and students of color routinely receive less instruction in higher order skills development than other students. Their curriculum is less challenging and more repetitive... this type of instruction denies students the opportunity to engage in what neuroscientists call productive struggle that grow our brainpower. As a result, a disproportionate number of culturally and linguistically diverse students are dependent learners. (p. 12)

Hammond (2015) continued to stress the impact of the achievement gap through research and data on marginalized groups and the numbers that demonstrate this gap. Most studies attribute this gap to the culture of poverty as Hammond (2015) mentioned:

The reality is that they struggle not because of their race, language, or poverty. They struggle because we don't offer them sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop

the cognitive skills and habits of mind that would prepare them to take on more advanced academic tasks. That's the achievement gap in action. The reasons they are not offered more opportunities for rigor are rooted in the education system's legacy of 'separate and unequal'...As educators, we have to recognize that we help maintain the achievement gap when we don't teach advanced cognitive skills to students we label as 'disadvantaged' because of their language, gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Many children start school with small learning gaps, but as they progress through school, the gap between African American and Latino and White students grows because we don't teach them how to be independent learners. (Hammond, 2015, p. 14)

Hammond (2015) continued research on dependent and independent learners through exploration of mindsets and neuroscience. The author framed cultural competence as a process rather than a strategy and attributed collectivism as a component of cultural competence. "A key organizing principle of culturally responsive teaching is collectivism – a focus on group independence, harmony, and collaborative work" (Hammond, 2015, para. 7). Recognizing that individualism and collectivism exist on a continuum, as the author suggested, aids in reaching all learners in classroom settings. Dominant cultures have been proven to be more individualistic and competitive in nature, while cultures of many African American, Latino, Pacific Islander, Native America, and Asian communities lean towards collectivism, also called communalism (Hammond, 2015). Understanding this, helps frame how educators may shape their classrooms. Reframing how educators approach teaching is another dimension to achieve cultural competency. "In a collectivist, community-based culture, relationships are the foundation of all social, political, and cognitive endeavors. In a culturally responsive classroom, we need a less authoritative relationship with students" (Hammond, 2015, para. 9). A learning partnership that

supports students is an approach that is expressed in much of Hammond's research. This partnership enables students to take more ownership of their personal learning journey.

Finally, Hammond (2015) discussed integration of cultural learning tools into instructional repertoire and CRT. "While the achievement gap has created the epidemic of dependent learners, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is one of our most powerful tools for helping students find their way out of the gap" (Hammond, 2015, p. 15). Hammond's (2015) research has demonstrated through student accounts that CRT education strengthened their connectedness with the school they attended and enhanced their learning (p. 15).

Through this method and ideology of instructing through awareness of self and others, cultural competence and CRT teaching go hand in hand. Siwatu (2007) presented research on culturally responsive teaching and self-efficacy based on the work of Geneva Gay (2010). This work emerged from a concern over the schooling of students of color. The author advocated for implementation of equitable and culturally sensitive instructional practices. The data for this research studied a population of preservice teachers enrolled in education programs in the Midwest. Participants were asked to teach a sample of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Participants were given a packet of questionnaires to complete after each teaching session. The *Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcome Expectancy Scale* (CRTOE) was used to estimate given behaviors and what outcomes would transpire from the list of questions used in teaching lessons among test groups (Siwatu, 2007). High scores on the CRTOE indicated a greater belief in the positive outcomes associated with culturally responsive teaching. The results of the tests concluded that when educators were culturally competent, better teaching and learning outcomes occurred (Siwatu, 2007). "Culturally responsive teaching was highest for the ability to help students feel like important members of the classroom, and educators were able to

develop a personal relationship with students” (Siwatu, 2007, p. 1). Overall positive student outcomes were associated with CRT. Vavrus (2002) described CRT as an educational reform. The author (2002) stated “Culturally responsive teaching is designed to help empower children and youth by using meaningful cultural connections to convey academic and social knowledge and attitudes” (p. 49). CRT has best been known as a response to the failings of traditional curricular methods for marginalized groups in education. The United States’ student body continues to grow more culturally and racially diverse (Vavrus, 2002; Washington, 2018). The largely unchanged demographic of educators shows that almost 90% identify as White. Vavrus (2002) stated, “CRT recognizes that the cultural identity of most teachers is significantly different than their increasingly diverse student populations...education is a form of cultural expression, which left unexamined by classroom teachers, can create a disconnect for historically marginalized students” (p. 50). Exploration of the democratic citizenry and goals for low-status students was covered to provide insight upon the need for CRT. By identifying dominant practices in addition, Vavrus (2002) unraveled issues of political dominance and oppression in education. CRT practitioners can acquire a knowledge base that helps explain the existence of inequalities that can negatively affect academic achievement of culturally diverse students (Vavrus, 2002, p. 52). Through application of case study research, CRT was further explored to suggest its positive remnants. Redford (2017) stated that there was a need for teachers to develop or adopt curriculum that supports and emphasizes cultural capacity. Building these aspects of CRT into classroom settings offers more room for inclusive education practices.

### **Professional Development**

Skill-building through professional development that reinforces culturally competent classroom practices is a method of support for educators (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 10). There

are professional development models for educators, as discussed in Landa's (2011) research, that aid in educating teachers in cultural competence. The author continued that these professional development opportunities should be self-driven. Duke (2007) noted that the professional development should provide opportunity for immediate application of the new skills in the classroom and should foster critical reflection. When it comes to cultural proficiency, professional development for educators is imperative to build the skills and awareness related to issues such as culture, language, race, and ethnicity (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005, p. 1). Trumbull and Pacheco (2005) of The Education Alliance at Brown University wrote, "It is critical for teachers to meet the learning needs of those students for whom disparities in achievement still persist" (p. 13). Students most in need were identified as most often being African American, American Indian, or from immigrant or migrant families (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005).

Significant numbers of teachers who work in low-performing schools fall into the category of teachers that were the least prepared to work with students who needed help the most (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Many teachers simply need the resources, knowledge, and skills necessary to work with students with varying backgrounds from their own, which may be obtained through professional development models.

Professional development, coupled with awareness, self-reflection, and the desire to create inclusive environments all constitute the overarching ideas of cultural competence. Hunter and Krantz (2010) suggested that the movement from cultural incompetence to cultural proficiency begins with background experiences of an individual and proceeds in a nonlinear fashion through "cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skill" (Hunter & Krantz, 2010, p. 5). These elements symbolize processes educators may take to combat the challenge within one of the most talked about components of culturally competency, the achievement gap.

## **Cultural Competence and The Achievement Gap**

The achievement gap is among the most significant aspects in cultural competence, as it directly affects the lives of marginal groups of students (NEA, 2008). Most commonly, the term *achievement gap* refers to the disparities or differences in scores between student groups in varying demographics on state or national achievement tests (NEA, 2008). Research on achievement gaps has shown large persistent test score disparities between White, Black, and Hispanic students, as well as between students with varying socio-economic status (Valent & Newark, 2017).

The National Education Association (NEA) (2008) broadened the term achievement gap to include the gaps in high school graduation, college degrees, and employment. In addition, access to quality education and teachers is included in this gap. The NEA believed that students living in poverty and English language learners are at risk of experiencing these achievement gaps. The NEA supports cultural competence, as their members believe that the appreciation of diverse cultures is a core value. NEA President Dennis Van Roekel (n.d.) has noted, “Educators with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to value diversity among students will contribute to an educational system designed to serve all students well” (“Van Roekel,” n.d., para. 1).

One interesting notion of the NEA’s stance on cultural competency is that educators are required to meet accountability requirements. Educators are required in public institutions to increase all students’ performance and reduce achievement gaps. While this provides a solid foundation of hope for public institutions, this leaves private institutions without repercussions. Brace (2011) continued the research by examining the achievement gap through standardized testing. “A definitive gap in the average achievement scores of African American and White students relating to their performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP) standardized test. In general, White students' average score was higher than the average score of Black students" (Brace, 2011, p. 17). In addition to viewing test scores, Brace (2011) argued that viewing school dropout and graduation rates, along with numbers of students in gifted programs are all ways in which the achievement gap can be identified and studied. Howard and Gay (2010) discussed the achievement gap through the importance of culture. An analysis and understanding of culture and race were described as a critical part of school reform that was designed to narrow the achievement gap between students of color and mainstream students (p. xi). Howard and Gay (2010) continued that the critical issue of culture, often absent from debates is a thorough analysis of culture as a cause and potential solution to closing achievement gaps (p. xvii).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Based on cultural competence research (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Howard, 2007; Gay, 2010), several essential themes emerged. The themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency framed the research in this study. These themes were foundational to the development of cultural competence and necessary skills needed in implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in teaching. Building upon the research of the aforementioned authors, the cultural competence approach offers practical and comprehensive guidelines for teacher educators, who are fostering their students' abilities to teach children from a broad range of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds (Landa & Stephens, 2017, p. 56). The framework of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency illustrates that cultural competence is a process (Deardorff, 2006). Cultural competence theorists such as Deardorff (2006) created the intercultural competence model believed that there is no one point at which an individual becomes completely culturally

competent, but rather, develops a process where one can acquire knowledge, skill, and attitudes in the development toward cultural competence. By framing the acquisition of cultural competence as a developmental process, Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model offered an approach for preparing educators to work with children from a wide range of identities (Landa & Stephens, 2017).



*Figure 1.*  
Student Perceptions about Cultural Competence in the Independent School Classroom: Cultural competence process orientation model. Adapted from Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model.

## **Conclusion**

Key themes that emerged in this chapter were the concepts of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency. The conceptual framework of these themes was presented through an adaptation of Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model. These



themes, through the lens of the Deardorff (2006) model were presented as processes in cultural competence development. These processes guided this study as perceptions of students of color were examined in the independent school experience. This study added to the topic of cultural competence through the discernment of students of color in the independent school realm.

Chapter 3 describes the proposed case study research that focuses on the experiences of the students of color who identify themselves as Asian, Black, or Latino(a) specifically. Emphasis on the phenomena of cultural competence in education through the perceptions of students of color guided this phenomenological study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand how students of color perceive cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in the independent school setting. The focus was on students of color who identify as Asian, Black, and Latino(a). The research questions addressed the experiences of students of color in independent schools that reflected the level of proficiency in cultural competence and culturally relevant instruction of educators and explored how cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching aided historically underrepresented students of color. This study attempted to answer these questions to identify themes that were presented in each student's experience. In this study student perceptions influenced the work in efforts to bring light to the importance of cultural competence in education. The methodology of this study was through the lens of phenomenology. The conceptual framework surrounding cultural competence that guided this study included the concepts of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency. These themes operated under the premise that they are each processes in cultural competence development. The notion of this process derived from Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence was sought after in an investigation of the perceptions of students of color in independent schools. The worthiness of this study was to bring awareness to environments of learning.

In this study, a qualitative phenomenological research design with emphasis on the perceptions of students of color acquired through a survey and individual interviews was used. A qualitative phenomenological approach allowed students to discuss perceptions of cultural competence in the classroom. Using a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to develop perspectives of individual experiences through semi-structured interviews and depict the

meaning of their lived experiences through the interpretive process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 33). Students of color had the opportunity to express their perceptions of the level of cultural competence displayed in classroom experiences confidentially. Students reflected on their distinct experiences in the classroom based on their relationships with their teachers and understanding of the successful use of culturally relevant pedagogy and instructional methods. Phenomenological research involves studying a small number of subjects through engagement to develop patterns and essential themes that constitute the nature of this lived experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 32). The themes and patterns that emerged from interviews were used to examine the phenomena of cultural competence. Experience accounts from students enabled for further investigation of cultural competence.

### **Setting**

Rivercreek Independent School (Rivercreek) was a pseudonym for the site of this study. The purposive selection of this school was based on the diverse population of the student body, its affiliation with the Independent School Association of the Southwest, and its mission statement and commitment to diversity. Located in the northern region of Texas, Rivercreek is a Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade coeducational independent day school. With over 1,200 students, there are over 45% students of color with the average class size consisting of roughly 16 to 18 students per classroom. The full-time faculty includes 170 members with 26% identifying as faculty of color. Rivercreek holds a membership with the Independent School Association of the Southwest (ISAS), and compliance with National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) accreditation practices, all of which were factors in its selection.

Another factor in choosing this site for research was the school's rich and comprehensive statement on diversity, multi-cultural education, and equity and inclusion initiatives.

Rivercreek's mission statement is centered on diversity, community, and the quest for excellence. It can be said that society is living in a time of growth and change in education. Rivercreek is known to be one of these institutions. Rivercreek describes itself as a coeducational independent school that provides exceptional opportunities for achievement. The school exhibits itself as bringing together diverse students; teachers with expertise both in their disciplines and in child development; a dynamic curriculum that embraces the liberal arts and sciences, fine arts, and athletics; and a commitment to equity and inclusion. Throughout the history of Rivercreek, diversity has always been at the forefront. Affinity groups, a department specifically dedicated to equity and inclusion, and in-house professional development models are all aspects within this school that are designed to aid in its proposed mission to support all learners on campus.

### **Participants**

All participants within this study were students of Rivercreek who either identified themselves as Asian, Black, or Latino(a). Currently at Rivercreek, there are several race-based affiliated affinity groups within the Middle and Upper school divisions. Affinity groups are voluntary and led by teachers dedicated to providing the students of color with a safe place for any needed support. Recruitment of student participants were drawn from these affinity groups. While many of the students within affinity groups used the space to tell their stories and solicit advice from like-minded individuals, students had the opportunity to re-tell stories and express perceptions by participating in this research voluntarily and confidentially.

Recruitment of student participants occurred through affinity group association. This happened by the researcher visiting student affinity group members and asking for volunteers for this research study. A handout (Appendix A) outlining the study and its intent, along with parental consent forms (Appendix B) and student assent forms (Appendix C) was sent home with

students. With parental consent and student assent, nine students ranging from grades nine through twelve volunteered to participate in interviews, and 25 students volunteered to take the survey (Appendix D). The criteria for selection of participants were as follows:

- All student participants are enrolled in the Rivercreek Independent School for at least one year at the time of the study.
- All student participants classify or identify as students of color either Asian, Black, or Latino(a).
- All student participants are in Upper School and are at least 15 years old.

Rivercreek Independent School operates on a trimester system. During the second trimester, approximately one month was used to sample this site.

### **Participant Rights**

The rights of each participant were considered in this research study. Participants were invited through affinity groups and direct recruitment and ensured confidentiality. The research process involved enlisting voluntary cooperation, informing participants about the purpose, and protecting the participants by the way that their information is treated (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Information was protected through use of pseudonyms and confidential interview sessions. All participants were informed of the researcher's intentions through a handout given before the start of the research process (Appendix A). The informed consent and assent forms (Appendix B and C) contained information on the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, foreseeable risks and discomforts, the benefits of the study, length of time of the study, contact information, and finally voluntary and confidentiality statements. The student assent process consisted of a discussion between students and researcher where a review and conversation about the study will occur with participants. Explanation of the one on one

interviews was noted within this discussion. Time was taken to ensure that participants understood all aspects of the study. A copy of the signed forms was provided along with contact information in the case that the participant had any questions later.

### **Data**

Data collection was conducted using surveys and interviews. The data sources required for this phenomenological study consisted of the student survey form (Appendix D), and the interview questions (Appendix E) that were used to acquire students' responses. This study used two approaches towards data collection:

- Student Surveys: A survey was used to collect data about how students experience diversity in school.
- Semi-structured Interviews: A guided and prompted interview with upper school students was conducted one on one in the school's confidential conference room with the exception of one interview session conducted with two students.

### **Surveys**

The survey for this study was developed using the Positive School Climate Tool Kit from the National Center for Cultural Competence and the Minneapolis Public Schools (Minneapolis Public Schools, n.d.). The survey was administered by the researcher during a time convenient to the students and lasted approximately 15 minutes. Selection for interviews was dependent on responses of students from the surveys and their desire to participate in an interview.

Consideration for interviews was given to students who expressed knowledge of the meaning of cultural competence and/or students who were interested in continuing a conversation on cultural competence.

## **Interviews**

Interviews in phenomenology are usually open-ended to allow the participants to fully describe the experience from their own viewpoint (Grand Canyon University, n.d.). Interviews were conducted with student participants independently. Two students however expressed a desire to be together during their interview session. This request was granted by the researcher. Prior to the interviews, semi-structured questions were developed to guide the discussion (Appendix D). The interview prompts were derived in part from the Diversity Tool Kit from the National Center for Cultural Competence and the Minneapolis Public Schools Positive School Climate Tool Kit (Minneapolis Public Schools, n.d.). Section F of the tool kit provided questions for use with students on cultural competence. The interview sessions lasted between 30 to 60 minutes depending on the organic evolution of the discussion. Interviews were conducted using the researcher's recording device so that coding of the conversation could happen later. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed through Rev.com, a service for transcribing audio files.

## **Analysis**

Through analysis of each survey and interview, common themes were identified to understand how students perceived their experiences in independent school environments. This analysis was a process consisting of organizing the data. This organization involved interpreting each response to see how language reflected each theme. Using the data collection models from the National Center for Cultural Competence adapted from the Minneapolis Public Schools Positive School Climate Tool Kit (Minneapolis Public Schools, n.d.), the predetermined themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency were identified. The use of predetermined themes allowed interpretation of each response to see how the language

reflected each theme. As with all qualitative inquiry, the data can be segmented into themes and the coding of the responses may be placed into categories (Creswell, 2015, p. 513). Data analysis followed Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) step by step process of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore in detail how participants perceived and made sense of their life-world (p. 53). Finding the meaning in each response was acquired by keeping a list of words and ideas that consistently arose. Discovering patterns was the main objective in data analysis. In efforts to make sense of large amounts of qualitative data, significant identification of trends and patterns were coded by sorting through the interview transcripts provided. The coding process involved a synthesis of similar themes, patterns, and sentiments that were linked to cultural competence. QDA Miner Lite software for coding was used to help assess these themes and their relationship to the data. The steps involved in data analysis started with reading and re-reading, initial noting of the development of emergent themes, a search for connections across themes, moving to the next case, and then looking for patterns across all cases (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 82-107). According to Saldaña (2013), a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically can account for a portion of language-based or visual data from a transcript. Categories were assigned after the coding process to further identify major themes for cultural competence. Themes in contemporary trends in diversity, and equity and inclusion initiatives were assessed and searched for in each interview transcript. Making sense of data collected was the main priority in data analysis. The predetermined themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency set the tone for analyzing the data; however, the study was open to any new themes or trends that arose.



### **Analysis of Surveys**

The student surveys (Appendix D) that were analyzed were developed from the Minneapolis Public Schools' Positive School Climate Tool Kit and validated from the National Center for Cultural Competence (Minneapolis Public Schools, n.d.). Through the use of REDCap software, each survey was generated, and a link was provided for students to use. This link was emailed to the 25 students who returned sign consent and assent forms. While the survey did not directly measure a student's understanding of cultural competence, it did serve as a representation for understanding the belief and sentiments of student perceptions surrounding their feelings of acceptance or level of comfort in independent schools. Patton (2009) suggested six types of questions that touched on experience and behavior, opinion and values, feelings, knowledge, sensory, and background and demographic questions (p. 349). These sentiments were analyzed based on the predetermined themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency. Each survey question contained a variable that was set-up through REDCap. The data from the surveys was analyzed by first organizing the responses. Surveys were administered electronically, and the results were tallied electronically through REDCap software. These results were electronically placed in a table through REDCap where the data was segmented and coded to identify patterns and themes by hand. This organizing was done through listing the topics and themes, along with the responses. Concepts that emerged from responses were listed as well. Frequent responses to questions were noted as those later aided in the building of overarching themes.

### **Analysis of Interview Transcripts**

Data for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix E) with the nine students of color from grades nine through twelve was analyzed through a thematic lens. Themes that emerged from the

literature review determined patterns that supported the validity of cultural competence. Through open-ended questions and specific guided questions, information on student perceptions of cultural competence was acquired. When analyzing each interview, audio transcribing was used to aid in the transcription process. With a 12-hour turnaround, information was sent to the transcription service, Rev.com by the researcher via the University of New England email server and received back through email from Rev.com. QDA Miner Lite software facilitated the analysis and the coding process. While analysis of beliefs and opinions may prove challenging, the themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency served as a guide in locating patterns and themes in the responses of the interview participants. Categorizing participant responses through the predetermined themes in each interview guided the analysis. Using Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) step-by-step method for interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher searched for themes in the first interview. After reading the transcript several times, annotation of any themes, concepts, or interesting responses was noted in a table. Emergent themes were written down along with frequently used words and phrases. A list was kept of these themes for each transcribed interview. All emergent themes in each transcript were placed together on another table to begin the process of locating connections between them.

### **Potential Limitations of the Study**

Potential limitations of this study included the use of one institution for conducting research and the use of nine student participants in that institution for interviews. The surveys provided information from a broader population than just the interviewees; however, there was still a limitation based on the single location and size of the pool. In deciding to use one institution rather than several in the northern Texas region, this study lent itself to possible

limitations in acquiring enough data to support the assumption that cultural competence or the lack thereof affected students of color in independent school environments.

As a researcher and educator of color conducting this research, there was the possibility for bias. This may have presented a limitation. The intent was to allow the data to speak for itself, by use of reflexivity and the process of bracketing. Biases, along with personal experiences and preconceived notions about cultural competence, were managed through this process of bracketing. This was done through journal writing and drafting memos during data collection. It was the researcher's commitment to allow the voices of the participants to be heard in this research.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described this study's research design. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to examine student perceptions of their lived experiences in independent school environments in relation to cultural competence and culturally responsive instruction. There currently is a lack of information in the literature about the experiences of students of color who identify as Asian, Black, and Latino(a) in independent schools as it relates to cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy. The purpose of this study was to understand how students of color perceived cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in the independent school setting. Chapter 4 provides the findings and further explanation of this phenomena from the data that was acquired in this study.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

While research in cultural competence continues to gain traction, there still is a lack of research on the perceptions of students of color on the topic of cultural competence. Even more so, fewer studies were found that exhibit the lived experiences of students of color that identify as Asian, Black, or Latino(a) in independent school environments. This study sought to explore how students of color in the independent school environment perceived cultural competence in their classroom experiences.

Participant responses were used to highlight the findings from each interview in order to uncover themes that were identified in the literature review. By uncovering the themes and subthemes that came about from each participant's story and survey, a relationship with the predetermined themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency was determined.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis Overview**

Twenty-five participants took the survey and nine students out of the 25 further participated in the study through interviews. Seven students participated in individual interviews, while two students asked to be interviewed together in a group with the researcher. Surveys and questionnaires, which are traditionally used as quantitative instruments can also be used in conjunction with qualitative methods to provide corroboration and/or supportive evidence in research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 108). In this research study, surveys provided the researcher with further insight into the lived experiences of the participants and often complimented the narratives given. The advantage of use of a survey is that it is relatively unobtrusive and is easily administered and managed; however, it can also be limiting in

determining complex social relationships or intricate patterns of interaction (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 120-121). After the completion of the surveys, nine students verbally expressed interest to the researcher in continuing on to an interview. Four participants had recently turned 18 during the 2018-2019 school year, and there were five participants that were under the age of 18. Parental consent was gained prior to the start of surveys and interviews. A level of trust and comfort was established by allowing the participant the option to choose the space on their campus to conduct the interview. The comfort level of each student was of the utmost importance to the researcher.

It was through these interviews that data about the lived experiences of each participant was acquired. With the use of REDCap, variables had been identified at the beginning of the construction of the survey. Each question within the survey represented a variable. Acceptance, respect, school climate, teacher competency, teacher expectations, fairness, representation, representations in textbooks, cultural assignments, and teacher intervention all presented the variables asked about in each survey. Interview questions were divided up into three parts. The first section of all interviews asked participants to describe their ethnicity, along with thoughts on education in general and how their identity played a role in their educational experience at Rivercreek. The second section of the interview called for a broader perspective of the relationship's participants had formed with their teachers at Rivercreek. Lastly, in the final set of questions in each interview session, the researcher asked each participant to share a specific example of a time when the participant was hurt or offended due to their race or ethnicity. Each interview was concluded with a question about each participant's overall sentiments about their experience in an independent school, whether it be positive or negative as a whole. While much of the interview process evolved organically as the student responded to questions, an

informational and conversational interview process took shape throughout each session. Following transcription of the interviews, each transcript was then placed in the QDA Miner Lite program for assistance with coding. All names of participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of each participant. Five participants out of the nine interviewed verified the correctness of the transcript. Only one member check was conducted in this research project with participants as the interview sessions occurred within the same time frame as final exams for all participants. Due to time constraints, participants were offered one week to respond to the researcher about verification of transcripts. Two out of the five participants who responded had minor edits to the transcripts while four never responded.

Each transcript was read a significant number of times. The researcher familiarized herself with each transcript and noted significant and interesting items within each transcript. After note taking, emergent themes were identified in each transcript. These emergent themes were noted on the right side of the transcript while general notes remained present on the left side. Connection of the themes was acquired by listing all themes found in every transcript on a separate sheet of paper. Similarities could be sought out once all were visible on the same page. Using the sequence in which each theme appeared, the themes were written down. The next stage involved making sense of the connections between themes which were emerging (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009, p. 70). Finally, with the help of QDA Miner Lite, transcripts were uploaded and coded with the emergent themes the researcher found initially by hand. Priority themes were then determined by eliminating other themes. The researcher considered how certain themes highlighted passages or aspects within transcripts and made decisions on eliminations of other themes from that basis. Once finalization of the themes occurred, the

researcher was able to facilitate the narratives of each participant to share the experience and voice expressed in each interview.

## Results

Emergent themes were highlighted by the researcher in the eight interviews and 25 surveys on the experiences of students of color in an independent environment. Five main themes were found. Within those five emergent themes, eight sub-themes were identified, many of which were the predetermined themes identified in the literature review.

Variables were created through REDCap at the initial set-up of the survey. Each question and statement in the survey was given a variable. The variable directly related to the specific question or statement. For example, the variable for the survey sentence, *I feel accepted and a part of my school* was *Acceptance*. Acceptance, respect, school climate, teacher competence, teacher expectation, fairness, representation, curriculum, cultural assignments, and teacher intervention were all variables used in the survey. Each variable was connected to a theme. Acceptance, school climate, teacher expectation and teacher intervention fell within the theme of Teacher-Student Relationship. The variable of respect, which was used in determining whether students felt that their teachers respected all races and cultures at their school, was associated with the theme of Bias. The variable of fairness contained a connection to Inequality. The variables of representation, curriculum, and cultural assignments all related with the theme Race in Education, and finally the variable of teacher competence fell under the theme of Cultural Competence among Teachers and Students. The result tallying of those 25 surveys was calculated electronically through REDCap. Themes that emerged from the interviews and variables used in the survey were combined in one list by the researcher. From this list, the researcher was able to group variables and themes that contained similarities. Some themes

ended up being a stand-alone theme, while most variables were similar and/or contained similar attributes of the emergent themes. Subthemes were determined by coding each interview by hand and with the aid of QDA Miner Lite. The emergent themes and the subthemes that were identified are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Student Perceptions about Cultural Competence in the Independent School Classroom:  
Themes and Subthemes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Race in Education	Self-Knowledge/ Acceptance
Cultural Competence among Teachers & Students	Professional Development/ Cultural Proficiency
Teacher-Student Relationship	
Bias in Teacher-Student Relationship	Stereotypes/Awareness
Inequality in Teacher-Student Relationship	Equity and Inclusion

Through this process of seeking patterns and developing themes and subthemes, a more concise look at the perceptions of students of color in an independent school environment was obtained. Participants from the interviews spent time with the researcher discussing their experiences at Rivercreek. Each participant's accounts of their time at Rivercreek was recorded and delivered within this research to capture the sentiments of each student accurately and honestly. It was the goal of the researcher to document and present these narratives in an unbiased and informative manner.

### **Participants**

Nine current students of Rivercreek participated in interviews for this research study. A total of four females and five males made up the sample population. Five of the nine students



were seniors embarking upon their last trimester at Rivercreek, while three students were sophomores and one junior. Seniors, identified here with pseudonyms, included, Miles, Amelia, Fiona, Sean, and Matthew. Anthony, a student since elementary school at Rivercreek was a junior. Jamal, Tanesha, and Emily were all sophomores. All participants had been at Rivercreek for a minimum of four years, and most have been at Rivercreek for over eight years. All participants were asked about their race and/or ethnicity and how they identified themselves. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to discuss race as it pertained to education, perceptions about their teachers and those relationships, and about the curriculum at Rivercreek and whether they saw themselves in it. All participants were asked by the researcher about their thoughts on education and whether their race or ethnicity played a role in it. Participants were also asked about whether they perceived their teachers as aware of their race. Finally, participants were given the opportunity to speak about an example or instance in their independent school experience that reflected the relationship or classroom experience for them as students of color. Table 2 depicts participant demographics.

Table 2.

*Student Perceptions about Cultural Competence in the Independent School Classroom: Student Demographics*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Miles	M	Senior	Black
Jamal	M	Sophomore	Black
Tanesha	F	Sophomore	Black
Anthony	M	Junior	Black
Amelia	F	Senior	Racially Mixed
Fiona	F	Senior	Latina
Sean	M	Senior	Asian
Emily	F	Sophomore	Asian
Matthew	M	Senior	Black

## Interview Responses

Each participant interview provided another level of understanding into the perceptions of students of color in an independent school setting. Each participant that contributed in an interview also completed the survey as well. Students who participated in interviews added to the research in both capacities. The following section provides the anecdotal data through participant responses from the nine participants who volunteered to do interviews after completion of the survey.

### Participant Responses

**Miles.** Miles described himself as African American. As a senior at Rivercreek, Miles expressed positive overall sentiments of his time at Rivercreek as a student of over 10 years in the independent school environment. Miles noted that education for him was about preparing himself for the things he wanted in life. Miles said:

I think it just allows me, personally, to set myself up for what I want to do in life. I think to reach the goals that I set in my mind, I have the education to do so. For me, in education, my race plays a part, especially in the college process.

Miles explained these phenomena of race having a role in education as good and bad. He discussed the downfalls of being Black in the independent school setting as challenging due to the lower standards teachers place on students of color but mentioned the benefits of being more attractive to schools when they see that he has good grades, plays sports, and is Black. Miles mentioned:

I think I was seen more attractive to colleges because I am Black, and I have good grades.

Even here at Rivercreek, I feel like people are like, “Oh, he’s Black and gets good grades.

Wow. And, he plays sports.” So, it’s like good. But I feel like it can also be bad, because you are held to a lower standard I think.

When the researcher asked about further explanation of the lower standards placed on students of color by their teachers, Miles introduced the idea of stereotypes and the role they play in the lower standards. Miles said:

I feel sometimes that African Americans are only used for marketing tools. So, on websites you’ll see the one Black teacher and the all-white class, and that’s supposed to be how your school is diverse. Or, how we’re always labelled as athletes first, sometimes. I just hate that sometimes we surprise people, if we have really good grades.

The researcher asked Miles about student and teacher relationships in his independent school. Miles explained that his relationships with his teachers were for the most part good. When the researcher asked about the race of the teachers with which he had a good rapport, Miles noted that out of the three that he felt close to, two were teachers of color. Overall, Miles expressed a positive experience at his school, but articulated concern over the lack of representation of his culture in the curriculum. He closed with remarks that while he personally did not face many problems at Rivercreek, he felt that his view was different from others because he grew up there. Miles explained:

My view might be different than other students of color. I could just be used to everything. I feel like I might not see things as well as other students just coming in to Rivercreek. I have been here for so long, I am used to everything.

**Jamal.** Jamal described himself as a Black, African American male. Jamal, a sophomore at Rivercreek had attended the school since elementary school. When asked about his thoughts on education, Jamal stated that he felt education should be something that was available to

everyone to better our country and the world. He further explained that while he felt his race played a role in education, he also thought that education should include everyone. When asked about teacher and student relationships, Jamal brought up teacher intervention and the lack of that intervention when issues on race arose. Jamal said:

There aren't very many teachers that seem to know what to do when something goes wrong. When it has to do with race, or if there is an issue with race, there isn't very much that teachers have done in the past to stop it. I want to feel safe and supported, but when teachers don't intervene, I don't really feel that way. This makes us as people of color at my school have to figure out a different way of navigating life at school, which is difficult and frustrating at times.

Jamal closed with a discussion on the curriculum at Rivercreek. When asked if he saw himself in the curriculum he explained that for the most part he did not, but he felt that Rivercreek was making strides to change that through their new History course curriculum. Overall, Jamal describes his experience as positive at Rivercreek.

**Tanesha and Anthony.** Tanesha and Anthony requested to be interviewed together. Both Tanesha and Anthony identify as Black and sophomores at Rivercreek. When the researcher asked about whether they saw themselves in the curriculum, both made note that they rarely saw themselves in literature and curriculum in classes. When both participants were questioned about their perceptions of the student and teacher relationships, Tanesha brought up bias:

I am not going to say that all of the teachers here are bad or anything, but there are definitely teachers who I feel that do have some kind of bias or show bias when dealing with students of color, compared to that of White students.

When the researcher further asked Tanesha to explain her sentiments about this bias, she and Anthony both brought up an example at Rivercreek when a group of students of color were reprimanded for an action that in their opinion was not worthy of punishment. Tanesha clarified when the students of color received detentions for an action that seemed not as extreme as past cases that had not received notice, she felt bias played a role in the decision making. Tanesha said:

There're so many bigger issues here that they try and crack down on, or say that they are, but don't. So many instances where they won't give detentions when it's obvious that it deserves one. I felt like in that situation they gave them a detention because of that, but there are White students doing things way worse. It might not be this way, but it sure feels like it.

Anthony added to the conversation and noted that he felt the same way as Tanesha in that the administration seemed to have bias when it came to students of color at Rivercreek. Anthony mentioned:

It came off to me that way as well, Tanesha. Not being a part of that group, but watching from the outside, I definitely saw the bias from the administration when handling that situation.

Both participants seemed to possess the same sentiments on the inequity of that specific example and the disappointment of the teachers unwilling to intervene. When the researcher asked about the overall independent school experience, Anthony described his experience at Rivercreek differently than Tanesha's. Anthony said:

I feel like my experience is a little different from Tanesha because I have been here for twelve years. I didn't really start noticing bad stuff until I got into high school here. I feel

like it has been neutral. It was kind of good here up until high school. Then, in high school you could start seeing some things, like the way some teachers might say certain things to you. I think you kind of pick up on differences in the way they talk to you that might be because of your skin color.

Tanesha described her overall experience at Rivercreek as good and bad. She illuminated on the fact that while she has had a few bad experiences, she chooses to see the good ones. There was an acceptance as she voiced the experience that she has gone through with clarity and insight towards how she would handle similar situations if they ever became apparent again. Tanesha explained:

I definitely do think that my experiences here have taught me, and better prepared me to deal with issues similar to this out I the real world because it's starting here now. Now I am seeing, okay, this happened. Well, we responded like this. Well, maybe we shouldn't have done that. It allows me to think about how I handled certain situations. So, I'm glad that it prepared me in that aspect, but I don't feel like I should have to do that in this type of environment, well, because it's not what I came here for.

**Amelia.** Amelia, a senior at Rivercreek identified herself as racially mixed. She explained that she recognizes her African American, Caucasian, and Latino roots. Amelia also detailed that her teachers often do not see her race at first glance, but once they take the time to get to know her, they are able to become aware of her heritage and culture. When asked about race and education, Amelia noted that she felt that education should contain representation from all races. She related the art of cooking to describe the importance of individuals being exposed to a variety of cultures in curriculum and education. Amelia said:

Education is a process of obtaining skills or certain facets of knowledge that are meant to prepare you for life as an adult. I think there should be an option for there to be some kind of representation in education. For instance, my family has always, because I am mixed, talked about the history of our racial backgrounds. For me, cooking has always been a way to kind of acknowledge that. I think a lot of people don't know the basics of cooking, and that's definitely something I think should be included in any person's basic education. It's important for people to connect. That has been a way for me to kind of connect with my cultural background.

Amelia affirmed that while she did not see herself in the curriculum per se at Rivercreek, she did see different aspects of herself in various parts of the curriculum because she is racially mixed. When the researcher asked Amelia about her relationships with her teachers, she identified an issue with students more so than teachers. Amelia said:

I have not had any issues with my race, well, my racial background at this school with teachers. I have noticed however that while my teachers are very open to getting to know me and understanding my racially mixed backgrounds and ethnicities, the students here are not. It is a situation where I'm not quite black enough for the African Americans and I am not quite Latino enough for the Latinos, which is something that I wasn't expecting. I was expecting it to be the other way, honestly.

When the researcher asked Amelia about how she navigated this situation at Rivercreek, Amelia displayed a sentiment of acceptance and understanding that she was the kind of person who can relate to many different people on varying levels because of the beauty of the many racial backgrounds she possessed. She expressed sentiments that her life experiences at Rivercreek could be perceived as good and bad. Amelia described the following:

I've learned to connect with everybody in one way or another. I can navigate social circles without any specific bias, which, I mean it could be considered a good thing, and it could be considered a bad thing. But, for me, it's just been a way for me to really understand everyone.

**Fiona.** Fiona, a senior at Rivercreek identified herself as racially white as there was not a specific place or category for Mexicans or Latinos. She continued by stating that she identified as Latino or Chicano but felt as though there were no other categories that fit the ethnicity of that group of people. When asked about whether she felt her teachers saw her race in the classroom, Fiona disappointingly identified that her socioeconomic status seemed to be visible first. Fiona said:

I think that my socioeconomic status is visible to my teachers, and I think they are aware of it. But, to the extent that I appear as a visible darker body, I don't think so. I would say that upon first glance, teachers definitely treat me differently from after we have had a conversation and it's revealed that I am Mexican.

When asked about student and teacher relationships, Fiona related an example of a time when a teacher was insensitive to specific races in the classroom. Fiona recalled telling the teacher of the insensitivity of rating the severity of the oppression of various racial groups on a scale but never saw any repercussions for that teacher as the teacher taught the same lesson in another class shortly after. In addition to teacher and student relationships, the researcher asked Fiona about her overall experience at Rivercreek and whether she would do it all over again if she had a choice to be in an independent school. Fiona explained:

No. I would do it again as a highly visible White person. There are a lot of things that the school needs to do to make things better for students of color. I think one thing is training



White people to have discourse on race, because that's something that...I mean, White people don't understand that this conversation needs to happen, and that it doesn't revolve around them, and that no matter how uncomfortable they're made, it shouldn't be a problem to have these conversations. We need to address the problem of them being uncomfortable.

Fiona expressed a desire for cultural competence training to be exercised amongst all divisions in Rivercreek as the topic affects students at varying ages. Fiona said:

Race problems arise from a young age in kids when they start to realize that they have friends with different colored skin. From a young age, kids are influenced by how they see their teachers treat the kids of color differently in their classrooms. People make it to high school and they are still racist. They make it to high school and they still don't know how to address the way that they benefit inadvertently from our racist system. We need the training to happen so that the awareness of how the structure works is apparent early on.

In addition to Fiona's thoughts on professional development initiatives for teachers, Fiona discussed that she also wished teachers intervened more in matters of race. She expressed a desire for the administration, teachers, and other people in the Rivercreek community to get involved. Fiona described the following:

Yeah, and also, when things do happen, people need to actually do something about it. Administrators, faculty, teachers, and people need to get involved and do things and not let them be isolated incidents when they are addressed, because socially, the ramifications are never isolated. It is very clear to everyone what it means when a White student can call a Mexican student a wetback and teachers respond by saying, "It was just a joke, get

over yourself.” For me it is not that simple. There needs to be as little complacency as possible.

**Sean.** Sean a senior at Rivercreek described himself as Asian American. He noted that his ethnicity was Chinese. While Sean noted that his race plays a role in education and felt that his teachers saw his race in the classroom, he briefly touched on the annoyances of being confused with other Asian American students in the same class. Sean explained:

In middle school I remember there would be some teachers who would confuse me with other students who identified as the same race as me. I guess it didn't really hurt me that much because we do display similar phenotypes, we all have the same kind of hairstyle, the same kind of eye color, the same kind of skin tone, but I guess... it didn't really bother me that much because I got so use to it.

Sean identified his sentiments on race and education through his institutional viewpoints on the elements of education that he felt were necessary for education to be successful. Teacher and student relationships were presented in a positive light for Sean as he recalled meaningful relationships with teachers that made an effort to get to know him. Sean said:

There is a power dynamic between a teacher and a student where the teacher is the one who is telling the student what to do, is the one who is giving the grade, and the one that their parent is paying for to attend the class. So, there is a power dynamic, so it is not comfortable for a student to get close to the teacher because of that power dynamic, or even just have the courage to be honest with them. So, the ones that I am close with is because the teacher has taken the time and the effort to develop that relationship with me first.

When the researcher asked about the overall experience of being in a private institution, Sean replied positively in that he was leaving in a good place but felt there was still much work for Rivercreek to do.

**Emily.** Emily, a sophomore at Rivercreek identified herself as American born with Chinese culture. Emily spent most of the interview discussing stereotypes and how they were prevalent in her independent school educational experience. While she credits her experience at Rivercreek as both good and bad, her tone was saddened as she reflected on the amount of bias and stereotypes amongst students and teachers both. Emily mentioned:

I feel like race and culture play a part in education, but for me, at least when I was younger, I was really studious. The stereotype for me was that all Asians get straight As and stuff. I remember trying to follow that stereotype. I feel like my parents had a big role in that, but I think because a lot of teachers had past experiences with Asian student like that, they expected me to be the same. It's not all teachers, but a lot of them were that way.

Emily spoke about experiences in high school where she noted the same stereotypes being placed upon her by students in social scenarios and in athletic activities. Overall, Emily explained that her experiences with teachers have been generally positive but had issues with students. She recalled a time when she endured a racial slur from another student but there was little to no teacher intervention. Emily explained:

A boy in my class in 8<sup>th</sup> grade kept calling me *Ching Chong*. I went up to him and I was like, that's very racist. For me it was hurtful. It happened in my History class. I went to my teacher to tell them what happened, but the teacher told me that this particular student

does this all the time and it was fine and not to take it seriously. This teacher did not help me when I needed support.

**Matthew.** Matthew, a senior at Rivercreek, self-identified as Black, African American. Matthew explained the bias that occurs when the researcher asked about race in education. Matthew mentioned that his appearance as a Black male may tailor how some teachers and students may see him in the classroom. Matthew said:

When I walk into a room, a male, and Black, with that there are naturally going to be certain biases in the minds of people I interact with whether it be teachers or students. My hope that it is positive, but I am forced to already have to work that battle of breaking the box of whatever stereotypes or ideas they have already made about me without knowing me. For me, it's noticeable.

Matthew spoke about how his experiences at Rivercreek were not necessarily bad or good, but rather they were better compared to the experiences of students of color in other area schools. He seemed disappointed by this, but continued to explain his rationale:

Being better off here doesn't justify any wrong doing that occurs, but we can clearly take more steps and continue towards progress.

Matthew discussed how while he did not see himself in the curriculum, every year he would recall a quick one or two lessons during Black History month. Matthew described how he did not see himself in the curriculum:

I don't think the curriculum is utilized as it needs to be. I think any student whatever their identifier may be wants to be able to learn about themselves whether it be their history or the history of those who like them.

One of the last insights on his experience at Rivercreek that Matthew disclosed to the researcher touched upon teacher's lack of intervention and the need for professional development for teachers. Matthew explained:

In middle school, there were some issues that arose where I thought, or rather, I had this expectation of every teacher that they should be prepared for certain things. But, I can't blame them if they're not going to be trained. I also think that with leadership if there's an individual whose purpose is to relay the concerns of the student body and those concerns aren't expressed in an equitable manner, then I think it's important that they should be taught and given those skills or find someone that can. When it comes to teacher intervention, you sometimes expect them to step in, but they do not always do that. Then you have to go and seek them out and it's like, why is that? If the responsibility is theirs to support and protect us, and they are consistently not there, it's like, where do I go next?

Matthew explained that his overall experience at Rivercreek had been positive but wish his school had reached the bar that was set. He mentioned that Rivercreek would emphasize the importance of change and how change takes time, but he noticed many of the elements that students of color faced in middle school were still present in high school. There was a tone of disappointment from Matthew in the progress of Rivercreek in matters on race, but at the same time, Matthew said that if he had to do school at Rivercreek all over again he would. Matthew said:

I think the short answer is yes. I would do it all over again. But, I think that's largely due to the unknown of what would happen at another school. Like, is it any better somewhere else?

All participants that attended Rivercreek all experienced both negative and positives experiences with respect to race in education, cultural competence among teachers and students, teacher-student relationships, bias, and inequality. These emergent themes arose from both the surveys and interviews. Within each emergent theme, data from the surveys, along with qualitative inquiry support the development of each theme presented.

### **Emergent Themes**

Derived through the process of coding, emergent themes were used to categorize and organize participant narratives. The themes presented in the following section are reflective of patterns and similarities within the interview and survey responses.

#### **Theme 1: Race in Education**

This theme of race in education was highlighted as a main theme because all nine interviewed participants referenced the importance that race plays in education in their personal narratives. In addition, when viewing results from the survey, the cultural competence survey statement, “There are textbooks and literature in my class/school that relate to my culture or race” was posed. Sixty percent of the survey participants replied *no* and 40% reported *yes*. When asked if students desired more pictures, videos, or assignments that related to their culture or race, 92% said *yes*, 4% of students marked *not sure* as a response, and 4% said, *no*. The nine students who participated in interviews were also survey takers and part of the 25 survey responses. With regards to race in education and representation, students expressed an overall need to see themselves in pictures, videos, or assignments that related to their culture or race.

While 92% of participants expressed a desire to see themselves in the curriculum and the nine students interviewed highlighted race as an important factor in education in their personal statements, when asked if there were pictures, videos, or assignments in school that related to the

participants' race in the survey, 70% reported there was not this kind of representation in their curriculum at Rivercreek. Twenty-six percent reported that there was some kind of representation, and 4% of students did not answer the question. The subthemes of self-knowledge and acceptance emerged within this main theme of race in education. Self-knowledge was determined through the interviews, while acceptance came about through both interviews and survey responses.

**Self-knowledge.** Each participant from the interviews possessed an understanding of who they were in terms of their race and ethnicity. The interview participants were able to self-identify and present a level of comfort in expressing their sentiments about what they enjoyed most about their culture. When the researcher asked Jamal about what he enjoyed most about his culture, he said, "My culture is nice because although being Black in America comes with a lot of hardships, we are still able to come together and overcome it." Anthony stated that, "I think the traditions are what I like best about my culture, and maybe the correspondence I have with other people of the same culture." Tanesha mentioned, "I like the way we interact with each other. Our bonds are so much closer." In addition to this self-knowledge that the interview participants were able to exhibit verbally, the subtheme of acceptance surfaced as survey and interview participants expressed a distinct recognition of how their teachers made them feel in their experience, positive or negative.

**Acceptance.** Six interview participants mentioned in their interviews that they understand the school climate that they exist in and accept it to a degree. Sean stated, "When I visit other schools I see that my school is a step ahead of the game, but it doesn't mean my school is at the finish line, and I have accepted that." Amelia described her acceptance when she spoke about the biases that exist amongst students at Rivercreek. Amelia noted, "It has just been

a way of life for me, it is just the way it is, and I accept that.” Anthony made the statement, “I just want to get this degree and move on.” He and Tanesha were referencing the inequalities faced in high school with teachers at times. Miles examined his frustration with a teacher once when he noticed that he was graded unfairly. In one of his classes, Miles and a friend compared their exams and noticed that Miles was counted off for items that his friend had not. With further personal investigation of other student responses compared to his own, he concluded that he was being graded unfairly. When the researcher asked him about how he navigated the injustice Miles replied, “I just got through it. I had to just move on.” Emily also stated, “I needed to move on,” when she referenced a time when she was having difficulty connecting with a teacher.

Acceptance, a variable used in the survey was asked of survey takers in relation to how they felt in school. In the cultural competence survey statement, “My teachers and other school staff make me feel accepted and part of my school.” Twelve percent of students said that they do feel accepted and a part of their school, 52% of survey respondents reported that this happens *a little*, and 36% stated that they do not feel accepted and a part of their school. When directly asked on the survey if they feel accepted and part of the school in general, 32% reported *yes* while 28% reported *a little*, and 40% said *no* that they do feel accepted in general. With this subtheme of acceptance, several participants gave examples and sentiments on cultural competence among both teachers and students in the independent school environment. While the initial focus was solely on the cultural competence of teachers, two students from the interviews expressed problems with students and insensitivity. The lack of cultural competence among both teachers and students was highlighted in the responses of two interview participants. The theme of cultural competence among teachers and students examined the insensitivity of both students and teachers in the experiences of the interview participants.



## Theme 2: Cultural Competence among Teachers and Students

Cultural competence among teachers and students was chosen as a theme as four participants from the interviews expressed an issue with either teachers or students in difficulty in relating with people from cultures different from their own. The other five participants made references to disciplinary discrepancies with regards to race with teachers. Initially, in this research, cultural competence among teachers was the primary investigation. However, after the individual surveys, it became apparent that issues with cultural competence stemmed across the student population as well. This incurred the addition of *students* in this emergent theme.

Cultural competence among students surfaced as an issue through the interview conversations. This unexpected finding sparked the necessity for investigation on peer cultural competence in addition to teacher cultural competence. While teacher to student competence was initially sought after, student to student cultural competence emerged as an element of interest in this research. In the surveys, 16% said that *all* teachers are comfortable with other cultures and races, 80% of survey takers reported that *some* of their teachers seemed comfortable talking to and teaching students from different cultures or races, and 4% said that *none* of the teachers on campus are comfortable with other cultures or races. From the interviews, the four participants who spoke about teacher comfort level with students from varying backgrounds suggested training as a method to reduce the occurrence of the issue of lack of cultural competence. In the online survey, with the variable of *teacher competence*, the 80% of survey participants that said that *some* of their teachers seemed comfortable talking to and teaching students from other cultures or races deemed significant. In matters of cultural competence with students, Amelia made note of the fact that students would treat her differently because of her mixed race. She said, “The problem for me is that I have to work hard to connect with students because they are

not as accepting as my teachers. They are not as kind.” In reflections from student interviews, professional development or training for teachers and discussions for students was recommended as a method to alleviate lack of cultural competence. Fiona mentioned this in her interview, “I feel that training for educators and students could help bring awareness to biases and help teachers see things differently.” In the next subtheme of professional development, this notion of training was explored.

**Professional development.** Professional development was recommended as a solution for both teachers and students with regards to cultural competence. Fiona stated, “I think training is important for teachers and students.” Fiona expressed the importance of having discourse about race in schools as an avenue to build better relationships in the community. Matthew said, “I think it is important for individuals to have the training they need to support the people they work with.” In addition, Fiona made note that the issues with students perhaps emerged due to the lack of training of teachers. She mentioned that student cultural competence could be linked to teacher cultural competence. Fiona stated, “Students do what they have been taught and only know what they see.” Through the subtheme of professional development, the predetermined theme of cultural proficiency emerged. This theme presented itself in accordance with Deardorff’s (2006) intercultural competence model as cultural proficiency was an element in the process towards cultural competence.

**Cultural proficiency.** All nine participants from the interviews spoke about at least one teacher that they all had a connection with that was positive. When the researcher asked participants to reflect on a teacher that understood the student and teacher dynamic and presented an environment that was inviting and inclusive, most participants could recall at least one teacher. Eight participants out of the nine mentioned that this teacher that they had a close bond

with was also a teacher of color. Sean stated, “The ones that I am close with is because they actually put an effort to become close with their students.” Tanesha mentioned, “There are definitely those teachers that you can go to if you have a problem.” While cultural proficiency was not something that was specifically asked in the survey, the questions and statements together presented elements that could be asked in determining levels of cultural proficiency. The subtheme of cultural proficiency presented itself as a positive attribute in education from the perspective of the students who were interviewed. Along with cultural proficiency, the main theme of teacher and student relationships emerged in both surveys and interviews.

### **Theme 3: Teacher-Student Relationship**

This theme emerged from inquiry from both the survey and interviews. The variables of school climate, teacher expectation, and teacher intervention played key roles in the emergence of this theme. When participants in the survey were asked about the expectations of teachers for all students and teacher desire to see all students in the classroom succeed, 32% of survey participants said that *all* of them do, 64% of survey participants reported that *some* teachers expect all students to succeed, and 4% of responses said that *none* of the teachers do. Miles touched upon this in his interview where he explained that he often felt as though his teachers held him to a lower standard than his peers due to his race.

Along with teacher expectations, teacher intervention played a distinctive role in this research study in both the interviews and surveys. In the survey, when asked if teachers and staff at school intervene when they see or hear name-calling, pushing, or other things related to culture or race, 8% of survey participants said, *yes*, 76% of the survey participants said, *no*, and 16% of participants reported, *not sure*. Six of the participants interviewed noted that when it came to race, teachers often did not intervene or would make light of the offense if it was race

related. This notion of teacher intervention or lack thereof connects with the fourth theme of teacher bias.

#### **Theme 4: Bias in Teacher-Student Relationship**

Teacher bias towards his or her students emerged as a theme as based on the responses from the surveys and interviews. When asked in the survey if students of the same race or culture as the participant were treated fairly in school, 60% reported *no* that students of different races were not treated fairly. Thirty-two percent said that students were treated fairly *a little* and 8% said that *all* students were treated fairly. In his interview, Matthew made awareness's to teacher bias in his interview when he spoke about teacher perceptions when he walked into a room. "As far as noticeable things, when I walk into a room, I am male, and I'm Black and with that it's naturally going to create certain biases." Through this theme of bias, two subthemes emerged. Stereotypes and awareness. Both correlated with bias in that participants referred to stereotypes as actions that were often placed upon them, while awareness was a component that each participant contained in noticing this action. Stereotypes played a role in teacher bias as well. Students discussed how their race and ethnicities often had a factor in stereotypes.

**Stereotypes.** In her interview, Emily discussed bias in the classroom in relation to stereotypes. Emily spoke of the Asian culture, and how she was aware of how teachers often would assume that she was smart because of her race. Emily stated, "The stereotype is that all Asians get straight A's and stuff." She presented the conflict in this stereotype when she reached a point in high school where she was not living up to the claim. "I feel like now in high school, it's different. I feel like because I am not as studious now, I am not exactly following the stereotype." Stereotypes as presented by the participants in the interviews contained an awareness where there was a reality that for them, the bias and the stereotype existed in their

lived experience. In the theme of awareness, this idea of students understanding and being aware of the role their race plays in their school is examined.

**Awareness.** All nine participants in the interview sessions expressed an awareness that bias, and stereotypes exist based upon their race or ethnicity. This sense of awareness was expressed in each story, memory, and sentiment acquired in the interviews. Anthony stated, “I understand that my race plays a role in my education, a little bit. In some respects, but in other aspects, no.” Tanesha replied shortly after Anthony made this comment saying, “I mean, I am aware that they see my skin and recognize that I’m Black.” When Emily discussed her difficulties with her team in her athletics class, she attributed race to much of her frustrations and illustrated her understanding of this. She said, “I feel like a lot of the girls on the team do not have much respect for me because of my race. I understand that it has a little to do with it.” While awareness and stereotypes are part of bias, inequality also is a key factor that is attributed in the lack of cultural competence. Inequality was discussed by participants and survey takers as an issue at Rivercreek.

### **Theme 5: Inequality in Teacher-Student Relationship**

Inequality was measured in the student survey and discussed in the interviews. Under the variable of *fairness*, students were asked if their teachers treated all students fairly when it came to discipline. Ninety-two percent of students reported that *some* teachers were fair. Four percent of students said that *all* teachers were fair, and 4% said that *no* teachers on campus were fair. In their group interview, Anthony and Tanesha shed light on the inequality of teachers in disciplinary actions when they referenced an instance at Rivercreek when a group of students of color were unjustly reprimanded for an action that presented no harm to any students. Anthony stated, “A group of students of color were together having a good time, but they were punished

for it. White students do things that are way worse and never receive punishment here.” Tanesha reported that as a student on the outside looking in, “it felt unfair and inequitable.” This theme of inequality contained the subtheme of equity and inclusion which referred to the manner in which teachers treated students fairly in class.

**Equity and inclusion.** The variables of *respect* and *fairness* in the survey both overlapped in their ability to portray equity and inclusion. The students were asked about whether students of color were respected and treated fairly and equitably in the independent school. In addition, in asking about how fair discipline was administered to students of different races and cultures was asked. The 32% of students in the survey that reported that students of different races and cultures were treated with respect *a little* and the 92% of students that said *some* teachers were equitable when administering discipline served as a basis for the emergence of this subtheme.

During her interview, Emily spoke about a time in her athletic class when she felt that equity and inclusion did not play a role in how she was treated as a team member. She recalled how she felt when she watched a student receive an award for something she felt that should have gone to her based on the facts and point system. Emily stated, “I feel as though because the coach connected with one of the girls on our team that was also White, that girl received the award.” Emily continued, “I guess I understand as the girl may have reminded the coach of herself, but I dropped the most points, so I didn’t understand why I didn’t receive the award.” Equity and inclusion, a subtheme in inequality was a predetermined theme that seemed prevalent in all participants that were interviewed. All participants that were interviewed experienced varying degrees of inequality that presented a glimpse into the lived experience they all shared as students of color in an independent school environment.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the experiences of students of color in an independent school environment uncovered by this study. The findings were organized through the participant narratives, surveys, and emergent themes. Data from each individual narrative was portrayed while data from the surveys were depicted in each emergent theme. The primary finding of this study was that while students reported having an overall positive experience as students of color at Rivercreek, there were still instances of inequality and remnants of negative actions that occurred during their time in this independent school due to a lack of cultural competence. The findings are discussed as relevant to the literature in Chapter 5. In addition, a discussion on how this study informs the practice of educators and recommendations for future research is provided.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As American classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators are tasked with contributing to an educational system designed to serve all students well (NEA, 2017). Cultural competence in education enables educators to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while aiding in gaining knowledge of at least one other culture (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). Today's classrooms require that instructors possess competencies for reaching all students and the ability to recognize the need to strengthen specific competencies to reach and teach all students through varied cultural lenses (Irish & Scrubb, 2012). Seeing cultural differences as assets and creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued are integral to culturally competent curriculum development, classroom climates, and relationships with students (Gay, 2010, p. 31).

The purpose of this study was to understand how students of color perceive cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in the independent school setting. While cultural competence research exists in current literature, there are very few studies that discuss the perceptions of students of color in independent school spaces. The problem is that there is a lack of information about the experiences of students of color in independent schools in the literature as it relates to cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy.

This research study sought to uncover the elements of cultural competence by examining the lived experiences of students of color in an independent school environment. By viewing the perceptions of students, different perspectives on cultural competence in education could be



gained. Two research questions were crafted to better understand the lived experiences of students of color in an independent school environment:

1. What are the experiences of students of color in independent schools that reflect the level of proficiency in cultural competence and culturally relevant instruction of educators?
2. How do cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching aid historically underrepresented students of color?

In addition to these research questions, four predetermined themes identified during the literature review—awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency—were used as guides in this research in collecting the data from surveys and interviews from students of color at Rivercreek. An adaptation of Deardorff's (2006) theory of intercultural competence served as the conceptual framework for this study and provided much of the foundational work in theorizing cultural competence. Deardorff's (2006) framework which comprised attitudes, knowledge, skillsets, and internal and external outcomes were the elements that served as a model in the development of cultural competence which was presented as a lifelong process where there was no one point at which an individual becomes completely competent (pp. 255-257). This framework, along with the predetermined themes enabled some of the understanding of the emergent themes that arose from participant interview and survey responses.

This study used a qualitative phenomenological methodology to gain insight towards the perceptions of 25 students of color in an independent school setting. Nine of the 25 participants volunteered to do an interview in addition to the survey. The participants in the study were all students who identified as Asian, Black, or Latino(a) and were current high school students at

Rivercreek. The main objective in the data analysis was to allow the voices of each participant to be heard honestly and in their entirety.

The emergent themes that came from the collection of interviews and survey data helped to connect the research questions and predetermined themes. These emergent themes included: (1) race in education; (2) cultural competence among teachers and students; (3) teacher-student relationship; (4) bias in teacher-student relationship; and (5) inequality in teacher-student relationship. Although the emergent theme of *cultural competence among teachers and students* was originally intended to only cover teachers, the need for the addition of students arose when participants in individual interviews expressed the lack of cultural competence among students as well. Several subthemes emerged within each main theme as well, many of which were the predetermined themes:

- Race in education
  - Self-knowledge
  - Acceptance
- Cultural competence among teachers and students
  - Professional development
  - Cultural proficiency
- Teacher-student relationship
- Bias in teacher-student relationship
  - Stereotypes
  - Awareness
- Inequality in teacher-student relationship
  - Equity and inclusion

This chapter includes an interpretation of the findings as it connects to the research questions and literature and discusses implications and offers recommendations for future study and action.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In the cultural competence survey administered to 25 students of color at Rivercreek, the variables of *acceptance, respect, school climate, teacher competence, teacher expectation, fairness, representation, curriculum, cultural assignments, and teacher intervention* were used to organize each question. In addition, questions presented in the survey were further explored in each interview. Overall, the participants in the interviews expressed a positive experience as students of color in an independent school setting as a whole. Both participants in surveys and interviews expressed a desire to see themselves in the curriculum more, but generally felt that they had positive experiences so far in their independent school education and credited a few good relationships with students and teachers of color for this. Also, both survey takers and interview participants expressed a desire for teachers to intervene more in matters of race in classroom settings. The feelings of acceptance wavered amongst students as students in both surveys and interviews felt generally accepted, but interview participants only had a few bad experiences within the school due to matters of race or inequity. Lack of cultural competence stemmed across both teachers and students as some participants in the interviews reported difficulty with students, while others in the interviews stated that they wished their teachers possessed more cultural competence. This unexpected finding of the lack of cultural competence in students contributed another layer of understanding of the experiences of students of color in independent school environments. In general, participants from the interviews felt that their race or ethnicity, while mostly visible to others and their teachers, did play a role in their education.

The following two subsections are interpretations based on the findings as they relate to the two research questions proposed in this study.

### **Research Question One**

In order to answer the first research question, “What are the experiences of students of color in independent schools that reflect the level of proficiency in cultural competence and culturally relevant instruction of educators?” the researcher examined how participants described their experiences in their independent school as students of color as mostly positive. These experiences were discussed in Chapter 4 under the themes of *race in education* and *cultural competence among teachers-students*. The researcher used a modified theory of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) to answer this research question. In terms of the level of proficiency in cultural competence and culturally relevant instruction of teachers, the majority of participants in both surveys and interviews expressed the need for more culturally relevant pedagogy in classroom instruction and a more competent level of cultural awareness from their teachers in classroom settings. From the literature previously discussed in this research, Gay (2010) made note that teachers simply cannot recognize and nurture the individuality of students of color if they do not know them (p. 30). Also, it is imperative for teachers to understand the relationships and the distinctions between the individuality of students and its connection to their ethnic identity in the classroom (Gay, 2010, p. 30). Gay (2010) described these entities as components in culturally responsive pedagogy. This was expressed mainly with respect to teacher intervention when it came to issues or conflicts relating to race. Participants had a desire to feel safe and have support through more teacher intervention when things like name-calling, or other things related to culture, or race arose. When educators are ignorant of or ignore and

silence the needs of ethnically different students, academic underachievement, cultural hegemony, and personal denigration may persist (Gay, 2010, p. 33).

While participants stated that overall, they felt their experiences were good at Rivercreek, many expressed a desire to see themselves in the curriculum. In the research by Gay (2010) she urged teachers of racial minority students to respect the cultural characteristics of minority youth and change the curriculum so that it reflects their learning and cultural styles in order to enhance their achievement in the classroom (p. 35). The majority of participants said that their culture or race was not represented in the curriculum and wished that it was a part of the curriculum outside of holidays or Black history month. The emergent themes of *race in education* and *cultural competence among teachers and students* played an integral role in this research question. Both presented patterns of participant's need to see themselves in what they were learning. In addition, both themes displayed student desires to have the support system of teachers in the classroom when it came to teacher intervention. These elements of cultural competence were continually expressed from all participants in this study and remained a reoccurring theme in each interview. The consensus among participants from the interviews was that the lack of teacher intervention occurrences were isolated events that happened throughout their experiences but were not impactful enough to take away from the overall positive experience that they felt at Rivercreek.

The conceptual framework of Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence theory on the process of one's attitude, knowledge, and skillset in cultural competence guided the researcher in answering this research question. The level in proficiency of the teachers at Rivercreek was described as lacking in some teachers, prevalent to an extent in others, and non-existent in a few. Successful cultural interactions are at the heart of education and this framework of attitudes, knowledge, and skills illustrates that it is possible for an individual to be more effective in

interactions with people with different cultures than theirs (Deardorff, 2006, p. 2). The work of Deardorff (2006) also influenced and guided the answers in the second research question.

### **Research Question Two**

The second research question was, “How do cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching aid historically underrepresented students of color?” These experiences were discussed in Chapter 4 under the theme Teacher-Student Relationship. The researcher used a modified theory of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) to answer this research question.

Based on the findings of this study, eight participants in the interviews accredited the few teachers who did possess a high level of cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching ability as one of the reasons for their success in specific academic, arts, or athletic areas. Two students specifically mentioned that having teachers of color was beneficial for them. Racial diversity benefits every workforce, and teachers of color tend to provide more culturally relevant teaching and better understand the situations that students of color may face (Partelow, Spong, Brown, & Johnson, 2017, para. 8). Sean mentioned, “The three teachers that helped me at my school made a difference for me. For me, it helped that we shared commonalities.” When the researcher asked Sean about the race of those teachers, he replied, “Two of them are teachers of color, and one is White.” Tanesha also expressed that her close relationship with a teacher of color aided her when she was in need of support. “I feel that not all teachers here are bad, but I was lucky to have a close relationship with one of my teachers to help me through some experiences.”

Participants that expressed happiness in their relationship with their teachers were noted as either teachers of color that seemed to contain relatability or teachers with deep understanding of the importance of getting to know their students. Sean and Tanesha specifically reported

having teachers of color as part of their “positive” experiences at Rivercreek. The eight participants who mentioned these cherished relationships spoke about the level of success that they had in the courses taught by these valued teachers. According to Partelow et. al. (2017), students who are fortunate enough to have a great teacher for even one year are more likely to matriculate to college, attend more prestigious colleges, and earn more later in life (para. 18). Sean mentioned twice in his interview that having good teachers made a difference in his experience. “Teachers that made an effort to get to know me helped to foster a love of learning for me in those subjects.”

The conceptual framework for this study included the concepts of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency. This framework served as a guide in answering and understanding this research question. The themes surrounding cultural competence, a phenomenon that was explored through the lens of students of color in independent schools relate to how cultural competence may serve underrepresented students in education. The themes of awareness, self-knowledge, equity and inclusion, and cultural proficiency were dissected through an adaptation from Deardorff’s (2006) intercultural competence model where awareness and self-knowledge were perceived as processes one can go through in cultural competence development. It is through this process that educators may aid historically underrepresented students.

### **Implications**

This study utilized the conceptual framework of a modified theory of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). The conceptual framework was utilized to provide an understanding of the perceptions of students of color about cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in the independent school settings. Furthermore, the results of this study

have implications for potential educational change on the individual level and the organizational level. The lack in information surrounding perceptions of students of color in literature presents a problem as it relates to understanding cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy. The purpose of this study was to understand how students of color perceive cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching in the independent school setting.

In terms of the implications for potential educational change on the individual level, the results of the study may inform individual teachers of teaching and learning best practices as it relates to cultural competence. This study revealed that students of color have a desire to see themselves in the curriculum. The results of this study aligned with Hammond's (2015) research on culturally responsive teaching and the brain. Hammond (2015) concluded in her research that the lack of cultural competence often leaves a disconnect in learning with students of color (p. 13). This is relevant in this research as it sought to understand cultural competence and how it could aid historically underrepresented students in education. While this study was not comparative to Hammond's (2015), the results implied that students of color had the potential to succeed provided their teachers demonstrated more cultural competence. In addition, 32% of participants in the survey said *yes*, that they felt accepted, 28% within this study reported feeling *a little* accepted, and 40% said *no* they did not feel accepted or a part of their school due to their race or culture by teachers or other students. Some participants stated that they performed worse in classes with teachers they felt contained bias towards them or did not have a connection with them. From the perceptions of the nine students who participated in interviews in this study, there are implications that through cultural competence a more positive classroom experience can occur. Cultural competence is empowering and enables students to be better human beings



and more successful learners which translates into academic competence (Gay, 2010, p. 40). This information on the individual transcends to that of the organization as well.

In relation to the implications for potential educational change on the organizational level, the results of the study may inform and aid independent schools' awareness of certain experiences students of color may face in their institutions. The results of this study have implications for positive educational change for improving practice amongst teachers in cultural competence. Gay (2000) made note of this in her research on culturally relevant pedagogy. The implication that all schools and teachers should be actively involved in promoting equity and culturally responsive pedagogy to improve the academic achievement and personal development of students of color was prevalent in the research (Gay, 2000, p. 22). Participants in this study mentioned a need for teacher and organizational intervention at the administrative level. The results of the study further contained implications of innovation as a move towards cultural competence may bring about a more positive school climate and change for the better. The results of this study also indicate that approaching the problem using a qualitative phenomenological methodology was beneficial in examining the problem as distinct and informative perspectives of the students currently experiencing this phenomenon were acquired for review. Built upon these implications are two recommendations for action that are outlined in the next section.

### **Recommendations**

This study examined the perceptions of students of color in an independent school setting. The results of this study revealed that although many students consider their experiences overall to be positive, all participants had a desire to have a more culturally relevant pedagogy in the curriculum and more teacher intervention in matters concerning race or culture. In addition,

the majority of participants reported having meaningful relationships with teachers of color or those that made an effort to foster a relationship with them. The findings from this study may suggest that professional development training in cultural competence may aid teachers in better understanding those they serve in the classroom. It is recommended that if teachers and administration wish to promote a positive school climate void of bias and rich in equity and inclusion, they must explore anti-bias and cultural competence training for their independent school organization. In addition to training, it is recommended that further investigation of hiring and retention practices of faculty of color be examined. While the majority of participants reported having meaningful relationships with teachers of color due to relatability, based on the findings of this study, it would be important for the percentage of faculty of color to be more reflective of the student body.

### **Recommendation #1 – Professional Development for Teachers**

Professional development and training in cultural competence is important for teachers that work with students with cultures different from their own. In a study by Coleman (2014) about professional development as a means to increase cultural competency, the importance of leaders to create effective and relevant professional development opportunities for teachers was noted so that they can meet the challenges of teaching in culturally diverse school settings (p. 27). “Given the opportunity gaps and the need for effective professional development, it would seem that the answer is to ensure effective training” (Coleman, 2014, p. 30). While professional development for teachers is a recommendation, based on the unexpected emergence of the insensitivity of students, workshops or activities that target cultural competence on a more student-based level is also a recommendation. It is important to note that as mentioned in

Deardorff's (2006) intercultural model, the journey to cultural competence is an ongoing process and requires continual work.

### **Recommendation #2 – Conscious Decision to Hire more Teachers of Color**

A conscious decision to hire more teachers of color is a recommendation as creating a diverse school climate that is reflective of the student body may aid in a more inclusive environment. This is expressed in Núñez's (2014) work on creating inclusive campus environments. A diverse faculty contributes to cultural life on campus and creates a culture of inclusion where being respectful of all members of the campus is expected and promoted (Núñez, 2014). Furthermore, the degree to which a student of color can look to the front of a classroom and see someone who might have come from the same background can be the difference between that student dropping out of school or staying in school (Núñez, 2014, para. 7). Representation matters. This was expressed in participant sentiments on their need to be accepted and have relevant relationships in their school.

### **Further Study**

This study provided additional information on cultural competence in existing literature by examining the lived experiences of students of color in one independent educational setting. Additional research could be warranted for teachers in understanding these experiences in the private sector beyond this one organization. Because of the small sample size, the findings may not be representative of all independent institutions. Expansion of this study to more independent organizations within the United States may prove useful in determining more information on cultural competence in relation to the experiences of students of color. Furthermore, examining the perspectives of teachers in independent schools could be recommended as further research. Cultural gaps for students of other ethnicities with Black teachers or teachers with their same

ethnic backgrounds could provide additional research and information on cultural competence in education.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to gain insight about the perspectives of students of color about cultural competence in an independent school setting. Through these perspectives, insight towards some of the issues in cultural competence at one independent school in Texas were brought to light. Results revealed that 92% of participants wanted to see themselves in the curriculum, 40% of participants also expressed not feeling accepted in school, and 76% had a desire to have more teacher intervention in matters on race and culture. While the nine students who participated in the interviews exhibited positive sentiments towards their experiences in their independent school overall, there still were reports of teacher bias, the level of cultural competence in teachers, and inequality. In taking note of these concerns and finding solutions to create a school climate that may benefit independent institutions as well as students of color that attend these institutions in the long run, this study sought to provide information on cultural competence through student perspectives. Examination of these perceptions not only provided insight towards the importance of cultural competence in education, but it also gave light and meaning to the voices within this study.

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## APPENDIX A

### UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND STUDENT HANDOUT PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION

Students,

My name is Valerie Gillespie. I am a doctoral student at the University of New England and I am doing research on the experience of students of color in schools. I am interested in learning about what helps teachers teach well in classrooms with students from cultures that are different from their cultures.

The purpose of this handout is to invite you to participate in this study and to give you information about this research study. Please ask me any questions that you may have about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete. You can also email me at [vgillespie@une.edu](mailto:vgillespie@une.edu) if you want to ask me questions. Your participation is voluntary. It is up to you whether or not you want to help in this research.

The purpose of this study is to take a closer look at your experience in the independent school classroom. I am hoping to understand your experiences and learn more about how you feel in your independent school. Students in this study will have met the following criteria:

- All student participants are enrolled in the Rivercreek Independent School (pseudonym). Students can be new or returning students.
- All student participants classify or identify as Asian, Black, or Latino(a).
- All student participants are in Upper School and are at least 15 years old.

If you are interested in participating, your parent or guardian will need to sign a consent form for you to participate, and you will need to sign an assent to participate form as well. Those forms will be provided to you today to personally take home. As part of the study you will be asked to complete a survey that will take about 15 minutes, and if you are interested in volunteering for a follow-up interview which lasts 30-60 minutes, you will be asked to contact me in person within a week time frame after the completion of the survey to arrange a one on one interview with me.

I hope you will think about participating in this research project, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your consideration,

Valerie Gillespie  
University of New England



## APPENDIX B

### UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND PARENTAL CONSENT FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY

**Project Title:** Unheard Voices: Student Perceptions about Cultural Competence in the Independent Classroom

**Principal Investigator(s):** Valerie Gillespie, Doctoral Student, University of New England (469-360-4931, [vgillespie@une.edu](mailto:vgillespie@une.edu))

#### **Introduction:**

- Please read this form. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete.
- Your student's participation is voluntary.

#### **Why is this research study being done?**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore your son or daughter's experience in the independent school classroom. In an effort to better understand their thoughts about their experiences in this study, it will seek to identify themes that may emerge from their classroom experiences.

#### **Who will be in this study?**

Students in this study will have met the following criteria:

- All student participants are enrolled in the Rivercreek Independent School (pseudonym). Students can be new or returning students.
- All student participants classify or identify as Asian, Black, or Latino(a).
- All student participants are in Upper School and are at least 15 years old.

#### **What will my student be asked to do?**

You are being asked to consent to your student participating in the study. Your student will be asked to complete a survey that will take approximately 15 minutes. The survey will be anonymous, and it will be held confidential. If your student is interested in volunteering for a follow-up interview, he/she/they will be asked to contact me in person within a week from the completion of the survey to arrange for an interview. The interview will be held in a private conference space and will last between 30 and 60 minutes.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

The risks involved during interactions will be minimal. Interviewing may involve mild discomfort. Discomfort sometimes occurs when individuals are asked to reflect on or think about their feelings. They may feel sadness or anxious about their feelings. These feelings are rarely strong enough to interrupt the interview; however, if at any time during the interview, your student is uncomfortable or does not want to answer any question, he/she/they should tell the researcher that and the question will be skipped or, at the student's request the interview will immediately cease.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

There will be no direct benefit to your student as the participant. Your student will have the unique opportunity to aid in the collection of data by telling about his/her classroom experience. These stories have the potential to help faculty, students, and administration learn more about how students of color perceive their classroom experience.

**What will it cost me?**

There will be no financial costs to you or your student.

**How will my student's privacy be protected?**

Pseudonyms will be used for the school and the participants. Student confidentiality will be protected in where the interviews will be held through use of a private conference room on campus.

**How will my student's data be kept confidential?**

No information that is identifiable will be collected. Pseudonyms will be used. No information will be shared with anyone else. All audio, data, and consent forms will be kept on a password protected computer. A copy of the signed consent forms will be kept in the researcher's possession throughout the duration of the study and destroyed once the study and project are complete.

**What are my student's rights as a research participant?**

- Your student's participation is voluntary. Your decision to allow him/her to participate will have no impact on your or your student's current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to allow your student to participate will not affect your or your student's relationship with the researcher or the school.
- Your student may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If your student chooses not to participate there is no penalty to you or your student and you or your student will not lose any benefits that you or he/she are otherwise entitled to receive.
- Your student is free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.

- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the research that may affect your willingness to allow your student to participate in the research.
- If your student sustains an injury while participating in this study, his/her participation may be ended.

**What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to consent to your student participating.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researcher conducting this study is Valerie Gillespie. For more information regarding this study please contact her by phone at 469-360-4931 or by email at [vgillespie@une.edu](mailto:vgillespie@une.edu)
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Marilyn Newell, Ph.D., Lead Advisor, University of New England by phone at 207-345-3100 or by email at [mnewell@une.edu](mailto:mnewell@une.edu)
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu)

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- You may keep a copy of this consent form. Two signed copies are enclosed. Please keep one for your records and sign and return the other copy via mail or in person to: [vgillespie@une.edu](mailto:vgillespie@une.edu), or P.O. Box 231, Addison, TX 75001

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my student's participation as a research subject. I agree to allow him/her to take part in the research if he/she assents to do so voluntarily.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Parent or Guardian signature or representative**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date Legally authorized**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Student's Printed name(s)**

**Researcher's Statement**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to allow their student to be in this study.**

---

**Researcher's Signature**

---

**Date**

---

**Printed Name**

## APPENDIX C

### UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND STUDENT ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** Unheard Voices: Student Perceptions about Cultural Competence in the Independent Classroom

**Researcher:** Valerie Gillespie, Doctoral Student, University of New England  
(469-360-4931, [vgillespie@une.edu](mailto:vgillespie@une.edu))

#### **Introduction:**

- Valerie Gillespie is doing a research study. Your parent or guardian has said that you can take part if you want to. You don't have to take part if you don't want to.
- Please read this form. If you like, the form can be read to you. This form gives you information about the study. If you decide to be in the study, this form will also show that you made that choice to be in the study.
- Please ask any questions that you want about this study. You can ask them, now, during the study, or once it is complete.
- The survey will be available for one week from the date you are invited to participate in this study. You have this time to decide whether you want to be in the study. Remember, it's your choice to be in the study, you don't have to be in it.

#### **Why is this research study being done?**

This study is being done so that I can better understand your experiences in your school. By listening to your stories and hearing about your feelings in school, I can get a better sense about how your teachers are in the classroom with you.

#### **Who will be in this study?**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you most likely:

- Are enrolled in the Rivercreek Independent School (another name for your school/pseudonym)
- You identify as Asian, Black, or Latino(a).
- You are in Upper School and are at least 15 years old.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to take a survey that takes about 15 minutes. At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you want to participate in the interview part of the study and if you do, you will be asked to contact me (Valerie Gillespie) in person so that an interview can be scheduled. You have one week from the completion of the survey to decide if you would like to participate in the interview. The interview will be in a private conference room at your school and will last between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview will be translated electronically so that I can read what you said.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

There are very little risks. Interviewing may involve some discomfort. Discomfort is when sometimes feelings of sadness or anxiety are brought on by thinking about your feelings. If you feel any discomfort, or sadness or anxiety during the interview, let me know and the interview will immediately stop.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

There will be no direct benefits. You will have the chance to help faculty, students, and administration learn more about your experiences in education.

**What will it cost me?**

This will not cost.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

A different name, also called a pseudonym will be used for the school and for you, so you cannot be identified in any way in the study.

**How will my data be kept a secret?**

No information that is identifiable will be collected. Pseudonyms or different names will be used. All audio, data, and forms will be kept on a password protected computer. A copy of your parent or guardian's signed form will be kept in my possession throughout the duration of the study and destroyed once the study and project are complete.

**What are my rights if I decide to be in the study?**

- Whether you are in study is up to you. You can choose to take part or not to take part. Whatever you choose is fine and won't help or hurt your current or future relationship with this school.
- You can skip or decide not to answer any question for any reason.
- If you don't want to take part in the study, nothing bad will happen. You will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise getting.

- You can change your mind and stop being in study at any time, for any reason.
- I will tell you if I learn anything important that may make you change your mind about being in the study.
- If you get hurt while being in this study, I may take you out of the study.

**What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to be in the study.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researcher conducting this study is Valerie Gillespie, doctoral student, University of New England, [vgillesie@une.edu](mailto:vgillesie@une.edu), (460)360-4931. Please contact me for more information regarding this study.
- If you take part in this study and think you may have been hurt by the study, please contact Marylin Newell, Ph. D. Lead Advisor, University of New England, [mnewell@une.edu](mailto:mnewell@une.edu), (207)345-3100
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights while taking part in this, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

**Will I receive a copy of this assent form?**

- You may request a copy of this assent form.

**Participant's Statement**

**I understand what this study is for, and I understand that my parent or guardian has said I can be in the study if I want to. I also understand it is my choice, and I don't have to be in the study if I don't want to.**

**Check your choice below:**

\_\_\_\_\_ **No, I do not want to be in the study.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Yes, I do want to be in the study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Participant's signature(s)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed name**

**Researcher's Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

---

**Researcher's signature**

---

**Date**

---

**Printed Name**



## APPENDIX D

### STUDENT SURVEY FORM

*Confidential*

*Page 1 of 1*

#### Cultural Competence Survey

Please complete the survey below.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1) I feel accepted and part of my school.  | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No<br><input type="radio"/> A little                        |
| 2) I feel that students of my race or culture are respected and treated fairly in my school.   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No<br><input type="radio"/> A little                        |
| 3) My teachers and other school staff make me feel accepted and part of my school.   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No<br><input type="radio"/> A little                        |
| 4) My teachers seem comfortable talking to and teaching students from my culture or race.  | <input type="radio"/> All of them do<br><input type="radio"/> Some do<br><input type="radio"/> None of them do |
| 5) My teachers expect all students in their classes to succeed, no matter who the students are.  | <input type="radio"/> All of them do<br><input type="radio"/> Some do<br><input type="radio"/> None of them do |
| 6) When it comes to discipline, my teachers treat all students fairly.   | <input type="radio"/> All of them do<br><input type="radio"/> Some do<br><input type="radio"/> None of them do |
| 7) There are pictures, videos, or assignments in my class/school that relate to my culture or race.                                    | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No  |
| 8) There are textbooks and literature in my class/school that relate to my culture or race.  | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No  |
| 9) I would like more pictures, videos, or assignments that relate to my culture or race.   | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No<br><input type="radio"/> Not sure                        |
| 10) Teachers and staff at my school intervene when they see or hear name-calling, pushing, or other things related to culture or race. | <input type="radio"/> Yes<br><input type="radio"/> No<br><input type="radio"/> Not sure                        |

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[www.projectredcap.org](http://www.projectredcap.org)



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**APPENDIX E**

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
2. Do you feel your teachers see you as your race/ethnicity?
3. What does education mean to you?
4. Does your race play a part in education?
5. We all come from different cultures. What do you like most about your own culture?
6. What are some of the strengths of your culture? Are you able to share these strengths with your teacher?
7. What have your experiences been in developing a relationship with your teachers?
8. Tell me about a time when you had difficulty with your teacher in the classroom.
9. What have your overall experiences with teachers been like in high school for you? If you can remember, when you were younger?
10. How would you describe your educational experience here? Is it a positive or negative experience? If it is a positive experience, what makes it positive? If it is negative, what are the elements that make it negative?
11. Do you see yourself in your classroom curriculum? Is it important for you to see yourself in the classroom curriculum?
12. Share an experience when you were offended, hurt, or disrespected because of your race or culture.

Adapted from *Positive school climate tool kit* [Fact sheet]. (n.d.). Retrieved from Minneapolis Public Schools – Special School District No. 1 database.