Culturally Relevant Writing Pedagogy: An Investigation of Assessments, Feedback, and Equity

BY

KARA TAYLOR
B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2010
MFA, Chicago State University, 2012
MA, Roosevelt University, 2012

DISSERTATION

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Defense Committee:

Rebecca Woodard, Chair and Advisor
James Gavelek, Curriculum and Instruction
Nathan C. Phillips, Curriculum and Instruction
Todd Destigter, English Department
Catherine Compton-Lilly, University of South Carolina
This dissertation is dedicated to all my students. I hope to show you that anything is possible, and encourage you to keep fighting for the justice you deserve. Your efforts are not in vain. You can do it and this.
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<tr>
<td>CCSS</td>
<td>Common Core State Standards</td>
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<td>CRP</td>
<td>Culturally Relevant Pedagogy</td>
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<td>CSP</td>
<td>Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy</td>
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<td>NAEP</td>
<td>National Assessment of Educational Progress</td>
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<td>NWEA</td>
<td>Northwest Evaluation Association</td>
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<td>PARCC</td>
<td>Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers</td>
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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the intersection between culturally relevant pedagogy and writing assessment/feedback. A qualitative multi-case study was conducted to explore the culturally relevant writing instruction, assessment and feedback practices of three urban elementary and middle school teachers. Interviews, observations, student writing and teacher lesson plans, and artifact-based think alouds were data sources used to explore implementations of culturally relevant pedagogy in practice. Findings included: all aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy enacted is interconnected (instruction delivery, assessment text selection etc.), teachers’ instructional styles are driven by experiences personal and academic, and culturally relevant writing assessments and feedback provide spaces for students to heal and emancipate themselves. Ultimately, I posit that in the midst of enacting culturally relevant writing instruction and issuing feedback/assessments, social action can be promoted and healing spaces can be created.
Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

“In diversity there is beauty and there is strength.”

—Maya Angelou

In my first year of teaching eighth grade, writing class was often neglected at my school because this subject was not assessed. The extent of the student writing was based solely upon their response to a preselected text, and often devoid of personal experiences. Writing was not viewed as a craft, in which students are encouraged to develop tools and techniques to express ideas in a safe environment about issues or topics that are important to them. Instead, they were required to follow a format for answering extended response questions to prepare for the Illinois Standards Assessment Test for Reading, which was used, in part, to determine whether students would graduate and go on to high school. Students were drilled into “making connections” to everything they read, and were often provided with a list of sentence stems, or starters to begin their responses. Not only did this way of thinking impact my classroom culture, but it also impacted students’ performance, and my own formative and summative feedback practices. Additionally, my students voiced their concerns that the curriculum was not interested in who they are as people.

After my first year of teaching following these types of standards and teacher-driven expectations, I decided that I wanted to adopt a more student-centered approach to planning and teaching literacy in the classroom. I aimed to capitalize upon students’ background to push academic success. In order to change the culture in my classroom, I knew that I had to learn as much about my students as I could. I worked to accomplish this by performing interest inventories, engaging students in quickwrites, taking them on neighborhood walks and
conducted home visits. I then used the data I collected to adapt and design lessons that merged my students’ unique backgrounds with the eighth grade state standards.

I was determined to know my students, not only as readers and writers, but as unique individuals who all had interesting stories to tell. The racial demographic of my classroom was 97% African-American and 3% Caucasian. Though race was primarily homogeneous, students reflected diversity in other areas such as culture, gender, family structure, and personal experience. Students ranged from being the children of Nigerian immigrants to some living in foster care. My intent was to start each lesson where the students were (experience-wise) and bridge those experiences with my academic expectations. Although students enjoyed writing about various topics of their own choice throughout the school year, when it came to the Illinois State reading subtest (ISAT) for written response, they were receiving the lowest ratings on the rubric (0 or 1 out of 4). On the subtest, students were required to make a personal connection to the passage read. When talking to the students about how they felt about the task of writing an extended response to a passage, I received many responses such as, “Ms. Taylor, I just didn’t know about farms and couldn’t connect,” or “I don’t even know what I did wrong.” Comments like that really made me think about the relevance between the task asked of students and the feedback received, which was often reduced to just a number.

The students, their stories, and my experiences have driven my research and interest in making culturally relevant writing accessible to all students, and providing feedback and assessment to aid them in their development as writers. I aim to use the stories of my experiences as a teacher to lay the foundation for the qualitative study proposed, often sharing personal anecdotes to show the role writing plays in the lives of urban minorities, and how culturally relevant writing instruction might be implemented and assessed. One example I begin
with is that of Mariana, an African-American student in my eighth grade class who did not attend public school until fourth grade.

Mariana was raised by her grandmother. Her mother was in jail, and her grandmother was not well enough to get Mariana and her siblings to and from school everyday, so Mariana did not start school until she was in fourth grade. The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) removed Mariana from the home shortly after starting school, separating her and her siblings due to neglect.

Before Mariana moved to the south side of Chicago’s foster community called “The Village” in seventh grade, she lived with her first foster family in Chinatown for three years. In this process of resettling, she remained separated from her sisters and brothers, and continued to piece together her identity based on the shifting world around her. With her traveling from place to place, she acquired many different experiences that informed her identity. Some of these experiences were positive, while others were quite negative. For example, her experience of living in Chinatown for three years, and learning Mandarin, helped her “use more words to show how she feels.” However, she also spoke often of the anxiety of not being with her family, causing the development of trichotillomania. She often ate the hair in her eyebrows and the hair from her head to help her cope. Her appearance, along with the merging of cultures she experienced, surfaced through translanguaging, and Mariana soon became an outcast in her class. She was called names like “weirdo” or “oreo.” She would often just write about her classmates, “They don’t understand.”

Mariana loved creative writing, drawing, and anime, and found the language of Mandarin intriguing prior to moving into a predominantly Black community on the other
side of the city. She would often sit by herself at lunch and during recess drawing pictures of anime characters and writing stories that “bring them to life,” as she said. Her characters went through issues of persecution or bullying and, most of the time, overcame the issues.

Mariana took pride in drawing intricate pictures that depicted her experiences in the foster care system, and in expressing her feelings by accompanying most of these pictures with a poem, or a story. The little bit of Mandarin she learned, she weaved in and out of her poetry and speech. Her poetry helped Mariana build confidence and strength to continue on, despite her difficult situation. These words, for example, came from a bell ringer activity at the beginning of the year in which students were asked to respond to the prompt, “Why do you write?”: “My pen bleeds words of pain and 斗争 [struggle].”

Such examples were common in Mariana’s writing in my class, where students were encouraged to incorporate personal experiences to activate knowledge for academic tasks that they might not have yet experienced. The writing Mariana was able to do allowed her the ability to heal from her experiences of being separated from family and deal with her anxiety. I used feedback as my opportunity to understand Mariana better by questioning her intentionality behind the stories she told, the characters she drew, and the obstacles they overcame. Writing and written assessments thus allowed Mariana opportunities to showcase herself and her learning in unique writing forms, and feedback offered opportunities for conversations nourishing her healing process.

I saw her as a skillful and proficient writer when engaged in narrative and creative writing. However, many of Mariana's other teachers did not recognize the
burdens she bore, the talents she had developed, or the knowledge she possessed. They perceived her as defiant and underperforming, and somewhat aloof toward learning. For me, as a teacher, one significant way to know Mariana was to read her writing and have conversations with her around her writing.

The disharmony that existed for Mariana in regard to her experiences, both in and out of school, and the knowledge that was required for her to be successful in her schooling is common for many minority students in the U.S. public education system today. Within today’s society, more often than not, teachers lack the necessary background knowledge that is unique to their students and would allow them to tap into the competencies that students like Mariana bring with them; nor are teachers aware of how to not only use these competencies to the students’ advantage in the classroom to build academic knowledge, but also to overcome the adversity in their lives. I acknowledge that Mariana’s experience is very unique in many ways, but what is common among the growing diversity of students populating schools is the lack of responsiveness to the wealth of knowledge they bring to the classroom and safe spaces for students to grow.

Mariana, similar to many other students in the 21st century education system, entered the classroom with a unique background, skill set, and identity that was constructed based on her experiences. In order to engage diverse students and capitalize upon their unique backgrounds, infused with rich culture and language, teachers must view all students as competent learners in the classroom, and strive to unlock their potential. It is often widely accepted that certain groups of minority and underserved students are often lower performing on standardized tests than their majority counterparts, but this is due, in part, to a complex system that has been designed and perpetuated to make this happen. Much of the blame has been laid on the students because they
“don’t try” or “don’t study”; however, the reality is that educators must learn to become adaptive in their practice and provide students with spaces to both heal/overcome the inequalities they experience and to succeed.

**Current State of Education: Performance Crisis**

Mariana took the mandatory ISAT (Illinois Standards Achievement Test) which was one criterion used to determine promotion to the next grade and scored a 1 out of 4 in extended response writing, and below grade level in both reading and math. As a result, it was recommended that she be placed in a remedial class.

Students like Mariana embody the performance crisis occurring, often called the “achievement gap,” between minority and majority students on standardized tests. Mariana is no longer known for who she is, but is known by her score on a particular test. The test does not measure the personal growth or ways in which she has reached academic success in the classroom. She has been reduced to a statistic. In 2015, students in grades four, eight, and twelve in U.S. public schools were administered the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2013). NAEP is administered every two years to monitor academic achievement in reading and math of school-bound students. From this acquired data a comparison between student achievement across states can be drawn and the tracking of changes in student achievement over time is measured. Though this is not the be all end all in data for education, much research and various curricular and policy initiatives within and beyond schools refer to this data. Unfortunately, this data exposes some academic disparities among various races across subjects and fails to match the diversity of the students in the classroom.

For the NAEP reading subtest, reading comprehension is measured by having students read a series of grade-leveled passages of literary and informational text, and then answer the
accompanying critical thinking questions. Analysis of NAEP Reading Comprehension data from
the 2015 report revealed that the average scores of students was not significantly different based
on students grade to grade from year to year. The average score at grade four (223) was two
points lower at grade eight (265) compared to NAEP 2013 results (U.S. Department of
Education, 2015). Yet, the sharpest variations are discovered when scores are compared and
examined across socioeconomic, racial, and gender classifications. For instance, the achievement
gap in reading between fourth grade African American and Latino students in comparison to
white majority students varied by 23 to 28 percentage points. Similarly, white eighth students
scored 28 percentage points higher in reading than African American students, and 25 percentage
points higher than Hispanic students. Based on data reported by the U.S. Department of
Education, from 1990 to 2013, the average dropout rate was lower for whites than for Blacks,
and the rates for both whites and Blacks were lower than the rate for Hispanics.

The U.S Department of Education (2015) describes these differences as an achievement
gap: a situation in which one group of students, distinguished by race/ethnicity, or gender,
significantly performs better than another group, which is reflected in the statistical comparison
of average scores for the two groups. The achievement gap among minorities and whites has
often been studied in educational research (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The gap is typically
determined through statistical analysis with a .05 level of statistical significance (Gall, 2001).
O’Connell (2006) describes the achievement gap as “pernicious,” given its impact on the lives of
minorities all over the United States. O’Connell’s (2008) definition of the achievement gap is
much broader, and includes the disparities that exist between all students of color and their white
counterparts; between native English speaking students and English language learners; between
students based on their socio-economic status; and between the academic performance of
students with or without learning disabilities. These attempts to operationally define the term “achievement gap” come with either the study of what caused this gap, or the impact this gap has on the lives of ethnic and racial groups.

This achievement gap becomes particularly important for many minority students like Mariana, who fall into the underperforming category. It is not that students don’t have knowledge at all, but their knowledge does not tend to be valued on standardized texts. Mariana knows what a main idea is, but testing on a topic completely divorced from her reality with the expectation that she make a connection to build upon using predetermined terminology, and form an interpretation of the text seems hard to achieve. However, from this gap many generalizations have been made that drive the instruction of minorities, education funding and research, and perceptions of students by teachers. The implications of this data are larger than life. The “why” behind this data seems to be just as interesting as the individual stories behind these large numbers.

For years, evidence of the achievement gap has been consistently surfacing in educational research literature when discussing measures of long-term academic performance such as socioeconomic status and rates of dropouts, retention, and graduation. The National Education Association (2005–2015) devised a list of possible factors impacting the achievement gap. Though the factors are multiple and completely interrelated, and they vary from school to school, district to district, and community to community, they include: socioeconomic status, teacher educational background, student effort, and family support, etc. One factor that has been taken up and discussed across educational research is the “opportunity gap.”

The notion of an “opportunity gap” was brought into the conversation in 1983 after a seminal report titled “A Nation at Risk” ushered in an era of standardized testing and academic
standards, along with measures to see how students were performing on both; it was characterized as a disparity of access to quality schools and/or resources (Scott Foundation, 2013). The achievement and opportunity gaps are not the only issues, but the residue of them is the accumulation of educational debt as a result of this disparity among minority students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Educational debt is considered to be the resources that should have or could have been invested in low-income kids and/or the schools they attend (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This absence of investment in the lives of socio-economically disadvantaged minority students has been a major contributing factor to the achievement gap and stereotype threat, which is defined as a situation in which people conform, or feel at risk of conforming, to stereotypes regarding their social groups (Steele, 1997). With the achievement gap among racial groups, students are often viewed as incapable and/or defective. The perception is that minority students are seen as less capable, and very few expectations are placed on these students (Domicio, 2001). Ladson-Billings proposed that the achievement gap between minority and majority students can be narrowed by eliminating the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006 AERA Presidential Address).

Though achievement and opportunity are connected, they are very different issues. In the United States, across communities, there exists a correlation between student achievement and the availability of critical resources and opportunities that students need, in both the in-school and out-of-school environment, that are conducive to learning and will enable them to reach their potential in college, career, and citizenship (Carter, 2013). In other words, the achievement gap might not exist if broad investments were made in quality education across the board. Advocates for this type of investment argue that states, supported by the federal government, need to embrace new formulas for paying for schooling by investing based on the needs of disparate
opportunities of individual students (Maxwell, 2013).

Researchers aim to collect data and compare academic success demographically (race, class, gender, etc.) in the United States through NAEP. Though the NAEP only measures a very limited scope of knowledge, the findings reveal a significant achievement gap that manifests among racial groups, with white students scoring higher than African American and Latino students in both reading and math. In order to gain ground in promoting equality between minorities and whites, there is an urgency for a shift in the day-to-day instruction of minority students and how they are actually being assessed. It is paramount for educators to tap into the wealth of knowledge that students bring to the classroom, a treasure that should be explored as well as celebrated (Chalmers, 1996).

**Statement of Problem**

The “opportunity gap” and a general deficit perspective toward minorities in schools sets the context for this study of culturally relevant teachers, and specifically culturally relevant writing teachers. Acknowledging and intentionally working to merge the identities students have inside and outside of school builds investments (in students) and shows the investment of teachers. The aim of culturally relevant pedagogy is to empower, and writing is one avenue to allow the silenced voices of the underserved to be heard and healed. The assessment of culturally relevant writing instruction works to provide guidance as students write themselves into the world and begin the healing process.

**Need for Culturally Relevant Education**

Over the last few decades, there has been a major shift in the K-12 student population demographics; racially, ethnically, and linguistically. Based on data reported in 1972, students of racial or ethnic minority backgrounds comprised 22% of the elementary and secondary public
However, by 2004, public school enrollment for minority students had increased to forty-two percent. Another significant finding was the wide range in the concentration of minority students in regard to locale, where they comprised 95% of the public school population in Washington D.C., but in Vermont only four percent. (NCES, 2007). As the number of minority students enrolled in K-12 public schools has risen in the United States, the population of immigrants has also been climbing. For approximately 20% of the student population today, English is not the dominant language spoken at home; and for a majority of these students English is the second, third, or even fourth language that must be learned in school. (Center on Educational Policy, 2006).

The changing demographics of the student population in public schools across America reflect changes in the demographics of the country. The United States is becoming increasingly diverse. In the 1980s, the population of the U.S. was 83.1 percent white, 11.7 percent African-American, and 6.4 percent Hispanic. Fast forward three decades, and the white population of has dropped to 62 percent, the African-American population has risen to 13 percent, and the Hispanic population has nearly tripled, to 17 percent (U.S. Department of Census, 2014). This change has significantly diversified the school-aged population that sits before teachers in classrooms today. This shift precipitates a change in the way students are being taught.

Teachers must be cognizant of the fact that minority students bring a wealth of unique experiences, and a particular lens through which they see the world. They are not empty vessels to be filled and assimilated into the majority; rather, they come fully equipped with ideas, values, history, artistry, and other treasurable belongings. Culture impacts the way in which they learn. Teaching and learning revolve around the culture and identities of the diverse group of students.
sitting in the classroom, especially in urban settings. Scholars have worked to explore and identify various teaching practices and strategies designed to incorporate the culture(s) students bring to the classroom in order to promote racial empowerment. An area of study that has proliferated is culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). A popular belief within this pedagogy is that teachers entering the classroom implement their practice(s) in an objective manner that incorporates all students’ backgrounds in order to facilitate quality learning in the classroom.

Pundits of culturally relevant pedagogy, including Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1995) aim to explore bridging the gap between outside communities and schooling in order to promote the empowerment of underserved minorities and give them a voice in the community.

Consequently, there is a consensus among researchers that when the culture and experiences of students are considered in the curriculum planning and teaching practices of educators, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). The teaching force, despite this change, remains predominantly Caucasian and female-led (NCES, 2010). Teachers must realize that students entering the classroom are very diverse culturally, linguistically, economically, and socially, and their experiences may also differ from their teacher’s. The one-size-fits-all model in education does not fit the needs of all students, nor does it connect with the cultural backgrounds of students in order to build investment. Teachers must prepare to teach all students. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) advocated culturally relevant instruction as a method of reaching academic success for the underserved in America’s public schools. Ladson-Billings (1994) characterized CRP as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382). When teachers adopt the
tenets of culturally relevant teaching, they work to create a crossroad that joins the home lives of students with their school lives, with the underlying goal of meeting the requirements of the curriculum endorsed by the district and the state. (Common Core State Standards in our case). Success with implementation of culturally relevant teaching depends upon how adept teachers are in adapting their teaching practices to glean the most from the background, knowledge base, and experiences which their students bring to the classroom.

**Need for Culturally Relevant Writing Teachers**

Part of the difficulty with standardized tests, and another potential explanation for the disparity between minority and majority student NAEP scores, is that students have very little opportunity to explain their reasoning; document their experiences of reading, writing, and solving problems; and make connections. Multiple-choice questions do not allow them to explain “why” they selected a particular answer, and all the factors that guide their thinking. Writing, unlike multiple-choice questions, allows students to connect to what they read, or to tell truths with a text they create themselves. Writing allows students to express “why” and “how” they arrived at answers, not just “what” the answer is; it also allows them to interact, both in real-life and vicariously with others, apart from the constraints of distance and time (Graham and Perin, 2007). In other words, writing is an emancipatory act that can be transacted with the reader, and thus create heritage and a bigger purpose for a larger group (Graham and Perin, 2007).

Despite the opportunity writing can create to explain one's experience, many students are not proficient enough in writing to fulfill the demands of state standards or academic assignments. The NAEP unveiled findings which showed that a majority of students lack the capability in writing that is needed at their respective grade levels (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003).
Understanding the cultural context of students may be an initial step to bring equity of content to all students; however, the data to measure effectiveness and accessibility can come through writing. Students must be allowed, and even encouraged, to express their understandings, experiences with content, and stories through writing instruction.

Many writing researchers seek to understand the use of reading and writing as tools of empowerment and negotiation for students in response to the world around them (Baker & Freebody, 1989; Davis, 1989; Nabi, Rogers, & Street, in press; Street, 1994). In this study, the writing practices of urban students will be examined. According to Erickson (1968), identity is developed during the adolescent years, and this is also the stage at which students acquire most of their formal writing instruction. Researchers such as Ball (1998) and Winn & Johnson (2011) have challenged current teaching practices used with minority students, and they, along with other researchers, are exploring writing as an emancipatory tool of making meaning of one's own self and the world around them.

Teachers that are passionate and empathetic to the cause of celebrating and affirming all students have joined the mission of culturally relevant researchers to explore the benefits of providing adaptive instruction to the shifting populations of U.S. classrooms. However, questions still remain as to what strategies are the best strategies to use, the translation of culturally relevant pedagogy in and across various disciplines, and what culturally relevant instruction actually looks like in literacy classrooms.

In addition to the potential for culturally relevant writing instruction to support academic success, this paradigm of instruction provides safe places for students to heal from the inequalities of the world. With the growing diversity in our schools comes an expansion of inequalities students have experienced. Writing instruction has the potential to offer students a
place for healing to confront and reflect on the burdens they bear. In addition to confronting these burdens, students can plot solutions and become activists for their community and culture. Writing classrooms can be a refuge for them.

**Project Overview/ Research Questions**

Using qualitative methods, this study aims to explore multiple facets of feedback and assessment in three writing classes with teachers attempting to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. It analyzes the healing nature of feedback and assessment, and searches for parallels between the ways these teachers offered feedback and research on CRP. Consistent with CRP, this study will focus on the experiences of urban teachers whose classrooms include diverse, underserved populations such as Hispanic and African-American students.

Paulo Freire (1970) challenges learners to “read the world through the word.” In this paper, I argue for culturally relevant writing as the method for minority adolescents to eventually write “the word.” Before students can write the word they must write the world, and, in the case of this underserved population, write themselves into the world. Culturally relevant writing helps to acknowledge differences and bring equality into classrooms nationwide. Culturally relevant teachers are tasked with the responsibility of creating spaces for students to critique and heal from the inequalities of the world. Moreover, culturally relevant writing pedagogies are maintained and extended through assessment and feedback designed by teachers.

**Methodology**

This qualitative study explores a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources, including teacher interviews, participant observation in classrooms with selected students and teachers, document collection and analysis. Selected cases (urban elementary/middle grades teachers recommended as culturally relevant) were used to explore the
phenomenon of teacher feedback using case study methods (interviews and artifact collection/analysis in particular) (Stake, 1994). I explored/studied the phenomenon of feedback by triangulating data from artifacts and interviews for the period of one unit of study with three teachers. Because the goal of study was to understand culturally relevant teachers’ feedback practices, in-depth interviews were conducted in order to understand the participant's’ unique viewpoints. In addition to interviews, artifacts were collected, observations, and think alouds were used to answer the proposed research questions. The three teachers each selected focal students to discuss, and follow-up interviews were conducted with these students. Student work was also collected to analyze trends amongst feedback methods. The major research questions were:

- How do culturally relevant teachers assess students’ writing?
- How is culturally relevant pedagogy reflected in teacher feedback, both verbal and written?

**Significance of Study**

This study provides information on how culturally relevant teachers enact writing instruction and assessments, as well as how students respond. The significance of this study is that it focuses on a shift in demographics that impacts everyone. The growing diversity of the United States remains a relevant and critical shift that impacts achievement, curriculum design, and teachers everywhere. Many policies in today’s society are concerned with the Common Core State Standards. These standards are being interpreted as one-size-fits-all when, in fact, every student is different. Given the necessity for writing instruction to be adaptive to the students sitting in class, I assert that assessment and feedback should also be adaptive. This assertion challenges the promotion and utilization of conventional rubrics and standardized tests.
as the sole method of student feedback and assessment. I aim to explore three teachers’ perspectives and experiences on how cultural relevance carries over into writing, and, more specifically, writing assessment.

This study aims to delve deeper into what cultural relevance is in the writing classroom, and how it is perceived by teachers. Few studies have been conducted examining culturally relevant writing instruction in general. In addition to exploring culturally relevant teachers’ interpretation of what this pedagogy looks like in the classroom, this study will also explore writing assessment and instruction. Writing research divorced from reading has not been a well-researched topic. This study can heighten the awareness of how teachers interpret culturally relevant pedagogy, how it looks enacted in a writing classroom, and how it is being assessed.
Definitions of Key Terms

For the purpose of clarification, terms deemed important to the study have been defined below.

• **assessment**: the evaluation or estimation of ability or quality of someone or something (Huot, 2002)

• **achievement gap**: the disparity of educational outcomes of or between the performance of groups of students (Ladson-Billings, 2006)

• **African-American/Black**: people of African descent born in America (Merriam Dictionary, 2013)

• **culturally relevant pedagogy**: a theoretical and pedagogical framework that promotes the empowerment of minority and/or underserved students by using “cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.32) ; involves fostering academic achievement, cultural competence, and a sociopolitical consciousness in students

• **culturally relevant teaching**: the enacted culturally relevant pedagogy (Gloria-Ladson Billings, 2006)

• **evaluation**: the making of a judgment about the amount, number, or value of something; assessment (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993)

• **opportunity gap**: the unconscionable disparity in access to the quality educational resources needed for all children to be academically successful (Ladson-Billings, 2006)

• **stereotype threat**: a situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 2005)
Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In today’s society, teachers throughout the nation have been charged with adapting curriculum and instruction for their students in order to create more equitable environments for students. This has become apparent through efforts at reform with revised curricula and practices committed to social justice and equity (Ladson-Billings 1994). In this chapter, the work of prominent scholars in the field of culturally relevant pedagogy and its contribution to the study of culturally relevant writing and assessment are discussed. A discussion of the areas related to this study are presented in the following order:

1) culturally relevant pedagogy

2) writing instruction

3) assessment

Finally, I suggest the need for studying the assessment and feedback practices of culturally relevant writing teachers.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Within the educational research world, there is a belief that the vast cultural and historical differences of students across the United States contribute to minority students scoring lower on standardized tests (Ogbu, 1998). Culturally relevant pedagogy, or CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) is a theory of education that was created to debunk original deficit models of teaching dating back to before the 1970s and 1980s. These models positioned linguistic and cultural diversity as distractions and/or problems to be fixed, as opposed to the educational resources we view them as today. From these deficit models came “asset pedagogies,” such as “culturally appropriate
teaching” (Au & Jordan, 1981) and “culturally congruent teaching” (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), to debunk the community of thought that cultural and language differences should be treated as issues for students. These approaches were formulated to find a middle ground between teachers and students due to the mismatch between culture and language (e.g., Au’s focus on Talk Story and Learning to Read, 1985). Ladson-Billings (1995) examined the impact that asset culturally appropriate and culturally congruent pedagogies had made in schools, but she also acknowledged that inequalities are perpetuated in the framing of differences that warranted accommodation. The consensus was that we must study how diverse students learn, rather than expecting them to learn the way we teach (Noguera, 2009). A monolingual and monocultural society has never been a reality in America.

In response to both deficit- and asset-pedagogies, Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term “culturally relevant pedagogy” in her book The Dreamkeeper (1994). She defined this pedagogy as:

[A] theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement, but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate (p. 469).

Ladson-Billings (1995) then provided a criteria for this pedagogy:

A culturally relevant pedagogy proposes to do three things—produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order. (p. 474)

In her book Dreamkeepers, Ladson-Billings introduces the notion of culturally relevant teaching, in which she provides an empirical and reflective study of the teaching practices of eight teachers in Northern California, nominated by parents and administrators and considered to
be exemplary educators (1994). This diverse group of teachers, five Black and three white were working in low-income areas, in school districts with predominantly African-American student populations.

Ladson-Billings conducted observations to discover how these exemplary teachers successfully implemented culturally relevant teaching practices with marginalized students. Through observations inside and outside the classroom; reflective one-on-one conversations and group meetings; and feedback from parents, administrators, and community members, Ladson-Billings discovered that these teachers approached their profession with commitment and pride, and each one of them communicated to their students the belief and expectation that they all could be successful (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through her rich account of how this group of teachers engaged with their students in *Dreamkeepers*, and her theoretical essay “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” Ladson-Billings has inspired future researchers to explore what cultural relevancy actually looks like within literacy classrooms for minorities with the goal of providing equity in education. Culturally relevant pedagogy is central to this study because it is the foundation of all teaching practices delivered by the participants.

In recent years, culturally relevant pedagogy has been adopted more broadly in classrooms across the nation for growing populations of ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse students (Paris, 2012). However, critics argue that identifying and celebrating cultural differences is not sustaining and emancipating for students (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Ladson-Billings (1995) agreed with these criticisms, and acknowledged the misappropriation of the term as it became a buzzword without much explanation to show its implementation. In a later publication, Ladson-Billings (2014) argues that the field of education may be ready for a newer version of culturally relevant pedagogy—one that aims to keep up with the ever-changing
demographic of the nation and world, but also offers a more critical eye to the concept of equity. Paris (2012), committed to respect and remain true to promoting the foundational work of culturally relevant pedagogy, goes further and proposes language that explicitly moves beyond the temporary act of being “sensitive” and “responsive” to one of perpetual enforcement. He proposes that:

Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. In the face of current policies and practices that have the explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society, research and practice need equally explicit resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and cultural equality. (Paris, 2012)

Paris not only advocates for naming the approach, but also offered a more concrete explanation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Throughout this study, I retain the use of the term “culturally relevant,” but shift my focus to this broader understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy introduced by Paris and reinforced by Ladson-Billings’s (2014) “remixed,” or 2.0, version of culturally relevant pedagogy. This understanding acknowledges the fluidity of culture and puts culture directly at the forefront of justice.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

There are distinguishable features that set culturally relevant teaching apart from teaching that maintains the status quo. In her book The Dreamkeeper, Ladson-Billings (1994) details practices that reflect culturally relevant teaching:

● Culturally relevant teaching has high expectations for success for all students and helps students to set high goals for themselves.
● Culturally relevant teaching creates opportunities for students to engage in discourse
without fear of losing control of the classroom.

- Culturally relevant teaching is reflected when the teacher assumes the role of facilitator, rather than the purveyor of all knowledge, and students are provided opportunities to work collaboratively.

- Culturally relevant teaching models the professionalism of teaching.

- Culturally relevant teaching makes it a priority to provide rich text for students to read that includes characters that look like them, and engage in some of the same activities that students engage in.

- Culturally relevant teaching accepts the students the way they are when they enter the classroom, and welcomes the community into the classroom as well.

The bulleted points listed above represent some of the theoretical findings researchers have agreed upon to be of great importance when implementing culturally relevant instruction. Other researchers have traveled from theory to teaching practices, for example, by examining how culturally relevant literacy instruction is enacted. This research has been aimed toward exploring how aspects of students’ lives are made relevant in literacy classrooms, with a particular focus on reading (e.g., Au, 1993, Compton-Lilly, 2007; Tatum, 2005). Some researchers have also looked specifically at writing instruction in classrooms. Dyson (2001), for example, used data collected in an ethnographic project in an urban first grade class to examine how children’s experiences with media informed their ability to compose and create text. She tracked students’ experience with media (i.e., cartoons, movies) through their interaction with text and the process of producing text (Dyson, 2001). This study showed how students’ experiences are interwoven in classroom compositions and sought to study how students ultimately use their experiences in order to help teachers connect with them in a better way. In
another example, Johnson and Gonzalez (2014) conducted an ethnographic qualitative narrative study of the culturally relevant practices of a teacher named Ms. Steck during two separate classes over the course of semester. Their methodology included observing and recording classes on nine occasions, and they also conducted interviews with the teacher and students during separate classes (Block A and Block D). They closely examined and analyzed how culturally relevant pedagogy manifested in Ms. Steck’s instruction and management practices in the various classrooms. Findings revealed how Ms. Steck’s culturally relevant instructional decisions were dependent on the class because she found herself tending to the “community” they created. For example, group D as a community approached learning differently, with more instances of being off-task. In efforts to engage her second class more, she allowed them breaks to creatively redirect their attention to their assigned objective open-ended tasks to allow students to infuse their experiences in assignments to build “freedom, ownership and investment” (p. 22). In addition to cultural and linguistic differences, this study showed differences that teachers might take in their instructional approaches. However, the research on culturally relevant writing instruction is still scarce.

**The Power and Potential of Writing**

In this study, I ventured more deeply into how culturally relevant pedagogy is enacted in writing instruction. I became interested, in particular, in writing research that has shown writing to have emancipatory and healing properties. Literacy instruction, especially writing, typically uses curricula in which the English teacher must construct coherence. The instructor is negotiating lessons in the curriculum, but also what is privileged to be considered literate and/or writing (Purcell- Gates, 1995). The act of teaching, thus, becomes a social and political practice aimed to facilitate thought about injustices and bring forth solutions. To reach the students in the
classroom and their community, teachers must learn to produce, communicate with, and value text in similar ways.

Given the shift toward a demand for increased writing competency for 21st-century learners, the notion of what is writing must be considered carefully. Adolescents now live in an age of digital communication, which has a great influence on how they socialize and choose to communicate (Sweeny, 2010). More importantly, this digital age impacts how information is shared, and how students choose to structure communication. Traditional definitions of what qualifies as writing, reading, and communication are no longer sufficient for 21st-century teachers. For example, Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, and Meyer (2010) used case study methods to explore how students used microblogs (i.e., tweets) to document learning and communicate with peers. On average, they found that students posted at least 53 times a day for a 6-week period and encouraged the incorporation of this form of writing into classrooms because it promotes transparency with communication through informal avenues they use (Ebner et al., 2010).

Studies such as these show how teachers today must acknowledge the changes in literacy, generally, within writing classrooms during their instruction. Such shifts in our understandings of literacy are carrying over into research on effective uses of social media in the classroom (Callow, 2008; Grisham & Wolsey, 2009; Jolls, 2008; Leu et al., 2008; Merchant, 2008), and is often referred to as “new literacy” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu, 2007; McKenna, Labbo, Kieffer, & Reinking, 2006).

With these new forms of writing being considered, the purposes for writing also shifts. Kress (1995) proposes that writing is an act of ethics that questions social, political, and moral issues. This directly connects to Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally relevant tenet of social consciousness. Thus, the instruction of writing and the act of writing provide a way for students
to address the world in which they are situated. The power of writing can complement the goals of emancipation introduced by culturally sustaining and relevant pedagogy by allowing students
to “write themselves,” so they can eventually write the words to achieve academic success.
Writing is a powerful, adaptable tool which can be utilized for a number of reasons and in many
different contexts. For example, in Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have A Dream” speech,
the purpose was to persuade the masses to envision America as a nation of equality, and a place
where the heritages and contributions of all its citizens were celebrated. The power of the writing
of one man who had a dream stirred a movement. Proponents of culturally relevant writing have
adopted the premise that writing can stir social change by writing the lives of minorities into
existence with permanent artifacts. Before discussing possible tenets of culturally relevant
writing, the state of writing instructions will be examined to situate these tenets into what research
has revealed about writing and policy.

**Current Views of Writing and Writing Instruction**

Students who do not acquire the necessary skills in writing are at a huge disadvantage in
today's society. Graham (2006) asserts that students who do not acquire proficient skill in
writing will have poor grades, especially in classes that regularly assess with writing. Many
students lack adequate skills to meet the increased present-day demands of policy for school, or
to meet the demands for employment. In relation to the demand for students to know and be able
to write in all genres, students are not faring well. The 2011 NAEP report reveals that
approximately 27 percent of students performed at or above the proficient level at eighth and
twelfth grade. African-Americans and Hispanics in both grades, male and female, score on
average 18 points below the benchmark score, and 6 points below the average for white students.
Though the NAEP has worked to quantify writing, the measures by which it does expose the
underperformance of minorities and students, in general. In order to explore reasons for the underachievement in writing, the writing instruction research must be reviewed.

The reality of students’ deficiencies in writing is that, across many states and globally, little time is being dedicated to writing or the importance of writing as a tool for learning (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Throughout the nation, however, the advent of Common Core State Standards (2010) has shifted greater focus on to writing instruction (Graham 2012). The Common Core aims to promote college and career readiness, for which a series of benchmarks were created to measure students’ writing skills in grades K-12, and their ability to apply these skills in various situations. There is great emphasis on learning how to write (primary grades) and writing to learn (intermediate and upper grades) (Gillespie and Mckeown, 2013). For example, in sixth through eighth grades students are required to write for various reasons, and use writing to construct new positions through synthesis, analysis, interpretation, and building on background knowledge. Though the Common Core has been viewed by some literacy researchers and practitioners as separated from students’ socio-political and socioeconomic backgrounds, I claim that these standards are general enough to allow teacher autonomy to implement culturally relevant practices, and that they already promote one key tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy—a academic success—identified by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995).

The Common Core State Standards explain the academic and professional benefits of writing; however, writing is a very versatile tool that can be used both academically and personally (Graham, 2006). Writing is indeed critical to the success of children, but what instruction looks like is variable. Typically, teachers ask students to create texts in order to demonstrate and deepen their knowledge of the world and themselves, but conversation about how it is done is absent (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004; Graham & Perin, 2007a,
Trends in today’s writing instruction (Graham and Perin, 2007; McCarthey, 2011; Troia, 2014). Troia (2014) explains that there are several evidence-based approaches trending in writing (e.g., timeless writing, text modeling, online avenues for producing text, learning through writing and reflection). However, many of these approaches do not necessarily provide students opportunities for justice through writing instruction (i.e., instruction that is solely based on skills like spelling, handwriting, typing, capitalization, punctuation, and grammar) (Troia, 2014). These skills are important because they can become obstacles in written expression being transacted from writer to reader (Troia & Graham, 2003). It is proposed that through authentic writing activities centered around students, basic writing skills can be learned and strengthened during text production (Andrews et al., 2006; Graham, Bolinger, et al., 2012; Graham, McKeown, et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007a). This means that basic skills that can hinder the stories students are using to writing themselves into the world can be covered in the midst of culturally relevant writing assignments in context. This is only true in more formal writing, because any other writing, such as free writing, should be continuous, without censoring or editing (Gomez, Parker, Lara-Alecio, & Gomez, 1996; Wienke, 1981).

Graham and Perin (2007) conducted a meta-analysis across 123 documents and reported trending topics in writing instruction that yielded positive outcomes. Their findings revealed the following instructional practices to be beneficial for adolescent writers: teaching strategies for writing and for summarizing, setting explicit goals for writing, and using technology as a medium. They also recommended that teachers provide students with instruction on how to write complex sentences, and provide students with exemplar models of writing. Professional development for teachers on how to teach writing was strongly recommended, as well (Graham
and Perin 2007). Findings showed benefits for systematic and explicit writing instruction. Students showed a preference for the use of technology in learning to write. Since most adolescents equate computers with fun, teachers can take advantage of the motivational aspects of this medium.

McCarthey (2011) conducted a study investigating 29 third- and fourth-grade teachers in the United States to find instructional trends, understand teachers’ approaches to writing instruction, and examine influences on their instruction. Some of the findings echo those already discussed. For example, in this study McCarthey found that in six classrooms, writing instruction was not occurring everyday because the teachers were only taking a skills-based approach linked to mandated curriculum (America’s Choice) or a textbook (e.g., Harcourt School Publishers, 2003). Conversely, many other teachers reported using practices combined from different approaches; these practices did not fit into any categories because they were tailored to the students in front of them, which is very similar to the mission of CRP (McCarthey, 2011).

Research reveals that in the midst of these trends, there is a place for culturally relevant pedagogy. In a later study of discourses in 20 elementary school teachers' writing instruction, McCarthey et al. (2013) found that there were no cases of sociopolitical discourses in prescribed district-wide writing curriculums (p. 28). Similarly, when McCarthey (2008) conducted interviews and observations of 18 teachers to discover the impact on writing instruction of mandates like No Child Left Behind, she identified commonalities such as heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing, effects of curriculum, recognition of students considered as lower-achieving, and concern for the challenges faced by English language learners. Urban schools tended to have higher regulations on writing curricula and to mandate more skills-based instruction due to
these mandates. Thus, she found that there is a need for writing instruction to shift away from catering to district mandates and toward students’ experiences.

The trends revealed through studies in writing classrooms do not necessarily mean that there is a “wrong” type of instruction going on; however, these findings tend to focus on content and instructional methods rather than the students in the classroom. Ultimately, studies like Troia (2014) and Graham and Perin (2007) were interested in determining which methods “work” to teach students academic writing skills. McCarthey’s studies showcase what teachers report to be doing in their writing classroom. If students’ success is the ultimate goal of writing instruction, then the academic aspects of writing should not be the only thing unlocked for students. The transformative and emancipatory nature of writing should be harnessed so students can “rise up” (Christensen, 2000). The one-size-fits-all model will not work for all students, even if writing is viewed as simply an academic skill because students learn very differently.

Culturally relevant writing instruction aims to tap into students’ academic and cultural potential through writing.

**Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction**

A growing community of scholars has begun to theorize and examine how culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy might be enacted in school settings (e.g., McCarty & Lee, 2014). The literature on effective writing instruction as a result of mandates like the Common Core State Standards overlooks gaps between teacher knowledge and ideas about writing and knowledge of what is best for students. Writing instruction should be centered around students’ thinking and experiences, exposing injustices to promote activism (Coker & Lewis, 2008). Various researchers have said writing instruction should or does revolve around products of writing (Fredricksen, Wilhelm, & Smith, 2012), while others privilege writing
processes (Smagorinsky, 2010). In classrooms that are centered around student voices and promoting critical literacy practices, teaching writing should value both product and process, but above all value the act of writing stories itself as a window into students’ minds (Ladson-Billings, 2014, Winn & Johnson, 2011).

Writing instruction infused with cultural relevance should be authentic (Kahn, 2009), powerful (Ife, 2012), and contingent solely on the experience and lives of students (Christensen, 2009; Kirkland, 2009). Winn and Johnson (2011) propose that culturally relevant writing instruction should begin by helping students bridge their diverse outlooks fueled by experience through written text that also critiques social and political issues related to them. Student voice, in this case, takes precedence over concepts like mechanics. By elevating students’ voices and experiences in their delivery of instruction, writing teachers are inviting students to participate in communities built around their ideas. Privileging a product (e.g., an essay, a narrative) or the fixed steps of writing will not produce good writing (Johnson and Eubanks, 2015). According to Winn and Johnson (2011), looking at both process and product allows “opportunities for students to collaborate, share, and exchange” (p. 44). In order for teachers and students to build a writing community around activism, instructors must view writing as an opportunity to write themselves into the world and tell unspoken stories. Learners of writers’ voices and ideas in this community must matter and be employed to create knowledge that can be used to build justice and community in their lives. Fisher’s (2003) research works to reveal the power of giving students a voice while looking at the integration of spoken and open-mic poetry around the African diaspora in both school and after-school contexts through writing learning modules for elementary school children. Through ethnographic observations and interviews, she showcased how an apprenticeship model from artists to writers supported minority students to break free
from monolithic labels with the power of their voices. Additionally, the notion of the classroom was reimagined as a chosen space of safety and equity through the spoken and written word.

Culturally relevant writing instruction also elicits students to reflect, heal, and interrogate their experience of the world. Students should be constantly reimagining for themselves a more equitable reality. This work is already being taken up by researchers such as Behizadeh (2017), who designed a four-week summer session for seventh through ninth graders about writing and code meshing, which is the combination of one or more languages or linguistic codes to create a hybrid text or language. These frameworks seek to celebrate and teach students how to maneuver between two or more dialects, and students’ work was tracked to see what was transferred from instruction to their final products. Such lessons help students build an appreciation for dialects like African-American English. In McCarthey et al.’s (2013) study of discourses in twenty elementary school writing teachers’ curricula, beliefs, and instructional practices, the authors described how one teacher, Jackson, used his hip-hop writing background to modify his mandated curriculum to foster creativity in discourse within his classroom.

Culturally relevant writing instruction is linked to how students are situated in society, but also to how teachers are.

Much of the preceding text about culturally relevant writing instruction focused on the healing and emancipatory powers writing can grant students in the classroom. However, research has taken up the tensions involved with implementing culturally relevant writing instruction. Researchers like Puzio et al. (2017) discuss possible dilemmas with implementation, exploring narrative analysis to expose “creative failures” of ELA teachers who tried to enact culturally sustaining and/or culturally relevant lessons and fell short due to a “disconnect between some teachers and their students” (p. 231). Other researchers, such as Howard (2003),
acknowledge that there must be preparatory steps taken by teachers in order to engage in the work of teaching diverse students in this way. Teachers must engage in critical reflection of their experiences with injustice, and acknowledge bias before they can facilitate this work in their classroom. This study aims to connect concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy with writing instruction for the purposes of giving students voices and tools to emancipate themselves, along with reaching academic success.

**Shifts Toward Culturally Relevant Writing Instruction**

Assessing students’ writing can be a difficult undertaking for teachers because it is not always strategic and can turn into an arbitrary, haphazard act fairly quickly (Winn and Johnson, 2011). This arbitrary feedback takes form when teachers mark up students’ papers for mistakes with X’s and make suggestions for how things should sound in order to sum up a paper with a numerical score. However, the wealth within writing is overlooked when assessing students in this way. Thus, missed opportunities occur for teachers to engage with students about experiences in conjunction with their writing, and to assist students in growing as writers of their world and themselves. Shifts need to occur in assessing and issuing feedback in order to nurture the writing that culturally relevant writing instruction produces.

**Culturally Relevant Writing Assessment and Feedback**

Many teachers, administrators, and researchers are faced with the perpetual dilemma of assessing students. But what are meaningful ways to review students’ work that encourage them to write the world and write themselves into the world? This section will review current understandings of writing assessments and feedback, and make a case for the need for culturally relevant assessment.
NCTE (2012) defines writing assessments, often synonymously referred to as evaluation, as a direct response to student learning aimed to assist students as writers. Researchers such as Sadler (1985) and Wyatt-Smith Klenowski (2013) argue that writing assessments are much deeper; they view assessments as socially and politically-situated acts aimed to gauge students’ learning that is deeply rooted in teachers’ past experiences and beliefs. Huot (1996) echoes previous sentiments when he proposed that writing assessments have been developed by the measurement community as a device whose inner workings are known only to those privileged with specialized knowledge. Historically, assessments have been used to rank and allow students admission into communities of knowledge (e.g., college entrance exams). Anne Ruggles Gere (1980) suggests that writing assessments often lack procedural theoretical foundations, meaning that not much research has been geared around how to enact or create assessments. Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffe and Skinner (1985) built upon this view by explaining that the pressing need to develop writing assessment procedures outstrips our ability to develop a theoretical basis for them. Huot (2002) adds that we have yet to create or find substantive ways in which teaching and writing are linked in a non-punitive authentic manner.

Analysis of a vast amount of student writing has suggested that there is a limited amounts of writing instruction in school, in part due to the difficulty of assessing/evaluating writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Broad (2003) asserts that writing assessments are difficult to create and enact because they fail to address the local realities the writing is situated in, and can be guided by the personal interests of those who are scoring it. In the process of assessing writing, assessor’s bias and lack of understandings of students whose writing is being assessed may surface, which must be considered because these factors may affect students’ perception of writing and their experiences. In Broad’s (1997, 2000, 2003) studies, and other studies on
summatives assessments, like exit exams (Haswell 1998, 2001; Huot 1993), it was found that outside factors from the text influence assessment decisions from the evaluators and the students as the writers. Stallion (2009), conducted a study examining college level assessments for an English 112 course and found that the issue of assessments was not personal enough. He observed that evaluators read essays without any previous knowledge of the author; however, evaluators were still able to use context criteria to create images of writers that influenced how they graded their writing. French and Carlton (1961) conducted a qualitative study of three hundred on-demand essays scored by fifty-three reviewers. Results revealed that, on average, at least seven different scores were generated during the grading process because of differences in opinions. This is one example that shows how difficult writing is to reliably grade across raters. These studies, and others, reveal the difficulty incurred when assessing writing, since writing is socially situated in the lives of students. During the evaluation of writing and assessments, teachers/evaluators fail to capture the complex nature of writing. With the changing times, the notion of what literacy is has expanded, and thus assessment should, too (Wilson, 2017). Mo et al. (2014) suggest that writing assessments should be authentic and fair for all because they are quite valuable.

The “why” behind writing assessments is also dependent upon the context in which they were issued. A teacher examines and assesses writing to informally measure progress, inform instruction, gain a view of students’ thought processes, and judge their effectiveness (Graham, 2008). Students look for growth in their own writing practices. Using the technique of peer assessment, students share their writing with one other, and feedback is provided in regard to what works, and what could be tweaked to add appeal to the intended audience. When students assess the writing of their peers, they are simultaneously learning about their own writing.
Schools assess writing in different ways--to determine effectiveness of staff and target students that may need remediation. This list can continue with various reasons why governments, districts and employers assess writing. The most visible assessment on the radar of K-8th grade teachers in my home state of Illinois is the high-stakes Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC evaluation; however, there are other types of writing assessments that are employed on a daily basis in writing classrooms. The following sections will first review summative writing assessments, then formative writing assessments, and conclude with a look at culturally relevant writing assessments and feedback.

**Summative Writing Assessments**

**Standardized Tests.** Summative assessments like standardized tests are used to evaluate learning, as well as serve as comparisons for the mastery of standards, like the CCSS. These tests serve as consistent measurements of student knowledge across schools and states. They can help determine the effectiveness of teaching and the retention of knowledge by students. Scores can be indicative of the quality of the curriculum, and are often used to rank students. Mccarthey (2008) argues that summative assessments often mirror large-scaled mandates like No Child Left Behind. In other words, these summative, standardized writing tests are not created to assess student growth as writers, but they are linked to mandates. Through her interview-based and observational study of teachers across the United States, she found that teachers reported the pressures they felt to excel on these large scale tests and how it affected their instructional decision-making. Due, in part, to the high cost of assessing writing on standardized tests, states like Illinois and Ohio dropped the assessment of writing altogether (Applebee & Langer, 2009).

Because reading has been privileged over writing on standardized tests, writing has received less focus in instruction. Mo et al. (2014) claim that the potential for writing to be a
source of opportunity and means of economic growth has gone unrealized. Writing really deserves to be placed at the center of policy, instruction, and school agendas (CEEB, 2003). However, if writing becomes an emphasized topic, then it should be in a manner that honors the potential writing brings. Writing has been emphasized more in the CCSS than in previous standards (Woodard & Kline, 2016); however, standardized tests have yet to “catch up” to the standards. Furthermore, much work needs to be done in classrooms on a more formative level to prepare students to do the kinds of writing the standards call for. Particularly, now that assessments for Common Core, like PARCC, challenge students to write in various genres to address most writing standards, there will likely be more writing instruction in classrooms.

Similar to No Child Left Behind (mandate ended in 2013), we are in the midst of summative testing that reflects the Common Core State Standards. The adoption of Common Core has called for a reignited view of writing and accountability measures for writing (Shannahan, 2015). Though these standards are similar to many previous state standards, they are being evaluated using a different test and style than from the past (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2013; Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2013). For example, students in middle school, as well as high school, are now required to synthesize information across multiple research documents on computer-adapted tests, which they were not required to perform in the past.

Teachers often feel the tension between state mandates for writing and what teachers deem to be “useful” in the classroom. This tension stems from the lack of connection to the classroom-placement, exit, etc (Huot, 2002). Because writing is one way to really dive into students’ thinking and processes, there is ultimately a need to evaluate and quantify it. At the end of the day, students need grades per the district requirement, and development in writing is
important to students, parents, and teachers.

**Rubrics.** Perhaps the most common type of summative writing assessment used in classrooms is the rubric. Rubrics are scoring tools that have been created for use by teachers and evaluators as a guide to analyze the processes and products demonstrated by students in their writing (Brookhart, 1999). There are popular rubrics, such as the 6+1 trait writing rubric, which most 3rd through 12th grade teachers are familiar with, and have widely circulated writing classrooms all over the United States. This 6+1 trait writing rubric shows value for traits like: ideas, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, voice, conventions, and presentation in writing (Wilson, 2006). It also correlates directly with the Common Core state standards for writing. Most English/Language Arts rubrics typically include sections such as: ideas, mechanics, and organization etc. There are also rubrics for specific writing purposes available for, and created by teachers, such as those used to assess autobiographical writing, position papers, letter or email writing, or compare/contrast writing.

Numerous researchers and practitioners have expressed dissatisfaction with rubrics. For example, Anson (1989) challenged this scoring method as a violation of the complexities of the writing process. Wilson (2006) argues that rubrics have been created for profit in a one-size-fits-all form; and teachers are often sold on them by textbook publishers who provide canned instruction, and promote their prescribed rubrics as convenient and highly adaptable. The creators of these rubrics promise them to be easy to grade, applicable to all subjects including writing, and claim that these rubrics make the writing process easy to understand. Standard writing rubrics appear to be the answer for many teachers of writing; however, if you have used rubrics, you may discover inadequacies in getting at what you think the writing process entails, and how to assess writing quality. Wilson (2006) discouraged undue reliance on the use of
rubrics because, in her opinion, rubrics do not allow teacher to give feedback of new insights, acknowledge the agreement between reader’s context and purpose, or challenge readers to articulate positions. If we want instruction to move beyond the one-size-fits-all model, evaluative rubrics must, too. Wilson suggests that there is a need for classroom assessments, such as rubrics, to be just as individualized as the instruction itself. Writing assessment should also value the same sentiments that culturally relevant teaching and writing instruction promote--individuality and students’ stories.

Goodrich-Andrade (2006) argued that there are drawbacks to using rubrics based on the interpretation of their value, in that they are often used simply for punitive purposes and not for building understandings. She, along with other like Huba & Freed (2000), caution assessors that scoring high on the rubric could be directly linked to the reader’s agreement with the content written and their perceived understanding of the assignment. Simply restated, the capacity, or useful of a rubric is based on the instruction to prepare students for the assignment and their comprehension of the assignment. As suggested earlier, assessment may be diverse in nature, and how results are delivered may vary; but much work remains to be done on how teachers can work to help improve student writing (Boix Mansilla & Dawes Duraisingh, 2007; Cizek, 2000).

Arnetha Ball (1997) and others have argued that the race of evaluators may affect a student’s writing score on standardized writing assessments in which rubrics are used. In one study, she found that although the teacher evaluators were similar in teacher preparation, years of experience, and in their backgrounds, in general, black and white teachers scored student writing differently based on their linguistic and cultural semblance to the dominant culture. She emphasizes the importance of including teachers of diverse cultures as evaluators for state writing assessments, and argues that student assessment feedback can affect the way they view
themselves as writers (Ball & Ellis 2008). Haswell and Haswell (1996) similarly found that evaluators’ gender stereotypes affected their scoring patterns on student writing assessments. Many variables must be considered when rubrics are relied upon as the sole basis for writing assessment. Formative assessments provide more opportunities for the teacher to address the diverse nature of the students in front of them.

**Formative Assessment**

Formative assessment is characterized as the process of evaluating student work or performance, along with measuring competence (Tunstall and Gipps, 1996). In the classroom this is viewed as a teacher using personal judgment of students knowledge and/or work ethic to determine whether they may need to redo an assignment, extend, revise, etc (Gipps, 1994). In order to truly assist students in becoming better writers, teachers must issue continuous feedback. Teachers can engage in formative assessment in writing by responding to students on day-to-day writing to help them develop texts that are still in formation. Over the years there has been a struggle for standardized assessments to measure the quality of all students’ writing on the day-to-day level (Godshalk, Swineford & Coffman, 1966). Some types of formative assessments that allow insight into day-to-day writing, and that have been the focus of much research, are on-demand writing prompts, portfolios, peer feedback, self-assessment, and teacher-student conferences. I will briefly review the literature on each.

**On-demand Writing.** Formative writing assessments sometimes take the form of on-demand writing tasks used to measure understanding and learning. Students are given a prompt, or task, geared toward a particular topic and audience, and asked to write about that topic. These prompts can be used at the beginning of a unit as a pre-assessment, and also after a unit to determine learning. Huot (1996) suggested these writing assessments require the development of
writing prompts that are similar in difficulty and suitable for the students in the class. Deiderich (1996) proposes that writing in response to prompts serves as samples of students’ writing and learning outside the bounds of their ordinary writing. He elaborated on the topic by saying that this type of writing is “the most direct way of being assessed” (p. 584). However, as described earlier, scoring on-demand writing assignments reliably across raters is difficult (French & Carlton, 1961). As with summative assessments, it may be hard for the assessor to understand the intentions of the writer.

**Portfolios.** Another type of formative assessment is portfolios. Many teachers have discovered the value of using portfolio-based assessment as a tool in writing (Barrett, 2000; Biggs & Tang, 1997; Cooper, 1997; Education Department of Western Australia, 2000a, 2000b). This form of assessment can be beneficial to both teachers and students, in that the student portfolio would most likely contain a variety of writing assignments that have been collected over a particular span of time, such as the span of a unit, quarter, or semester (Cooper, 1999; Cooper & Love, 2000). The portfolio can provide a rich picture of students’ writing over time (Barrett, 2000b). Students are actively involved in assembling the portfolio, as well as in the learning process; and they are given a voice in what they may, or may not, want to include (Bowie, Taylor, Zimitat, & Young, 2000). Hedge (2000) maintains that this form of assessment provides the teacher (and students) with a more comprehensive picture of the students’ writing competencies than one on-demand piece of writing composed under restricted circumstances. This form of assessment can provide teachers with the ongoing opportunity to gauge their students’ writing development (Taki, 2010). Portfolio writing can be considered as both formative and summative in terms of assessment because it can require an evaluator to issue ongoing feedback on teaching and learning on whatever time parameters the teachers designates.
(Dysthe, 2008). Herman et al (2010) acknowledge the difficulty in measuring reliability amongst graders when viewing portfolios because their purposes and meaning may vary.

**Peer Feedback.** Feedback can come in the form of teacher feedback; but it also can be provided by peers, or occur in the form of self-assessment. Students are usually frank and honest in their assessment of their own performance and that of their peers. Peer review can be the act of having a classmate, or students of a similar age offer feedback on work within an instructional setting. Peer assessment/feedback supports students and teachers, and increases engagement and understanding. The findings from Freedman’s (1992) study of peer response in two ninth grade classes revealed that peers working within writing groups typically remain on task. Engaging students in a partner grouping allows one student to learn by assisting, and one student to receive the feedback needed to improve success. Peer feedback can offer feedback teachers may not be able to relate to and understand because of generational differences, or illuminate experiences that are solely centered on the text from a different perspective.

Merry & Reiling (2000) claim that peer participation in a safe collaborative atmosphere for feedback allows students to learn better because it prompts them to think more critically. Huisman et al. (2018) conducted a study on 83 undergraduate students who received or gave peer feedback around their academic writing in an English course. Results from the follow-up questionnaire and artifact analysis in this study revealed their perceptions of feedback. Receiving feedback in the form of detailed comments from peers was perceived by students as quite helpful, and there was a correlation between perceived peer feedback and students’ motivation to engage in revision and future writing (Huisman et al., 2018). Patchan et al. (2016) conducted a study to explore, not only students’ frequency of taking up peer comments/feedback, but also the quality of their revisions once they took up these comments. In this study researchers reviewed
the topic of peer feedback by analyzing 7500 comments from reviewers and authors on written submitted drafts and coded the feedback based on its qualities. After analyzing the type of feedback, researchers then analyzed revised work to see how the comments were received (Patchan et al., 2016). It was discovered that only two aspects of feedback improved students’ chances of accepting and using peer feedback (i.e., overall praise and localization) (Patchan et al., 2016). Both studies reveal the power of peer feedback to invoke changes in students’ attitudes toward assessment, and in the quality of their writing pieces as well. Furthermore, when students are given the opportunity to issue feedback to one another, this helps to build a relationship of trust amongst peers, if done correctly, and can also set students up for effective self-assessment.

**Self-Assessment.** Boud (1991) defines self assessment as, “the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgments about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards” (p.4). Peer feedback can be instrumental for students in moving toward self-assessment by providing them with models of questions, comments, and spaces to reflect on their writing process (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999). Boud (1995) highlighted the relationship between peer and self-assessment when saying, “the defining feature of self-assessment is that the individual learner ultimately makes a judgment about what has been learned, not that others have no input to it” (p.200).

In reviewing peer feedback, writers are able to make decisions as to whether or not they wish to incorporate suggestions/comments into their writing, which can be helpful in assessing success in their intent and clarity of writing. Various researchers have argued that self-assessment is essential to promoting autonomy in the classroom (Holec, 1981). Khodady et al. (2012) studied 59 students in an effort to investigate the benefits of self-reflection on student
attitudes and performance during the construction of a portfolio. Researchers collected data through a questionnaire and pre-and post-writing tests. It was found that, in that writing class, the students who engaged in self-reflection performed higher and had better attitudes towards their work (Khodady, 2012). Nicol (2006) claims that some students are already generating feedback for themselves in their minds, or self-regulating. However, most often, students learn to self-regulate because this is not an innate capability. Teachers must, thus, work to teach students to recognize areas they deem important to develop. When students are faced with something that seems difficult to accomplish, or conquer, the teacher must be prepared and available to step in for a teacher-student conference.

**Teacher-Student Conferences.** Teacher-student conferencing is characterized by allotting time where teacher and student can discuss writing, or a particular writing piece, for the purpose of helping the student become a better writer. In this conference, the teacher serves as a ‘live’ audience to facilitate student writing, reflection and growth. Keh (1990) claims that in this relationship, the teacher facilitates the discussion by asking probing questions, helps the writer sort through problems through reflection and suggestions, and assists the student in decision-making. During the conference, the teacher becomes a willing participant in the writing process of the student (Keh, 1990). One benefit of conferencing with the student, as opposed to simply providing written feedback, is that the teacher is able to provide more feedback within a given time constraint. Duke (1975) concludes that in the teacher-student conference, a counseling-like scenario is created in which the teacher shows appreciation for student’s craft and what the student says in order to promote student intentions in writing.

Kolling (2002) examined the instructional strategies used by teachers in a four-month study during writing conferencing. The research group included teachers from various grade
levels who were observed in the everyday classroom setting. Participants submitted work samples for review, and also completed surveys. Results revealed that students demonstrated growth in understanding the process of writing according to surveys, and spent more time on the revising and editing phases (Kolling, 2002). Those results also revealed a higher quality of student writing according to the rubric generated by the teachers and the researcher. Similarly, Morse (1994) and McCarthey (1992) sought to explore how to make writing conferences authentic. Morse (1994) conducted a study of ten San Diego teachers to explore the communication techniques within their conferences with students through videotaped observations. Results showed that there was no single recipe for the communication techniques between teacher and students that teachers typically followed, but conferences were unique from case to case (Morse, 1994). McCarthey (1992) studied two elementary school teachers and their conferencing techniques through videotaped observational data. The two case studies revealed very different techniques the teachers used in dealing with students during conferencing: one participant privileging ideas of the students, while the other demonstrated the use of specific intervention techniques. According to findings from other studies, conferences have potential to yield positive outcomes for student writing, if the conferences are effective and adaptive for the needs of the students involved. Teacher-student conferences thus serve as one of many types of formatives assessments employed to promote growth in writing as individuals.

Ultimately, a variety of classroom-based formative writing assessments can work to help improve students’ ability to communicate their own thoughts and ideas effectively. This helps to improve writing abilities because teachers can measure progress in writing techniques and the effectiveness of instruction in order to make modifications accordingly. These assessments can assume different forms, whether it be a teacher issuing written or verbal feedback, students self-
assessing, or peers assessing each other’s writing. Graham, Harris, and Hebert (2011) suggest that, no matter the method, teachers should:

- “Provide feedback. Writing improves when teachers and peers provide students with feedback about the effectiveness of their writing” (p. 716).
- “Teach students how to assess their own writing. Writing improves when students are taught to evaluate the effectiveness of their own writing” (p. 716).
- “Monitor students’ writing progress. Writing improves when teachers monitor students’ progress on an ongoing basis” (pg.716).

Culturally Relevant Writing Assessment and Feedback

In a culturally relevant environment students’ learning cannot possibly be adequately assessed by the use of “convenient” tests with multiple-choice or true/false formats (Mumme, 1991; Romberg, 1993). Consequently, there is a need for a variety of assessment tools that can be utilized to measure students’ diverse skills. Students’ ability to answer open-ended problem-solving, and critical thinking tasks can be captured through writing tasks and nurtured through feedback. Nowadays, society expects students to obtain cognitive skills; however the terms in which they demonstrate understanding, and the way in which the teacher engages with students through feedback is not defined (Dochy, 2001). Since society demands new trends in teaching and learning that reflect its changing demographics, this also calls for a shift toward a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment. “Because of this reality, teachers must employ a variety of approaches to assessment to make informed judgments about both the process of student learning and the outcomes to be obtained” (Birgin, 2007, p.76).

Culturally relevant pedagogy critically evaluates whether the prescribed goals and objectives which are typically mandated are appropriate for the target population, and if not,
suggests that teachers must create conditions and modification that ensure this is achieved (Frierson, 1996). Sadler (1989) claims that the nature of writing assessments and feedback is to redefine what excellence looks like for all students, and must be inclusive of their background. Thus, what counts as writing and text matters in culturally relevant writing assessments. Culturally relevant feedback should invite students to engage in the writing process and encourage them to continuously use words to expand upon their stories, and emancipate themselves. Formative writing assessment requires feedback between the learner and the teacher working in partnership, but cannot be divorced from the instruction delivered by the teacher to the students.

Winn & Johnson (2011) define culturally relevant pedagogy as “humanizing, respectful, and considerate of the histories, perspectives, and experiences of students as an essential part of the subject matter, classroom practices, and content of educative practices and spaces. Culturally relevant pedagogy considers students’ experiences as legitimate and official content of the classroom curriculum” (p. 70). They argue that writing assessments in many classrooms today can be described as haphazard at most, with a lopsided focus on correcting grammar, or wordsmithing, rather than delving into the stories the student have to tell. Winn and Johnson (2011) suggest that teachers acknowledge the cultural differences and diversities of experiences and language within summative assessments. Some of their suggestions include:

- inviting a variety of writing structures into the the writing classroom
- explicitly teaching purpose and audience
- providing well-written, culturally relevant texts as models
- assessing the process of writing
- inviting students to contend with personal and cultural issues in their writing
(Winn and Johnson, 2011).

Teachers and administration cannot necessarily pick and choose standardized test items, nor the assessment instrument mandated by the district; however, teachers can capitalize on the autonomy afforded them in their classrooms to design both writing curriculums and assessments formatively. Summative writing assessments that acknowledge the identity and backgrounds of students show that the most valuable takeaway is their growth, journey, and experiences, as opposed to just the placement of periods or the organization.

This work of enacting culturally relevant writing instruction has been taken up by some researchers already. Woodard et al. (2017) interviewed nine urban elementary and middle school teachers, and found that teachers aimed to created linguistic and cultural pluralism throughout all aspects of writing instruction, including assessments. Behizadeh (2017), in her study of a linguistically-diverse curriculum within a 7th grade class, found that the teacher adopted a culturally relevant writing portfolio assessment. Features of this assessment included allowing students to write for impact (social justice); dialects and multiple languages were invited; and students were privileged to choose their own topics (Behizadeh, 2014b). Both examples spotlight some of the many different ways culturally relevant writing assessments can be enacted. There still remains a need for more in-depth study of how the enactment of culturally relevant writing assessment complements the research that theorizes about it. The following section will further spotlight some of the research behind culturally relevant writing assessment, both formative and summative.

**Summative Assessment.** Winn and Johnson (2011) referred to summative assessments as “Big A: Formal Assessments” because they are predominantly designed by outside sources and enacted to measure mastery. Often times, when thinking of summative assessments it is hard
to imagine that they have a place in a culturally relevant classroom; however, in classrooms students are working towards a final product which is similar to the ones on standardized tests in college and at work (Winn & Johnson, 2011). A monument of the original research on culturally relevant pedagogy is academic success; it is our job as educators to help prepare students for this kind of assessment by supporting them to arrive at rigorous final products (Ladson-Billings, 1995). An example of a culturally relevant summative writing assessment is described by Machado et. al (2017), in which students’ spoken word poems were evaluated using rubrics which attended to figurative language constructions, poetry forms, and literary devices. However, artifacts were also evaluated based on students’ intentions and self-evaluations. Spoken word was used not only as an avenue for students learning to write a poem, but it afforded them the opportunity to create poetry that was meaningful to them and told their stories.

Summative assessments should not be limited to on-demand writing, even though this form of assessment is what students most likely will encounter on tests like PARCC. Such writing can be an important form of assessment, but there are other ways to assess writing in culturally relevant ways. Winn and Johnson offer the following suggestions for summative writing assessment ideas:

- Portfolios constructed of students informal assessments revised can become the larger summative assessments. Winn and Johnson (2011) used the vignette of Latrice and her ninth grade students completing a portfolio, selecting eight assignments out of about twenty from a bank full of reader responses, pictures, character journals and essays to be included. By allowing students the opportunity to revise and later choose the assignments they want to broadcast, students are able to polish work based on feedback and see their journey as a writer.
• Adopting multiple genres of assessment or writing would assist students in summative writing assessments (Winn and Johnson, 2011). In literature classes students are exposed to a variety of genres, but often they are not required to emulate these genres in their writing assessments. There lies an art and understanding in being able to adopt and recreate writing styles, not just for academic reasons to relay content, but to relay identity too.

Summative writing assessments still have a place in the culturally relevant writing classrooms; however the forms in which they occur should be expanded. Students should be able to challenge what they know as literacy and assessment, and break away from the misunderstanding of assessment being a means for punitive measures and ranking. However, much of the work done to build up to this summative measure is formative.

**Formative Assessment.** Formative writing assessment can be thought of as “little a: informal assessment” because it reflects the means of evaluation or issuing feedback in the midst of instruction, content, and classroom practices (Winn & Johnson, 2011). Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that teachers must legitimize/sustain students’ culture, language, and experiences through every aspect of instruction. These formative assessments, and the means of feedback issued with these assessments provide teachers with opportunities to constantly discuss students work and develop craft, while still helping students to critique the world around them. Good writers in culturally relevant writing classrooms are writers that are free to infuse themselves in written words, while still maintaining academic success. Behizadeh (2017) in her designed curriculum with portfolio assessments for a summer program, worked to capitalize upon students’ tendency toward multiple language use, including dialects like AAE in writing through the ongoing feedback offered. Winn and Johnson (2011) and Wilson (2018) also provided
various suggestions regarding how formative assessments should look and sound:

- **Formative assessments should be rooted in self assessment.** Because culturally relevant pedagogy tenets are centered around the experiences and lives of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995), assessments can promote ownership by teaching students how to reflect on their own writing based on expectations set by themselves and the teacher (Winn & Johnson, 2011). An example provided is students’ writing pieces about their growth and reflection on assignments that can later be shared with a future class (Winn and Johnson, 2011). Wilson (2018) echoes that all tasks should include metacognitive opportunities for students to reflect over their writing and get to know themselves as writers.

- **Valuing story over scales** (Wilson, 2017). Writing itself reflects a journey from idea to product, with the writer addressing issues in tasks that they have dealt with. Tasks in culturally relevant writing assessments should offer a mean for stories to exist. These day-to-day assignments should allow for, and open the door for a position to be taken in a disagreement and explore this position compared to that of others. Carvalho et al. (2016) claim that tasks given should not just promote the mastery of concepts, but should also promote civic engagement of students for the purpose of justice.

- **Provide audiences to build relevance with writing tasks** (Winn & Johnson, 2011). Providing students with the opportunity to write to different audiences and the world in these assessment tasks ingrains within them the understanding that their words have power. Ladson Billings (1995) promoted social consciousness in writing which involves action rooted in the critique of identifying injustices. Woodard and Coppola (2018) have most recently provided an example of audience engagement supported through a blog platform (blog) to publish writing for classmates and the teacher. Writing is often thought
to be such a private thing, but writing for social justice sometimes requires words to become public.

With these formative writing assessment suggestions comes the need to nourish writing over time through feedback. As described above, both Winn and Johnson (2011) and Wilson (2018) suggest that feedback must assume different forms, and not be restricted to the use of rubrics or number scales. Rubrics and number scales promote a means of ranking, inequality, and competition amongst students, when writing should be a personal journey to know oneself (Wilson, 2017). There is a need for the use of a variety of writing assessments and feedback, such as writing conferences and holistic feedback in culturally relevant writing instruction. Teachers must be cognizant of the fact that each writer is different and approaches any given assignment with distinct experiences, values, beliefs, and cultures (Wilson 2018). More personalized forms of feedback should occur because students are embarking on a journey that involves potential healing that is unique to each of them as a person, and thus requires unique means of communication that fit the individual writer (Winn and Johnson, 2011).

Conclusion

Culturally relevant writing assessments allow for students to engage in the journey of writing and to re-imagine ideas that already exist in ways that have not traditionally been acknowledged in previous research. Because writing is such a personal process, it can be used to unlock the door to meaningful opportunities for students to express their thoughts and ideas (Winn and Johnson, 2011). However, this requires teachers to be strategic and deliberate in the ways they design writing content, as well as summative and formative assessments. Ultimately, these can work together to nourish both writing products and writers.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The basis for this study was to investigate the type of feedback and assessments teachers issued in urban classrooms where teachers were implementing culturally relevant writing pedagogy. I completed a multiple case study that used various qualitative methods, particularly interviews and artifact analysis.

I selected three urban writing teachers through referrals from a larger research study, titled “Culturally Relevant/Sustaining Literacy Instruction Research Project,” conducted by an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The study aimed to explore implementations of culturally relevant and sustaining literacy pedagogy for the purpose of improving literacy education for underrepresented populations. It began by asking College faculty in an urban elementary education program to recommend literacy teachers interested in or known for “culturally relevant literacy instruction” and/or “success with African American and/or Latinx students.” Then, these teachers were interviewed and follow-up case studies were conducted in the classrooms of some of these teachers. Through this larger study, I was thus able to access a pool of college faculty-recommended literacy teachers interested in or known for culturally relevant instruction.

I formulated this study with a primary focus on writing and assessment. In particular, I was interested in analyzing feedback and assessment primarily through artifacts, observations, and interviews. To reiterate the focus of this study, the research questions formulated to be addressed in this comparative study were as follows:

1. How do culturally relevant teachers assess students’ writing?
2. How is culturally relevant pedagogy reflected in teacher feedback, both verbal
and written?

This chapter outlines the methods, instrumentation and procedures used in the study, which include: (a) research design, or blueprint, (b) participants (c) selections, (d) school/classroom setting, (e) instrumentation, (f) procedures for data collection, and (g) procedures for data analysis. This study used qualitative methods, or procedures for data collection and analysis of interviews, observations, and artifact analysis of selected teachers. The next section includes research design and methodology, and provides a detailed description of how these questions were addressed through the proposed qualitative study.

**Qualitative Research Methods**

A qualitative design using aspects of case study research methods was employed for this study. Qualitative methodology has been defined and enacted in many different ways. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define qualitative research as:

> [A]ny type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. [Qualitative research] can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, and cultural phenomena (pp. 10–11).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that optimal conditions for qualitative research are:

(a) when the research is compatible to the researchers’ own experiences and preferences, (b) address the essence of the research problem, and (c) build upon a knowledge base on which very little or no research has been done. Miles and Huberman (1994) elaborate on this idea by saying that the researcher usually conducts this method of research in order to: (a) validate prior research done on a particular topic, or area of study (b) provide a different or more thorough perspective on something already known, or (c) expand the scope of an existing study.
Ratner (2002) wrote that one benefit of qualitative methods is the subjectivity that molds everything within the study, from the topic to the collection and interpretation of data. This becomes especially fitting when studying the intersection of sociocultural factors and education in the classroom—those aspects are not one-size-fits-all.

In this particular study, qualitative research methodology was chosen to create an “empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes thick description, conveying to the reader what the experience itself would convey” (Stake, 1995). The richness of the narrative text describing the perspectives and enactment of culturally relevant writing assessments was dependent on the methods of data collection.

**Case Studies Methods**

For this study, I adopted a multiple case study methodology. Using case studies afforded me the opportunity to describe and expand my understanding of the phenomenon of enacting culturally relevant pedagogy in writing classrooms, and multi-case studies are often used to study programs and people in education (Stake, 1995). In case studies, “we take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others, but what it is, what it does” (Stakes, 1995, p. 8). In a case study, the researcher is able to refine and understand what is being studied (Stake, 1995).

A case study charges the researcher to be on the front lines, recording and observing the participants in the study. Case studies report “objectively what is happening, but simultaneously examines its meaning and redirects observations to refine or substantiate those meanings” (Stake, 1995, p. 9). All this data is collected and interpreted based on the researcher’s understanding of the literature, and their experience in the field (Stake, 1995). A multiple case study was used in order to offer multiple examples of how teachers perceive and execute the enactment of
culturally relevant pedagogies.

Case Selection

I was specifically interested in working with teachers who were already thought to be implementing culturally relevant writing instruction and assessment in the classroom. I drew from a larger study that was aimed at understanding how culturally relevant teachers enact writing pedagogy in their classrooms. This study included 10 teachers who were interviewed about their teaching. All 10 teachers were recommended by graduate-level College of Education faculty members, other teachers, and Curriculum & Instruction PhD candidates as “culturally relevant teachers” and/or “teachers who were particularly successful in working with African-American students.” Notably, these faculty who recommended teachers were not offered Ladson-Billings’ criteria for culturally relevant pedagogy, and their conceptions of what this means likely varied. From that larger interview study came multiple more intensive, observational case studies with more focused topics, including this one.

From the original large pool of teachers, I hoped to focus exclusively on middle school teachers serving African-American students, but teacher selection was dependent on those who were referred and those who agreed to participate. I invited all teachers who had indicated interest in further involvement in a research study, and the three teachers who agreed to participate were selected. After initial interviews with each teacher, I determined that each was committed to Ladson-Billings’ vision for teaching towards cultural competence, critical consciousness, and academic success, although their methods varied. This intentional selection of teachers committed to these ideals was purposeful because the study was designed to explore existing culturally relevant practices. There was a necessity to select teachers who were already attempting or known for these practices so that I could understand diverse enactments of
culturally relevant pedagogy.

Each of the three focal teachers in this study had received a “Proficient” rating, were certified to teach K-5 students in all subjects, and those teaching in grades six through nine held a middle school ELA endorsement. Two of the participants were pursuing degrees beyond the bachelor’s level at a local university, and all participants held a Type 03 Certification (General Elementary). Though these teachers have varying teaching styles, they have each focused their instruction on aspects of culturally relevant teaching—social competence, academic success, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Context**

All three participants came from the a large, urban metropolitan district, one of the largest school districts in the country with more than 600 schools and serving 371,000 children of all backgrounds. The vision of the district includes preparing all students for success in college, career and life. The district is known for its diversity—linguistically, racially, and socioeconomically; and it reflects the changing and growing demographics of the city where it is situated.

The city where the district was located has remained largely segregated, despite historical court orders and initiatives to address this problem. The demographics of the student population include 37% African American, 10.2% White, 46.8% Hispanic, 4.1% Asian, and 1.9% other. There is a heavy concentration of African American students in schools located on the far south and west sides of the city. A majority of schools in these areas are classified as lower performing annually, and unless students are fortunate enough to gain a spot in the coveted magnet or selective enrollment schools where diversity is maintained (and even encouraged), they often find themselves trapped in an under-performing school plagued by obstacles such as poverty,
neighborhood crime, high student (and teacher) mobility, low expectations for student success, and inadequate or inferior resources. White and Asian students are concentrated in schools located on the north/northwest areas of the city, as well as in pockets of communities where poverty levels are lower, student performance is higher and resources are more abundant. The disparities that exist in this district highlight the importance of better understanding and cultivating culturally relevant teaching.

**Participants**

Richer descriptions of the teachers included in the case studies, their schools, and writing are presented in chapters 4 through 6 within the findings. However, in the table below, there is a brief introduction to each participant, ordered by grade level (see Table 1). Although all schools, neighborhoods and students were given pseudonyms, each of these teachers have opted to use their own names within this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School &amp; Student Demographics</th>
<th>Grade and Subject Area</th>
<th>Career Stage</th>
<th>Writing Unit Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Evan | **Finley School**  
Asian 0.0%  
Black 97.7%  
Hispanic 0.3%  
White 0.6%  
Other 1.3%  
Low-Income 95.5%  
Diverse Learners 7.8% | 3-5th Literacy and Social Studies | Early- 3rd Year Teaching | Tall- Tale Narrative Writing |
| Dan  | **Northland School**  
Asian 11.7%  
Black 45.3%  
Hispanic 9.7%  
White 25.5%  
Other 7.7%  
Low-Income 29.8 %  
Diverse Learner 6.4% | 6th grade Literacy and Social Studies | Early - 2nd Year Teaching | Comic Strip Creation and Critique |
| Rick | 7th grade Literacy and Social Studies | Mid-career- 14th Year Teaching | Spoken Word |

Table 1. Overview of the case study teachers.

**Case study one: Evan.** I recruited Evan as my first participant for a case study based on a recommendation from one of his professors who was familiar with his craft as a teacher and his personal affinity for poetry writing in regard to equality, race, and schooling. At the time of the study, Evan (an African-American male) was a third-year, third through fifth grade literacy teacher in an urban public school. He worked in a neighborhood situated on the far south side of Chicago. His school, Finley (all school and student names are pseudonyms), located in the Roebuck neighborhood serves 308 students, with a class size average of 28 students. The student ethnicity breakdown was 0.0 percent Asian, 97.7 percent Black, 0.3 percent Hispanic, 0.6 percent white, and 1.3 percent other. Ninety-six percent of the students were eligible for free or
reduced lunch and 0.3 percent were classified as limited English proficient. In Evan’s class there were 23 students, 21 of whom were Black and two of whom were biracial (white and Black). There were 12 boys and 11 girls. Evan had previously worked in a suburban neighborhood school in which the language arts program was solely based on the curriculum designed by Pearson Publishing Company and heavily monitored. When he came to Finley, though, Evan was granted autonomy to plan and execute instruction as he pleased, as long as the connections were visible with the Common Core State Standards and “big pushes” from the school network.

Evan was also a master’s degree candidate studying language, literacy, and culture at a public university in Chicago. Evan and I have worked together in other contexts at the university, including in an inquiry group on culturally sustaining pedagogy, and a close personal relationship was built over the course of this dissertation. I began interviewing him during the fall of 2016. Observations took place during the fall of 2017. During his interviews, Evan expressed interest in social activism and the need to create healing spaces in his classroom through his writing instruction and teacher practice. His unit focused on extending the tall tale of John Henry, and was infused with hip-hop. Students read the story and had to extend the story by resurrecting John Henry as an African-American hero who could solve issues students deemed important in their neighborhood.

Case study two: Dan. I recruited Dan for the second case study through the recommendations of a professor from his undergraduate degree program and his mentor student teacher. We were also both involved in the larger research project, so we had met roughly a semester prior to my dissertation participant recruitment.

Dan, a Hispanic male, was a second-year sixth grade literature teacher instructor who had recently graduated from a local state university in Chicago. After obtaining his bachelor’s
degree, Dan took a break before pursuing a graduate study in order to get acclimated to teaching, but still participated in various research and community-engagement projects at the university.

At Northland School, where Dan taught, the demographics were as follows: 11.7 percent Asian, 45.3 percent Black, 9.7 percent Hispanic, 25.5 percent white, and 7.7 percent other. Students identified as low-income made up 29.8 percent of the student population, and 7.6 percent were designated as having limited English. The diverse learner population was 6.4 percent. There were 25 students in the class, of whom three were white, 10 were Black students, six were Hispanic, and six were other. In terms of gender, eight students were boys and 17 were girls.

I observed Dan during the spring of 2017 teaching a comics unit that prombelatized ideas of gender to his “neighborhood class” (students who were not in the gifted class, sorted by test scores). Dan had students critique gender depictions in Marvel comics featuring heroes like Captain America. Students questioned who and what makes one a hero and how heroes should or would look. Students demonstrated their thoughts and understanding through the creation of an original comic or written essay.

**Case Study three: Rick.** Rick was recruited for my last case study because he was involved in many research projects on campus that centered around creating an equitable learning context, and was a highly recommended teacher by faculty. Rick and I have known each other for six years, and have developed a close professional and intellectual relationship through shared coursework and participation in other research projects.

At the time of the study, Rick (a white male) was entering his thirteenth year of teaching literacy, but has taught virtually every subject in the past. Rick also worked at Northland School with Dan, so he shares the same school demographics provided above. Rick had 25 students in a
neighborhood class that consisted of 15 girls and 10 boys. There were 18 Black students, three white students, and four other.

Rick served as the lead teacher on the school’s Instructional Leadership Team and had been nominated for many awards for phenomenal teaching skills. He has participated in many university literacy research projects, as well as in-house projects to promote culturally relevant teaching and cultural modeling. Rick served as a mentor teacher for Dan and helped facilitate his learning of the craft of teaching during his pre-service time. I observed Rick during the spring 2017 semester teaching his spoken-word writing unit to one of his seventh grade English language arts classes. Rick expressed interests in problematizing the concept of culture for students through his teaching. He examined this interest through a spoken-word unit based on a curriculum titled *Louder Than a Bomb*. Students read and viewed performance poetry from local artists traveling through cultures in their lives. Students then emulated writing styles through various smaller writing pieces, building up to a final spoken-word piece in which they problematized culture.

**Focal Students**

For these embedded case studies, I asked each teacher to choose three to five focal students to track over the course of the unit. This decision was made to ensure that robust descriptions could be built about both the teachers and the students in order to inform important facets and perspectives regarding culturally relevant writing instruction and assessment (Sargeant, 2012). From this pool of tracked focal students, one student per teacher was chosen to spotlight in this dissertation based on accessibility (i.e., some students transferred) and the completion of the project according to the task recommendation of the participating teacher. These students will be discussed later in the dissertation. Refer to Table 2 below for the pool of
focal students and the spotlighted focal student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evan’s Focal Student From Finley School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter*</td>
<td>4th Grade</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>4th Grade</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>4th Grade</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan’s Focal Students From Northland School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima*</td>
<td>6th Grade</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adriene</td>
<td>6th Grade</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>6th Grade</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Columbian and African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick’s Focal Students from Northland School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewel</td>
<td>7th Grade</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American and white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>7th Grade</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha*</td>
<td>7th Grade</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mallory</td>
<td>7th Grade</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates name of focal student students spotlighted for more in-depth discussion in the dissertation based on teacher recommendation and accessibility to the researcher

Table 2. Focal students from three classes
Focal student: Carter. Carter was a nine-year old, fourth-grade African-American male student in Evan’s fourth- and fifth-grade split class. This was Carter’s first year at Finley Elementary. Carter lived in a single-parent household in the the Roebuck neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. He did not consider himself a writer, but wanted to “change the world.” For his writing assignment, he wrote about the gang violence in his neighborhood that he witnessed everyday walking home. He resurrected the character of John Henry to solve the issue of warring between the Gangster Disciples and the Latin Kings through a meeting for unity.

Focal student: Fatima. Fatima was a sixth grade female African-American student in Dan’s neighborhood class. She was a twelve-year-old girl who had attended Northland School for seven years. She came from a single-parent household due to divorce. She lived within the neighborhood boundaries of Northland. Fatima loved to write and “stand up for what is right.” She found interest in gender inequality because she lived with a her mother, whom she described as “strong.” For the final assignment, Fatima designed a comic that surfaced her issue with bullying, but spotlighted the women and men around her, like her friends and family, as heroes who helped her overcome this challenge through moral support and unity.

Focal student: Samantha. Samantha often reiterated, “I am not a writer.” This was her third year at Northland School, and first year in Rick’s class. Samantha was a 13-year-old African-American female in the seventh grade. She came from a single-parent household headed by her mother, and spent weekends with her father. She had a young step-brother who lived with her father. Samantha lived in the neighborhood of Northland, but still got a ride from her mother every day to spend time with her. She considered herself to be “shy” because she often expressed herself in “nonverbal ways.” She attributed her shyness to her belief that others “don’t
understand me.” For her final writing assignment in the spoken-word unit, Samantha wrote a poem called “Untitled,” in which she educates readers of her Nigerian heritage, debunking stereotypes about people of African descent.

**Remaining focal students.** The other focal students were used to triangulate data and were interviewed, but were not available for follow-ups. Their words and stories hold much value and were used to build a story around how the teachers teach, assess, and offer feedback on student writing.

**Data Collection and Data Analysis**

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred between early spring 2017 and late fall 2017. All data gathered during this study was by permission of participants and in compliance of both IRB and RRB guidelines. Similar to qualitative research traditions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), data was collected from multiple sources. Generally, my data collection involved audiotaped interviews, observations, artifact collection of students’ work, and teacher reflection. Aside from participating in structured interviews and writing a reflection, the teachers were not asked to do anything other than execute their designed unit. Over the span of a year, I collected multiple interviews with the teachers about their unit design, execution, and reflection; notes from classroom observations; and numerous artifacts created by teachers, in the design of the unit and reflection on it, and by focal students who participated in the unit (see Table 3). In turn, I created transcripts, field notes, and reflections based on the collected data.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Focal Participant (Teacher (T) and Students (FS)) /Frequency/Quantity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervi ews</td>
<td>-Audio recorded - Transcripti on</td>
<td>Evan (T): 3 formal interviews (30-60 mins) 1 informal follow-up interview (15mins), Carter (FS): 1 formal interview (30 mins), Dan (T): 2 formal interviews (30-60 mins) 1 informal Interview (30 mins), Fatima (FS): 1 informal follow-up interview (30 mins), Rick (T): 2 formal interviews (30-60 mins) 1 informal interview (30 mins), Samantha (FS): 1 informal follow-up interview (25 mins)</td>
<td>I met with the teachers around the planning execution and outcome of the writing units designed for the students. Students were interviewed around thoughts and beliefs of assessments, outlooks on the unit and their teachers feedback style. I conducted follow up interviews to run findings and understandings and big ideas past participants. In this time we discussed any gaps or questions I had about what was said or collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Prod ucts</td>
<td>- Artifacts from unit design - Completed student formative assessments</td>
<td>Evan (T): 3 artifacts Unit Plan Remixed rubric Written reflection, Dan (T): 2 artifacts Unit Plan Written reflection, Fatima (FS): 4 pieces of writing with feedback John Henry Rough Draft Written Reflection Ungraded John Henry Revised draft, Rick (T): 3 artifacts Unit Plan Remixed rubric Written reflection, Samantha (FS): 5 pieces of writing with feedback Two workshoped pieces from Louder than a Bomb Two spoken word pieces Written Reflection Ungraded</td>
<td>I collected written products produced by the teachers to understand the teachers’ instructional moves for designing assessing and issuing feedback in the classroom. I collected written products by students to see how students took up the designed assessment and feedback, along with personal feelings about the issues in the unit or the unit itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3. Overview of data sources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Classr oom Observations | -Field Notes  
-Artifact Collection  
-Audio Recording  
-Selected Transcripts | 2 classroom observations capturing the introduction and initial execution of the John Henry Tall-tale unit along with a teacher student conference. | 2 classroom observations capturing Dan’s lessons geared around annotating gender within Marvel comics. | 2 classroom observations capturing students’ workshops and appreciative feedback. | -Audio recordings were taken during selected teacher lessons within the larger unit. Conversations with and between focal students and teacher were captured. -Field notes were presented as drawings, jottings, and details. This was cross referenced during selective transcriptions. - All documents in reference to the unit were collected and documented. |
Interviews. The purpose of the interviews conducted with teacher participants was not to evaluate, nor to test a hypothesis, but simply to get answers to a set of questions. Semi-structured formal interviews allowed my participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms, or to tell their story, so to speak (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). Words are microcosms of consciousness (Vygotsky, 1987), and can shed light on many abstractions that exist in the social and educational worlds because they are based on experiences (Berg and Lune, 2004). Interview data can be more morally sound, reliable, and honest to the interviewees’ point of view, thus the data is “realistic” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 371). A deep interview process was employed in this study to explore teachers’ lived experiences and the manifestation of these experiences in teaching craft. My personal interest in the stories told helped to build relationships between interviewee and interviewer (Kvale, 1996).

The interviews conducted with both teachers and students were audiotaped and transcribed using a professional transcription company. Ultimately, these interviews were very important to analysis; for example, chapter 5 explores in-depth the stories of the interviewees. Furthermore, because the participants matter deeply to me, the opportunity to learn, share, and represent their stories was especially important. Teachers were provided opportunities to review and member-check (validate information observed and transcribed by the researcher) (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998; Stake, 1995). Member-checking affords the opportunity to triangulate observations and interpretations made by the researchers (Stake, 1995). Although teachers’ real first names were used, per their request, student, school, and neighborhood names were all given pseudonyms for identity preservation (Siedman, 2006).

In addition to the audiotapes, handwritten notes were taken during the interview to make personal notes, note body language, and/or extend questions. The interviews took place in
locations that teachers requested, including their schools, the university, or coffee shops, and were centered around the design and execution of the unit. Table 4 will explain the topic of each interview:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Interview</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pre-Unit Interview</td>
<td>Unit topic, objective, goals, purpose and formative assessments</td>
<td>Teachers explained their rationales for designing the unit and discussed its connection to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Think Aloud Interview around student work artifacts that were brought in and collected.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mid unit Interview</td>
<td>Execution of unit and formative and summative assessment design</td>
<td>Teachers explained how students were responding to the unit and feedback issued. Teacher explained the summative assessment and how it was considered culturally relevant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Think Aloud Interview around student work artifacts that were brought in and collected.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Post Unit Interview</td>
<td>Reflection of unit impact on students</td>
<td>Teacher explained how the unit went, what they would or could have changed, and the impact of the unit on the students and teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Interview</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Post Unit Student Interview/ Think Aloud</td>
<td>Student work production and attitudes towards assessment/ feedback</td>
<td>Students were asked to discuss the feedback they were issued, next steps, and rationales for writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Teacher interview topics
Before this study began, interview data from the larger study was reviewed to shed insight on each teacher’s ideas about culturally relevant instruction. Then, I engaged in pre-unit interviews to understand how participants described their ideals of culturally relevant pedagogy by first asking the question: “What does culturally relevant teaching look like to you?” Then, they were asked to explain how their unit aligned. This was important because it set the foundation of the entire study. Subsequent questions asked them to apply their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy to the subject of assessment with questions such as “What role does assessment play in your culturally relevant classroom?” or “How might a culturally relevant assessment look?” The pre-interviews were used to interpret how the ideologies discussed were enacted in the participant’s unit design. The interview questions were not limited to those presented in Appendix A because probing questions arose based on each response. These foundational questions differed greatly from those asked in the post interview.

Teacher mid-unit interviews (see Appendix B) took place toward the middle of the unit of study to capture each teacher’s explanation of the design process of the formative and summative assessments for the unit. Teachers were given the opportunity to discuss the assessments they designed for their culturally relevant unit and their rationale for the unit and assessment design. Teachers were asked to “briefly describe how their awareness of their students’ backgrounds, abilities, needs, and interests impacted the planning of the unit/lessons.” They were also asked to walk me through the assessment with questions such as “What is the culminating assessment to your unit of study?” and, “Why was this assessment chosen?” This allowed teachers to connect their enacted units with the original interview data about culturally relevant instruction more
generally. Finally, teachers were asked to discuss how they thought students might perform on the assessment, and provide reasoning that would allow the researcher to see their views of students.

Following the mid-unit interview was the artifact collection of the teachers’ assessments and feedback (see Appendix B). These artifacts provided details and evidence of consistency or contradiction as compared to other collected interview data (Merriam, 1998). When reviewing these artifacts, I kept in mind that they were not created for research purposes, so these sources of data were used in conjunction with the dialogue that was elicited as teachers explained the rationale, purpose, and meaning of the artifact.

The post-unit interview was geared around the impact the unit had on students and teachers—academically, emotionally, and socially. Each teacher was asked to gauge how effective the unit was and what could be done in the future to better the unit. Also, they were asked how the unit could be considered culturally relevant based on the artifacts collected were discussed.

After the conclusion of the unit, teachers were asked to select three to five focal students who expressed differing views on the unit of study and/or assessment. I initially interviewed the students selected by each teacher, but decided to highlight only one student from each class, based on their availability and my ability to follow up with them during analysis (Appendix C). In addition to these factors that contributed to my choice of focal students, I wanted to delve deeper into the students’ stories, rather than wider for student descriptions. Students were given their culminating assessments, which had been graded with feedback, and were asked to discuss their produced piece. Students were asked questions such as, “What was your piece about?” and “Why did you write about the topic you chose?” Students also responded to the question, “What
benefit did the assignment have for you?” Interviewing the students allowed me an opportunity to gain insight about how students approached the designed task, and how well they understood the assignment. It gave me important insights into how they felt about the unit, their writing, and the ways they were assessed.

**Artifact writing and written products.** Teachers were asked to turn in all graded culminating assessments with feedback for their three to five consenting focal students. They also shared formative assessments collected throughout the entire unit of study. I collected the formative assessments to show the day-to-day feedback on a smaller scale, and the summative culminating assessment to determine what the teacher felt was the most valuable concept to be assessed; in addition to how they created a task that was emancipatory and possessed healing properties. Teachers also wrote a reflection on the progress of the unit and its impact on them professionally and emotionally, and students wrote reflections on the impact the unit had on them.

**Think-loud interviews.** Think-aloud protocols were used with both teachers and students throughout the duration of this unit to capture their thought processes, intentions, and attitudes around writing and feedback processes (Appendix D). Teachers were asked to look over student artifacts and partake in a think-aloud talking me through their process of thinking about writing and the assignment. I asked questions like, “What stuck out to you when you first read this piece?” or, “What feedback was issued around this piece, and how is that appropriate for the student you issued it to?” This information helped me understand how the teacher thought about writing and assessment.

Students were also asked to look over the feedback from their teacher and discuss their personal interpretation of the teacher’s comments, and their response to the feedback (e.g.,
“What do you think the teachers means by this comment and what are your next steps?”

Attainment of this information allowed me to gain a heightened understanding of the teacher and the students’ thoughts about the created response to the assessment. Finally, I worked to elicit students’ views about the unit by asking them questions such as: “What role did you play in this unit?”; “What were your thoughts and feelings throughout the process?”; and “How were you able to incorporate who you are into the work that was done?”

The attached appendices serve as reference points for the interview protocols and artifact analysis.

Observations. Finally, I conducted teacher and student observations during the units to triangulate my analysis, attempting to create an “incontestable description” of how these cases infused culturally relevant pedagogy into writing instruction, assessment, and feedback (Stake, 1995, p. 62). In-depth observational descriptions can also create a “vicarious experiences for the reader” in which the entire atmosphere of the room and its contribution to students can be captured (Stake, 1995, p. 63). The observations were few to minimize the “observer effect” within the unit (Creswell, 2007); furthermore, they were primarily a means to triangulate the intensive interviews and artifact analysis. Each participant was observed through the duration of an entire lesson on at least two occasions. During the observations, I paid close attention not only to the teacher’s delivery of instruction, but also to the focal students that were highlighted. Following the observations, I wrote field notes that included both descriptions and reflections (Creswell, 2007). These notes, along with my analysis, were later checked by teachers for accuracy (Stake, 1995).

The Role of the Researcher

As an educator, I have six years of teaching experience in an urban elementary school
setting, teaching middle school. I have learned much about urban education from teaching within the system. Since the topic of this study was rooted in joys and struggles I shared in teaching, I was keenly interested in the stories of the participants about the local school district community in which there was commonality, and I attempted to account for what brought me to this work in the first chapter. My passion for culturally relevant teaching and my background in writing led me to this multiple case study of teachers across grades 3 through 7 enacting CRP in the writing classroom through assessment and feedback.

I was familiar with both schools in which this study took place because they are governed by the same mandates and initiatives enforced at my school. As part of the school district, and through affiliations with the local university, participants became more than just colleagues, but a community of culturally relevant teachers working towards similar goals. At the outset of my study, I understood that these teachers were functioning under mandates for evaluation like Danielson, the Common Core State Standards, and PARCC readiness. My hope was that my work could potentially help teachers to reimagine understandings about assessment, and work to materialize culturally relevant pedagogy. From knowing the participants, I hoped to spotlight the unique and innovative practices occurring in their classroom.

Although I built strong relationships and friendships with each teacher during this research, and through our simultaneous participation in an inquiry group focused on cultivating culturally sustaining practices, I assumed a collegial role when observing and interviewing the participants.

Data Analysis

Conducting interviews as a primary source of data collection renders a very large amount of data to be analyzed. In this study, the process of analyzing data was ongoing, and it began
with transcription of initial interviews. The collection of data and initial data analysis thus occurred at the same time. Merriam (1998) argues that this method is “the right way,” or strategy to use in qualitative research (p.162) because it allows the researcher to “focus and shape the study as it proceeds,” through continual reflection on the data and direct attention to what the data reveals (Glesne, 1999, p.130). Throughout my research I attempted to write memos that were analytical and conceptual (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The analytical memos provided a space for continuous reflection on the data and the research process, allowed me to develop possible themes, and helped better direct my attention and focus (Emerson et al., 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Through the use of a qualitative research design, I sought to provide in-depth descriptions of assessment practice(s), ideals regarding culturally relevant pedagogy, and creation of assessments. The total data set was first coded for the characteristics of critical consciousness, academic success, and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The term “critical consciousness” refers to the notion that all students are given opportunity to challenge what is thought to be the norm (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, in Evan’s tall tale unit, he allowed students to walk the corridors of the school to identify issues they observed on a daily basis, and propose solutions to the issues, which would be shared with the school. Students were given the opportunity to identify problems that they had just accepted in the past, and reimagine their school with applied solutions. I coded this as “critical consciousness.”

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), “academic success” means teachers are no longer negotiating expectations based on students’ backgrounds. In the example above from Evan’s unit, all students, regardless of race, culture, and linguistic background, were expected to complete the assignment of reimagining their school by combining collected data, past experiences
with schooling, and the funds of knowledge they brought from outside the school to engage in this emancipatory act. The avenues students took to complete the assignment, and the assignment content, were varied. Some students chose to discuss findings verbally, during the tour, whereas other students jotted down possible solutions. In the brainstorming activity that followed the school walking tour, some students assumed the role of observer, while others took the roles of recorder or reporter. The outcomes were varied because students honed in on different issues that affected them personally based on their experiences and their comfort level of sharing in the space. I coded this as an example of “academic success.”

“Cultural competence” means students are able to have cultural integrity while reaching academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, Dan sought to capitalize on his students’ love for comics as an avenue to critique gender, and worked on things such as citing evidence and characterization within the class. Students were given the opportunity to explore deeply the connections between pictures and written text in order to assist them in constructing their own comics depicting gender equality. I coded this as an example of “cultural competence.”

After using these as priority codes inspired by Ladson-Billings’s (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, I then looked across each data set for emergent codes.

Interviews. Using my two research questions as a guide (How do culturally relevant teachers assess students’ writing? How is culturally relevant pedagogy reflected in teacher feedback, both verbal and written?), I began the work of analyzing and transcribing the data which was obtained from the interviews conducted with teachers and students. In my analysis, I worked to uncover relationships that existed across the data, and then created categories for themes that were discovered. Based upon my literature review and the responses revealed by the
teachers, the themes that were created included: ideals for assessment, ideals for writing instruction, and ideals for culturally relevant teaching practices in urban classrooms. In this initial open coding, I attempted to stay “close to the data” by going line by line (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). From the acquired open codes, I looked for more specific codes, narrowing my themes to codes like “the healing nature of writing;” “addressing trauma in writing;” or “the belief in writing as a form of emancipation.” This helped me make sense of the relationship between the terms and how they fell into various categories and subcategories (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). I gained greater insight into these central themes and trends (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). Finally, the codes were narrowed even further to concepts across documents like “culturally relevant writing assessment for the purpose of healing.” This final phase of coding helped me to develop a single storyline across interviews and participants around which all other information was connected. This technique of interpretation follows a process of analysis that includes the following three steps: first, open coding; then, axial coding; and last, selective coding of dialogue or short phrases provided by participants during interviews (Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method of coding also allowed me to eliminate irrelevant data to help me gather credible information to thoroughly answer my research questions. From this credible data, I frequently member-checked inferences made from these themes to further ensure validity. These interviews helped me to present my findings, interweaving excerpts and spoken word around artifacts to spotlight how culturally relevant teachers assess writing.

**Writing product and artifact analysis and think-aloud interviews.** I also closely analyzed the artifacts and think-alouds. Descriptive coding as a means for analysis was used to create summaries of the meaning the documents held after examinations. There were 25 documents and artifacts that fell into the category of feedback and/or assessment. These 25...
documents were assembled to make meaning of the teacher and student’s experience in the midst of giving and receiving feedback. Once the documents were sorted by the information they contributed, they were addressed through think-aloud interviews with both the teacher and the student.

During the think-aloud (Jääskeläinen, 2010), participants were asked to verbalize the feedback they would issue students around their writing and explain why (see Figure 1).

Image 1. Teacher and Student Think Aloud Data Image
In the example above, teacher feedback is written in black, capturing probing questions from the teacher for the student about the writing based on their first read. In the red highlighting at the right, I have attempted to describe the teacher’s moves based on their rationale for issuing feedback captured during the member-checking process. This think-aloud method allowed me to understand targeted comments for targeted aspects of writing that a rubric or a sticky note may not have captured. After interviewing the teacher and creating this document, students, during their interview, were given a copy of their writing with feedback to explain their rationale, and the opportunity to respond to the teacher comments. A conversation was thus created between the teacher and the student on this one document. The use of this protocol provided information about the reasoning of both the teacher and the student that could not be obtained by simply looking at the assignment or through an overview of the assignment in an interview. The protocol of interviewing participants around artifacts provided data about teacher feedback strategies, how students received feedback, and the knowledge and experiences that the student used to construct writing. It also provided data about lines of reasoning that were abandoned, or missed, at some point when translating students’ writing from “apprentice” to teacher and feedback from teacher to apprentice.

**Observation.** During observations, I used predetermined criteria for what to record regarding the participants. My purpose was to record atmospheric data such as anchor charts displayed and desk configurations, in conjunction with the spoken words of the participants and
teacher moves when delivering instruction, assessing, and issuing feedback. Finally, the observational field notes served as a meaningful data source that I used to cross-reference the teaching practices within interviews and capture other aspects that the participants may or may not have been aware they enacted (Hoepfl, 1997; Patton, 1990). This was quite important because observations served as an enactment of teaching sentiments expressed in the interviews (Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2009). These detailed field notes served as a source of data to build, verify, and further challenge themes that I considered. For example, Rick spoke highly of the role he played as a teacher during instruction to help facilitate healing in his class, but during the observation he sat among the students and positioned himself as more of an equal, as opposed to the authority figure in the classroom. This was evident when he sat with the students at a student desk and engaged in conversations on a more personal level without giving directives. Notes like this and other observation notes were also used to help paint a picture of teachers’ perceptions of student work.

**Limitations of the Study**

When considering the findings, it is important to keep the limitations of purposeful sampling in mind. Creating a purposeful sample based on the judgment of the researcher can potentially be perceived as a problem. However, all recommendations for focal teachers came from parties who had the opportunity to study culturally relevant pedagogy extensively. Recommendations were taken from esteemed researchers in the field and the larger studies’ interview responses helped me to cross-reference the participants’ notions of culturally relevant pedagogy with researchers.

Additionally, the intensive interview process opened the door to potential issues of interviewees staying on topic. Before beginning the interviews, I had designed questions that
were centered around specific topics; however, the reality of the interviews and the nature of the work created more organic conversations stemming from student work. As a researcher, I also came to realize that instruction and assessment cannot be divorced from one another, which contributed to interview limitations. Additionally, interviewing participants allowed them to express beliefs and attitudes about feedback and assessment, but the researcher’s analysis and conversion applied to the participants’ words could potentially lead to incomplete findings or miscommunications. Member-checking through follow up conversations and interviews became imperative to creating a true depiction of the case study participants (Yin, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Toma, 2005).

Another limitation to consider is that participants designed units around the students in their class; therefore, the units became context-dependent, and, therefore, may not yield the same results when applied similarly to another culturally relevant writing teacher’s classroom. Another limitation includes that although participants are allowed to express their beliefs and attitudes during the interview process, I had to use caution in the analysis and conversion of participants’ verbal responses in order to lessen the occurrence of incomplete findings and implications, particularly without more intensive observations to corroborate them. I observed to the extent possible since I completed this research while also working as a full-time teacher.

Finally, the intentional selection of both focal teachers and focal students for this study is also a possible limitation. Critics could argue that the cases are “cherry picked” or “too idealized.” Because this study is aimed at examining existing teaching practices within the realm of culturally relevant writing instruction, selecting teachers already identified as enacting elements of this pedagogy was necessary. Similarly, the selection of focal students by the teacher as exemplars of varying views within the class was necessary to highlight different outlooks.
based on the varied backgrounds of students. This study was not designed to represent larger populations, but to provide glimpses of what is already being done in the field; in some ways, it aims to showcase “ideal” cases.

**Conclusion**

In closing, through this qualitative study, using case study methodology, I explored how culturally relevant teachers assess writing and whether these assessments align with theory. The procedure and logistical details for this study previously listed allowed me to address my research questions in a meaningful and logical manner. Additionally, I kept in mind guidelines for maintaining quality research and analysis throughout the entire process of this study. Stake (1995) states that the function of dissertations and research, more broadly, is not to capture and explain the world, but to be used as a tool for enlightenment. The purpose of the work done in this study was to illuminate and understand the ideologies of teachers regarding assessment and how students receive them.
CHAPTER IV: Teachers Designing Culturally Relevant Writing Tasks, Assessments, & Evaluations

Research reveals that there is a disjointed relationship between the literacy currency minority students bring to the classroom (e.g., pop culture, music, comics) (Obidah et al., 2000) and the expectations of the teacher heading the literacy classroom. This mismatch can result in failure, indifference, or the seclusion of students, especially those whose culture is not valued. Teachers had lowered expectations of students (Irvine, 1992), made assumptions regarding the background of students, or simply lacked knowledge of what students value in their everyday lives (Delpit, 1996). Culturally relevant pedagogy challenges educators and students to broaden the definition of literacy as not simply reading words on a page—for example, oracy must also be considered (Ladson-Billings, 1992). More broadly, literacy through this lens includes reading, writing, speaking, and the performance of culturally customary practices (Winn and Johnson, 2011). When customizing instruction, all of these components of literacy are paramount to show students worthiness that can be applied to their everyday lives.

In reality, the reading, writing, and speaking students do in the classroom is often not practical to their cultural experiences (Winn and Johnson, 2011). If not enacted thoughtfully and made meaningful outside the walls of school, culturally relevant teaching can fail to serve its purpose. Research remains to be done showing how educators seek to foster relationship between students’ lives and school curriculum. This chapter seeks to analyze three different educative spaces in order to spotlight the diverse possibilities for planning, executing, and evaluating culturally relevant writing units. With a primary focus on assessment across the three classes included in the study, my premise is that classroom design, instruction, text selection, task creation, and assessment are all interrelated components of writing pedagogy. I attempt to understand how teachers teach writing in culturally relevant ways throughout a unit of study.
Each section will discuss the unit design, implementation, and assessments for each teacher participant. I provide their rationales and pedagogical choices to demonstrate the ways educators enact culturally relevant practices based on their knowledge of student needs, their thoughts and beliefs, and culturally relevant principles. There was no one “right” way to design a culturally relevant writing unit. Each teacher designed, implemented, and assessed in unique ways. However, their rationales for doing so were similar, and tied to the tenets of literature guiding culturally relevant instruction.
Evan: Writing Socially Conscious Tall Tales

This unit revolved around tall tales, specifically John Henry. This tall tale is one that is of vital importance due to the fact that John Henry is one of the few, if not only, African-American tall tales in the United States. The purpose of this unit was to have students bring John Henry back to life to solve an issue within their community that is of vital importance to them. This resurrection serves many purposes because it responds tangentially to the loss of Black life in the United States and allows for students to place an African-American on the pedestal of a hero. Students not only used John Henry as a mentor text, but also used a text I composed, “The Return of John Henry,” to guide them in the development of their own stories.

Before composing a story, students came together to analyze issues they noticed within their own communities, which either affected them personally or affected their communities in general. Students took up various topics of writing, but many took up the issue of bullying, which is unique to the climate and culture of the school experience of most of the girls in the classroom. This unit allowed many students to address social issues within their communities and within their own lives through the character of John Henry. Students were assessed on their ability to resurrect John Henry to solve a problem within their community, or the world at large, and their ability to make the story flow as much as possible. They used the song “The Cool” by Lupe Fiasco to help them imagine what and how John Henry would come back from the dead.

The students used the rubric broken down into categories of “rememberer,” “storyteller,” and “griot” to guide them in their story composition, and also to allow each member of the classroom community to know that their stories or skills were valued within the room. (Many were excited to have their piece read and to receive feedback. Others were excited to be given creative freedom with their story, while others struggled with this freedom, which impacted their story composition.)

—Evan, written communication after the conclusion of the unit

Unit Overview:

-Culture shock at barber shops ’cause I ain't hood enough
-We all look the same to the cops, ain't that good enough?
The Black experience is Blackened serious
-'Cause being Black, my experience, is no one hearin' us
-White kids get to wear whatever hat they want

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1 John Henry is the story of a man who, since childhood, dreamed of being a steel-driving man. His parents saw his potential because he was giant, and able to hammer from the time he was two years old. He left his home at age 18 to search for work and showed promise when he was asked to hammer by his employers. He found love and got married to a woman named Polly Ann. Everything was great for John Henry until he had to participate in a race against a new invention that was introduced to his employer as more efficient than him and his crew. John Henry won the race, but died shortly after defeating the machine.
When it comes to Black kids one size fits all

—Childish Gambino, “Hold You Down”

In his tall tales unit, Evan used Childish Gambino’s lyrics to highlight what he saw as significant to the unit. Evan asserted, “Students need to know that when we write, we are building significance and making ourselves relevant.” He helped his students see that race and culture create a lens in which students and others see and experience the world around them. Because these lenses have such great influence on the lives of minorities, they must, in his view, be honored in the school setting, where a great deal of time is spent. Through acknowledging racial inequalities with his students in third through fifth grades, who are primarily African-American and live on the south side of Chicago, Evan provided a space in which students could construct an alternative reality with justice, using the tool of writing.

The overall goal of the unit Evan designed was to provide students with a space in which they could think through solutions for issues that plague their community every day. Despite sharing a similar ethnic background to most of his students, Evan said, “I could never fathom their plight because I don’t live in the same context.” He supported them in addressing their communities’ problems through the design and implementation of a tall-tale writing unit that spanned four weeks. As students resurrected the folk hero John Henry, Evan saw this as an ideal opportunity in which they had the power to write solutions into existence. He related in the second interview, “It is very important to give students a voice because not many people value, or wish to hear the good ideas students have.” Thus, he attempted to use writing as a vehicle for addressing social consciousness and social justice.

In this section, my goal is to invite the reader into the unit and classroom of Evan and to paint a picture of how he interprets culturally relevant writing assessments and curriculum in general. Emphasis is placed on the role that hip-hop music and pop culture played in
heightening the social consciousness among students, and on how Evan sought to embed the historical knowledge of students’ culture within the unit. Woven through this section are excerpts of classroom dialogue, artifacts, and excerpts from interviews to focus attention on how Evan promoted tenets of culturally relevant instruction throughout this writing unit.

Finally, I give readers a close-up view of not only how a topic is culturally relevant in a unit, but how implementation of the topic is just as important and cannot be ignored when describing this unit. There are not many rich examples of how culturally relevant pedagogy is enacted in the field of writing, particularly with a focus on assessment. I seek to add to the literature by providing in-depth descriptions of three diverse writing units.

**Designing a Classroom Context to Promote Activism**

Compared to more traditional classroom settings, Evan’s classroom could be considered unconventional in its appearance. Famous individuals, both past and present, whom he considers “heroes” are prominently displayed on the walls of his classroom. These include influential minority icons like Muhammad Ali, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malala, and Russell Westbrook. Evan related in his first interview, “I want to surround my students with excellence enacted in many different ways because they don’t know what their calling is yet.” He proposed to analyze the question of what makes a person a hero, and what it takes to bring about change, by surrounding his students with visual images of people who have impacted an arena of society. This connected directly to the task his students were asked to complete in the unit. Along the window ledges of the classroom are mythical superheroes such as Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, and the Black Panther, some of whom are minorities, women activists, and crusaders for a particular cause. The prominent display of such characters in the classroom promotes the notion that being an activist, politically, socially and culturally, is a responsibility for people in a
society. Desks were arranged in groups of four to promote dialogue among students. In his third interview Evan related, “Students need a fugitive space to walk. Talk allows for the classroom to become more of a free, safe space. That's when you learn the most.” The layout of Evan’s classroom is shown below in Figure 2.

*Figure 1. Layout of Evan’s classroom*
Aside from the physical appearance of his classroom, Evan sought to provide a welcoming zone for his students to enter. He greeted them at the door to gauge their emotions for the day. He offered advice to help students focus on their day, and reflections from the previous day. Evan articulated in his second interview, “I don’t want my first interaction with students to be negative because it is hard enough to try to follow all those rules in a day.” He mentioned that this conscientious effort of welcoming them was intended to combat the restrictive nature of schooling by dialoguing with students, and he attempted to offer a “warmness they don’t get within the prison/factory of school.” Each day students were presented with text(s) used to empower them as individuals and teach them life skills. For example, students read the text *Charlotte’s Web* to teach topics like gender roles of women, friendship, and the superficial nature of society. Also, students wrote each day to learn the power of the pen and how to wield the power.

These routine aspects of Evan’s classroom all contributed to his mission to promote activism through writing instruction. More specifically, these practices served as a means of preparing students for full engagement in the unit on tall tales. Similar to the intentional design of the classroom context, the construction of the unit was carefully calculated to fulfill Evan’s mission for writing instruction.

**Selecting Texts to Promote Cultural Competence**

In the unit, Evan aimed to build students’ cultural competency through his mentor text selections of both the John Henry tall tale and the lyrics of the song by Lupe Fiasco, “The Cool.”

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2 “The Cool” is a rap song about a man who worked on the streets as a local drug dealer and was killed by men in his neighborhood. The man returns from the dead in search of returning to “the cool” (all the things that he had prior to dying: the money, the fame, and the life). He returns to the blocks where he was successful in his previous life in hopes of selling drugs and hanging with the same people. However,
help students “recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture” (p.36). This cultural competency aims to improve socioeconomic status and encourage social justice, thus aiding students to make knowledgeable and thoughtful decisions regarding the lives they envision for themselves. Both texts Evan selected were used as mentor texts for students to see aspects of their culture and enforce fundamentals that revolve in their culture through storytelling/storying.

Evan expressed in an interview, “The reality is, our kids come from the same streets the stories write about. … They have a community culture they bring to class that is dictated by being African-American, but also [by] living on the blocks that they do.” He spoke of the familiarity he hoped to develop between students’ home life and aspects of the story. The creator of “The Cool,” Lupe Fiasco, is from Chicago and makes references to life in poor neighborhoods like Roebuck, where Evan’s school is situated and where his students live. Lupe Fiasco once said in an interview, “People don't understand that where I come from, everyone is either a convict, has been in jail, been in a gang, or is a hooligan of some sort; but those are my brothers, my family and the people that I travel with.” Fiasco aimed to expose listeners to this setting of urban Chicago, not only to show what it is like, but to also tell listeners that the street lifestyle persists. According to Evan, his students live on the same streets and know these lessons.

The character of John Henry exemplifies a characterization missing from the experience of many African-American children—a strong Black man. John Henry provided students with an opportunity to see a Black man as a hero. In his third interview Evan explained, “I am not saying they don’t see heroes in their neighborhood, but John Henry provides them with a Black

when he returns he gets robbed and is threatened with death, but he shows no fear because he is already dead.
male hero that society will honor, unlike the negative depiction they are bombarded with in the media.” The story of John Henry is about a freed slave character who had been promised land if he and his crew could finish digging a path for the railroad through a mountain by a specific deadline. Despite the deal made with John Henry and his crew, a steam hammer is sent by the management of the railroad to displace the crew, and the original contract is reneged upon and burned. John concocts the idea of a challenge that pits man against machine. Though he puts forth a heroic effort and forges a tunnel through what seemed to be impenetrable, solid rock while swinging two hammers at the same time and wins the challenge, John Henry suffers a massive heart attack, collapses and dies. In an effort to revitalize and reclaim aspects of African-American culture that have been lost by colonization and the oppression of Black culture in American society, Evan aims to reposition an African-American male as a hero for his students (McCarty and Lee, 2014, p. 101). Since this text was mentor text, students had to know the story well before they were able to write a continuation piece starting where the original story left off, with John Henry rising from the grave.

Morrell (2005) suggests that popular culture can serve as a curriculum that maintains and extends literate competencies. “The Cool,” Evan’s second mentor text, also provides students with an example of a resurrection story. He related in his third interview, “Unfortunately, we live in a society in which minorities don’t get justice, and justice needs to be taken into their own hands. That message is enforced in the Black community through video games—just everywhere in their world.” The song is about a hustler who was shot to death, but resurrects to return to the same life that led to his death in the first place. This return, however, gave the hustler a new appreciation for the things around him as he returned to the scene of his crimes. This text was used as a mentor text to show students how detailed a resurrection story must be.
Evan asserted in the third interview, “You can’t just have John Henry hop up out of the ground—it is a process.” The song is very detailed about how the character claws his way out of the dirt with his mouth, and how he begged for cash to get back to the blocks where he used to walk.

Some of the lyrics are as follows:

Not at all nervous
As he dug to the surface
Tarnished gold chain is what he loosened up the earth with
He used his mouth as a shovel to try and hollow it
And when he couldn’t dirt-sput, he swallowed it
Working like a hmm, reverse archaeologist

And, again:

He begged for some cash
To get him on the train
Caught the reflection in the window
Of what he became
A long look
Wasn’t shook, wasn’t ashamed
Matter of fact, only thing on his brain was brains
Yeah, and gettin’ back in his lane.

“The Cool” presents an honest depiction of life in the “hood” or “on the block” that Evan claims the students are “familiar with because it is honestly their life.”

A tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is to “sustain the ways in which the students’ culture and language are alive and flowing” (Pedro, 2017, p.138). The mentor text, “The Cool”
used by Evan not only shows, stylistically, how he would like students’ stories to flow, but also presents a story that affirms things that look familiar to them in their home life and culture. Evan offered the reflection, “It is not that all Blacks live in the hood, but students have to live in the neighborhood of the school, and it is a community of poverty I know so well from venturing to the homes of the students. I am not making assumptions. I made the decision to use this song based on collected data.”

Evan stated in his first interview that he believes “all students have something good to write about.” Through the mentor texts selected, he provided students with familiar characters, settings and storylines to assist them with emulating storytelling techniques and combining them with their funds of knowledge to create an original text. These texts tap into the African-American community’s rich cultural wealth that Evan has learned from students and seeks to sustain (Yosso, 2006). Through the use of these two texts, Evan has sought to reconfigure a dominant negative narrative of African-Americans perpetuated by popular media and American society and to sustain positive, realistic visions of success.

**Creating Writing Tasks to Promote Social Justice and Consciousness**

Evan’s culminating unit task prompted students to use the hero from John Henry as a vigilante activist in their community with a resurrection similar to the song “The Cool.” In the students’ stories, John Henry was supposed to come back to life and solve issues that plague their community. Evan said in the third interview, "I wanted to show them that community problems are important and have them think about solutions that members of their own community can solve.” At the end of the unit, students identified issues like: racism, gangs, gun violence, segregation, and bullying as issues that affect them each day, which are shown below in Figure 3.
According to Geneva Gay (2010), Evan is functioning as a cultural mediator because of his work to create for his students the opportunity to take part in critical dialogue about conflicts within their culture, and interrogate their reality looking for inconsistencies. The mentor texts students studied prior to writing provided them with a knowledge of style, as well as an alternative narrative for African-Americans. As the teacher, Evan used texts to give students necessary knowledge of why the selected stories are meaningful to the world, of how honest they can be within a story, and to apprise them of some examples of issues in African-American culture.
By allowing students to choose their own issues of relevance to them on a day-to-day basis, and how they can affect change, Evan supported them in building social consciousness by critiquing norms that examine inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Evan asserted in his third interview, “Students don’t see the issues that I think are important, like capitalism. They are the experts of their lives and what they see, like pollution and poverty.” With the wave of Common Core State Standards that has deluged American public schools today, a major goal of schooling is to groom students for success in the real world by fostering “college and career readiness.” Part of this readiness, Evan argues, is having the free will to critique the world around them. He shared his view in the third interview that “school constrains kids, and … they spend all day being told what to do by adults. This unit gives them a chance to show the adults what [the adults] need to do.” The use of community-oriented tall tales was just one potential way to inspire social consciousness through writing; this inspiration can be derived from various forms.

**Teaching by Encouraging Action**

Beyond social consciousness, another major tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is that it promotes an academic success for students that is not necessarily dependent on the state or national curriculum (Ladson- Billings, 1995). The task Evan planned for his students was not an easy task to complete. It took scaffolding to prepare students with necessary information, and examples and rehearsal to write about the issues in their community. This particular section aims to spotlight some of the important activities planned to prepare students for the culminating writing task. Evan scaffolded for his students the practices of utilizing mentor text, generating issues for topics, and engaging in pre-writing exercises about issues of the school.

Evan maintained in his second interview, “I know I could have been doing a lot with my students, but it all needs to start with mentor text to acquaint them with a model of reference.” In
addition to the texts John Henry and “The Cool,” Evan also wrote an exemplar text shown in Figure 3. In his original mentor text, Evan set the stage for John Henry to combat police brutality. The setting of the story portrayed the aftermath of numerous deaths involving police brutality toward Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, and other prominent cases involving African-Americans. Evan’s plot centered around the true but less publicized story of a fifteen-year-old Black boy named James Means who was shot by a white worker at a dollar store in West Virginia in an altercation that resulted from an accusation that the teenager had a gun (allegedly a BB gun, which was never found).
Using mentor texts as a gateway to improve students’ writing is part of an apprenticeship model for writing (Collins et al., 1989). Theses texts provide opportunities for learning through guided experience and metacognitive skills. By studying the John Henry text, students collected details that were necessary for the resurrections in their own stories to be accurate. Evan asserted in the third interview, “John Henry can’t just come back to life taking up a life of crime when, in the story, he believed in justice.” Students collected information about the

Figure 4. A portion of Evan’s mentor text
protagonist’s background while reading to allow them to make inferences. Through the use of the song “The Cool,” and his own exemplar text, Evan intended to increase students’ background knowledge, fuel student-centered discussions, and build students’ comfort level with writing this type of text by presenting guides for stylistic features. Students were reminded of the importance of paying attention to detail in story writing. Evan said during the interview, “My exemplar text addresses … issues in the community to show students who I am and how to write an accurate story.”

After reading the John Henry tall tale, Evan facilitated a discussion to generate a list of problems students observed in their neighborhood. One scaffolding activity he used was to have the students walk around the school and jot down their ideas on problems at the school, and how they could change them to make school a better place. As he chaperoned the students through the corridors of the building, they were encouraged to generate ideas and list them as important issues. They then returned to the classroom, where they were allowed to discuss and compare them, as well as brainstorm solutions. Evan then challenged students to the task of identifying problems in their own community, and the country at large to afford them the opportunity to think more globally. He redirected them back to the text on John Henry to facilitate the way they brainstormed. When turning to community issues (bullying, gangs, gun violence, drugs), students mentioned their perceptions of how President Donald Trump and Governor Bruce Rauner felt about how these issues were affecting their neighborhood, based on what they may have heard from their parents, other people in their community, or the news. This struck Evan as particularly interesting because, to him, “it shows the extent to which students are informed through listening to adult conversations, and from the news they watch, and how they are able to articulate their views on issues typically reserved for adults.”
Through note-taking, followed by generating, brainstorming, comparing, and synthesizing ideas, students gained practice that helped prepare them for the culminating writing task, which, in Evan’s opinion, increased their ability to reach academic success. He related in the third interview, “By first … letting the kids … walk through the hallways, I felt that I gave them a voice to bring justice to the hostile setting in school.” By operating as a facilitator, he allowed students to rehearse and receive feedback without any of the numerical constraints of grading, as well as to engage in critical emancipatory conversations. For much of the time they spend in school, student are prescribed behaviors, customs, and rules. Students were shown, and not simply told, that their voices are important, and that they can push back against norms, a skill necessary for them to be successful in the final assessment, and in the community outside of the classroom.

Hamachek (1999) suggests that culturally relevant teachers go beyond teaching curriculums as they join the lives of students. Figuratively speaking, Evan shared, “I was just a recorder. I did not offer any judgments or feedback because I am, by no means, a judge of what they find problematic.” Villegas and Lucas (2002) suggest that teachers need to believe that schools can be sites for social transformation and make such opportunities for students to be agents of change in their curriculum. The list of issues generated during the brainstorming session was created through students’ vocalization of problems they deemed to be of importance to them, and they were able to gain ideas from their peers.

Assessing by Reimagining Rubrics

The students used the rubric broken down into categories of rememberer, storyteller and griot to guide them in their story composition and also to allow each member of the classroom community to know that their stories or skills were valued within the room. (Many were excited to have their piece read and to receive feedback. Others were excited to be given creative freedom with their story, while others struggles with the freedom which impacted their story composing.)
Evan’s final task assessed how students wrote stories that brought the character John Henry back from the dead in order to solve issues students identified in their community. Students received feedback through a combination of verbal feedback, written feedback, and a tall tale rubric, pictured below (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Tall tale rubric used for Evan’s writing assessment/feedback](image-url)
Evan rethought common uses of rubrics by infusing cultural history in the unit’s rubric. His rubric replaced a number rating system with a model that values all students, and acknowledges that students can be assessed based on phases of writing stemming from Western African tradition: *rememberers* retell the same story, *storytellers* take pieces from a well-known story and rewrite a new story based on it, and *griots* create or perform unique stories. With each of the new categories, Evan assigned a song and made it available for students to listen to in order to gain understanding of the phase of writing they were currently emulating. In an interview focused upon assessments Evan related, “I just pulled songs that I knew from artists students knew to use as a scaffold. Sometimes music says it better.” For example, he coupled the song “The Art of Peer Pressure” with the *griot* category. It tells a story of Kendrick Lamar robbing a house with his friends for a quick profit. In this story, Lamar speaks from his point of view, and assumes the voices of his friends while still rapping over a beat.

```
Really I’m a sober soul
But I’m with the homies now
Really I’m a peacemaker
But I’m with the homies right now
```

The lyrics suggest that the character is acting a certain way because of being in the company with friends. In the following lyrics, the author creates dialogue for himself, his mother, and a friend, which goes beyond simply telling a story. He infuses descriptions, gestures, and inflections, in performing the rap.

```
Pull in front of the house
That we been camping out like two months
The sun is goin’ down as we take whatever we want
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My mama called: “Hello? What you doin’?” “Kickin’ it.”
I shoulda told her I’m probably ‘bout to catch my first offense
With the homies
But they made a right, they made a left
Then made a right, then another right
One lucky night with the homies
What that n—
What’s that Jeezy song say, n—?
“Last time I checked, I was the man on these streets!”

Evan explained that Lamar’s style was “very hard to do” and an ultimate “sign of craft.” He related this to how griots are not just storytellers in West Africa, but performers.

He coupled the song “Neighbors” by J. Cole with the storyteller category. This song tells a story of J. Cole’s studio being raided by the police because of an anonymous call from a neighbor with false information about him selling drugs. He is only reporting what he saw from the cameras and is limited in the point of view and story told.

Evan related this song to a storyteller because there is a lack of complete originality due to “pieces being pulled from other stories.”

Some things you can’t escape:
Death, taxes, and a racist society that make
Every [n-word] feel like a candidate
For a Trayvon [Martin] kinda fate
I can’t sleep ‘cause I’m paranoid
Black in a white man territory
Cops bust in with the army guns
No evidence of the harm we done
Just a couple neighbors that assume we slang
Only time they see us we be on the news, in chains, damn …

He coupled the last category of rememberer not with a song, but with a role in the music world—an emcee. The emcee hypes the crowd at events, but will always play the music of others. This means that the writer is pulling directly from other stories and remembering, which can still be exciting to the reader.
The rubric used by Evan defies typical formatting rules students are accustomed to. Because students needed help understanding the rubric and using it meaningfully, Evan also issued verbal feedback. He shared in the second interview, “Rubrics, no matter how you design them, need to be accompanied by written and verbal feedback.” After the rubric was filled out, Evan provided the students with a note, and engaged many in conversation to follow up with the rubric. His written feedback provided probes designed to expand students’ thinking with the use of how and why questions, and the opportunity to apply their learning to solve problems in their own communities (e.g., problems can be solved when individuals or groups work together). Such probes, Evan believes, are more powerful than assigning a letter grade. Below is an example of such written feedback (see Figure 6).

![Image of Evan’s feedback with probing questions](image)

*Figure 6. Evan’s feedback with probing questions*
In this example, the teacher presented probing questions for the student to help them develop beyond the *rememberer* or *storyteller* categories because the student had to use the information from the story and their own ideas and experiences to add to their story.

The student then had an opportunity to reflect on and understand how their writing was received by their teacher in comparison to their intent. Evan’s written feedback thus provided a potential bridge from current stylistic choices to future stylistic choices. Students could use their teacher’s feedback to reflect on their current work, examine how it could change or improve the current work, and also use this feedback in the future. Evan conveyed in the third interview, “I am in the business of creating better writers, not writing, so I ask probing questions to help students improve their craft.”

Wilson (2006) claims that we must avoid groupthink and bias in rubrics; rather we should be “helping students to wade through conflicting views of their work, honoring disagreement without getting lost in it” (p. 60). Wilson adds, “an assessment method must convince us that it reflects our values about teaching writing before it seduces us with its claim to save time” (p. 28). Evan’s desire to have all members of the class feel included and valued pushed him to reimagine rubrics that look at how students don’t measure up. Through his rubric, he worked to privilege story over scores, and writers over writing. His rubric sought to encapsulate his understanding of the complex nature of his students’ stories, rather than reducing them to easily measurable categories.
Dan: Problematizing Gender through Comics

The unit’s goals were to have students understand the different ways in which a “good reader” could be understood. Literacy is not simply about reading the texts that our system of education has been known to place into a canon of literature, but also about understanding the different ways in which literacy is achieved: for example, through visuals working in tandem with writing as seen in comic books. More than this, the purpose of the unit was to critique and address the notions of gender, race, and representation in the comic book medium. In this way, the final assessment allowed students the opportunity to create their own comic book, utilizing visuals and standard text to address a real-life concerns faced in our world, such as gang violence, or issues facing the LGBTQ community. Students were asked to analyze various Marvel comic strips to identify how to read pictures like text and see how they work together to relay a theme. At the same time, students worked to interrogate how race, gender, and class were presented in the comics. After this analysis has been done, students create a comic or essay to demonstrate their understanding.

—Dan, written communication after the conclusion of the unit

Unit Overview

Steven McNiven, Marvel Avenger Civil War comic

The image above is a picture taken directly from the Marvel Avenger Civil War comic book that Dan used as an opening piece to his unit. He thought this image would pique students’ interest and provide a preview of the theme of his unit. He pointed out that “in a world with
anything you could imagine being possible, with superheroes, there still are not strong women
and minorities.” Though there were these types of critical social issues to be interrogated,
another profound thing to acknowledge and celebrate is the way Dan included abstract forms of
literacy that are often not acknowledged. By showing literacy in various text forms and allowing
the students to be critical of something they read often, Dan allowed students room and a safe
space to question the world around them.

The overall goal of the unit Dan designed was to provide students opportunities to assess
depictions of gender, race, and class in media (particularly comics). Dan related in the second
interview, “The students and I both view comics as a form of entertainment. Something for fun,
right, but through the composition of character and plot a message is sent.” The inequality of
representation in media was assessed through his comics unit that spanned five weeks. Students
read a comic to analyze the author’s craft of relaying a storyline, focusing heavily on the hero
characters. Students studied stylistic aspects of the comic genre to ultimately create their own
comic, or write an essay in which they created arguments about representation within comics. In
the second interview, Dan reasoned, “This assessment allows students to both interrogate the
injustice and also present literacy in a way that is not typical in school.” Dan defies what are
considered valued forms of literacy, and uses unconventional text to expose the injustices we
sometimes overlook, especially in entertainment media.

In this section, I aim to invite the reader into Dan’s unit and classroom to paint a picture
of how he interprets text and writing with his sixth grade students. I emphasize his depiction of
what qualifies as text, and the issues related to using comics as a form of text, along with how
this decision is culturally relevant. I also aim to explore how Dan used media as a tool to create
critical conversations of race, gender, and class not only in comics, but around the world. Similar
to Evan’s section, this section will include artifacts, interviews, and think-alouds to explain how the choices made in this unit reinforce the ideas of culturally relevant writing instruction. I will explore steps Dan took to prepare students to engage in critical conversations on gender, race, and class to complete the final task. This unit serves as another example of how culturally relevant writing instruction might look when enacted in the classroom, this time with middle schoolers.

**Designing a Classroom Context to Highlight the Diversity of Heroes**

I like to create an ambiance in which students see heroes, justice, and things they can relate to.

—Dan, interview

Dan’s classroom “surrounds students with heroes” to make them feel powerful enough to take chances, he explained. There are superheroes like Batman and Wonder Woman on tapestries hanging around the room. There are pictures of Batman’s Bat Signal on one wall, which was used in the city of Gotham to alert Batman, or his alter ego Bruce Wayne, that the city was in a state of emergency. Additionally, quotations by Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi are displayed in the classroom. Dan communicated in his third interview, “I want students to feel invincible like the people on the walls. Yes, Martin Luther King is not alive, but his legacy lives on.” Dan’s aim was to surround students with superheroes, and also to make up for a lack of diversity in comics by using other heroes to let students “see themselves” on the walls. Turner & Paris (1995) claim that environment and culture of the classroom setting determines how literacy is defined and taken up by students.

Dan stated in his first interview, and reiterated in his third, that “our students are in a state of need due to the color of their skin, the system of schooling, and where they come from.” He used comics and real-life heroes to “protect” his classroom like these heroes protected the people
they fought for. This safety created in the classroom was necessary to support students as they interrogated the topics of gender and culture, and because these notions were solely based on personal experiences of the students. For example, one student, John, described his personal struggle to come to terms with his sexuality in his life and in comics. He asserted, “People need to know that just because you are born a boy doesn’t mean you have to be one. … Mr. R’s class lets me feel like I can talk about it being true in my life and comics.” Dan proposed in his third interview, “Students need to feel open to engage in conversation on their home life, [their] parents, and their own journey as sixth graders.” To promote conversations, Dan positioned the students’ desks in long rows and placed couches in several areas around the periphery of the room to make students feel “comfortable.”

Dan supported his students in bringing their home life into the classroom through daily journaling activities. Students were given writing prompts that served as check-ins and provided a safe conversation space. In his third interview, he related that “everything is based on the reality that students know. Their thoughts are based on experiences.” Dan thinks that, in order for students to create an argument, they need to remember the experiences that drove their stances on the argument. He proposed that this “remembering” that students engaged in daily through journaling prepared them to take stances on socially and politically relevant issues in their lives—such as the 2016 presidential election, in which the first female candidate ever nominated by a major party was widely expected to win. Exploration of current affairs was also presented through audio, visual, and written text to expand students’ understanding. Dan holds that by allowing students to cross-reference political cartoons, personal experiences, and videos of the presidential debates with comics, they were given holistic pictures of gender and class within the media.
Culturally relevant instruction in Dan’s writing classroom was situated in the experiences of his students. The goal of writing in Dan’s unit aligned with the work of researchers who purport that students should not only be allowed to share their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but also expose the injustices in the world and think up new solutions (Winn and Johnson, 2011). According to Dan, “Student writing is a bridge from the world students know, written in Black-and-white text, to an imagined safe place presented in different ways.” This goal was reiterated in all aspects of the planned unit, from text selection to the assessment.

**Selecting Texts to Problematize Dominant Gender Norms**

The nature of choosing comic books themselves served as the first piece of culturally relevant texts due to the wide appeal of these stories in our current popular culture. The texts I chose to explore were a Captain America comic book that tells a traditional coming-of-age superhero story to allow students an easy entry into the comic book form of storytelling. Secondly, I chose to explore injustice, because of the ways in which it goes against the established norms of what it means to be a superhero (such as questioning whether heroes can kill). However, both of these comics were chosen because of the problematic ways in which they represent men and women, whether through race or gender.

—Dan, written communication after the conclusion of the unit

In his unit, Dan aimed to build students’ critical consciousness through his text selection of the *Captain America Theater War* comic. Ladson-Billings (1995) positions such work as a teacher engaging in the world and with others in critical ways. Through the use of this text, Dan believed that students would be able to explore the concept of injustice in representation of gender, race, and class within pop culture and interrogate what the norms are for literacy. Students were also able to write their ideas of justice into the world using multiple forms of literacy, including drawings and pictures. The texts he selected highlights the notion of multimodality and multiple literacies in the classroom, and challenges students to question both what is considered literacy and text, and how we can create positive representations for minorities and women.
The *Captain America Theater of War* series is a compilation of short stories in which Captain America, the iconic hero soldier, fights on the side of America in wars like WWII and the Iraq War.

Students spent most of their time reading one story in particular, “America the Beautiful.” In this story, Captain America recounted his experience with a private named Shaw who reminded him of himself growing up. He described the private’s physique as being small and thin like his. Captain America took this private under his wing because of his uncanny resemblance. While fighting a war, Captain America asked Private Shaw to be brave and wait for him to return. His dead body was found years later still waiting for Captain America. Some of the dialogue from the text is included below:

**Private Shaw:** Sir, I don’t know if I can do it. They’re shooting at us.

**Captain America:** I’m going to take a wild stab, Private Shaw: You joined because you love your country. When I look at you I see a man who wants to do what’s right. So this is your chance. Are you with me?

This comic served as a mentor text for writing. First, it highlights the power of combining text with visual and multimodal forms of representation (Bachmair, 2006). Second, the comic problematizes the notion of masculinity through the Private Shaw character. He was thin, made fun of, and deemed inadequate for defending the country because he was not physically strong; however, he showed extraordinary bravery in the end by waiting for Captain America until his death. Dan questioned in his third interview, “Who says that thin men cannot be strong, and that strength is dictated by physical build?” He challenged ideas about strength
being depicted through muscles. When I asked his student Julia what “strength” means to her, she replied, “Strength is your ability to go against the crowd and stand up for what you believe in. My mom told me that and she is strong.” Julia thus pushed the concept even further by integrating women into the conversation.

Dan chose a text with a new look that reflects how 21st-century text looks—often combining text, print, and digital images (Leu, 2004). In the second interview he expressed that “comic pictures extends the meaning from the author, and allows students to feel enveloped in the story.” This visualization of the text helps students without background knowledge to engage in conversation and the process of understanding, and to critique issues such as gender, class, and race, thus pushing academic success. Ladson-Billings (1995) explains that social consciousness is beyond just looking at issues of underrepresentation, or textbooks only being in print; it involves moving from critique to action. The comic’s plot of the war was not necessarily the main focus of the unit and tasks; rather, Dan sought to increase students’ abilities to engage in critical conversations in search of solutions.

Dan’s focal text also provided students with a new view of bravery and masculinity outside of what students might see in the media. He expressed in the second interview that “sixth graders are in such awkward places in their life where they’re faced with coming of age and figuring themselves out. I want to give them the resources to think about that, counter to what they see in negative media.” The comic he selected presented a counter-narrative for students to consider. He also used it as a mentor text to prepare students for the final assignment of creating a comic and/or essay interrogating gender based on conversations from the comic.

**Creating Writing Tasks to Interrogate Gender**
Similar to Evan, Dan also aimed to build social consciousness with his unit. He did this by having students interrogate gender norms through reading and writing comics. Friere (1988) suggests that interrogating gender through comics could be an example of “conscientization,” or building critical awareness of reality through reflection and action (p. 400). In his third interview, Dan suggested that “students are taking comics they read all the time and challenging the norms of Superman being buff and Wonder Woman being half-dressed. I am challenging them to ask why that is.” In order to bring about the social action Ladson-Billings (1995) writes about, the students first had to go about reflecting on their reality to change it. Freire suggests that we all acquire myths that are accepted and dominate our reality. This unit topic challenged students to find the real problems behind the myths and address actual needs.

Within comics, the notion of gender is complicated. Weida (2011) says males are presented as muscular with masculine bodies, who have colorful, form-fitting attire. Usually wearing feminine fashions (e.g. tights, capes) is accepted; however, women are scantily dressed and presented as weak. Women are presented as provocative, but are seemingly somewhat exposed (Weida, 2011). Dan, who read comic books regularly growing up, reinforced this idea when he said, “comics reinforce unrealistic bodies and gender inequities. This is dangerous because students are vulnerable.” By centering the interrogation of gender in this literacy unit, Dan supported students in debunking the notions of gender they are asked to subscribe to by society. One of his students related in a final interview, “My mom is my hero and she doesn’t dress like Wonder Woman. Does that mean she is not a hero too?” Dan’s unit afforded students the opportunity to engage the world and others critically, and he utilized a textual form deemed valuable by the students to do so.

Teaching by Critically Analyzing Texts
Students were given a graphic organizer with a box displayed on it and were asked to discuss what it means to be a man and a woman. Inside the box they needed to explain the normal ideas of being a man (e.g., masculine, strong, tough, not feeling emotions), and outside of the box they needed to explain what does it not mean to be a man (e.g., weak, showing many emotions). Students were then asked to discuss these stereotypes and issues out loud. After this they were given writing prompts that explored their own definition of manhood or womanhood and whether they stayed “inside the box” or “outside the box.” Further, they were asked to explain whether comic book representations kept the stereotypical ideas of manhood and womanhood as well. This forced students to grapple with their own ideas of manhood and womanhood and confront the stereotypes seen in media representations.

—Dan, written communication after the conclusion of the unit

Dan promoted academic success by creating open-ended tasks to allow students freedom to think through societal norms—to digest and push back on them. In order to prepare students to engage in this conversation, Dan designed prerequisite tasks to ease students into the work of combating issues of gender representation in media. He had students define what it means to be male and female through a quick-write, annotations of visual images, and ultimately an analytical essay or designing a comic in which they compared their definitions of manhood and womanhood with the Captain America comic they read.

Dan opened the unit with students completing a quick-write prompt to answer the question: What is a man and what is woman? The definition was generated by students, and then cross-referenced with Marvel superheroes. Students critiqued whether or not comics upheld the same sentiments. Students were given exactly twenty minutes to answer this question on their Chromebooks. Dan explained that his hope was for students to reveal aspects of what they have been exposed to in media and personal experiences in their answers to the question. For a quick-write, students are usually presented with a question and asked to write a brief response in which they must explain their understanding of a phenomenon—in this case, gender. Dan related in the third interview, “quick writes are very low-stakes without grades, so it eliminates the frustration of writing. Students had flexibility.” These quick-writes allowed students to construct their own
definitions of males and females based on lived experiences. Several samples of student quick-writes are presented in the next figure. (see Figure 7; Bass, 2003).

Figure 7. A quick-write by a student in Dan’s sixth grade writing class
In the example above, the student wrote about what being a woman meant from their perspective: being your own person, believing in yourself, and making your own decisions. The student also argued that, even though Wonder Woman was a superhero, all girls should not aspire to be like her because she fits the stereotypical portrayal of beauty in the media of a white, curvaceous woman that does not represent the average woman. The student challenged the portrayal of Superman as the muscular buff who always takes control, as well. Coming together in discussion, students defined being a woman as showing independence in thought and behaviors despite issues like peer pressure that they face. This definition was cross-referenced with the depiction of superheroes like Wonder Woman. She was used as an example of this independence, but also as a stereotype through her presentation. Through writing and discussion activities like this, Dan worked to reconfigure his classroom as a space to interrupt inequality and gender insubordination.

After the quick-write, students were asked to use the knowledge introduced in the quick-write when annotating pictures from the Captain America comic read in class. Dan stated in the third interview that the class “used quick-writes as a way to generate stereotypes of women and men introduced in media to assist in annotating Captain America and the Avengers comics.” Students were tasked with choosing any picture they found intriguing and annotate the picture for stereotypes, but also for the message the picture was used to convey. Kress and Leeuwen’s (2001) theory of multimodality claims that meaning is made through situated instances across image, gesture, gaze, body posture, sound, writing, music, speech, and so on. McVickers (2007) suggests that while reading comics, students are synthesizing visual representation with written text to expand the comprehension of students. The pictures in the comics had meaning that needed to be explored just as much as the text.
In the figure below, students worked to annotate characterization of heroes (Batman and Superman), and to cross-reference them with the villain (Joker) (see Figure 8). The annotations reveal the strength of the hero, and the nonchalant attitude of the villain. Dan commented on the assignment in the fourth interview by saying, “Masculinity is often acknowledged through physical strength or fearlessness—even though there are good guys and bad guys, they are all still men.” Like the quick-writes, this visual annotation assignment gave students more data and preparation for the final assignment of interrogating race, thus promoting academic success.
Figure 8. A student’s (Fatima’s) annotations of characterization of superheroes versus the villain

One student wrote, “Superman is punching through the wall and debris flies everywhere. It’s light behind him, so I can tell that there is an explosion behind him.” In another annotation, the student wrote, “There is an internal conversation between Batman and the Joker about if Superman was going to become a new person or not.” In describing how the characters were behaving the student elaborated in another annotation that “Superman threw the table at Batman while his other hand is in a fist. The Joker’s hands are up nonchalantly and he doesn’t care about what Superman will do to him.” By examining the annotations, one finds that the student is making inferences about the characters based on their actions and body language.
Annotating the Marvel comics, coupled with the quick-write, gave students room and opportunity to think about gender. These assignments led up to the larger task of designing a comic or writing an essay defining the students’ understanding of gender roles, how gender is depicted through comics, and whether or not those two explanations align. Dan said in his fourth interview, “Not every student is good at writing analytical essays. … I know I am not the best, so I gave the students the chance to emulate comics to show their understanding if they chose to.” Allowing students this option granted them an element of choice, but still demanded academic success. Both were valued the same.

In the figure below, Dan’s student Fatima chose to draw a comic to express the conception of gender and bullying (see Figure 9). This figure will be explored further in Chapter 6.
Dan’s student Fatima drew an image of a girl who likes to dance and is free-thinking; however, the response of her fellow female peers was ridicule. This ridicule caused the main character to become self-conscious. The last two frames suggest that the characters should come together and not tear each other down. This student adopted the form of literacy that included dialogue and imagery, but also introduced the idea of women being unique and standing against the crowd. With the visual and written text being promoted as equally valuable in Dan’s classroom, his assessment followed suit. I will explore her story further in Chapter 6.

**Assessing by Holistic Responses**

Dan’s incorporation of drawing and comics had the potential to make the task of assessment and evaluation even more difficult. He shared in the third interview, “It is your first
inclination to grade grammar and errors for them to get better, but I wanted to change that. I took … a holistic approach.” This holistic approach consisted of him assessing the work of the students for their individual progress as writers, as opposed to a using general criteria he generated. To avoid enabling students to take a rubric, glance at it, and then tuck it away until forced to retrieve it, he offered students written feedback highlighting their growth as writers. He wanted them to gain familiarity with this new paradigm, not just in the instance of this comics unit, but also in their future as writers, as a self-assessment tool. This approach humanized students, and was considerate of their histories, perspective, and experiences. The students received sticky notes with a score and written probing questions to push their thinking. Dan acknowledged that, “at the end of the day grades have to go in,” but he solved this by grading students based on their stage of writing development, not compared to a perfect standard he might have written for them. This meant that a score of ten out of ten might not look the same for any two students, but it suggests that in their journeys as writers, both students have surpassed their expectations for themselves, and the teacher’s observations support their growth as writers.

For example, the sticky note below commends the students for taking on the difficult task of annotating the picture with script (see Figure 10).
In this comment, Dan probed this student to think more about the font and typography, as opposed to reiterating what the letter says. When discussing the piece of writing with me, Dan said, “Fatima is generally very good at being critical and annotating pictures from this unit, and in her other work.” Because both the student and Dan agreed that this was not her best work, she received a score of 7 out of 10. By following up with a conversation about the feedback provided on the sticky note before assigning a numerical score, Dan’s intention was to maintain the student’s investment in writing within the democratic community of his classroom.
With the feedback given on sticky notes, Dan—like Evan—made a statement against scales and the quantification of student scores. When interviewed about his assessment he replied, “It shouldn’t be about ranking and quantifying kids—the school does that enough.” Dan made a reference to his school, Northland, having a gifted and neighborhood track which is based on standardized test scores—the “gifted” students were supposed to receive more rigorous work because they can “handle it,” whereas the neighborhood students received “regular” work, or remediation. Dan purports that scales do not help students because the binary between good and bad clouds and limits the understanding of the teacher (Wilson, 2017). No matter what the teacher writes on the paper, the higher number will mean good and the opposite side will mean bad to students. Because of this, Dan chose to grade students on their personal progress as opposed to the use of a rubric with a scale. When discussing his grading technique he relates, “An A for one student may not be an A for another because students are in different places. With some students you work all year to help them get to the point where they are able to physically write a story, whereas others simply work to improve their technique from the beginning.” Similar to Evan, Dan worked around quantifying students with assessments to value stories and journeys made in class. Their efforts supported the emotional aspect of students, which is a tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy and theory in general.
Rick: Negotiating Culture Through Spoken Word

The poetry unit emphasized composition and performance as well as the reading, annotation, and analysis of poetry. Using the documentary *Louder Than a Bomb* (Jacobs & Siskel, 2011) as an anchor text, my goal was to validate the cultural experiences and practices of my students, drawing on their participation in various aspects of larger youth culture. I was interested in cultivating a space that invited my students to name their own experiences through poetry. I facilitated several smaller workshops for students to compose individual poems representing aspects of their culture and identity (e.g., exploring notions of home, creating portraits of important persons, places, and things in the students’ lives). Additionally, we spent considerable time reading, talking through the text, and discussing underrepresented texts and forms (e.g. hip-hop, spoken word, tanka, ghazal, etc.) to challenge students to problematize traditional notions of poetry drawn from doing poetry in school. We compared and contrasted these forms with the reading and annotation of selected canonical poems. Ultimately, all these tasks were in service of the culminating activity: the composition and performance of a spoken-word poem, including an additional multimodal component.

—Rick, written communication after the conclusion of the unit

**Unit Overview**

I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended except by my permission
I mean...I...can fly
Like a bird in the sky

—Nikki Giovanni, excerpted from “Ego Trippin”

The excerpt above was taken from Nikki Giovanni’s poem “Ego Trippin.” This text was one of the many poetry works studied within Rick’s spoken-word poetry unit. Though there are different interpretations of the poem, one interpretation is that Giovanni is on an ego trip, or celebration of pride. This selection seemed quite fitting because Rick’s intent was to provide students with a safe space to show pride and celebrate their home cultures and language(s) through his nine-week unit. Students were ultimately asked to interrogate the concept of culture through a spoken-word poem that they wrote and performed orally.

The goal of this assignment was to allow students space to negotiate how their culture is presented versus what they know it to be. In Rick’s unit, culture expands beyond the concept of ethnic background to include things like youth culture or sports culture. Rick revealed in the
second interview, “I am not here to tell them what culture should be privileged, but I want them to choose at least one to push back on.” In this unit, students were presented with the challenge to contrast their understanding of culture and self with ones that had previously been force-fed to them by society. They were tasked with evaluating societal images of culture, in light of their new understanding about cultural diversity that can be expressed through writing.

This section describes how students took up the task of interrogating culture, and how the teacher assisted students with the process of creating and performing spoken word. I emphasize the youth-written mentor text(s) used to coach students through the process of creating spoken word because of Rick’s efforts to create a safe space in which students can problematize things they have been conditioned to accept in regard to culture. Artifacts and interviews from Rick and his students are synthesized to present how culturally relevant pedagogy was taken up in this seventh grade classroom. Rick sought to promote cultural competence and academic success through this unit, to learn more about who the students are, and to share himself with them.

**Designing a Classroom to Create Safety**

Rick acknowledged in his fourth interview, “I would like to consider my classroom as a safe haven for students to be free because school is thought to be so negative.” He promoted this freedom by creating a very homey space. Students were granted access to areas in the room where they could relax, like cushioned seating areas. For some phases of workshopping, students sat in long rows to create a sense of “togetherness.” The photograph below shows how desks were clustered (see Figure 11).
Rick’s desk was located in close proximity to the students’ desks because he wanted to be part of their work and to be accessible. Along with desk placement that promotes engagement, Rick has inspirational quotes along the walls and couches in the front of the room. One poster contained the challenge, “Be inspired 365,” and a parking lot (a poster for questions and comments) hung on another wall which was used as a medium for students to persevere and take chances. The parking lot created a space in which students were open to challenge instruction through questioning, or anonymous comments. Rick expressed in the third interview, “Above all else, I want my classroom to at least be the one place students can be, or feel, safe.” One of Rick’s students, Nathan, commented, “I’d like to think there is a world in which I am still smart despite me being in this neighborhood class. Mr. C’s classroom makes me feel smart.” The student went on to describe his experience in the midst of a tracking system that denoted gifted versus neighborhood classes. Rick’s inviting classroom worked to counter this structural inequity; he created and taught the same content to both his classes, and sought to create an environment that
led to similar outcomes for students. He stated that he wished to “undo schooling as students know it.”

Teachers know that the aesthetics of the classroom can impact student motivation, attitudes, and learning outcomes, so many of them try to provide their students with a comfortable, clean, and safe environment in order to stimulate learning and build community. However, for Rick, his environment extended past the quotes on the wall and the desk configuration into the community. His classroom was a safe space created through dialogues with students in which he shared parts of himself. When he taught, Rick revealed himself to show students that it is safe to expose oneself socially, culturally, and academically within a writing community. During an observation visit by the researcher, Rick disclosed to his class that he was not always a great writer, and his processes for writing did not always help. This is a painstakingly honest admission that most teachers would rather not divulge. He also shared with his students that the challenge to improve his writing using a standard rubric, or model, did not hinder his perseverance because, in his words, “Who will write my story if I don’t?” This act of revealing himself is part of the environment he created to empower students to take chances and solve the problems in life with the weapon of their words.

Selecting Texts to Highlight/Elevate Cultural Data Sets

Louder Than a Bomb was selected as the mentor text. This documentary tells the poignant story of four Chicagoland high school teams as they compete in the nation’s largest slam poetry festival. I wanted to include a documentary to expand notions of text, given that the students were inclined to view text through the traditional lens of print-based media. Additionally, I thought the main poets featured (Nova, Nate, Lamar, and Adam) represented a diverse collective, a perspective that cut across race, gender, religion, ethnicity, language, socioeconomics, family, and affiliations with youth culture. It represented the multicultural and diverse perspective of the students I serve. The documentary chronicled their journey as they found the courage and strength to take their life experiences and transform them into powerful compositions, texts that challenged the canon, artifacts that revealed aspects of their culture and identity. I also invited all the
students to attend the *Louder than a Bomb* indy finals, as a way to extend the documentary and provide a mentor on how to negotiate live performance. I also drew on poems from the anthology, *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*. Hip-hop represents one of the largest cultures that youth participate in and the power of this book resided in how the artists and poets included in the anthology remixed the genre of poetry, creating something that was original and meaningful to them. For example, students explored “No Country for Black Boys,” a contrapuntal poem by Joy Priest. Contrapuntalism contains multiple points of views and the poem is intended to be read three ways: left column with centered lines, right column with centered lines, and finally horizontally, from left to right, to bring both perspectives into conversation with one another. Poems from this anthology resonated especially with my African-American and Latinx students. Beyond hip-hop and spoken-word poetry, we also extended poetic forms to include underrepresented forms, not typically included in seventh grade poetry curriculum, including Arabian ghazals and Japanese tankas.

—Rick, written communication after the conclusion of the unit

*Louder Than a Bomb*’s creative writing curriculum encourages young people “to understand the importance of their own stories and those of others.” With this premise in mind, the designers developed a curriculum to promote collaboration to make communities more equitable places. Though the components of this curriculum were not solely constructed by Rick, the choice to use this curriculum demonstrates his commitment and value invested in his development as a culturally relevant teacher. Some of the texts selected were hip-hop portraiture from both local and famous artists, in an effort to project unspoken voices all over Chicago. Central texts in this curriculum include Nate Marshall’s text “Look”\(^{3}\) and Nikki Giovanni’s text “Ego Trippin.”\(^{4}\) Rick shared with his class when introducing the texts, “The cool thing about these texts is they are very similar—a South Side Chicago local’s voice is held just as valuable as that of a world-renowned poet.” Both poets, similar to the rest of the poets in

\(^{3}\) “Look” is a spoken-word piece by Nate Marshall that celebrates the strides he has made as a poet and a writer. He is telling readers and others to look at how he has gotten other poets “shook” with his word wizardry. He challenges other writers to try to contest his craft.

\(^{4}\) Nikki Giovanni’s “Ego Trippin” refers to her celebration of being Black and a woman. She relates this celebration to that of royalty in African Civilization- Egypt etc. The act of trippin means that you are amazed, crazy, or in shock.
the curriculum, speak of issues students in urban settings (and generally) are faced with—race, class, gender etc. By giving students a chance to read poetry and see performances, Rick allowed students to study how others from the same city use words to combat the things they face, in hopes that his students will do the same.

Ladson-Billings (2014) extended some of the ideas in her original theory of culturally relevant pedagogy when she coined the term “culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0” (p. 74). This updated conceptualization urged teachers and students to go beyond just consciousness and competence to become critical and take action. Rick acknowledged that action is not always simply physical movement through this unit; he revealed that power can be wielded through words. Rick argued that he is “pushing students to determine where they fall culturally, if they feel they belong somewhere, and [to] interrogate the notion through writing similar to the artist.” These mentor texts were used as an impetus to show students that artists, just like them, could be esteemed as highly as “canonical authors,” and that they could make a difference with their words.

Rick’s text selection was also instrumental in promoting justice in his classroom by problematizing what is considered text. Freire’s (1970) theory of critical pedagogy advocates for a problem posing model for education, and privileges the knowledges of marginalized individuals. In acceptance of the mindset of this kind of pedagogy, Rick’s texts allowed students to see the open-endedness of spoken word that he wished for them to adopt through their own writing (Low, 2013). The notion of a text or teacher depositing information into students’ minds was dismantled by providing texts that voiced the plight of urban students.

Famous slam poet Ishmael Reed asks, “Why do Black and Hispanic students pack the slam poetry events and write hip-hop verse themselves, but doze off in the missionary classroom
and receive low scores in reading and writing on the missionary’s SAT?” (Reed 2003, pp. xviii-xix). Rick’s answer is because students are not shown that their texts are of value in schools. He challenged the preconception of what counts as important texts in school, and explored ways to help students become successful in school using texts that capture the “mess” that exists in their lives as urban youth, and also show the value of it. Rick related in the first interview, “Somewhere along the line someone said that Shakespeare was valuable, and others followed. I want to do the same with spoken word because there is value to what our students hear.” Rick thus elevated texts that highlighted the value of spoken word.

**Creating Writing Tasks to Explore the Complexity of Culture**

Ladson-Billing (1995) defines “cultural competence” as the ability to maintain a sense of cultural integrity (p.36). Rick’s unit challenged students to explore all the different communities of culture they are a part of and interrogate the notion. In the third interview, Rick addressed this by saying, “Schools themselves are hostile places that work to ‘posture’ and ‘style’ students.” This unit allows students to break away from the molds of culture, such as being reduced to simply the color of one’s skin, and expands the concept of culture to being abstractly constructed beyond any collective aspect of students’ lives.

Through spoken word, Foley (1992) suggests that words are always situated. The words spoken are contingent upon context or previous occurrences. The message behind the spoken word reveals the student’s understanding of culture as well as the student’s understanding of words themselves (Foley, 1992). Rick’s students had the opportunity to reveal aspects of themselves to their class, their teacher, and the world. In his first interview, he related, “I want to give my students the opportunity to write themselves in to the world.” His students chose to speak about topics like stereotypes, dealing with subcultures such as youth culture, urban life, the
African-American experience, and sports. Johnson and Eubanks (2015) suggest culturally relevant writing requires that students have an opportunity to question, reflect on, and interrogate issues and ideologies relevant to belonging to and/or being excluded from broader communities. Students are able to interrogate for the purpose of healing because it begins with assessing problems.

Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy challenges students to engage in a search for the other cultural affiliations they are part of (Machado et al., 2017). The task was taken up in many different ways within the classroom in which students exposed social, emotional, financial, cultural, and familial hardship. An example of how this task was taken up is revealed through the example below in (Figure 12). The student, Jewel, discussed her issues associated with society's concept of beauty and the sadness it brought her about her own self-image. Part of her poem reads:
Figure 12. Jewel’s spoken-word poem
When interviewed about her text Jewel shared, “I wanted to look at youth culture because we don’t talk about it as much and it’s hard to be young.” In this case, a middle school student would be a perfect example of a “cultural insider” with youth culture because they are immersed in it everyday (Machado et al., 2017, p. 374). Jewel went on to say that “adults forget what it is like to be young.” As a cultural insider in youth culture, Jewel works to educate those who have forgotten, or do not know about what it means to be a girl with the peer pressure of attaining beauty in society. She shares this seemingly daunting task with her listeners—Rick and her classmates—through her writing, which allows her to think through its impact and to heal herself. Through her effort, Rick and his students were potentially enlightened, and gained a better understanding of the complexity of culture through the various affiliations students speak about. Writing and performing also allowing them to educate and heal (things that standards do not call for, and neither does his technical job description). In order for this healing, education, and negotiation of culture to occur, Rick had to extend his work of creating community healing spaces beyond the construct of his classroom.

**Teaching by Creating a Collective Community**

In order to promote academic success on this task, which was somewhat unfamiliar to students, Rick had to create assignments that led up to the final spoken-word performance. This section will spotlight writing workshops and blogging activities that were utilized to expose students to the diversity that exists within poetry and spoken word, and the notion of engaging in activism through words within urban settings. After each piece of writing studied in the unit, students worked to emulate the author’s craft in order to build a writing “repertoire,” as Rick called it. This strategy of writing follows the apprenticeship model in which students are agents in the process of reading, while actively shaping writing based on that which was studied through
immersion. Teachers are the experts in this case, and use their expertise to guide students into the strategies used by skilled readers and writers (Jordan et al. 2001). This model is reliant on students background as a resource. The focus shifts from the “what” we read to the “how” and “why” we read in the writing and reading apprenticeship.

In the second interview, Rick related that he told his students, “This is not one of those assignments you can control throughout.” He wanted them “to have freedom to shape their own writing and grow.” Though this paradigm may seem hard to execute, Rick created a space of freedom in which students collected data and observed forms of spoken word in order to develop their craft of writing around things that are important to them.

Rick used a class workshop to create spaces in the classroom that would support students’ growth as writers after studying a text. In reference to this, Rick said in the second interview, “They studied a text in the Louder Than A Bomb curriculum and emulated a particular stylistic move the artist introduced in his writing.” Students had a workshop session around the draft they generated after each anchor text in the Louder Than A Bomb curriculum was read. This session involved students sitting in a circle or space with a draft of a poem, ready to discuss the stylistic choices involved in crafting the piece. The success of a writing workshop with this design depends on the freedom encouraged in the group, time and safety afforded the students. Students were provided choices about how they could go about generating their writing. No two writers move themselves through these phases exactly the same way, but better outcomes are rendered when students are presented with the opportunity to write about a meaningful topic, or one that they can impose a personal angle to. In other words, they must be able to somehow “own” the topic. In this exercise, safety was created when students discuss experiential feedback as opposed to evaluative data. An example of this workshop structure was evident in the figure
below, in which students read the text “The Red Wheelbarrow” and, based on their analysis, created a “so much depends upon…” piece of their own for workshop. In Figure 13, Rick’s student Samantha annotated “The Red Wheelbarrow” text, highlighting the eight-line structure and creating an image for each stanza, and then wrote her own eight-line poem with a commentary on life.

Figure 13. Samantha’s annotated mentor text and original poem
The student author of this poem, when interviewed, explained, “I wanted to create an image with the poem, too, like the text we read, and comment on life to explore that technique.” The poem infers that looks often outweigh the substance of people in today’s society. This piece and the students’ will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

Samantha created this draft after workshopping with her classmates. Once the students sat down with their writing in the group, they read their pieces aloud and took turns sharing their experiences with the text to allow her to evaluate her clarity and the communication of intention based on the response. Rick explained, “A big portion of the workshops revolve around the talk of classmates and the decision of the author about what to accept, and how to address changes through their writing.” The talk generated in this workshop helped create a space in which students feel safe and reimagine a space of feedback. Samantha said, “I got to learn that my intention does not always translate to the reader. This helps me with clarity and structure.” This workshop creates a space of growth as writers in their craft and a place in which students can interrogate the world through their writing. Rick’s writing workshop structure also allowed students to take part in critical conversations about race, human nature, and inequalities, among other subjects. Workshops did not always occur in class, however; students also engaged with each other through an online platform on Blogger, a blogging website.

A blog is a platform for interaction, journaling, or writing. By the early 2000s, over four million blogs had been created, and now over 60 million are active (Huann, Ow, & Ho Pau Yuen, 2005). Over 900,000 new blog posts are written every day, with new blogs created all the time (Richardson, 2005). Blogs can be about any topic, and can include videos, GIFs, and
pictures. They often include links to other sites, blogs, or resources. This feature makes blogging a truly social communication tool, as most of them solicit comments once a post is created. In Rick’s classroom, he uses a private Blogger account (just for the class review) to allow his students to read and review their work, and to have a platform to offer feedback for their peer’s spoken word. He stated in the third interview, “This is something all students have to engage in to create conversation and engage in appreciative feedback around writing in a space where students are probably more familiar.” Each student was charged with reading their spoken word piece aloud in class, and immediately after hearing the poem students logged into their Chromebooks to write their reactions and experiences to the text and provide appreciative feedback in the form of praises, probes, and/or suggestions. Jewel, a student in Rick’s class, explained that the blog was a space where her classmates could offer ideas and collaborate, and where she could communicate. Rick, too, joined into the conversation on the blog to provide feedback, and the author is able to respond to or clarify any questions or misunderstandings. The picture below serves as an example of Rick and Jewel’s classmates engaging in a conversation around her poem “Beauty” (see Figure 14).
Figure 14. Feedback from a classmate and the teacher for a student’s spoken word

Through the exchanges in the figure above the student (top post) communicates to the author of the spoken-word piece, “Beauty,” that she hit the nail on the head in describing in a few words what girls go through in trying to figure out who they are. She agrees with the author that girls need not try to fit into a mold, but only be themselves. The student’s feedback is positive, in fact effusive, and complimentary, while telling what she specifically likes (i.e., the author showed that the opinions of others doesn’t matter) about the poem. The teacher’s feedback (bottom post) is also authentic, specific (i.e., he commends her on her honesty, bravery,
and vulnerability) and celebratory. He challenges the author to look within to find her Prince Charming.

Ladson-Billings, along with Paris Alim (2014), agree that what students need to know academically is half the battle with working to create spaces of healing in a classroom full of students who have suffered many injustices. There are many social and emotional characteristics that students must acquire that are not captured in the standards (e.g., hope, joy, humility, trust, and respect), and in order to work to create spaces for students to develop these attributes, a teacher must shift from focusing on what they need to teach students to what their students need them to be (Ginwright, 2015). In this case study, Rick in some ways assumed the role of an organizer. He worked to organize a collective community in his classroom through workshops and blogging in which students learned not just how to improve or communicate intentions in writing after adopting a stylistic method, but, more importantly, how to communicate with peers in a manner in which they are able to support and uplift one another. Workshopping was designed to disrupt the normative practice of providing feedback that is often negative and requires revisions of mistakes, while at the same time allowing students the opportunity to negotiate and confront the hardships they face. The mentor texts, and follow-up writing assignments on topics like the shallowness of humans and/ or self-esteem issues students may face, are a testament to the trust Rick worked to foster in his classroom. In addition, students openly discussed their writing, free of judgment, and received constructive feedback to help overcome obstacles in establishing a sense of belongingness and acceptance. In the fourth interview, Rick related that, “If students had nothing productive to add, they didn’t have to contribute. It has gotten to the point where everyone wants to participate.” In his quest to give
students freedom of choice in writing, and an opportunity to come together virtually and physically, Rick worked hard to provide a safe community.

**Assessing by Decentering the Teacher’s Voice**

The success of Rick’s spoken-word unit was contingent on his openness and vulnerability as a teacher. Freire (1970) suggests that this openness and vulnerability is achieved by teachers gaining humility through granting equal value to all students’ voices, despite perceived qualifications and/or intellect. In this classroom, Rick removed himself from the position of authority and treated students as his equals, for the purpose of fostering growth in their writing. He communicated this in the second interview by saying, “I am learning just like my students, so there is no one who is more knowledgeable in this case. We all bring different types of knowledge.” The onus was thus placed on students to communicate with one another for assessments without depending on Rick as the final word; Rick did engage in conversations, but positioned himself as a student, too, learning with his students and engaging in conversation to gain a better understanding about possible affiliations associated with culture, too. His students’ final spoken-word artifacts, published on the blog and performed before their peers, served as a final assessment for the unit. By positioning himself as a learner, Rick allowed students space to understand feedback, develop social skills with peers, and develop their own identity as a writer.

Students created a spoken-word poem that was published to the blog, and also performed a one- to two-minute spoken-word piece celebrating their culture and/or identity. Their ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, neighborhood, affiliations, interests, life experience, etc. were included as a means of cultural expression. Students also had to create a multimodal component to accompany the spoken-word poem. They were given several options for this component, which could have been in the form of a video, a compelling photo, a meme, a drawing, etc. Throughout the unit,
Rick’s students honed their ability to listen to voices of urban authors who come from the same place they do (Chicago), and learned to extract from the rich voices of their classmates to help develop the voices they wish to have. Rick related in the third interview, “Not everyone is perfect at spoken word. Some people are better than others, but there is something to learn in listening to their peers.” By asking students to perform their poems before an audience, Rick addressed the situated nature of words, with respect to inflection, pace, and volume. This contributed to the actual meaning of the text and promoted the use of a multimodal component to the written text as an avenue to expand the students’ understanding of text.

Rick also aimed to bring justice to his rubric. He worked to create a sense of equity in his design of a rubric to with the written spoken word piece and the performance. Rick explained that the rubric “allowed more of a level playing field where, if you are not good at one thing, you can make it up in another category.” He did this because he “values the students and feels that not everyone is great at everything.” The rubric below serves as an exemplar of his understanding of his students (Figure 15).
When interviewing Rick’s student Mallory, I discovered that the students took ownership of the rubric because they felt that it was created, in part, based on what they said they needed:

Kara: What role do you think you guys played in the creation of the rubric?

Mallory: I think Mr. C knows that the performance is the hardest part for teenagers because it is new, and public speaking is just hard. That is why you can easily still get a B even if you don’t do well on it. I am learning to speak in front of people and perform.

This student acknowledged her perceived weaknesses in the assignment, but found comfort in the fact that just because she was working on public speaking did not mean she would fail the assignment. She went on to explain why she had the confidence to continue with the assignment.
**KT:** What makes you continue to put in the effort, if you know you are “learning to speak in public”? This assignment is partly based on your performance.

**M:** I think I am getting better because I got to watch performers perform. I listened to their voices and studied their performances. Then I tried it when I read aloud in class.

The categories in this rubric debunk the notion that mechanics, transitions, ideas, organization, etc. are the only set categories to value in writing (like proposed in 6+1 Traits rubrics). Students are still growing in the process of writing, and Rick’s rubric was designed to reward points to students for the attempt to participate and learn. Ladson-Billings (2006) says that student learning assignments and assessments should measure what “students actually know and are able to do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers” (p. 34). By using the assessment categories of “memorization,” “presented with pride,” and “on time,” for a possible combined 25 points, Rick conveyed the idea that much of the background work required of students does not go unnoticed in performances of spoken word, and is indeed valued. Rick asserted in the third interview, “There is something to say about a kid who can memorize their work, turn it in on time, and present the paper neatly. Those are qualities that can help with a future job.” Through this rubric, Rick celebrated skills that go beyond this unit of measure.

Maja Wilson (2018) asserts that to grow as a writer is to grow as a person who uses the written word to see, hear, feel, hear, ask, know, create, make sense, express, and communicate. If the assessment cannot capture these things within the assignment then it cannot capture the kind of growth Mallory acknowledges she is in the midst of. Students will start and finish at different stages with this assessment; however, the assessment should not be limited to students merely reaching a learning target, as opposed to developing as a writer. The rubric above tells a story of a student’s journey from writing the word to speaking the word into the world, without any prescriptive measures or directives on content. These criteria allow students to spotlight their
relationship to spoken word, with an emphasis on both the author’s intention and the audience’s experience. Rick related in the third interview, “I tried to capture growth in my student work from written language to oral expression. Oral expression helps written language come to life. … You can’t have one without the other.”

**Conclusion**

The three examples of units designed by the teachers in this study showcase that assessments are heavily contingent upon the planning of the unit—including the selection, task creation, and instruction. Each teacher’s unit serves as a unique example of how culturally relevant pedagogy is being embraced by teachers through curriculum design to promote academic success, cultural competency, and social consciousness. Though very different in approach, all three teachers’ intentions circled back to the same rationales that are supported by research—to provide underserved populations a space for healing, and for achieving academic success without forfeiting identity, justice, and cultural understanding. The following section will briefly review commonalities among the cases and the links to culturally relevant pedagogy.

**Creating Safe Spaces in Classrooms to Promote Social Critiques**

All three teachers created a foundation for students to engage in the work of culturally relevant pedagogy through intentional design of the classroom context. The spaces created could be referred to as a “safe spaces,” or the intersection between spaces thought to be very different, yet intersected to create authentic interactions and a shift, a change in the pattern of relationship between learning and what is considered knowledge. Each teacher used visual displays on the walls, intentional organization of desks, and their own words to create a space in which students expanded learning, knowledge, and texts.
Evan and Dan focused on the physical construction of the classroom, with the use of heroes on the walls and ledges. Evan presented athletes, superheroes, and African-American activists through figurines, toys, and posters on the wall. Similarly, Dan presented Batman, Malala, and Gandhi as heroes in poster displays. Both teachers made comments about surrounding students with an alternate reality from the heroes they might see publicized. Moje (2004) suggests that physical space operates in the socialization of human interaction and, concomitantly, by surrounding the students with heroes on the wall and ledges, Evan and Dan created an environment with an expectation to support conversations about justice and equality.

Rick created a third space, in particular, through discourse. He did not necessarily depend on the pictures or figures on ledges to invite students into a space where they can serve as activists, but instead used his words. This third space in Rick’s classroom was created through the language used and embodied practices within the curriculum, in which critical, social, and sociocultural theories become fused with the historical, local, and the present-day world (Gutiérrez, 2008). He filled the classroom with stories that made him vulnerable, practices like appreciative feedback that helped students feel space, and presented them with honest depictions of truth through text. Rick advanced the notion of classroom environment created through spoken word and collective communities of students.

The third spaces in these classrooms created by posters, action figures, and words provided spaces where the oppressed (the participants’ underrepresented students) could plan and work toward their own liberation. In these cases, physical space and words both provided students with the foundation to engage in this activism work—safely.

Selecting Cultural Data Sets to Promote Academic Success
Rick, Evan, and Dan all worked to shatter understandings of what qualifies as a canonical text through the use of spoken word, rap lyrics, and comics as a means to teach students various writing techniques and genres. This practice of text selection is an example of cultural modeling within teaching (Lee, 1997). These everyday texts that students encountered outside of the classroom were used as cultural data sets in instruction to bridge the students’ outside lives with their school lives, and broaden students’ awareness that all texts can be meaningful. By choosing these cultural data sets in their writing units, the processes students already engaged in when previously encountering the text became explicit. Evan’s work with hip-hop music allowed students to value the descriptive nature and perspective in works like “The Cool” and “Neighbors.” He then juxtaposed these texts with the well-known tall tale of John Henry to show students they were of equal value and employed similar stylistic techniques. Dan similarly chose a common text type that appeared to be popular among his students, namely comics, and used this genre to spotlight characters and characterization as a means to critique beliefs about gender. He worked to show students that in order to understand comics, they must already exercise a level of analysis of character, and invited them to criticize these texts to determine the author’s and society’s view of gender portrayed through these characters. Rick used spoken word from local Chicago artists to show students that hip-hop can be married to poetry; then, they celebrated the spoken-word pieces alongside canonical poetry produced by poets like Nikki Giovanni.

Thus, all participants created cultural data sets based on text that are valued by students, and used the sets to promote academic success and shatter the understanding of what qualifies as valuable. Culturally relevant pedagogy hinges on the power to comprehend that academic success is never lost in the midst of the work being done, and teachers are striving to maximize achievement for their students—not just on tests, but in life. Ladson-Billings (2006) purports that
the ability to maintain academic success through the use of culturally relevant practices (in this case, cultural data sets created through text) requires a skilled teacher who is aware of the stories of their students. The cultural data sets created through text were used to teach students academic skills supported by grade-level standards, but also allowed students to see value in aspects of their outside life as value-added, as opposed to as a disadvantage. Evan shared that he selected texts to “show students the value of the practices of underrepresented artists and how they use their music as a means to leverage knowledge to the public.” Research on culturally relevant pedagogies acknowledges that students run into obstacles in maneuvering between their outside lives and in school lives, but teachers must work to equip them with knowledge to function within, and eventually break free from a very oppressive system of schooling (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Urrieta, 2005).

**Promoting Social Consciousness through Task Selection**

By inviting students to bring their outside lives into the classroom through cultural data sets within the writing units, students were tasked with using the texts as means to build social consciousness. Sociopolitical consciousness is defined as the ability to identify, comprehend, and critique inequities within society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Much of the work of creating writing tasks that promote sociopolitical consciousness began with the teacher-participants’ understandings of the issues of race, class, and gender first, and how these issues impacted their students before they could implement the writing tasks in the classroom. Evan recognized that the Roebuck community was in a very dangerous location that presented an obstacle for his students when he had to walk the perimeter of the school as he escorted them outside the building during dismissal. In his first interview he said, “I break up fights, they shoot, and a lot of my students walk home by themselves.” Recognizing the danger of location motivated Evan to create a task
centered around students talking about community issues and proposing ways in which problems can be solved.

Dan acknowledged that gender has been a very big issue nationwide with the presidential elections, disparities in income, and feminist movements. He shared in his first interview, “The students asked a lot about Hillary Clinton, and many come from single-parent households due to divorce.” Comics, however, overtly present dominant perspectives on gender through visual and written text. Dan’s task required students to take a well-known text (comics) and analyze the presentation of women and gender within the text. His student Fatima told me in an interview, “this unit helped me really think about the times we live in because we can have a woman running for president, but still have someone who harasses her for being a woman as an opponent through the media and win.” Gender is very abstract, and some would even argue it is socially constructed, but students took on the task of evaluating how it is presented and what that means for them if that premise holds true. Fatima also asked, “Can my mom be my hero, if comic book depictions of women are true?” This pondering shows how students were working through their understanding of gender and how it is presented in media, which the task challenged them to do.

Rick worked to problematize the ways culture is often thought to be cut and dry. Similar to Dan, Rick wanted to demystify a topic that students have encountered, but expand the notion by studying examples through culturally relevant text. In Rick’s case his task asked students to adopt aspects of the mentor text in order to accomplish the task of creating a spoken-word poem. The text gave students various examples of urban writers using words as a means of social justice, and students were expected to do the same. Rick related in his first interview, “I have a very diverse class and my students come from various walks of life. … This is their chance to educate and correct the wrongs.” A student named Samantha said in her interview, “This spoken word gave
me a chance to explore what it means to be Nigerian and educate readers that it does not include having to dress in tribal clothes and hunting animals.”

Through these units, it is clear that teachers of culturally relevant writing create tasks that force students to critically reflect upon their lives and what they have accepted to be true, as well as on the preconceptions held by those in the society in which they live. All the tasks had an open-ended nature that allowed students to engage in recognizing injustices with topics like race and culture, and to begin thinking of ways to resolve injustices through various avenues of activism.

**Implementing Tasks that Encourage Activism**

In one of her latest works, Ladson-Billings (2014) “remixed” her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, introducing a more refined version coined by Paris (2012) called culturally sustaining pedagogy. With the understanding of the abstract nature of culture, Ladson-Billings argues that theory should mirror this appreciation that culture evolves, and “any scholar who believes that she has arrived and the work is finished does not understand the nature and meaning of scholarship” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 82). One major development of transitioning from culturally relevant pedagogy to culturally sustaining pedagogy is the understanding that we should go beyond simply identifying issues and to promoting action to address systems of oppression. The activities designed by all three participants urged students to think beyond merely acknowledging a problem and living with it.

Evan’s task of asking students to walk the school brought the broad issue of social action down to the smaller scale of the students’ school. By allowing students to walk the school and identify issues within it, engage in dialogue about the issues, and present this information in written form to the school, students gained an understanding of justice when it comes to resources and what they need to get an education. This series of mini-steps served as preparation for
students for the bigger task of dealing with issues like social justice, but also introduced them to the process of social action through petitions. Students wrote pieces serving as petitions for change in their school. Evan also introduced the songs as petitions for justice.

Dan’s assignment allowed students to reimagine alternative forms of comics that bring gender equality to the forefront for depiction. His students came to understand that one way to bring justice through media was to create a counter-narrative in which equality is served through broadened depictions. Dan asserted in the third interview, “In this new comic their mom can be a hero and not have to be half-dressed ... or more than one Black man can be in a comic at a time.” Students were given the opportunity to rewrite (or redraw) reality.

Rick’s assignment provided a platform to educate the public through the written word. Once students gained an understanding about the cultures in which they exist, their spoken words served as a means to heal and educate the public on what it means to be part of that culture. Mallory spoke about the purpose of her spoken word in her interview and said, “My spoken word is to pay homage to my parents. They got pregnant young and didn’t have support. They quit high school, even though they had basketball scholarships for college, to work to raise me. I want people to know why I play basketball. I want to make it all worth it.” Students took up the task of writing spoken word in workshop and a final project to educate their peers on issues that are not easily understood. Spoken word shows students that they can take up activism through the art of writing and performing.

The writing activities within these units all asked students to take up a form of social activism to deepen community involvement and their own understanding of themselves. The writing pieces informed readers of the critical perspective students formed after studying the mentor texts and completing the activities.
Designing Assessments for Healing

Ladson-Billings (2014) asserts that the purpose of CRP is more than students hitting targets or performing well on standardized tests; it is about growth. This means that academic success can be measured with the use of final assessments, though they may vary from traditional constructs. Final assessments should mirror this sentiment. Each assessment and method of feedback in the teachers’ units were designed to create space for student growth and measured beyond a quantified score. Each teacher worked to reframe assessments that were culturally sustaining through their writing unit assessments. Rick’s appreciative feedback and Evan’s rubric formats both created a space in which students were free of quantified scores and were challenged to extend their learning. Dan’s use of holistic grading valued individual growth, rather than reinforcing the right/wrong binary.

Evan’s rubric for the final assessment stripped all quantities from the assessment and instead assigned students “phases” of writing, while Rick’s appreciative feedback platform assigned no grade, and all members were equal contributors in issuing feedback to students. By designing assessment and feedback methods this way, these assignments were free from the pressure of grades until both the teacher and students agreed on the process (Wilson, 2017). Much of what schools do, and have done in the past, equates assessment with ranking systems through quantified scores; however, rubrics and appreciative feedback provide students with guidance from others and room to self-assess without gauging success based on a “good” or “bad” score. Students were able to reimagine assessments and move past negative experiences of the past. Rick’s student Nathan said, “I like how Mr. C does appreciative feedback because I still feel good afterward. I am used to teachers marking my paper up and [being] given a grade on top.” These
methods aim to undo the practice of scoring that overpowers the need for improvement afterward, and are adaptive to the students in the classroom.

Dan sought to help create a healing space from previous notions of grading through his approach of using holistic grading. He worked to grade students based on their progress as a writer from the beginning of the year to a specific point, as opposed to comparing students text to one another, or providing an all-inclusive rubric. Dan related in his third interview, “Students set academic goals for themselves, which I hold them to, and that’s how I piece together their grade.” Through what students expressed that they wanted to achieve, Dan’s knowledge of his students, and a review of their work over time, scores for each individual student were derived. This holistic way of grading relied heavily on written feedback and the conversations Dan had with his students. This shifts emphasis onto students growing their intention and craft. Consequently, the relationship between Dan and students is ever-growing through conversations. Students no longer have to worry about teachers making assumptions about their intent and writing in prescriptive feedback, but now can reimagine a relationship between teacher and students that puts their goals at the forefront.

Assessments influence teaching (Wilson, 2017). In order for students to heal from previous punitive assessment experiences, they must be presented with an alternative way of grading that focuses on creating, collecting, and reviewing artifacts that demonstrate growth, as opposed to using a predetermined rubric as the sole method for assessment. The goal should be to grow writers in the safe space teachers have worked hard to create and bring them together for a collective community to stimulate change.
CHAPTER V: Teachers Looking Inward to Design Assessments and Issue Feedback

My analysis of culturally relevant writing pedagogies with three teacher participants over the course of one unit of study revealed numerous ways that culturally relevant pedagogy is being applied in the field of writing. The findings in this chapter explore the impact of personal experiences on each teacher’s methods of feedback and/or assessment design. I acknowledge that by beginning with the personal experiences of participants, the generalizability of practices can seemingly be diminished; however, in order to truly discuss or engage in emancipatory teaching practices, one must critically reflect on his or her experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The epiphanies each individual derived from such reflection has the potential to drive much of what goes on in their classroom because teachers teach through their own inwardness (Howard, 2003). Howard (2003) proposed further that teachers project, whether consciously, or subconsciously, the essence of their soul upon their students, as well as their given subject, and their way of interacting. Personal lives and experiences thus shape professional instructional choices. Whitney (2009) claims, “As in life personal and professional concerns are not only mixed, but are bound together, aspects of the same single stream” (p.240). Personal experiences from teachers drive professional decisions in the classroom.

When considering how reliant culturally relevant pedagogy is on viewing students as a whole in order to allow them to interrogate the world around them, one can also assume that the teacher must also engage in the practices students are encouraged to carry out to ensure authenticity and trust between the teacher and the participant. With the teacher participants in this study, this process was often not spoken of explicitly, but intermittently referenced throughout all the interviews whenever the “why” behind instructional choices was posed. In the
first section, “Assessing and Issuing Feedback through Inwardness,” I seek to examine the ways in which teachers discuss how past experiences drives them to take on culturally relevant pedagogy in the manner in which they do, particularly in the writing assessments designed and feedback issued. Drawing from Howard’s (2003) argument, I refer to the reflection and impact of past on present as “assessing through inwardness.” The teacher participants and I each considered some essential questions about what may, or may not, be required of a culturally relevant teacher—experientially in their personal lives, professional lives, and, in this case more specifically, writing.

The second section is entitled "Task and Assessment Design.” I focus on the process the three participants engaged in to choose the topic and audience of the final assessment for the unit. I explore why culturally relevant pedagogy covets a place not only in their instruction, but in the assessments that follow. The teachers and I again considered essential questions about culturally relevant pedagogy writing assessments, including how assessment can be used for liberatory purposes.

Finally, in the section entitled “Cultivating Pedagogies of Healing in the Writing Classroom,” I spotlight the innovative methods of issuing feedback adopted by the participants that are outside the realm of commonly discussed feedback methods. These examples spotlight the ways culturally relevant pedagogy can expand, and even transcend, traditional, imagined ways of assessment to promote academic success. In addition, these examples of alternative feedback methods work to sustain the diversity of students through the conversations that occur between teacher and apprentice around student writing, and formative and summative assessment. In each of the three cases, a primary reason for these alternative feedback methods
stemmed from teachers’ inwardness—critical reflection on their lived experiences and personal stories.

The Importance of Critical Reflection for Culturally Relevant Teaching

All three teachers looked inward through critical reflection to design culturally relevant writing tasks and assessments. Although what goes on in the minds and hearts of teachers drives their instructional behaviors, understandings of “reflective teaching” generally refer to teacher inquiry in regard to instructionally oriented behavior, and have very little to do with what is going through the mind or heart of the teacher at the time. The notion of reflective teaching has been interpreted in various ways. This section will review some ways in which the term “reflection” has been embodied, define the purpose of critical reflection, and explain how teacher engagement in critical reflection impact the construction of assessments, or the process of issuing feedback.

Webster’s dictionary defines the term reflection as “serious thought or considerations made,” which makes sense in the field of teaching. Teachers put serious thought into their everyday practices in planning for each day (Clark, 1984). In its simplicity, this definition captures the understanding that reflective teaching revolves around the thoughtfulness of teachers in regard to their teaching practice. They work to reflect on things like how well something worked in the classroom, how students responded, and what the logical next steps are in the curriculum. One of the earlier definitions of teacher reflection comes from Dewey (1933), when he characterizes reflection as the active, persistent and “thoughtful consideration of any belief, principle, or supposed form of knowledge, taking into account the grounds that sustain it, and the further outcome toward which it is disposed” (p.9). This definition has been extended, and even refined by other researchers. Lambright (1995) claims that the purpose of reflection is
to broaden the understanding of issues, beliefs, values, and opinions. The intent behind reflection should be to initiate dialogue that elicits voice, centered around rigorous thinking about the meaning behind things. This definition extends the considerations Dewey (1933) writes of by repositioning reflection as a space to interrogate truths. Many other definitions exist in regard to reflective teaching, but what they all have in common is the analytical thought challenging the reality of teaching practice. Some definitions are more general in nature than others, such as the above two. It is assumed by others that genuine reflective thinking can only originate from a deep examination of the “why” driving the teaching practice.

Often in research and teaching the terms “reflection” and “critical reflection” are used interchangeably. However, critical reflection demands much more than a thought or consideration. Critical reflection is another level of reflection beyond what one might or might not cover in other forms of reflection (e.g., a diary or journal). Eraut (1994) explains that sometimes action is just “too hot” for us to consciously engage in during the moment of reflection. In other words, reflective teaching might not occur in the moment during teaching practice; rather, it may occur later on in the day, or that night, etc. Critical reflection is ongoing and oriented to larger systemic issues than the classroom practices of the teacher (e.g., racism and policy). My reference is to critical reflection because teachers have voluntarily chosen to venture into their past to explain their present. They are seeking to understand how systemic and personal forces have intertwined to inform their classroom decision-making.

Mezirow (1981) argues that critical reflection can appropriately be categorized as an access point and assessment of presuppositions. This reflection challenges all forces contributing to teaching and learning, and creates a bridge from what we thought we knew to what our students actually need. When one examines his/her own personal thoughts of who s/he,
is in terms of one’s beliefs, identity, and values, this can be deemed as critical reflection (Wilson 2002). Self-reflection is beneficial for the purpose of working things through for oneself, and it is paramount to the restorative action of psychoanalysis (Lewis 2000). When we examine how we support, or agree with our particular identities within social systems (e.g. teacher, student, parent, nurse, doctor, etc.), this critical reflection prompts us toward discovery of how these identities influence our behaviors (Wong 2016). I seek to examine the implications of critical reflection on culturally relevant teaching, and the feedback practice, along with choices of assessments in writing units.

How do culturally relevant teachers come to be? A common belief about culturally relevant teaching, or teaching in general, is that certain teachers have an affinity for it; however, much of the work that occurs before a teacher can even stand before students and teach happens internally. Howard (2003) asserts that it is important for teachers who seek to adopt culturally relevant ideals to be challenged, through critical reflection, to interrogate their individual beliefs, values, traditions, and positionality in relation to the students before they can engage in facilitating learning. Engaging in the practice of exploring and expanding identity helps teachers to understand the journey students will be perpetually engaged in, while it challenges teachers to build and shift values for teaching based on their realizations. When teachers engage in inwardness—when teachers reveal who they are through instruction—and teach this inwardness to their students, it can have positive and negative implications on a classroom (Palmer, 1998). For example, the inwardness teachers project can subscribe to a deficit model of teaching that contributes to the underachievement of minority students; however, inwardness can also push educators to develop, tweak, critique, and extend teaching practices. I assert that the teachers in this study have engaged in extensive critical reflection to build their understandings
of culture and its relationship to practices in the classroom. Through the personal and professional mobility they have experienced, each has come to understand more about themselves, and to translate these understandings into teaching practices within their culturally relevant classrooms. Evan’s story includes going to Arizona and learning about himself through books. He attributes to this experience his motivation to create assessments that revolve around abstracts from text rooted in culture, along with feedback that relies on references to other text. Rick’s story includes being raised Italian and finding out later that he was actually Polish. This experience showed him how boundless culture is, and drove him to create assessments in which students interrogate the topic. Dan found out much about himself through the books he read in the library. This experience fueled his decision to critique racial and gender representation within comics.

Evan: Literacy Is a Tool for Self-Exploration

Both in the past and present, schools have been havens in which racial and gender socialization occur (Thorne, 1993, p. 22). Within society, they function as sites for developing knowledge regarding values and norms (Loewen, 1995, pp. 43-51; Spring, 1994, p. 16). However, Evan came to the realization early in life that teachers are not the sole purveyors of information within educational institutions, when it came to formulating his racial identity of being African-American. In an interview, he recounted his experience of moving and learning about the power of books:

[In] sixth grade, we moved to Arizona. And at the time, I think it was a 1 percent Black population. So I went there and I had no one there who looked like me, who could connect to my experience. And so … one day, I went to the library and … there was this small section with all the African-American books. I think I pretty much read through
each of the books in that section. … I realized that the teachers weren’t going to give it to me, so I had to go somewhere else to get that. And I think those books made me want to keep learning and reading throughout that process.

Evan’s personal experience of moving from a predominantly Black school on the West Side of Chicago to Arizona, which he described as a drastic demographic switch, forced him to acknowledge his racial otherness. His assertion that “the teachers weren’t going to give” him any understanding of his African-American culture and identity encouraged him to explore and learn about himself through text. Evan’s experience in finding his understanding of being African-American through books encouraged him to push various types of text about culture, youth, race, etc., within his instructional practice. This aspiration to develop his racial identity and social group membership is quite typical of an adolescent (Erikson, 1968); however, the way in which he uses this experience to inform his teaching practices helps to show the importance of critical reflection of educators prior to and during engagement in the work of teaching. At that moment, Evan begins to address his understanding of the complexities that surround the issues of culture, ethnicity, and race (Howard, 2003) when he continues his story:

I realized it more in Arizona because … I didn’t have people who looked like me, so I didn’t realize how, as a student, you have to go and … find books that are available that connect to you.

Evan is acknowledging that, as a student, he came to the realization that culture is not something that is always accessed in schools; it is something that he, as a student, had to seek to understand and shape himself.

Though the experience of Evan seeking his understanding of race outside of school is what proponents of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining
pedagogies (Paris, 2012) hope to address, he used this experience to help him become “the teacher that [he] wished [he] had when [he] was in school.” Now, he introduces his students to themselves through exposure to carefully selected texts. This practice is one promoted by Ladson-Billings (1995) who states that, “[culturally relevant teaching] helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). In order to truly understand the inequities of schooling, and know that he has to affirm his students in the classroom, Evan had to go through the experience first of feeling the otherness, disconnection, and the need to take ownership of one’s journey to know oneself.

This reflection process Evan engaged in should be a constant practice—as he is always growing as an individual and shaping who he is (Howard, 2003). This journey of using this continuous reflection to shape teaching practices is evident when he states, “I thought that culturally relevant teaching was [that] if I had Black students in front of me, I [would] need to teach, like, all Black text, Black authors, this, this, that, and the other.” He continued to relate, “But then last year during student teaching, and even more so this year, I realized that culturally relevant teaching changes based on the students.” This shift in understanding that connecting academic expectations to students’ being embodies the argument posed by Paris (2012) when introducing the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy. Culturally sustaining pedagogy promotes the premise that educators should “seek to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 93). The experience of reading about being African-American led Evan to believe that students, at least, need to see themselves in text. However, through further reflection in the midst of teaching, he came to understand the necessity of sustaining this exposure and growth of identity,
while still exposing students to the dominant culture, too (Paris, 2012). Now he relates, “This year, with teaching third grade, I have a lot more books and action figures, because that’s a part of their culture as well; so they need that. What they watch on TV, the things they play with, are as much a part of their culture as their ethnic identity.” The phrase “this year” signals that the literature he exposes students to is dependent on the students he has. The students’ exposure is not just limited to their individual culture or preferences, but a plethora of materials as a reflection of the collective group in class.

Implications for assessment and feedback methods.

These experiences with literacy and schooling inform how Evan plans writing assignments to assess writing. In another interview, Evan described his feedback and assessment methods as “unorthodox.” He shapes his assessments around what the students need that “may not fit the confines of the school.” For example, he assigns essays and pictures as assessment forms. Evan states, “Not all students are the best at writing essays—some are better at pictures, or they can do a story, but they remember and retell better than they can create. By giving students diverse assessments that come in various forms, supporting them as they progress through different stages in writing, and assessing from where they are, students are allowed more opportunities to be successful while still engaging in the same work. This expenditure of effort stems from Evan’s own experiences in schooling.

Evan’s move from Chicago to Arizona as an adolescent confined him to a context in which he did not have the opportunity to learn about his culture other than through literature. He took the initiative to go to the library to read authors like Walter Dean Myers and Jacqueline Woodson. Now, he works to create spaces in which students have opportunities to get to know all aspects of their culture (youth, race, etc.) In the final follow-up interview, Evan stated:
Kids don’t read books the same way that I was drawn to books. Everyone likes a good story. Their culture is more of youth culture that needs to be nourished because, at the very least, families talk about being Black more than they do about being a kid in the 21st century. They don’t have … that privilege or tool. But their culture does incorporate music. I try to find music that does tell narratives or at least let that be a vehicle to get to the text. What they love has power.

Similar to Evan’s belief, Munce and Fraser (2012) report that African-American students’ interest in core subjects (math, science, etc.) “has decreased significantly over time; it is now lower than that of any other ethnic group, and is expected to remain low in coming years” (p. 67). The love for literature and narratives, though, is timeless, regardless of the form in which narratives are presented. Evan explains that what students value now as literature (blogs, music, etc.) is very different than what he valued because all he had was books and gospel music, due to his conservative background. He asserts that their literature has just as much power as any other more traditional text. This observation is confirmed by Gardner (1999) who considers that being able to decipher any of these sources of literature requires intelligence, because intelligence is “a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (Gardner, 1999, pp. 33–34). In his assessments, Evan uses literature that is relevant to students to draw them into learning in a way they understand—music. More specifically, Evan uses the hip-hop genre.

Evan recounted using songs like “One Man Can Change the World” by Big Sean and “Wings” by Macklemore as assessments tool to measure students’ understandings about the world around them, their culture, and differences between them. He has taken writing that
students have turned in and chosen an aligning song that serves as a mentor text to introduce how
students can enrich their writing. He stated in the second interview:

I had a student in my previous school who was very broad with his writing, using phrases
like “and stuff happened,” or referring to people not by name, but saying “somebody.” I
needed them to hone in on one story and not be so vague, so I referred them to the song
“Neighbors.” This song was an isolated incident in which J.Cole talks about the police
busting in his studio and raiding it solely off a wrongful call from a neighbor. His story
was also about injustice, and by having him go home and listen to it, he had a mentor text
he valued at his fingertips.

Of course, it took knowledge of music on Evan’s part to recommend this song, but he was able to
choose a song that aligned with both the topic and revision he had to offer his student. Evan
claims that “music provides wide realm of exemplar text that often tells better stories for
students.” Expanding the notion of expressing of text through music offers an increasingly large
number of valuable texts that can be used as resources for students. Sometimes J.Cole or Tupac
can say it better than I can.” Vygotsky states that “human activities take place in cultural
context, [and] are mediated by language” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 191). Hip-hop is a
highly popular music genre among urban students, and can be described as a culture in, and of
itself (Emdin, 2010). Students’ experiences with the hip-hop culture, which was often banned
from classrooms in the past, are being embraced by some culturally relevant teachers today, who
invite students to bring all of themselves into the classroom, that teachers and students may learn
and grow together. Some teachers have incorporated the lyrical texts and presentation into their
instruction. The influence of hip-hop culture is often manifested in the ways in which urban
students dance, talk, dress, and even in the mannerisms they use (Adjpong, 2015). Evan, like
many others experimented with “bringing hip-hop culture into urban classrooms, and not only incorporating it into curricula, but also incorporating the culture into the ways in which he interacted with his students” (Adjpong, 2015 p.68). In his third interview he questioned, “Which would be easier: for me to write on my student’s paper ‘Be more specific,’ and they don’t understand what isn’t specific in the story, and they still don’t have an example; or [to] give them a song like J.Cole’s ‘Neighbors’ that they already listen to, that chronicles someone's story from start to finish?” In the classroom, it is true that learners are often dependent upon others who have acquired more experience, to instruct them using practices that promote safety for learners and comfortability with the content. Evan states that he feels an obligation, as a Black man, to teach his students in the most relatable ways. He goes on to say in the fifth interview, sharing his rationale for using alternative text:

One, it's important for them to know that their way of seeing and understanding the world is valuable. They need to know that the stuff they like, … like hip-hop, has meaning. At the same time it gives me a platform to teach them things they may not take up other places in the classroom. I just assume I may be the only one to give them this stuff, not as a deficit model, but as a Black educator.

The meaning in hip-hop and the value Evan sees in everything students produce appears through the way he issues feedback in the classroom. Gebhart (1980) asserts that feedback, in fact, can almost be considered the base of writing because it is what allows a window into the reader's interpretation and the writer's intention. Through the feedback that Evan provides for his students, he is able to understand the intentions and messages students have while they are writing themselves into the world. He also adds that he is able to allow them to heal. In the first interview, Evan proposed that, “Above all, the words I say I think of really carefully, because not
only am I helping them perfect their words for themselves, I am helping them heal from the wrongs they have suffered. I am healing from the wrongs I have suffered with them.”

Researchers throughout the literary field seek to show and validate the importance of voice. Voice can manifest itself as narrative—the telling of one’s story (Nye, 1997). Two major examples of Evan’s inwardness were his proposed effort to promote healing, and the incorporation of his beliefs about assessments in his rubrics. Providing formative written feedback to the students during the planning phase was instrumental for him in pushing his students to extend their thinking and writing.

Tall Tale Rubrics

Andrade (1997) defines a rubrics as “a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work, or ‘what counts’ (for example terms like purpose, organization, voice, and mechanics are often what count in a piece of writing)” (p.1); it also articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor. Evan has worked to remix this concept of a rubric to show what he, as an educator, deems to “count” in writing, and the levels of quality that matter through his tall tale rubric. As described in the last chapter, his version of a tall tale rubric was based on a West African tradition, using “griot,” “rememberer,” and “storyteller,” rather than numeric quantifiers, as shown in the following figure (see Figure 16).
Limited research has been devoted to the study and development of authentic qualitative methods that are based in oral traditions, but Evan sought to explore the many different and valuable ways a student can contribute to a story through this rubric. Evan, in conversation with his students, deemed that what “counts” in writing this particular piece as “story flow” (how a story reads and moves from scene to scene), “building background” (how the writer educates the reader of what they are talking about), and “originality” (how new is this story outside the realm of mentor texts and the text the teacher has created for them).

The term “story flow” was derived from the hip-hop term “flow,” which references hip-hop freestyle. Through freestyle, a rapper uses their ability to convey ideas seamlessly through the words they say. In the second interview, Evan pointed out, “When a rapper raps and has a
flow, they are not stopping, nor do they need assistance; they are doing it all on their own and they don’t stop. It flows like water.” This term could allude to organization and transition, but it expresses these features of writing in language that students understand. Using hip-hop as a means to communicate with students is just “keeping it real” in a way they understand (Hill, 2013, p. 76). Evan claims, “Assessments should not be a secret held by [the] teacher, but something everyone in the room values.” With the notion of value in mind, the “background information” section of his rubric spotlights the power of the writer to educate the reader through their story.

Rosenblatt (1986) asserts that when we write, and when readers read our writing, it is a transaction of information from the intent to the interpretation. This category focuses on the writer's ability to build upon what readers already know, and yet at the same time pushes the imagination of the reader. Evan asserts in the second interview, "Teachers are not keepers of knowledge. I can get educated just like a student can through the stories they write. I am not the all-knowing, so I decided to value their ability to push me on what I know to imagine something bigger.” This could relate to the category of “focus” that might appear in a traditional rubric, but it allows students to write about whatever they want, and gives them license to use their imagination.

The final category in his rubric is “originality.” This builds upon the writer’s ability to educate and push readers, but seeks to explore the student’s ability to break away from the typical story construction, with familiar setting and character structures. Evan expressed in the second interview, “I want to feel like I am on a new adventure [where] I haven't been before. I don’t want to hear about a fairytale princess in a kingdom. That’s played out.” Students’ ability
to imagine the unimagined is a measure which does not often have a place in rubrics and research.

The method Evan used of co-creating a rubric with students can not only improve the caliber of the learning environment and the learning process, but it can also hone the students’ critical abilities, and increase students’ self-governance (Topping, 1998). This also allowed students to take part in the process of grading because they were part of the process of creating it.

**Written Feedback Sticky Notes**

Another form of feedback Evan utilized frequently was written sticky notes. Students were presented with probing questions, given words of encouragement, and, where applicable, a suggestion of a musical text that reinforced the comments that were provided, whether verbally or in written comments. Here is one example of a sticky note taken from the paper of a student who tells a story of John Henry solving the problem of police brutality, in response to an assignment to write about an issue plaguing their community (see Figure 17).

![Sticky note of teacher feedback with recommendations to consider](image)

*Figure 17. Sticky note of teacher feedback with recommendations to consider*
In an interview Evan talked about this student’s writing, saying:

He had trouble really focusing in on one story. He was telling many different stories all at once, so I told him to focus in on the one he wrote the most about, which was the police breaking into people’s houses. This reminded me of the song “Neighbors.” In the song J. cole tells a story from his perspective of the police busting into his studio. I think he can see how to … go from broad to narrow.

Evan went on to say, “I tried to tell him he had three great stories first, because I want him to know it was really good, but I don't want it get lost.” The ways in which hip-hop artists present events, people, and symbols for the purpose of conveying a message parallels more closely to the language and culture of youth today (Aldridge, 2005).

Evan never claimed to be an expert, so he presented his feedback in multiple forms to make it accessible to the children. He used these sticky notes throughout the entire writing process. Students then had a section or the room to listen to clean versions of the songs suggested to them, or a parent was notified and they allowed students to listen to the song at home. By encouraging students to have hip-hop in the classroom, they are offered another avenue to hear feedback, but also are presented with the idea what they listen to has power.

**Inwardness and Healing**

The academic, social, and emotional struggles experienced by African American and Latino minority students in schools across the U.S. have been well-documented. A gross over-representation of these students exists in special-needs subgroups (Ford & Harris, 1999), while
they are underrepresented in categories such as gifted, honors, and advanced placement. A probing push back to this statistical finding should be, “Are these students being reached through instruction?” I propose that issuing feedback can be a healing practice for both the teacher and student, particularly if—as in Evan’s case—it is heavily based on the inwardness of the teacher, and works to bridge the students of color are low-performing and thus placed in special needs settings. Evan recounted that much of his experience of being in Arizona was negative, except the moment in which he saw himself in books he read by authors like Walter Dean Myers. This pushed him toward developing an intense passion for text, and it also provided a catalyst for him to search out text that was applicable to students. He explained in the third interview, “I want [my students] to get what I am saying, and through … giving them songs in feedback, I am showing them themselves through music.” Hip-hop music is a very popular genre of music among urban students. The decision to use music was derived from Evan’s personal experience of seeing himself in text, including in lyrics, and wanting to pass it on to students.

Gay (2000) asserts that the power of caring is a foundational hallmark of culturally relevant teaching. Evan worked to research music he already knew as well as new music to continuously provide students with various forms of the same feedback. The element of care played a big role in the creation of the rubric used for assessment, too. By designing the new rubric, Evan's class was 99 percent African-American, and by designing a new rubric, he worked to thwart the punitive numerical nature of rubrics and offer students stages based in West African history. With the use of his rubric, students’ writing is no longer reduced to numbers, but is assessed based on their stages of development, which provided just enough comfort for them to stay for a while, then press ahead toward the next stage. Evan seeks to maintain students’ individuality as writers, and help them to articulate their emotions. He related, “Everything isn’t
about winning or losing. I wish I had known that when I was a kid.” Evan reflected on his childhood experience of school during several interviews, and through confronting the “why” behind his practice he has been “granted some peace,” as he would say.

**Dan: Attacking Gender Through Comic Strips**

Like Evan, Dan relied on texts to learn about who he was as a person. He and Evan were both in contexts where they were racially and ethnically minoritized. Dan found refuge in comic books. Comics invite students into an alternate reality in which they are challenged to think more deeply about who they want to be and what they want reality to look like. This escapism is often one of the main reasons that people engage with comics (Nell, 1988; Radway, 1991). The need to escape is often fueled by social realities and obstacles. Comics are also a form that is problematic in many ways, including being sexist and/or racist. Dan took this into account when creating his unit. His task and assessment encouraged students to interrogate existing norms regarding concepts such as gender and race, and compose in multiple modes. Within Dan’s unit, his sixth grade students examined gender norms presented in comic strips. Dan, along with others who are open to using a variety of alternate texts engage their students with texts such as comics and graphic novels. When used correctly, as with other forms of text, these student-centered texts can be powerful tools for reading and writing instruction. Students are usually familiar with the characters, and eager to read about their exploits. Students can be encouraged to become more skillful at making critical judgments based on what they read; and create their own texts that interrogate and examine complicated concepts (Frey & Fischer, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Berkowitz & Packer, 2001). Through reading comics presented in narrative forms, teachers and students can reflect upon their own personal experiences as they relate to standing up for one’s rights and the rights of others, and showing compassion toward
others. Brent Wilson (2005) concurs with others about the advantage of welcoming the use of comics as one way to obscure the boundaries that stand between visual culture, the school setting, and the profession of contemporary studio artists.

In this section I offer grounds for experimentation with the use of comics in the classroom as a culturally relevant tool. Dan Schwarz (2002) claims that since most of us are dependent upon, and enamored by the visual culture in which we live, educators and researcher can capitalize upon the use and study of graphic novels with middle and high school students in the classroom. Graphic novels include fiction and nonfiction text presented along with pictures—“comics” in book format (Schwarz, 2002). The multifaceted form suggests that how stories are read and told can be reimagined. Though comics are growing in popularity as a form of literacy, Dan has more of a personal connection to this genre due to his experience of being the only Mexican-American student in a predominantly white school. In his first interview he divulged:

I was surrounded by all white students because … I went to school in the suburbs. I went to the library one day and picked up a book and saw a character that wasn’t white. He was like me. I didn’t know characters could be like me.

Like Evan, Dan relied on texts to learn about who he was as a Mexican-American adolescent. He went on to say in the first interview, “I learned things like it was okay to be Mexican and not speak Spanish.” He often felt that he was not a true Mexican because he never gained fluency in his heritage language.

Dan and Evan were both placed in contexts where they were racially and ethnically minoritized—Evan as an African-American surrounded by whites, and Dan as a Mexican American surrounded by whites. Dan’s initial experiences of seeing characters like him in books
sparked his passion for reading; however, his taste shifted towards exactly what Schwarz (2002) describes as the “superhero stories of youth” (p.1). A lot of his choice to shift his interest had to do with the vulnerability he felt as a child. He explained in the fourth interview:

I didn’t realize the potential [for] how comics can inhabit this position of literature … until I started reading them, and a lot of the times what I really loved about it was just how poetic these stories could be, and they were done in such short, like twenty-page comics, but in that twenty-page story, you got a lot of character development. I guess the metaphor of the superhero and the symbolism behind it all really appeals to me because I’m a sucker for symbolism or a good metaphor, and the metaphor of superheroes seems like a timeless one in terms of believing ourselves to be the person comparing ourselves to them.

Dan found refuge in comic books from the otherness he felt. He confessed in the second interview, "I just was left out. I mean I had some friends, but nobody I could talk to about what it means to be Mexican or even a minority.” He wrestled with feelings of isolation because he did not quite into any of the white majority circles of students at the school, and he felt that he had lost an important part of his identity (i.e., his language) at home. Comics provided him with a space to negotiate and heal from being an outsider. The possibility of “everyone being a superhero” really caught his eye because he could be the superhero he read about and somehow save the day. Williams (2008) compares a graphic novel to a seemingly overpowering artwork, or an exceptional writing piece, and boast of its potential to create a feeling of compassion, or empathy, and human bonding among students. The stories that the protagonist endures, and comics witness, allow readers to step into the eyes of another to see things from their point of
view. This empathy is something Dan felt allowed him to know others and allow others to know him. “Me reading and trying to create comics helped others know me.”

Although Dan found refuge and healing in comics, he also problematized them. In the second interview he said, “I do know that comics were great for me because they did have male heros I could see myself as … [but] women … were half-dressed and beautiful.” In this statement Dan acknowledges that, of the comics he knew, many of the heroes were men and the role women played was that of half-dressed beauties. Smith (1985) asserts that gender in the media has been of interest to researchers because of the inherent social implications. The social implications mentioned relate to gender inequality in representation. Quite often, the problems that exist in our society are reflected in our literature. Gender stereotypes and misrepresentations are underlying problems that are evident in the content of many superhero comics; however, steps taken to improve their quality, through the use of teaching approaches adopted by teachers who are enthused by critical pedagogy, with alternate references from graphic novels can speak to some of the inequalities that are present in comics (Weida, 2011). In his unit, Dan sought to explore the gender roles and inequality that exist within comic strips. He explored the way characters dress, speak, and act. He reiterated the idea that, “[My students] rarely see women in comics, and if they do they are half-naked.” Exploring the issue of representation in comics expands the notion of culture to include gender as its own dimension students are boxed into that they can push back on. A major aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy is students’ education in social consciousness for the purpose of emancipation and social justice. All these issues were considered in his unit as talking points to explore and topics to address through writing.

Implications on Assessment and Feedback
In the third interview, Dan reasoned, “Not everyone is good at … writing, so I decided that my final assessment could be a comic or an essay, and they got to annotate comics as well as write.” Dan allowed students to present their understanding of gender roles in comics, through a comic strip they designed, telling a story familiar to them, or they could recreate a comic. A third option was to write an essay on the inequalities presented in the comic. He claimed to “appeal to even the analytical thinkers.” Robbins (2002) purports that in American mainstream superhero comics, women readers are rare, women characters are rare, and working women artists can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Dan stated, “I just want all my students to see themselves as they are in comics, and as artists.” In the final project, he allowed students to write themselves into the world, either through an essay or through a comic strip; however, these were not the only forms of assessments he designed that were a reflection of his passions and understandings. He also allowed students to annotate pictures as formative assessments, reasoning that “not all students are good at writing, but annotating a picture from a comic allows them to label visual representations. … They can work to identify emotions.” This decision to include other forms of media allows students who have trouble reading the words to receive the message in another form.

Both Dan and Evan looked inward to design their culturally relevant writing units and assessments. Both participants reflected on learning about themselves through text. However, Dan contemplated further by admitting, “I never really thought I was the typical learner … I mean, I believe that people flourish in different ways in aspects of literacy. Some people can write better; others can speak better, while some people are better at things like identifying what’s asked. I try to give people opportunity because that’s how I learn.” Dan recounts that he was not always the typical student who was able to write about what he was asked to do, or
conform to the one-size-fits-all model of schooling; so he seeks to provide opportunities for students to have multiple ways of showing knowledge through the use of various types of assessments. Students are presented with a variety of tasks, not only for assessment, but for application in life. Two major examples of Dan’s inwardness and belief in multimodal assessments and products were included in his formative picture annotation activities and his quick-writes, which were done on an online platform.

**Picture Annotation**

Throughout the course of Dan’s comic unit, student work was assessed using picture annotation, which was described earlier (see Chapter 4). Students selected a picture and jotted down notes about various aspects shown in the picture (e.g., characterization, voice). In describing the freedom he provided his students, Dan explained in his third interview, “It’s like you are able to choose whatever picture you wanted; you are able to choose a skill that we have worked on and that you would like to spotlight.” Dan considers both the picture and the text of equal value, and because of that, he assesses students’ ability to annotate a picture because a picture can “say a million things.” By marking these millions of things that students could annotate in the margin, a dialogue between reader and author is formed (Schilit, 1998). In the image of the work of one focal student (see Figure 16), an annotation prompted the student to make an inference about the severity of war, based on seeing a soldier lying on the ground, screaming in agony. This inference verifies that the child has acknowledged emotions and attached it to their understanding of war in the picture. Using pictures to draw inferences can be a less daunting task for some students who may find it difficult to apply this skill to text presented as stories, articles, etc.

**Quick-Write**
Dan also engaged his students in writing tasks called quick-writes (described earlier) in order to capture their thoughts about gender and gender roles throughout the unit as a means of assessment. Quick-write are prompts that are presented in question format; they are teacher-directed, and can be easily embedded into the writing curriculum. Students’ responses can be written on a notecard or sticky note and shared only with the teacher, or responses can be shared with peers. (Readence et al., 2001). This strategy is often used at the beginning or end of class time, and referred to as admit- or exit slips (Brozo & Simpson, 2003). Students were allowed to piece together their understanding of “being a woman” based on the comic unit provided or personal experiences. Dan stated in his third interview, “Gender is such a fluid term in today’s society. Girls don’t have to just play with Barbies and women don’t have to be depicted in short skirts in the comics. We have women role models like Michelle Obama or Hillary Clinton that show an alternative reality.” Emad (2006) concludes that very few women fall into a heroine role in comics, other than, perhaps, Wonder Woman, who is often depicted scantily dressed in ultra-tight clothing. These comic images of women often reflect the values of the nation. By allowing student to push back on the image of women and men in their comments, Dan allowed students to push back on society. A major tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is allowing students the space and opportunity for equity and social justice (Howard, 2003). Dan was forced to examine his own learning about his culture, and his ideas about gender were exposed and interrogated. “I read comics and saw how men saved women and how women encouraged men,” he shared. “I didn’t really pay much attention to what they looked like until later. I find it problematic now and want my students to recognize these stereotypes.” The following figure shows that quick-write of one of Dan’s students on womanhood.
Inwardness Driving Text Selection

Culturally relevant texts have several commonalities in feature. They are selected by teachers who know their students well, and know that their students can relate to culture, characters, setting, and experiences presented in the text because of familiarity or for enlightenment (Freeman & Freeman, 2003). Students can readily tap into their own cultural experiences and background knowledge to make meaning (Goodman, 1996; Perez, 2004; Smith, 2006). Growing up, Dan was able to see himself in text and learn about gender through text. This helped to shape his love for text, and influenced his investment in using it as a tool for teaching culture. His affinity for the use of comics as a tool, in particular, was fueled by his
desire to interrogate the construct of gender with his students because he had never really thought about it in that manner before.

**Rick: Culture is Fluid**

Fluidity of culture is important to Rick. For example, Rick’s ethnic heritage has always been important to him (even though what he always believed turned out to not be true, which was disconcerting for him). Now he is married to someone from a different culture and trying to raise bicultural and multilingual children. Rick feels like he has spent a lot of time in his life trying to cross borders. He designed a unit that encourages his students to grapple with the complexity and fluidity of culture, too. Rick came to the understanding that culture is dynamic and not something that can be mastered, which inspired him to introduce instructional practices centered around students demonstrating who they are. This understanding stemmed from what he saw as an "atypical” experience while growing up. He told a story in the first interview:

I was born thinking I was Italian. My family celebrated like we were, with dinners and gatherings. I was Italian. The smells of Italian gravy would fill my apartment on Sundays. Italian culture dictated everything in my home—from my last name to our religious practices as Catholics, and even holiday traditions.

Rick discovered through an ancestry test that he is not, in fact, Italian, but Polish. This left him skeptical as to where he belongs or who he really is—Polish by test, or Italian by cultural practice? Paris (2012) Within the realm of culturally sustaining pedagogy, multiculturalism and multilingualism are clearly supported for teachers and students, in both perspective and practice. Understanding that culture is dynamic caused Rick to question his culturally sustaining or relevant pedagogy. He confessed, "I think it's something that I really grapple with. And, you know, I recognize that my positionality on the surface is white male, but I also think of myself as
Italian.” After considering himself for so long as a bonafide member of one culture, Rick felt that he should have experienced the world in a certain manner prescribed to him by stereotypes—which he did. However, through further reflection in the interview he concluded, "I talked about culture being fluid and sort of beyond these tightly contained boundaries; I think I’ve had an experience in the world that has been very atypical.” Rick’s personal experience, which he recognized as being outside the norm, of being raised Italian while actually being Polish helped him to understand what culture means. This deeper level of self-knowledge and acknowledgment of his worldview can have a major impact on students' conceptions of self (Howard, 2010). Fluidity of culture is important to Rick because of his experience with his own heritage, but also because of his experience with his daughter.

Rick’s daughter taught him a very important lesson regarding the fluidity of culture. He related in the second interview:

My wife is Mexican. As a father of two children, I fear that society’s pressure to enact whiteness may smother my children’s Mexican heritage, including Spanish, their first language.

Rick questioned at length that if he is married to his wife, a Mexican woman, does that make him part of the culture? He has learned Spanish for his family, too. Being married to someone from a different culture, and trying to raise bicultural and multilingual kids, forces him to move out of his white culture, in which he was raised Italian but is really Polish, to embrace Mexican heritage. Edward Tylor (1871) defined culture as “including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p. 101). Rick belongs to so many contexts that he finds himself border-crossing through both his professional and personal life. He asserted in the second interview:
I shift from being Mexican, Italian, and Polish at home to understanding the various
cultures at school like race, language, and youth culture. I try to get to know [my
students] through assignments, you know, because I can’t walk the community like I used
to. I learn my students through writing.

Rick’s avenue into understanding his students was through their writing. The cultures he travels
within are webs of meaning encoded through symbols of spoken and written language (Geertz,
1999). He affirmed that it is hard to juggle and learn about cultures in the same way, so he uses
writing and assessments as tools for learning.

**Implications on Assessment and Feedback**

Rick designed a unit that encouraged his students to grapple with the complexity and
fluidity of culture through the creation of spoken word. Students were assigned a number of
small writing pieces in which they were forced to grapple with the communities of culture they
were part of. In one writing activity they used note cards to record their ideas to the prompt: “so
much depends upon…” Rick and his students were able to explore what students find
circumstantial in their life. This and similar assignments led up to a larger spoken-word piece,
after students heard and read other texts that interrogated culture, and were given the opportunity
to interrogate their own culture. Todorov and Mack (1986) claim that race explains writing, or
the other way around, so the notion of culture cannot be divorced from it. Though Rick admitted
that he cannot walk the block of students like he used to, using writing as a tool to learn culture,
too, can reveal very good information for him to have in crossing borders. The literature created
reveals the reality of students. Rick surmised, “I think spoken word has a rhythm you can’t
capture in any other form. The rhythm says just as much as the words they say.” Rick allowed
students to project their understanding of culture through rhythm and words.
Rick expressed the sentiment, “I like to flip culture on its side as many times as possible. I had dreadlocks, I have a split-culture family, and I was raised one culture thinking I was something else. I want to give students the chance to really understand it.” Because he believes that culture is so complex, he allowed students many opportunities to change and develop their understanding of culture through short exercises that led up to the larger performance, in which the flow of the spoken word poem was just as important as the words contained in it. Below is a picture of the exercise students took part in (see Figure 19).

*Figure 19. Student response to teacher provided prompt: “So much depends upon …”*
Appreciative Feedback

"I never really had many people ever read my writing for the purpose of the experience and enjoyment," Rick related during an interview. Appreciative feedback for students provided by both the teacher and peers is prioritized in Rick’s writing assessments. As mentioned earlier, some feedback is presented in a forum through the use of media. Rick asserted in the first interview, “You learn a lot by saying how you experience something because the author knows [whether] their intent was conveyed. I am not there to judge, but share how I took up the text.” Student preferences measured by the use of surveys revealed that students are favorable toward receiving feedback from peers, but they also expressed the desire to receive teacher feedback about their ideas, and ways to improve writing content and language clarity (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991; Oladejo, 1993; Saito, 1994). Most students are used to the typical feedback of the teacher’s insistence that all errors are corrected; however, Rick worked to reverse this notion by offering an alternative to punitive feedback, and creating sources of feedback dedicated to allowing students a chance to understand and discuss their experiences with a text. The following figure contains a spoken-word poem by Samantha. (see Figure 20).
Rick  April 27, 2017 at 11:34 AM

Your poem unfolds and becomes a beautiful, rich roadmap to your ancestry and I was so moved by the level of depth and description in your poem. I love the way the poem infuses English and the language of your people (Igbo...thanks for letting me know). To steal your words, your poem is a "perfect harmony between native and English tongue". This move really adds a lot of layers of meaning.

Additionally, you not only incorporate the cultural practices of Nigerians, but give us glimpses into the history of your people, and I especially appreciate the ways in which you call out people who cannot distinguish between the countries of Africa and the larger continent.

This poem is an impressive achievement and you are a gifted poet. Continue to find spaces to explore the layers of your identity, both in school and beyond.

Reply

Figure 20 Samantha’s spoken word poem
Conclusion

Much of what and how we teach students is based on our identities as teachers. It is necessary for teachers to interrogate their past in order to understand their present teaching practices and choices of assessment. Assessments must be student-centered and culturally relevant in order to fully extract from students new ideas and learning, and to help them apply their learning to their everyday lives. The otherness, dilemmas, and experiences that Dan, Rick, and Evan shared drove the types of assessments and feedback they built into their units for the purpose of empowering students and inviting them to engage in emancipatory practices. The experiences of all three participants also helped them to empathize with their students, and build trust within their classrooms by exposing their own struggles in learning about, accepting, and even celebrating their cultures. In this section it was revealed:

Reflection is a never-ending process. Rick emphasizes through his story that culture is fluid and nothing concrete, so we will always engage in the work of reflecting on the issue. Schon (1987) says that reflection is a process that cannot be divorced from action, and discourse should occur about the necessity for reflection to be followed up by action. Reflection should occur continuously for culturally relevant teachers, and for teachers who are not. Because culturally relevant teachers want students to embrace the same reflective practices, teachers must first demonstrate this for students. Evan and Dan were able to acknowledge that books were their gateway to understanding culture, and they allow students the same opportunity to learn about their culture through music and
comics. Rick’s struggles with culture drive him to facilitate a space in which students
begin to think about culture outside of what they have been taught about it (i.e., that
culture transcends the ethnic group to which an individual belongs). Being a culturally
relevant teacher makes one more prone to make mistakes in the classroom because you are
learning daily, along with the students. Also, being able to reflect on your past makes it
easier to reflect in your present reality, both professionally and personally.

Reflection illuminating injustices. Political consciousness is promoted among
students in school through culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings (1994). With this
in mind, teachers should be knowledgeable about the implications of their actions on the
students and others in the school setting. Rick was able to build a sense of empathy for
students who juggle identities in more than one context, and for that he allows them the
opportunity to explore themselves through talk. All of the teacher participants spoke of an
experience of injustice in their inwardness, which was re-purposed to help them grow as
an educator and connect with their students. Rick says, "I tell them stories to show them
that I, too, have experienced some of the same things they are going through. Reflection
is used to constantly member check political and social implications that can potentially
surface in a classroom.

Experiences driving assessments and social justice. All three participants aimed
to tap into the complex nature of culture in their assessment design. The teaching
profession, generally, is not concerned with equity and access on the average day. This
reflective process and inwardness help drive the design of the assessment as the teacher
works to make it equitable in every way possible. Dan and Evan neglect to mention
teachers as the source of the epiphanies about their culture, but they each strive to be the
one to lead students through this process. Evan says, “I am the teacher I wish I had in school.” Teachers use assessments as a means of establishing relevancy and to facilitate activism.

Through the activities provided, students were encouraged to take risks, and were rewarded without the fear of failure. Culture is not stagnant, but fluid and responsive. Culturally relevant writing teachers allow their students, and even encourage them, to interrogate societal norms, and respond using multimodal and multidimensional assessments that are focused upon the needs, interests, and development stages of their students.
CHAPTER VI: CULTIVATING PEDAGOGIES OF HEALING IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Research has revealed that one function of culturally relevant pedagogy is effective engagement of young students. Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995) early works indicated domains of effective, culturally relevant teaching that include academic success (which is multi-dimensional); cultural competence (awareness on one’s culture and respect for the culture of others); and sociopolitical consciousness (being aware of, and maximizing one’s position in society); as ingredients of effective teaching. However, these tenets alone do not always address the trauma, emotions, hopes, and fears of students rooted in obstacles they face within the school and outside the school. Teachers, in turn, can counter these obstacles, injustices and disparities that students face and facilitate healing spaces. One way to do this is by introducing students to writing as a “pedagogy of healing”—a means of dismantling cultural norms that have been accepted (Baker-Bell et al., 2017). I propose that these three teacher participants have designed writing units that aim to enact this healing of students through the implementation of their units and assessment practices. This chapter will discuss obstacles students faced in the form of extracurricular and school-based traumas, and the healing nature of these teachers’ classrooms and units. These obstacles are not unique to urban students; rather, they are obstacles that are potentially faced by all youth, who need opportunities for emancipation and healing. I will intentionally incorporate the voices of one focal student from each classroom to explain the implications of the unit on them.
Evan: Helping Students Heal from Trauma through Community Building and Social Activism

“Did you hear about the rose that grew from the crack in the concrete?”
—Tupac Amaru Shakur

During several interviews conducted with Evan, I gained much information about the school and the community that he and his students are a part of. Many of the students that walk the hallways of Finley Elementary do so after walking the disinvested streets of the Chicago community of Roebuck. Founded in 1849 by Dutch immigrants for the purpose of agrarian life, Roebuck was a community of immigrants. This peaceful agrarian community was altered with the migration of Blacks from the South seeking gainful employment when the Pullman Company came to the South Side of the city. The once agrarian community became known for the occurrence of a race riot between Black residents who were a part of the Chicago Housing Authorities project when they tried to integrate the Lynnwood Park housing project and neighborhood. Black residents were met with violence from gangs of white residents, and they found little support or protection from the police.

According to Evan, this experience is echoed again today for many children who walk the halls of Finley Elementary, and the streets of the Roebuck community. They have access to the land, but their land has been divested and their schools and community resources are underfunded and under attack. However, many students are those roses that Tupac spoke about in his poem, “The Rose that Grew from Concrete.” Evan asserts that Black children in Roebuck have “proven nature’s laws wrong” in learning to survive in spite of the challenges that negatively impact the community. The children walk through gang territories, some family and some foreign. Students have learned early on how to navigate the streets and how to heed the warning that comes over the intercom on a warm fall day, “Head home quick because it’s warm
outside”—knowing that these are code words within their community that mean, *find your way home before harm finds you*. These are the stories, experiences, and languages that students carry on their shoulders, right beneath the straps of their backpacks, on their way to their classroom. These are the experiences and stories that they are try to suppress in their minds while they focus on the material being presented to them. They try not to worry, and to be a kid while they are in school, but the cries of the community seep in through spaces in the window casements. They are told that this holding onto is healing, but as the wise Maya Angelou stated, “There is no better agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.” In encouraging students to let go, Evan had the students compose these pieces about solving the problems in their community to unload the burden of their untold stories. In doing so he took up the sentiments of Tupac Shakur in saying, “Long live the rose that grew from concrete, when no one else even cared!”

Students within Evan’s classroom faced hardships—both personal and academic—in school. The teachers at Finley are forced to work with limited resources, or to try and “squeeze blood from a turnip,” in the most dire situations. Evan believes that low teacher morale and a high incidence of student discipline problems depress the climate of the school. He also related that students have fears associated with safety due to violence in the street; student rates for absenteeism and mobility are high, with students transferring in and out throughout the year; and homework completion is a problem in the middle and upper grades. Others issues that impact student achievement nationwide include high absenteeism among teachers, difficulty is recruiting exceptional teachers, and the absence of family stability (Ascher, 1991; US Department of Education, 1996). Due to legislation like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), districts have created sanctions and awards around the performance on these assessments (Dee & Jacob,
McCarthey (2008) attributes the sanction and reward system to the fact that “under NCLB states are required to comply with an agreement to (a) have academic content standards, and (b) administer standards-based assessments in reading-language arts and mathematics in grades 3 through 8” (p. 465).

Evan laments, “Schools are still following a one-size-fits-all model, even though our students come to us in many forms, and functioning on at varying levels.” Urban schools today are faced with a major challenge of how to improve the academic achievement of minority students (Tanori et al., 2002). Research indicates that there is an obvious gap, or divide that exists between the performance of African-American and Hispanic students in comparison to the performance of Caucasians and Asian students that cannot be attributed to racial difference (Kober, 2001; Miller, 1999).

“Grieve. so that you can be free to feel something else.”

—Nayyirah Waheed

In touring the school, when you enter the building at Finley, the first thing you see are the metal detectors. Evan explains that while it seems as though these detectors have not been used in years, they still serve as a reminder to the fact that some view school in impoverished minority neighborhoods as a training ground for prison. Past the metal detectors you find two security guards who serve as greeters for the school, as well as guardians and first responders. Students’ first interaction with the school gives them the idea that this is not a place that is focused so much on their learning and growth as it is on their complacency in your dehumanization. Evan clarifies that, while this certainly is not the message of all members of the staff, one cannot help but take into consideration the use of numbers as opposed to names within the school. He is passionate about what he feels is the misuse of data. He relates that visitors to the building are bombarded with data on the walls about student test scores and attendance percentages.
numbers displayed in charts and graphs on walls are what these students are reduced to, not only at Roebuck Elementary, but at schools across the country. Students are often limited to being recognized and taught based on their test scores. Evan made it clear in conversations about his school and education in general that often “creative and innovative lesson plans go out the window because they are not considered as reliable approaches for helping students to reach their goals for the test.” Exposure to fine arts is sporadic, or almost nonexistent, because of cuts in funding positions, or an unfilled position staffed by a substitute. Contrary to Evan’s idea of the worthiness of a story, at Finley he believes that the value of a story is often missed or overlooked because its quality is narrowed down to whether or not it can be used to help students meet the standards spelled out in the Common Core. According to Evan, “it is as if the students and their work are pieces of meat being inspected and valued to determine whether they should be sent out to market”. Evan paints a picture for the researcher that the act of standardized testing students is a prime example. “Students sit with their score, waiting to pass to the next grade (in this case, pass inspection) … the next grade is the market and the meat is the students’ scores.”

**Designing Healing Spaces in the Classroom for Emancipation**

Students who enter Evan’s classroom can see a potentially different story. He attempts to create a “magical kingdom” where their ideas are valued and various forms of self-expression is allowed, and even encouraged. The dragons of self-doubt, fear, and worthlessness that impede progress are caged and silenced through the liberating activities that he engages them in. This is the safe space that he works hard to create and maintain, where students can heal and express themselves without fear of being made to feel small or insignificant.

In his instructional practices, Evan sought out texts that are reflective of issues within society at large, as well as those that hit close to home for his students. He is often seen moving
around the classroom, interacting with students, sharing laughs, and allowing them to voice themselves and their experiences in their writing. He related that once, while he was teaching, a student asked if she could write the “f-word” in her journal entry, and he responded, “As long as it is used within context that is fine.” These small moments allow his students to let go and share the untold stories that are within them. They are also encouraged to voice their emotions, such as fear, triumph, anger, happiness, nervousness in their writing. While students still know that they are in school and that they are not completely free, his classroom space, he believes, affords them a breath of freedom.

*Fall in your ways, so you can crumble
Fall in your ways, so you can sleep at night
Fall in your ways, so you can wake up and rise*

—Solange, “Rise”

When I asked Evan about his classroom design, he spoke about how it took him an entire quarter to set up the classroom space and build a community that embodied healing. He spoke of how, when he first grouped the students, he knew that he was going to be moving kids and desks around until he found the right feel, almost as if trying to perfect the feng shui of his room, he said jokingly. He talked about how, within his room, he valued true apologies and not simply the heartless “sorry”s that students often give. He mentioned how he takes time to model and have students practice offering genuine apologies and seeking resolution when a wrong has occurred. “At the beginning of the year this was difficult because many students were used to either being harmed or causing harm, instead of just looking at what happened, talking about it, and moving on.” He took a stand from the beginning of the year to rid bullying from the classroom spaces, and made a conscious effort to be more supportive of students who had been wronged. In his classroom there is a Connect 4 apology anchor chart. There are quotations by the singer Solange about one’s right to be mad, and it is evident in Evan’s interactions with students that he aims to
create a healing and serene space where growth can occur. Evan believed that the classroom space had not completely taken the healing form he aimed to create, but was satisfied with where the room and students were within their healing processes.

**Decolonizing Schooling for Healing Purposes**

According to Evan, healing is necessary for his students because it is part of a decolonization process of dismantling norms that perpetuate inequalities and disparities to heal. Learning to heal and take care of oneself is a skill that all humans need in order to be happy and healthy beings. Society too often tells us to simply deal with the pain, or hide our experience of pain from others and to carry on, not realizing the incalculable harm that we cause to ourselves and others by doing so. Evan’s father is a clinical psychologist, and he has spoken several times about the lack of mental health services within Black communities. He believes his classroom can serve as a space for healing and mental health to the greatest extent possible, as he learns to respond to his students’ needs, and as students learn to interact with their teacher and with one another.

**Addressing Trauma through the Encouragement of Social Action**

It is often thought that students engaging in practices like recycling or writing letters is social action; however, Evan works to create a new understanding of activism through his unit. In his class social action was encouraged through a project in which students solve community problems. The students took part in the very first stage of activism, according to Evan, which was “building awareness.” Evan’s students must survive the streets of their community, and to survive schooling, in general, he designed his unit on John Henry as a strong example of culturally relevant teaching that strives toward healing. His tall tale unit allowed students the opportunity to release the untold stories within them that have caused them agony. Some
students used the lens of DC Comics’ Cyborg, and as they brought John Henry back from the
dead they rebuilt him with enhancements, so he could take on evil forces looking to destroy the
Earth. Evan pushed this students to provide more detail as to what attachments or technological
advances they would add to John Henry, and what specific problem John Henry was to solve.
This form of assessment-through-feedback excited the students as they returned to revise their
pieces, which will be elaborated on further in the next section.

The assignment of first identifying issues in the neighborhood prompted some students
to share safety concerns about getting to school and back home safely. They talked about what
they saw, heard, or experienced daily that made them feel afraid, such as other students bullying
them or trying to start a fight, older teenagers or grownups standing on the corners (students
described them as “gang bangers”), the sound of shots fired, or speeding cars. Evan explained to
the students that these concerns can be called issues, and listed the most commonly mentioned
ones on the board, (see Figure 2 in Chapter 4). Students then talked about what they could do to
solve these problems. This brainstorming activity helped prepare the students for the writing
activities and assessment that followed.

**Assessing Students to Build Cultural Competence**

Evan read a few pieces in which students addressed the issue of police brutality in the
United States in writing about John Henry. He decided to use the lyrics of 21 Savage’s “Nothing
New” as a mentor text for them to consider as they composed their pieces. Before playing the
song, he gave students a brief mini-lesson on the history of the N-word and how African-
Americans, through hip-hop, have reimagined the word. He understood that the use of the N-
word was a part of his students’ culture, and decided not to teach against it, or tell them how to
speak. Instead, he used the opportunity to tell them about the varied use of the word before it appeared in the lyrics.

*Breakin’ down my people, tryna kill our faith and hope*

*They killed Martin Luther King and all he did was spoke*

*Welcome to the hood yeah where niggas dyin’ at*

*Same place where the best chicken gettin’ fried at*

*Same place where the police killin’, tellin’ lies at*

Evan directed the class’s attention back to how the song began, and encouraged them to incorporate a familiar structure within their stories.

*They thought I only rapped about murder and pistols*

*I’m tryna feed my family, I ain’t being political*

*You ain’t giving out money then they look at you pitiful*

*You make a couple million, niggas greedy, they envy you*

In the introduction of the song, Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James are speaking about racism in the United States. What follows their talk is 21 Savage’s critique of the same issue. As students returned to revise their stories, Evan conferenced and spoke individually with them in regard to how they could improve their pieces by adding details that would further hook the reader to their text.

*you are an altar of stars.*

*remember this.*

*always.*

*do not ever forget this.*

—Nayyirah Waheed

One of the most important parts of Evan’s assessment and feedback practices is that they value where each individual is in their process without making the student feel as if their work or
skills are any less valuable than another’s. His aim was to create a rubric that, first of all, allowed students to feel as though their story and writing process had value, and, secondly, to reinforce the idea that the skills that they had were necessary within their community. While distributing the rubric he spoke to the African roots of the griot, which aided students in acquiring knowledge about their own cultural background and history. His feedback involved using hip-hop, which made students see their cultural practices as valued within the classroom space.

Often, young people are led by their elders to believe that the music they listen to is inappropriate, or bad, and that they do not know anything about good music. However, Evan listened to lyrics his students liked and were familiar with. He even sang or hummed to aid in his selection of the music he would use to offer feedback to students. He mentioned that prior to listening to and speaking with students, he would have been deprived of the experience of listening to 21 Savage, whose work he presented in the second day of instruction within this unit through the song “Nothing New.”

I argue that there is healing in being given back what was yours, or even being allowed to use the skills and cultural practices you bring with you to school. There is healing in having a teacher who is willing to engage with the students’ cultural practices alongside them. Evan calls these “healing bridges” that allow us to enter into the worlds or dreams of our students, which we invite them to bring into the classroom.

One of the most important aspects of Evan’s assessment—to him—was that his rubric was non-punitive and non-quantitative. The rubric that he curated had the potential to allow students to remain valued and whole as they left their one-on-one conferences and walked away with their feedback. He gave them goals to aspire to—a rememberer, storyteller, and griot—
rather than a numerical scale. “A student who may struggle with composing a story, and simply build onto the original John Henry story would be considered a rememberer,” Evan stated. He noted that being able to remember is a valuable skill to have, and that this skill is no less important than the ability to tell a story, but simply a different skill.

For example, one student wrote a piece about how John Henry’s child grew up and became a strong steel driving man, just like his father. Although this story did not add to the story, or address an issue in the community, it showed that this particular student, a diverse learner, brought valuable skills to the assignment which could not be diminished in comparison to the skills of others. “A student who puts together a new story but does not always stay true to the character of John Henry and does not give insight to his adjustment to his new life would be considered a storyteller,” Evan explained. In contrast, in order for a student to be a griot they must be able to hone their literary skill to place John Henry in a new context and with a new issue and elaborate on how he grapples with that new context and issue.

The students in Evan’s class were excited to have someone read their writing and to see the finished product in print, which encouraged their sense of value. They were eager to write and share what that had composed with anyone willing to discuss their writing. Evan believes that this project helped them to release the agony of one of the many untold stories inside of them.

**Focal Student: Carter**

“Last year was one of the worst years for me. Inside and outside of school. My teachers didn’t help me and I want to be a good student and my mom struggled with our money. I wanted to lessen her load.”

——Carter, interview

Carter was selected by Evan, with his consent, because he felt that Carter’s story gave the most authentic depiction of his everyday life being meshed into the assigned task. Carter was
described by Evan as a “unique fifth grader” because he was really in tune with the world around him. He is being raised in a single-parent home, and he has a younger brother in preschool whom he picks up and walks home with from school. Evan said in his fifth interview that Carter often “reflects on the experiences that he takes in daily.” When asked about his experiences in the past, Carter mentioned how last year was one of his worst years academically and personally. He spoke about how last year he struggled in his classes and how his grades were the lowest they had been since he started school. Carter described last year by saying, “I just could not get it right with my reading and grades. It was hard, and I did it myself.” The students in Evan’s class were asked to write about an obstacle they faced recently. Carter recounted the obstacle he had faced, and how he felt no teacher cared or wanted to support him. This image was taken from a reflection Carter wrote to Evan when he was originally brainstorming issues for his writing piece. Here is an excerpt from his writing. (see Figure 21).

Figure 21. Excerpt of student’s writing about an obstacle faced
Carter explained that his issues at school carried over into his home life. In Figure 21, he describes how his mother was often called in to school (“every five minutes”) for the negative things he had done, resulting in negative consequences (getting “whoopins,” or whippings). Carter did not elaborate on why he thought he struggled with his grades, or whether his teacher provided the additional help he needed.

When questioned about other details outside of school that made last year challenging, he spoke about how there were days last year when he would return home from school and find that there was no food in the house to eat. He stated that when he got home and saw that there was no food his mother would go out to get food for him and his brother while they waited. He said, "My mom did the best she could to help us, but money was hard for her. We did the best we could.” In our conversation, Carter brought together experiences of academic hardship, poverty, and obstacles in the neighborhood. These experiences and stories were stored inside of Carter for a while, but his participation in this unit was the first chance he had inside of school to speak about obstacles without worrying about getting in trouble or being judged. Carter explained, “This is the first time someone wanted to know about how it was at home and my mom and stuff. A lot of kids have the same problem, so I wasn’t by myself.” By having authentic conversations about problems and struggles, Evan was able to build a community of safety for the students to not only tell their stories, but also to think of solutions.

For the John Henry project, Carter chose to write about stopping gang violence (see Figure 22). Carter explained, “The biggest issue in my neighborhood is violence. People get shot because of gangs and I am scared it could be me.” The following passage is a sample of how John Henry was resurrected and tried to solve the problem of neighborhood violence. Figure 22 is an excerpt taken from Carter’s story.
NBC news reports that Roebuck is one of the top ten most dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago with a murder rate of 42.9 per 100,000 people. Carter’s story centered around the Latin Kings and Gangster Disciples, two rival gangs that often retaliated against each other with gun violence. In his story, John Henry rose from the grave, joined the Gangster Disciples, and formed a cease-fire agreement between the gangs. Carter’s version of John Henry worked to create peace among gangs in the neighborhood. He revealed his hope to “just be able to walk home in peace and play with his friends.” In his story, the character John Henry broke free from
images promoting racial inferiority of Blacks (Baker Bell et al. 2017). John Henry was thus positioned as the hero in his text.

**Evan:** How did John Henry learn about gang violence?

**Carter:** He heard it on the news.

**Evan:** You know, you mentioned blue or red. What gang were you trying to write about? I don’t know of any gangs with blue and red. What gangs are you talking about? The local gangs are the Gangster Disciples and Latin Kings.

**Carter:** …

**Evan:** Let me tell you about some local gangs and their purpose and you decide.

During this conversation Evan and Carter are sitting around the table discussing gangs. Evan starts with the issue that Carter has chosen, which is gang violence, and works to build around
his ideas with his feedback. He poses questions either to seek clarity—"What gangs were you trying to write about?"—or push thinking—“Let me tell you about some local gangs and their purpose and you decide.” Evan begins and ends with student voice, allowing Carter to write about what he wants and make informed decisions free from judgement. Evan says, “My job wasn’t to sit there and tell him gangs are bad and decide for him what he can write about. I was there to help.” Evan worked as a facilitator by presenting Carter with information that helped him make a decision to improve his story to include what gangs were made for, to the names of local gangs and their colors. This method of assessment was necessary in Evan’s thinking. He explained, “Carter needs to heal and confront the situation that dictates whether or not he can go outside or feel safe. That’s why I chose to questions him for clarity.” Evan trusts Carter as an expert at authoring his story and his neighborhood. In my interview with Carter about the feedback from his teacher, I asked him how he felt about it. Carter replied by saying, “I am a storyteller because I depend on gangs and stuff I know already. Mr. Taylor and I talked about how I can become a griot after our conference. Evan probed Carter with questions for clarity to stay true to his vision, and scored Carter’s writing with him using the rubric he designed. A sticky note was left on Carter’s paper reading "How did John Henry learn about gang violence? How did John Henry resurrect himself?" A reminder is left at the bottom of the note that reads: “both sides join and talk to protect their community.”

Evan wrote down the goal Carter had to keep at the forefront of the conversation. He stepped outside of the curriculum and standards to educate Carter about his neighborhood and what he knew about gangs.

Carter did a think-aloud based on the feedback given during the conference. Refer to Figure 23 below:
Carter acknowledged that his story was based heavily on his walk home from school. Evan presented Carter with probing questions to help him think about adding details to make his story more “realistic” and “plausible” for readers. Carter said, "I knew I needed to use actual gangs and not make-believe ones because the ones in my neighborhood ain’t make-believe.”
The diagram Evan drew served as a reminder for everything he and Carter talked about, so when Carter went back to his seat he could make the necessary revisions. During the interview, Carter explained, “I decided to use the Latin Kings and Gangster Disciples because they are the real gangs in the neighborhood. I knew that because of the colors Mr. Taylor talked about.” He was able to add realistic details from the probing questions and diagrams supplied by Evan. Evan suggested, “This method was great for Carter because he forgets to give details sometimes, or his writing may sound vague to the reader; I wanted him to add clarity.”

I asked Carter about if and how the unit allowed him to heal, and he spoke about being able to write about things (e.g., topics, issues, encounters) that he had been told in the past were not appropriate for school. He stated, “That’s why I liked writing the story so much. I got to bring my problems into the classroom and solve them. Teachers are always telling us what to write.” With this response, Carter gave a nod to the prescriptive nature writing instruction can assume, at times, with pre-selected topics. Evan also noted how Carter, and many other students, showed a change in their demeanor toward reading and writing during the John Henry unit. He observed, “It was like the students paid more attention and efforts in class increased.” Evan spoke to how the unit gave students the opportunity to be relieved of the agony of the untold stories within them. The healing power of the unit helped students to muster the courage to release what some of them had bottled up inside for a long time.

Many students, like Carter, healed in various ways. Carter’s healed began when he was given voice to speak about his community through an honest lens and not one that was limited by the teacher, or the school’s opinion of what is or is not school-appropriate. Carter’s healing continued after the unit in his willingness to have open conversations about his life with Evan.
Evan believed that his relationship with Carter and many other students grew because of this unit and the space it gave students to heal.

**Dan: Healing through Comic Creation**

“Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.”

—Kofi Annan

Often times, education is equated with being the key to progress in society, socially and financially for individuals and their family. However, family and community are necessary for the progress of one’s education. As with Evan’s class, the students in Dan’s classroom faced multiple obstacles that impact school learning. However, his students wrestled with different types of problems. Dan affirmed in the fifth interview, “The obstacles my students face are related to what’s going on in their home life. … A lot of my students don’t have the benefits of going home to a nuclear family. Most of them go home to an empty house, and the head of the house is a working single parent. There is a lot of pressure on them to look out for their younger brothers and sisters.”

Dan’s school, Northland, is economically diverse: Students from high-income backgrounds regularly interact with students from low-income backgrounds. Student expectations at Northland are high for everyone. Some of the students face external pressures to be at the top of the class, especially the higher-performing students, who grapple with living up to the expectations that others have set for them. These pressures arise daily, as some students struggle with anxiety when trying to perform to the best of their abilities. “Some of my students get so bent out of shape, and even physically ill when they get a bad grade on a test because they
think they it will stop them from getting into a good high school, or university. That's crazy, man,” Dan related.

Although most students come from the wealthier Northland area, there are also students who come from poorer neighborhoods farther south in the city. According to Dan, the neighborhood in which he works reflects a successful effort in gentrification. In the mid-90s there was a wave of development and investment in the community surrounding the school, which drove up the prices of real estate, and gradually displaced working class African-American families. Dan related that students who travel from outlying areas farther south in the city have access to fewer resources and cultural capital (e.g., museums, plays, trips, private music lessons) than their peers who live in or near Northland. It can be difficult, in some cases, for these students to stay motivated academically because the level of investment in and support of their school success is not communicated to them to the same degree as their wealthier counterparts. It can be a struggle for some to stay on-task and/or sustain the work throughout the day, which is often more rigorous and engaging than the work they received at their former schools (many of them are transfer students).

Focal Student: Fatima

“One's dignity may be assaulted, vandalized, and cruelly mocked, but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered.”

—Michael J. Fox

One student from Dan’s class whom I talked with at length and highlight here is Fatima. Fatima was chosen by Dan because he felt she was one of the only students who chose to relay her ideas via comic illustrations and words. Dan says, "Fatima’s voice is so strong already that I feel like it is time for others to hear her amazing thoughts, too.” Fatima is a twelve-year-old African-American female student in Dan’s “neighborhood” class. She described herself as
quirky, strong, and outspoken because she said she “stands her ground” when needed. In her writing for the unit, Fatima chose to problematize the issue of gender through a hero story comic design shown below. (see Figure 24).

Figure 24. Story comic design created by Dan’s student Fatima

Fatima wrote about a girl who liked to dance and express herself. Her character was very different from the other girls, and was bullied and felt alone. The first hero Fatima introduced
was a friend who stuck up for the main character. This friend encouraged her to stop being friends with people that don’t make her feel good. The next hero introduced was the character's parents—despite a divorce, they were still supportive and believed in her. The comic concluded with all the heroes joining hands and announcing their intention to be the community the character needs. The issues of family relationships and bullying are both ones that many teens face, as mentioned by Dan earlier. Fatima concluded, “This comic mirrors my life. Writing my story as a comic gave me a chance to work through some things.” As with the healing space for students in Evan’s class, this writing activity gave Fatima a space to release issues and create a counter narrative outside of just experiencing an issue with no resolution.

Fatima shared in an interview with me that, “becoming a teenager is hard because you are coming to know yourself, while sometimes being bullied and attacked.” The obstacle she talked about—bullying—is a familiar problem among students of all ages. Dan also talked about the problem of bullying at Northland in an interview when he stated that, “The school has noble intentions, but it struggles in making good on those intentions. Take bullying for instance, which is … a big problem at the school. They haven’t been able to stop it.” He went on to explain that there were structures in place at the school to handle the problem, but this issue can be somewhat fluid, and they have not been able to permanently resolve it. Another student, Rachel, agreed: “They talk about anti-bullying, but they ignore people being tripped in the hall and people being talked about.” Dan spoke about how a newly formed student council has taken up discussions about the ways in which students felt safe or unsafe on the way to and from or at school. Dan said in the fifth interview, “The students themselves acknowledged that there is very little follow-through at the school when they report bullying, and no clear-cut consequences. I don’t know whether it’s to preserve the image of the school, or what.” Dan believed that the issues
students faced at school (e.g., bullying) and the ones they brought from home (e.g., high expectations and lack of time with nuclear families) made it difficult for them to fully heal.

Creating a Context for Healing Through Storytelling

“I tried to offer a space for my students to heal by allowing the problems of their lives to enter the classroom and the conversations we have. Most of my units are structured around class discussions,” Dan told me. His students were encouraged to not only talk about the text in front of them, but also to weave their own experiences into the conversations. During the few years that he has been teaching at Northland he has worked hard to develop the practice of keeping his students’ lived experiences as the focus. To Dan, it is clear that students bring their own cultures, histories, and knowledge into the room, so it is vital to leverage these ways of knowing in order to advance their thinking, and to validate the fact that the students come well-equipped to take up the lessons learned at school outside the classroom as well. He acknowledges that there is a necessity to embrace the humanity of the students, since they are not robots that can be powered on each day once they reach the classroom; allowing them to explore the spectrum of common humanity is the ideal for his classroom. This included talking about the good parts of humanity as well as the bad parts. Some of his students, based on their stories and discussions, were more acquainted with one side than the other. To Dan, there should always be a safe space made in the classroom to listen to these stories.

The Importance of Creating Assessment Choices

Dan’s assessment consisted of three options. Students could 1) create their own comic strip, 2) write a story of a superhero fighting against a real world issue, or 3) discuss how the
student would like to be in the future. The freedom to choose their task also allowed students to select an assessment type that would best suit their individual ways of learning and engaging. Most commonly, teachers expect a product from an assessment, but Dan was also looking for evidence that students were actually exploring their own issues that were important to them. In other words, according to Dan, he was trying to allow a space for students to heal from the realities of our world by giving them the chance to change the narrative about their problems: whether it be struggling with divorce, sexual identity (including gender), or racism. This flexible assessment method gave students the chance to have a voice in fixing these issues or exploring them in a meaningful way, and may ultimately have allowed some of them to heal.

Dan’s feedback to student writing was appreciative in nature, meaning that he highlighted growth and progress with probing questions as opposed to focusing on pushing what he thought the student needed. In addition to giving appreciative feedback, Dan used feedback as a means to connect to students. An example of connecting with his students through feedback can be seen in his response to Fatima as he helped her through her issues and commented on her progress at a writer. He wrote:

Your writing never fails to strike an emotional chord in me. Your story is one that so many people can relate to … we all have those moments where we feel invisible, or left out. Yet it’s the ones who reach their hand out to us that save us more than any superpower. You write in a way that allows one to see you for who you are, there is an unapologetic honesty and sincerity in your words (and pictures!). Blending these elements together made for a powerful story that serves as a reminder how we are never alone, and how we can serve to be there for others in our own lives. Thank you for sharing this
story Fatima. You should know that the world is a better place having a heart like yours in it.

In the case above, Dan used his feedback to express appreciation for Fatima’s ability to conjure emotions in him as a reader. He also told Fatima that readers should be reminded that they are never alone. Dan went on to say that the world is better place because of hearts like Fatima’s. This comment spoke to how Fatima depicted the main character as lonely and addressed Fatima directly, saying that her heart is wanted in the world. Feedback such as this has the potential to address students’ academic work as well as the more overlooked social and emotional aspects of their lives, ultimately allowing them to heal. Dan thought it appropriate to honor the students’ voices, rather than critically examine them. Each student had a voice and an idea that they wanted to introduce that could help solve a problem in the real world. “My feedback was offered to encourage this kind of thinking and this kind of healing instead of critiquing it,” he said.

Fatima did a think-aloud about the feedback Dan gave her to demonstrate how she received it (see Figure 25):
This figure shows that from the feedback Dan provided, Fatima received a lot emotionally and academically. She was able to understand her strengths of clarity and voice in the comic, and she felt a connection to Dan as he openly admitted to feeling alone sometimes. The feedback provided helped Fatima to view herself as a writer in a way that she had not seen herself before. From Dan’s feedback Fatima was able to determine her next steps.

"All the world is so heavy on me for race and gender, so I fight.”

—Fatima, interview
Fatima, according to Dan, was a student who was very passionate about the issues she faced, and understood the power of words and the power of her own voice. During class discussions, she was always one to raise her hand and elevate the conversation to include more reflection. More than this, she was rarely too shy to express her real feelings about an issue, no matter how personal it might be. There were moments in class when Fatima would tear up as she shared about an incident or an aspect of her life that held meaning for her. The passion, sense of safety, and confidence that she exuded in the classroom helped her to really examine her own life and reflect her thoughts and ideas in her writing, as well as in her voice. Dan’s view of Fatima was that she was an active and fierce feminist, who acknowledged the institutional ways in which her race and gender confronted obstacles in our world. She boldly expressed her hopes and frustrations, and negotiated ways to resolve problems or challenges in life. Unfortunately, as an African-American, Fatima is met with stereotypes and misperceptions depicted by the media and accepted by the public (Baker Bell et al., 2017). She described herself in the student interview by saying, “I am outspoken and I am not the way they make Black people look. I can be a hero and Black people can be heroes.” Thus, one obstacle Fatima faced that she felt she could not control was perceptions of her race. Instead, she chose to write about another topic—bullying—that she felt could help any teen anywhere.

In an interview, Fatima told me that in school her obstacles seem to be the "normal" ones involving fitting in and finding real friends. “It is not like when you are younger, and you ask somebody to be your friend. It’s hard. I want to be liked,” she confessed. In her response she uncovered the struggles of many middle school students that are often considered just part of the experience of being a teenager. Fatima admits that she knows she is different from other students because she is very vocal and does not mind taking an opposing stance from her family
or friends, yet at the same time, she wants to be liked. It seems almost like a choice that she
consciously makes daily between speaking her mind and remaining strong in her stances, or just
trying to fit in. Dan admits that the school has not yet found a way to approach bullying for the
purpose of ending it or healing from it, so students like Fatima are left to cope with the issue on
their own.

Dan pointed out earlier in this study, that complications with families are often obstacles
faced by his students. Fatima admitted that in her personal life she struggled with her parents’
divorce. “I'm very close with both of my parents; it still hurts that my parents aren't together. I
wish I could see my dad more than I do now.” Not having her family intact, and sometimes
feeling alone due to a lack of friends were weights that Fatima carried everyday. She spoke
about how men are thought of as being heroes much more than women are, and said that she
considers both her mother and father to be heroes. Her interrogation of the position of women,
along with the personal weights she carried, were able to surface within Dan’s writing unit.

Relating to the piece that I wrote, my heroes, which are everyday people, are heroes
because they have always been there to accept and love me for who I am. That is all I
needed.

—Fatima, interview

Dan’s unit allowed Fatima the opportunity to reimagine who a hero could be to fit her
reality. She thinks that heroes are “everyday people” like her mother and father. She described
the superpower these superheroes possess as the ability to love her and accept her because “that
is all [she] needed.” Dan's culturally relevant teaching of writing through his comic unit allowed
students like Fatima to open up in the safe space he has built through the classroom setting; his
use of conventional and nonconventional texts; rich, nonjudgmental conversation; and
assessments that are centered around the growth of individual students.
Rick: Community-Building for the Purpose of Healing

Rick described working at his school very candidly: “Working at this school has been an interesting journey in intersectionality. The students that attend this school represent a diverse student body, and their diversity is expressed in ways that move beyond racial, ethnic, and religious categories.” According to Rick, his students span a continuum in terms of their socioeconomic realities, the neighborhoods they live in, their access to life opportunities, and the labels that are often ascribed to them, such as “gifted” versus “neighborhood.” Some of his students identified across a wide spectrum of sexual orientations, with many identifying as part of the LGBTQ community, and their familial realities were also diverse, and represented an array of living arrangements. Rick described his students are complex, and explained that their identities are shaped by the constellation of factors that inform who they are.

Rick saw his students as no different than the journey of adults, in that “all of us are working towards healing and striving to be the fullest expression of our individual humanity.” As learners, he proposes that we are all negotiating what it means to be reside within the institution of school, and we are continually negotiating what it means to exist within a shared humanity. Rick preferred not to frame his students as obstacles, because that suggests a deficit-based view of seeing them. As Dan shared, a number of his students are grappling with how to heal from the divorce of their parents; some of his students wrestled with having to split their time between two residences across state lines. Others were coming to terms with their own sexuality and trying to find spaces—both physical and within interpersonal relationships—where they could feel normal. Still others were healing from the disparities of neighborhood funding in Chicago, even as the sidewalks of the Northland school community were adorned with inspirational words like “believe,” “hope,” and “opportunity.” Rick also observed that many of
his students were “healing from the hypocrisy of a school context and student body that should celebrate the diversity it reflects, when in reality it often works to isolate and segregate.”

Both Dan and Rick work in the Northland community. The racial demographics of Northland School are 48 percent white, 28 percent Black, 15 percent Asian, and 6 percent Hispanic. Roughly 73 percent of Northland residents are white-collar workers, with careers in law, medicine, finance, and university settings (CPS, 2016). According the Rick, the neighborhood in which he works reflects a successful gentrification project. In the mid-90s, a wave of development and investment in the community surrounding the school drove up real estate prices. The negative aspect of gentrification is that working-class African-American families are being displaced from the community due to soaring real estate costs.

Rick spoke about the overcrowding, which has been a problem at the school for quite some time. He told about how, after many years of campaigning, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) recently agreed to erect another building, to coincide with the development of a 62-acre parcel of land that connects the Northland neighborhood with Charleston. However, the plan has was met with controversy, since these plans would include closing Norfolk Teaching Academy so that the Northland and Charleston community would have a viable high school option for their children. Opponents see this plan as part of an accelerated effort to gentrify the Northland community and displace African-American students, who make up nearly half (45 percent) of the student population of Northland (CPS, 2016). Rick believed that this reality sets a context for healing along geographic and sociopolitical lines.

**Creating Healing Spaces through Classroom Arrangement**

The school context, in Rick’s opinion, was transactional in nature. He stated in his interview, “After being in my class for a year, many of the students remarked that it’s the first
time they have engaged in any meaningful conversations about identity, race, gender, or sexuality. They feel the space, in both its physical arrangement and student-centered pedagogical orientation, validates them as human beings.” Rick’s initial years at Northland were shaped by his perception that there were many rules sanctioning behavior within the classroom, while students were allowed to roam free in the halls. In his opinion, there was a series of contradictions. The physical arrangement of his classroom—the sofas, pub tables, plants, fabrics, and décor from his international travels—were at first met with resistance by his principal. She was skeptical that such an arrangement would be conducive to learning. Still, she allowed him to proceed, providing some professional leeway. Within two years, she was securing funds so all teachers could mimic the layout of his room, drawing on more flexible classroom seating arrangements. Rick concluded that she saw first-hand how respecting the developmental location of students, and allowing them opportunities to move about the classroom with some autonomy, opened them up intellectually, and socially. It also allowed him to facilitate conversations between individual students and small groups of students in ways that mimicked how you might interact within the comfort of your own home. “I want the space to feel like home for my students,” he said.

**Focal Student: Samantha**

Rick selected Sidney from among his students, with her consent, because he felt Samantha took on a unique voice with translanguaging and assumed a genuine, honest voice when discussing personal issues. Rick says, “She always says she is not a spoken-word artist and she cannot create stories worth reading. I wanted to spotlight her to free her story.” Samantha was thirteen years old at the time of the unit study. Her parents divorced when she was six, and her mother had custody. In terms of healing from such a major life event, Rick related
that Samantha never mentioned it in class, feeling she had conquered that issue as a sixth grader. She lived in the Northland neighborhood, in a high-rise with her mom. Although she made mention of experiencing racism as a Nigerian, those comments were never internalized, nor did they affect her sense of self-worth. Samantha’s particular journey with healing was framed around coming to terms with the deaths of her grandfather (in Nigeria) and cousin (an innocent victim of Chicago street violence). Additionally, she grappled with the changing nature of friendships and peer relationships that went sour because of “typical seventh-grade drama.”

Samantha was an accomplished hiptop dancer, a combination of ballet and hip-hop. Although she was featured in several videos, she never made mention of them or showed them to her teacher. She was embarrassed to open up about her out-of-school practices with her classmates generally because she was worried about how they might receive her. However, after discovering the videos, Rick showed them in class, and after initial reservations, Samantha quickly discovered that her peers responded to her in positive ways that uplifted her. This made her feel more comfortable about sharing aspects of her personal life and setting the stage for increased feelings of confidence, and the ability to merge her two worlds into one.

In her spoken-word poem “Nnae=Brother,” Samantha wrote about her half-brother on her dad’s side. Her poem appears in the figure below (see Figure 26).
Samantha acknowledged the difficulty in maintaining a positive half-sibling relationship when distance and opportunities to interact with one another were few and far between.
Samantha stated, "I need my brother to know that I still love him even if we do not get to see each other.” She also used the poem to discuss her feelings of insecurity that her half-brother would take all the love that her dad had to give to the both of them. This poem allowed Samantha to confront issues of family in a manner that she considered to be "low-stakes.” Through writing this piece, she was working through hurt and fears.

In other compositions, like her spoken-word piece “Untitled,” Samantha wrote about being a native Nigerian, and challenging deficit third-world narratives that have accompanied those native to Africa (see Figure 27).
Rick stated, “I was struck by her maturity in this poem and her refusal to indict those that have negative feelings toward her homeland. Rather, she took full advantage of the opportunity to educate and move people with an emotionally compelling and heartfelt narrative.” Samantha
responded to his feedback by saying, “I never really considered myself to be a poet. I wanted to show people that being Nigerian is more than wearing tribal clothes and hunting animals.”

Through her process with writing this poetry, Samantha claimed her identity in all its glory. She also had moments where she revealed her doubts and insecurities. In the end, poetry allowed her a place to heal by revealing the complexity of the human experience, and the many layers which inform our identity—even as an adolescent girl. When asked about the purpose of her writing, Samantha replied, "I wrote this poem to educate others and to come to terms with my issues with family.” This assignment gave Samantha an opportunity to take the hurt of stereotypes that she has encountered and transform it into a teachable moment for others. Baker-Ball (2017) claims that the distorted images portrayed in the media influences the public’s understandings and attitudes toward Black youth, and how they view themselves. Samantha coped with the pain of these stereotypes in part through her poetry, by describing what it means and does not mean to be Nigerian.

Creating Healing Spaces Through Blogging

Rick worked to transform his feedback beyond typical feedback methods found in classrooms, like rubrics and quantitative scoring. He used a blogging platform to support peer feedback, enhance writing, and, more importantly, to help students heal. Samantha explained to me, “The blog is a safe space in which we can comment on others works with pushes and praises. I like the space because I can get things out of my head and let it become real on [the screen] and get advice.” Rick’s students were invited to a private class blog where they posted their spoken word pieces and gave each other feedback (e.g., compliments, appreciative efforts, suggestions). His intention was to use the blog to inspire students to write, and to practice using feedback from their teacher and peers to improve their writing. He summed it up by saying,
“This blog gave students a platform to release and grow at the same time.” Richardson (2006) suggests a potential advantage of a blog in a writing classroom is its ability to erase the restrictions of school, identity, and life, while still offering possibilities to connect with others outside of the classroom.

The freedom offered through the blog allowed students to engage and heal through conversation, and also allowed Rick to assume a very different position outside of being a teacher. Rick explained, “I am no longer teacher, but an active participant. I feel like I am better suited to that role. I want to help students work through these spaces.” Figure 28 showcases feedback from Rick and a classmate in response to Samantha’s poem “Untitled.”
In his response, Rick commended Samantha for her ability to translanguate between English and Igbo and her ability to show glimpses of history in her piece. He ended his feedback by calling Samantha a “gifted poet.” Similarly, one of Samantha’s classmates told her that she learned so much about her through this piece and commended her on making it evident that Nigeria is her home. In their feedback, both Rick and Samantha’s classmate aimed to spotlight
the strengths of her poem, and also to make personal and experiential connections. Rick thought this contributed to building a community via the blog, a platform that allowed students to assume whatever role they chose to take on in order to work through healing. Samantha explained that the blog was effective because she was able to speak “freely,” and in order to do this everyone must be “equal.”

When I questioned Samantha about Rick’s feedback to her, she responded, “Good feedback makes reference to what you wrote, with very personal praise and ideas for growth for the writers. They tell you how they experienced your text.” I asked her to show me an example of feedback and to think aloud about it (see Figure 29). The figure below is the example shown, and what she said is directed to the feedback with an arrow.
In the same way in which Samantha’s writing piece was personal, she made reference to highlighted elements of feedback that felt personal to her writing. This is important to students because Rick and his students expressed that many people don’t listen to or read what they write, especially for school. Culturally relevant pedagogy views students as unique individuals with cultural knowledge. Rick’s feedback practices were student-centered, informative, varied, interactive, and celebratory of the cultures of his students. His feedback allowed him to connect with his students, while still pushing them to think more critically about craft and content. He

Figure 29. Samantha’s think-aloud about some feedback she received.
challenged his students through his feedback to reflect deeply and use their voices in writing about topics and issues that affect their lives. He encouraged and praised them when they showed courage and honesty to open up and reveal themselves to the reader.

**Conclusion**

Scholars have tried to make connections between writing, trauma, and healing in classroom spaces. Marc Lamont Hill (2009) wrote about the possible transformative and healing powers composing can assume using the term “wounded healing.” He suggested that “through wounded healing, students form a storytelling community in which membership is predicated upon individuals’ ability and willingness to expose their wounds (through storytelling) to the rest of the group (249). Hill (2009) proposed healing through general writing; however, I contend that much of writing research overlooks the potential healing effects of writing assessment and feedback. Students face obstacles rooted in the personal and academic aspects of their lives, and they carry the trauma with them to school and into the classroom. The writing units designed by the teacher-participants in this study have showcased ways in which writing classrooms can become spaces for students to confront their obstacles and trauma, and how feedback can have a healing nature. The units also helped some students to reconceptualize what “effective” feedback to writing can look like. This section will address themes that surfaced across units, teachers, and students.

**Students’ Inwardness as a Force Against Adversities**

Evan stated in his fifth interview, “This is how real schooling should be. Students learn about themselves and the world for the purpose of transforming it.” According to John Dewey (1910), "truly educative" experiences are meaningful, interesting, and awaken curiosity for answers and solutions (p.9). All three units provided students a space to reflect and transform
difficult experiences into genuine learning experiences. These obstacles included: divorce, gang violence, bullying, and cultural prejudice. By confronting these obstacles, students were able to learn about broader economic, social, and political issues. They were able to understand the content in class as well as assess their own goals, values, and fears. For example, in her student interview, Samantha said, "I don’t know if I really would have confronted this issue [of a family relationship] in any other context, or at all.” The unit assignments supported students in solving community problems, problematizing culture through spoken word, and evaluating gender in comics; they provided students with opportunities to critically assess and create new stories, but also to confront issues that often are not invited into the classroom.

Giroux and Simon (1989) suggest that educators should take into account how transactions in students’ everyday lives inform others of their meaning-making process and give substance to their experiences and voices. This idea for critical pedagogy suggested by Giroux and Simon is meaningful for underserved student populations, but is not limited to them. All students come to the classroom with different experiences and obstacles. In conjunction with culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0 (Ladson-Billing, 2014), one goal for educators is to facilitate a space in which students can address injustices and inequalities, and overturn pervasive deficit narratives with ones filled with students’ knowledge about their own and other cultures. However, having students merely identify their issues is not enough; part of social consciousness is providing solutions. Ultimately, this work can help students heal from their pain.

Rick explained in his fifth interview that the types of assignments he provided “allow students to write counter-narratives and write themselves into the world.” His comment gives credence to the understanding amongst students and teachers that the personal is not tested on standardized test, so it often has no real place in the classroom. Fatima says, "We tuck pain
behind smiles because nobody really cares or invites it in the classroom.” The writing units of the participants, though structured in different forms, each provided students with a way to confront issues, promote academic success, and promote positive self-image. By allowing students to be the ones writing solutions, they become problem solvers to bring the unity, peace, and safety that can solve issues from within.

In his fifth interview, Dan articulated, “The [dominant] narratives [about school] typically speak of students being divorced from emotions in order to achieve academic success. The counter-narratives claim that only students who are poor face real issues. The counter-narratives say that there is nothing children can do.” Carter combatted the narratives Dan speaks about by saying, "My narrative makes me strong.” Through classroom communities and the dialogue that occurred in the classroom, students were able to tell their stories for the purpose of healing and becoming more self-aware.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) claims that social consciousness is always necessary to create activism. By allowing Samantha to write a spoken word debunking stereotypes made about her Nigerian culture; encouraging Carter to write about gang violence that plagued his neighborhood; and creating space for Fatima to write about the dismantling of her family structures, the educators in this study allowed students to come to peace by talking about issues, proposing solutions, and addressing the hurt.

The counter-narratives that the students constructed in their writing revealed to their teacher and classmates who they are and how their world works. Some of the dominant narratives told to and about students constrain them. However, their stories worked to remind the writer that they are stronger than they may think. By replacing negative narratives with constructive counter-narratives, students benefit personally, emotionally, and academically.
Teachers modeled ways to overcome challenges, and worked intentionally to do better and honor what each student brings to the classroom and school community. In doing so, these teachers pushed against another dominant narrative in schools—fear of what students cannot do. Instead, they focused on cultivating confidence in what they can do.

Creating Feedback in Meaningful Ways

With the counter-narratives they wrote, students were able to learn about themselves as well as educate others. Another thing students learned from the study of the three units was their preference for and the purpose of feedback. Rick’s student Nathan reasoned, “Feedback methods need to suit the assignment. When you get personal, rubrics shouldn’t be used. But if you do an argument you should use one.” In today’s schooling system, teachers are told that assessments and student success can be accomplished using the right formula. If you administer the right type of test (mirroring standardized test) that hit the right targets (Common Core State Standards) with the right feedback tool (rubric), then students will yield success (Wilson, 2017). Researchers like Culham (2006) believe that this mentality of assessments driving feedback often reduces assessments to copying standardized descriptors onto a student’s paper (e.g., mechanics or organization). However, how do those descriptors promote growth and assist students with the highly personal aspect of writing these students engage in? I suggest that, ultimately, these units helped students formulate new outlooks on feedback methods and purposes that work to assist them with healing.

Creating Unity Through Feedback

Fatima and Carter both wrote about issues they faced personally, namely gender and neighborhood violence, respectively. Their stories shared an orientation to solving personal and community problems. Carter stated in his essay that “John Henry solved the gang violence by
bringing gangs together,” and Fatima’s comic concluded with her support system holding hands and coming together to help her character out of her loneliness. Evan and Dan worked to create unity—among students, and between students and their teacher—through feedback in order to create the support system these focal students need as they confront issues of their past and present.

Dan asserts that, “Dialogue must occur and a community needs to be made to sustain this culturally relevant work in writing.” The combination of holistic feedback and rubrics, as well as the design of the classroom, and activities in class, to bring students together in class. In Evan’s classroom, the issue Carter selected (gang violence) was taken from a list generated from the class of issues they are plagued with. By selecting an issue that was important to him from the list deemed important by all students, Carter is essentially working to solve an issue for his classmates, too. Carter related, "We all know how it is around my school when they are shooting and stuff. I want to help everyone with my story. When I read my story, the other kids were happy." In Evan’s class, Carter and other students collaborated to address the issue of gang violence once their original stores were created. By hearing other stories regarding gang violence, Carter was able to get feedback from his peers on how to improve his story by just reading the words of other students and ideas. Evan related, "Carter decided to transform his story from just saying John Henry brought the gangs together to add a meeting—similar to a town-hall meeting. When I asked him why, Carter told me it was because his classmates asked him how John Henry was going to bring them together.” He created a method in which John Henry could bring together gang member for the purpose of unity. By allowing students with like issues to talk about what they did, Evan provided students the opportunity to form a
collective group with the common purpose of ending violence. Carter related, "The group of kids I told about my story helped me know what I needed to do to fix my story.”

In addition to allowing students to talk to one another about their issues, Evan incorporated music in writing instruction for the purpose of guidance. This innovative method of feedback through music worked to unite students with a particular musical artist who shared some of the same realities (Emdin, 2011). Carter explained, "We all like to listen to music and it is something we all can talk about.” Artists such as J. Cole, that were used for the purpose of feedback, create music about what it is like to be African-American, and often live in urban settings and suffer injustices. The use of music as a means of feedback allows Evan to create authentic dialogue around personal experiences that bring the classroom community together for the purpose of growing as writers. Evan proposed that, “Once students are able to talk about music together, then they can talk about their similar experiences, and finally arrive at the comfortability to talk to each other about solving the problems they share due to injustice.”

Dan had students distribute their comics and essays in class and talk about issues with gender. These feedback methods also helped to create a classroom community. Fatima distributed her final comic on bullying and shared this issue with her classmates. She explained, "Bullying is an issue that many girls and boys can face and people don't want to talk about it. I wanted to break the ice to have a real conversation, so we can come together and do better.” Through her writing, which sought to address issues of bullying among girls, Fatima felt she was able to break the ice for authentic conversation in the class. Dan referenced this comment made by Fatima when he said, “Having students discuss issues like bullying worked to bring them together because it gave students the strength to talk about it.” Not only did Fatima’s piece spark conversation in the classroom around bullying with her honest admission, but also sparked
conversation around the school regarding bullying. Fatima decided that “the only way to solve issues like bullying is through unity and I am trying to create that.”

Community-building is very important to culturally relevant teaching. Dan and Evan’s students were tasked with gaining a sense of interdependence, to rely on one another for feedback and emotional support. This cultivation of feedback from peers de-centers the individual competitiveness among students in the class. According to Dan, “This work is grounded in community because peers may know each other better than I do.” Both teachers worked to help students form collective successes with their writing pieces by having peers collaborate around writing. Neither teacher forgot or neglected individual accountability, but given the topics of the tasks, they saw no need to elevate the individual over the group (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

**Promoting Voice and Culture Through Feedback**

Culturally relevant writing pedagogy also allows for possibilities for identity formation and plural truths, highlighting both student voice and culture (Leggo, 2007). The truths these teachers promoted through their units were multifaceted, diverse and organic. Rick stated, “These students are experts of their truth from experiences and culture.” In order to engage in truth-making processes, students’ voices needed to be put at the forefront of assessment and feedback, and teaching in general. Similarly, in order to promote students’ voices for the purpose of healing, a classroom environment had to be created where students felt empowered to explore their truths comprehensively through various avenues. The classroom needed to serve as a sanctuary where students could share experiences and engage in the meaning-making process. Rick and Dan worked to create these kinds of environments where students’ voices were elevated.
When asked about Ricks’s feedback methods, Samantha replied, “He never tries to change my words when we take part in appreciative feedback. He shares how the text made him feel, and pushes and praises around my intention. He always wants me to put more of myself in my writing.” Rick worked to spotlight students’ voices through his appreciative feedback method. When giving feedback, Rick was careful to avoid being prescriptive to students around writing. Instead, he focused heavily on how to question or explain his experience while reading, in order to promote what the students intended to convey. An example of this type of feedback is embodied in Figure 30 below:
In this example, Rick responded to a student’s spoken-word poem, which was written about self-esteem and motivation (and modeled after Nikki Giovanni’s “Ego Trippin”). The student chose to engage in writing in which they ego trip (meaning they are congratulating themself and celebrating themself). Rick expresses his experience with reading in the first paragraph. He mentioned being hooked by the references to familiar lines that drew him into the piece (e.g., “Super Mario Bros” and “The Great Wall of China”). He made reference to the student’s brevity of words, and linked this to the student’s demeanor of being reserved and quiet. At no point in the feedback offered did Rick attempt to tell students what they should write or how something should sound. He instead spent time explaining his experience to allow students the autonomy to take or leave the feedback given, or the method taken to address the feedback. The student, Nathan, responded to this feedback by saying, “The feedback I got was that I was brief and my use of allusions worked. My parallel with Nikki Giovanni was identified. From this I was given the choice of whether or not I wanted this to be brief because it was effective. I may put in an extra stanza with another allusion to extend it.” Through his feedback, Rick tried to make it clear to Nathan that his voice was important, respected and honored.

Nieto (1994) states, “Student voices sometimes reveal the great challenges and even the deep pain young people feel when schools are unresponsive, cold places.” She also states, “those who spend the most time in schools and classrooms are often given the least opportunity to talk. …students have important lessons to teach educators and we need to begin to listen to them more carefully” (p. 420). Dan also worked to put students’ voices in the center of his feedback methods. Fatima related during the interview, “I determined the path of my writing, and the
feedback is how to make sure I am taking my writing to where I want it to go.” Similar to Rick, through Dan’s probing questions and comments, he aimed to provide students with things to reflect on in order to convey their intended message. Figure 31 is another example of feedback Dan gave to a student's attempt to annotate a graphic from a comic.

Figure 31. Teacher feedback for student’s attempt to annotate graphic from comic
In the above example of feedback provided, Dan acknowledged the strengths of this student in defining what is male, and what is female, and how those definitions function in comics. Dan worked to acknowledge the strengths of the student, and to reveal his reading, in order to help the student make decisions about what should be changed or remain the same. His student Fatima responded to this feedback by saying, "I realized from this that I need to work to convey a solution for the injustice of gender in comics more because I thought it was my overarching message in this response. I see what I did well already and what can stay the same.” Dan explained, “There is a value in silence. From this silence students are able to understand what I received and did not receive in their writing on their own.” Similar to Rick, then, Dan worked to create feedback in a non-punitive way for the purpose of promoting reflection, as opposed to prescribed changes. Particularly, to empower students who have been unable to release their voices, or who have been sidelined by schools and society, teachers must work to recoup control and authority of their own personal lives (Howard, 2001). Valuing students’ voice puts their experiences and stories in the forefront, and allows them to write their experiences into the world.

Creating Healing Spaces through Feedback

Students write, think, talk, listen, read, represent, and learn to know themselves and others through spoken and written language (Howard, 2001). When students write, they construct their identities and the identities of others, and students learn about the world through words (Howard, 2001). With this being said, incorporated in these meaning- and identity-making processes are obstacles students face in and out of school. Evan shared his opinion
during an interview, saying, “There is a level of healing and un-doing that needs to occur in culturally relevant writing classrooms through things like assessment.” All three teachers in this study worked to use the process of writing, and used their words to help students create a world where they are able to be happy. By valuing voices/culture, creating community, and engaging in the creation of counter-narratives, students were able to begin healing. Rick explained that “students will always write stories to make meaning. Some of the stories they write will be happy and some will be filled with sadness, but culturally relevant teachers strive to equip students with methods to change it.” These teachers show that feedback and assessment can be used to promote healing, and to combat the stories students carry full of injustices, hurt, or trauma.
CHAPTER VII

Summary and Implications

This dissertation was birthed from my experience of teaching writing to urban students. I always wondered about how other teachers who have embraced the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy perceived writing and assessment. Evan, Rick, and Dan’s cases offer examples of how culturally relevant pedagogy has been enacted within urban writing classrooms for the purposes of emancipation and empowerment of students. During the current era of PARCC, NWEA, and the Common Core State Standards, there is an increase in the standardization of assessments, learning, tracking, and leveling students. I see this research as important because it seeks to address students’ and teachers’ identities inside and outside the classroom, and it also centers writing—a field that has often taken a back seat to reading.

This analysis explored the connections between culturally relevant writing instruction and assessment through an examination of unit design, implementation and assessment and feedback processes in three classrooms ranging from third to seventh grades. I attempted to describe teachers’ experiences and motivations for teaching culturally relevant writing and some of their students’ experiences. I focused on academic aspects of the unit, but also personal aspects that each unit addressed for both teachers and students. These cases showed the potential for transformative schooling when healing and the “whole” student are centered in writing classrooms.

Although my research and conclusions are based on the case studies of the three teacher-participants, this research reveals that the enactment of culturally relevant pedagogy has potential healing powers for the teacher and the student in a place that is often considered to be punitive, namely the classroom. I conclude as I began, in personal reflection, with thoughts
about how this journey has influenced me as a teacher and as a researcher. My goal was to discover findings that had potential implications for students, teacher and researcher in the field. Ultimately, I argue for some modest implications on writing for teachers and writing researchers to consider as they seek to design, implement, and study culturally relevant writing pedagogy.

**Implications for Writing Teachers**

This study is centered around teachers, and thus, have primary implications for teaching practice. The stories revealed through Dan, Rick, and Evan’s units provide a picture of the demands of culturally relevant work in places that are not always culturally relevant. The research revealed that teachers and students have the potential to heal in spaces that are designed to be culturally relevant. Each participant approached creating healing spaces in different ways, whether through conversation or classroom decor. In addition to the necessity to create safe spaces, the data collected reveals that storying should be valued over scores. In culturally relevant classrooms, students are placed at the center as experts who should be afforded spaces to overcome obstacles in the classroom and in life.

**Design spaces and units to support personal and community reflection and action, and to heal.** Research often associates "classrooms," "schools," and "learning environments" as interchangeable terms to describe spaces for learning. However, this study views the classroom as more than simply a place to learn, but as a place to heal, too. The three classrooms in this study were quite different in structure, but all worked to present students with a birth to feel empowered to deal with the obstacles they face. In addition to student healing, teacher healing can occur as a connection is born.

Rick introduced the notion of spaces to include the words the teacher uses. He created a safe space by demonstrating his ability to be vulnerable in what he shared in the classroom
space. He told stories of his daughter, his wife, and his experiences with culture to show students that the things and feelings we often try to hide can be set free through writing. To complement dialogue and discussion, Rick arranged the students’ desks in rows facing each other, and positioned his desk of the room to show that he is an equal player on the team. His choices about the physical environment worked to create spaces in which students like Fatima could educate others about race, or other topics that students find meaningful. Not only could students share their stories face-to-face, but they can feel safe enough to post their work through online platforms like the class blog.

Evan’s use of posters and action figures of famous and little-known heroes and icons, both real-life and fictional, that are diverse in race, gender, and career path, demonstrated his commitment to spotlight and get students thinking about the qualities of heroes. In Evan’s class, learning was reciprocal. The students taught him about who their heroes are. “The kids think people like LeBron James are heroes, so why not spotlight that?” he explained. Now he sports a T-shirt and a cap with an applique of the NBA team LeBron plays for, and he has earned some cool points with his students. Through his use of superheroes like the Black Panther, Evan shows his commitment to making students feel safe in a place surrounded by things they value. He makes clear that classroom spaces are for the kids, and not for the teacher. Evan thinks the students should see things that are meaningful to them on the walls and ledges around the room.

Similarly, Dan used posters and superheroes to supplement the physical space in the classroom, and to build empowerment for students. The motivational phrases posted on the walls that remind students to dream big and persevere also help to create a protective force field for students while they are in the classroom learning. Dan explained that “the tapestry of the Bat Signal shows students that the world is in need of their help, and they can be like Batman and
save the day.” During interviews, he spoke a lot about students being the heroes of their reality, and that is why they are working to first uncover problems.

The designs of the three classrooms were very different, but they did share some similarities that work to create spaces of healing and activism, and can inform other teachers. All the classrooms exuded positivity and peace, and most of the students appeared to be uninhibited about moving around the classroom and sharing their ideas and stories with others. Nurturing appeared to take place as students learned and grew as writers, as evidenced through discussions (everyone’s voice appears to be valued), appreciative feedback, student presentations, blogging, etc. Activism was also promoted, as evidenced through mentor text and music selections, brainstorming activities, and annotation of texts followed by feedback to extend the students’ thinking in order to challenge them to apply their learning to real-life situations. Teachers encouraged their students to interrogate societal norms about race, gender, and social injustice.

**Value narrative, dialogue, and response over scores.** With the influx of standardized testing in schools, scale grading such as rubrics have been a go-to method for assessing writing. The scales make it easy to clearly identify evaluation criteria, and to compare performance across students. However, within these scales, there are also limitations. Despite their diverse methods, all three participants in this study aimed to explore possibilities of assessment and feedback by valuing stories over scales. Maja Wilson (2018) argues that after reviewing assessment and feedback methods, teachers were not able to tap into the “personal” aspects of a student and/or the intentions of their writing. Because of this finding, Maja Wilson (2018) also argues for more personalized feedback nurturing students as a whole.
Rick emphasized that students and their stories are complex because they transition in and out of communities throughout the day. Some communities highlighted were home communities, cultural communities, classroom communities, youth communities, etc. He thought that the complexity of students’ stories and lives should be mirrored by the feedback methods. By using alternative feedback methods like remixed rubrics, blogs, and holistic feedback, the teachers in this study aimed to delve into this complexity. Evan argued that, “Above all, we must preserve the voice of students before someone writes their stories for them.”

Though scales are considered by many as a means to provide standard feedback description, scales can instead just contribute to ranking (Wilson, 2017). They do not necessarily promote further growth and learning; rather, they are often used to help distinguish the good from the bad. Carter, the focal student in Evan’s class said, “When I got bad scores on my rubrics and stuff I never knew why. I kept messing up.” Scales can become a tool of oppression, leaving students to grapple on their own with figuring out how to improve (Wilson, 2017). Evan, Dan, and Rick used conversations (dialogue) and stories, as means to assess growth over traditional scales. These stories express who students are by combining experiences, goals, hopes and dreams.

Implications for teachers may include using alternative feedback assessment methods for writing. This might include replacing rubrics that contain numeric categories with rubrics that contain culturally relevant categories, similar to the one used by Evan. In the culturally relevant classroom, teachers can also dialogue with their students through formative feedback, similar to the assessment practices used by Dan. Students can also dialogue with their peers and provide appreciative feedback, as in Rick’s classrooms. Teachers in culturally relevant writing classroom can also utilize technology to provide interactive exchanges between teacher and
student, as well as peer-to-peer exchanges to give readerly feedback. These are just a few potential examples. Others might include the use of peer workshop or teacher conferencing. The important takeaway for teachers is that feedback and assessments must be transformed to fit the fluid nature of the students in the classroom. New types of assessments should be explored connecting students’ outside identities to inside (school) context for the purpose of healing.

**Implications for Writing Research**

This dissertation aims to further enhance the body of research literature around writing, by giving examples of how culturally relevant writing teachers engage in the practice of assessment. It shows that, while engaging in the teaching and design of these culturally relevant units, teachers had to first engage in reflections and assessment of their own experiences in order to better guide students through the process through the feedback issues. This is important for researchers to consider as they study teaching and learning of writing. It also seemed important, to me, to talk with students about how they received feedback and their preferred feedback. At the center of culturally relevant pedagogy are equity, competence, and consciousness. These attributes cannot be achieved without a fluid relation between teachers, researchers, and students.

**The need for exploration of teachers’ histories and lives.** This study revealed that teachers had to be open and honest to assess their own bias, pain, goals, and dreams before they asked their students to do the same. This practice of openness is one that should be repeated over and over for teachers in order to create authentic teaching experiences with students. Dan claimed, “We need to check ourselves because our bias gets in the way of meeting students where they are.” It took courage for them to ask themselves tough questions. All three participants, though, worked to discover findings from their critical self-explorations to help leverage social consciousness and academic success in the classroom.
Rick maintained that he is not a “spoken-word artist,” but a “spoken-word teacher.” He leveraged his stories and realizations to help his students find and share their own. Rick shared several stories with his students to help them understand that he, too, engages in the art of writing. He told a story of his family that he thinks drives his feedback and assessment techniques with students. Because Rick has confronted the challenge of having a wife from a different culture and a daughter who is working to merge both cultures, he thought about implications for his teaching and assessment. He disclosed his discouragement during one interview, saying, “My daughter doesn’t like us speaking in Spanish to her and that hurts me.” However, his hurt and discouragement fueled his ambition to push translanguaging in his classroom, which mattered for students. As Samantha said, “My favorite part about my spoken word is my use of language.”

Dan also reflected on his own experiences to design his unit and assessment. For him, he thought a lot about growing up and his experiences in school as a student. “Gender was always a difficult thing for me and with everything happening in the media, I find myself perplexed,” he shared during an interview. His understanding of the anxiety over gender in middle school, as well as his personal interpretation on the subject of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which was the first time in American history that a woman secured the nomination of a major political party, drove him to create this unit. Dan’s personal struggles with the role of gender, particularly in relation to his love for comics, made him feel it necessary to study this topic in the classroom.

Evan also drew from his own life experiences, as well at the needs of his students in deciding upon the topic for his unit. Growing up, he was raised in the church and forbidden from listening to music like rap. This motivated him to intentionally use music students could connect
to as a teaching point. His choice of hip-hop resonated with students like Carter, who said, “I like that we use music because it’s something I can connect with.”

The need for critical self-reflection is crucial for all teachers. Teachers of students of diverse linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds must guide students in the journey to become activists. By using culturally responsive methods, teaching and social justice can be accomplished because culturally responsive teaching encourages students to first identify issues, and then become active participants in the fight for equality and change (Ladson- Billings, 1995). Once the process of self-reflection occurs in the classroom setting, teachers are asked to put students’ needs before their own. This act of selflessness requires teachers to always have this reflection process in motion as they set out to design curriculum for their students. The work of culturally relevant writing serves to create a potential space for not only students to heal, but teachers too.

Though reflection and healing through culturally relevant writing assessment and feedback seem to present implications for teachers, there are implications for researchers, too. Researchers must examine the tenets that drive teacher practices in the field of culturally relevant writing, similar to the ways they aim to explore the impact on students. Teachers play an integral role in classrooms embarking on this work, and reflection, critique, and empowerment start with them. The three teachers in this study led this process of healing and reflection by example, and from that process they were open and free to help students engage in the same work.

**Give students opportunities to annotate and talk about their feedback.** Because culturally relevant feedback is personalized for the students in the classroom, the way in which these assessments are analyzed to determine their effectiveness is through the students. In this
study, I adopted a think-aloud protocol in which students were given the feedback issued to them by the teacher, and they explained the value of the feedback and how it was interpreted. From there, students explained their next steps toward revisions they were going to make in their own writing. This protocol can prove to be especially effective when research is designed to analyze student outlook on teacher-generated resources. The graphics allow viewers to see specific aspects of text that were valued by the student in an effective way.

The use of student interviews and the examination of artifacts were not sufficient to provide a true outlook on how students received the feedback issued around their writing. A think-aloud protocol was created as a necessary tool to spotlight the connection students had to feedback, personally and academically. If culturally relevant teachers or researchers, consider the use of this protocol, then students would perhaps become more vested in the words of the teacher, and teachers can transform feedback into a more meaningful and manageable concept. Researchers would be granted more incite into how students think about written artifacts and process information. Students are experts in what helps them, similar to teachers. This presents a welcome departure from the current state of assessments and feedback that are structured around ranking. The practice of using the think-aloud for clarification can benefit both teacher and student and help them grow. Each teacher-participant in this study expressed their commitment to continually grow in the practice of culturally relevant teaching, and seek ways to improve in their practice daily. In the classroom all learners must be given the opportunity for growth and healing. This emphasis on growth puts both teachers and students in control of the process to help improve the reality of students.
Conclusion

This dissertation project was created from my experiences of being a middle school teacher. I have worked diligently to attempt culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies to help the many students in my classroom that depend on me to provide and protect a safe space for them. I wondered about, and therefore wanted to explore, how culturally relevant pedagogy was being taken up by various teachers in an urban setting like Chicago. I was not sure whether it would look the same or look somewhat different from the methodologies mentioned through the research. I wondered how teachers could take diverse students and nourish their ability to feel empowered through the feedback they issue students and the assessments they design.

My key goal in this dissertation has been to understand how culturally relevant writing teachers assess writing. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as a practice of emancipation and empowerment. In this study, each of the units explored writing as a way to overcome the contexts in which the students live (Bakhtin, 1981). In order to do this, the teachers must officiate the marriage of the outside lives of students with the inside healing spaces of the participants’ classroom. Comics, tall tales, hip-hop music, and spoken word were used as means to promotes activism, and provide new examples of how theory is enacted into practice. This close examination of writing instruction and assessments reveals that the two cannot be separated, and are as abstract as the concept of culture. The work of assessing writing can be used to break through the barriers students face, serve as a healing space for both teacher and student, and help teachers reimagine writing as we know it, as well as the purpose for it. With continuous research, the expansion of culturally relevant teaching can create non-threatening spaces where teachers and students can flourish as writers and expose their inwardness. Present
and future teachers can be inspired to take up culturally relevant writing instruction in different ways that meet the needs of the students in front of them.
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VITA

Name: Kara Taylor

EDUCATION

PhD Curriculum and Instruction (Language, Literacy & Culture), 2018
University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Il
Thesis Title: Culturally Relevant Writing Pedagogy: An Investigation of Assessments, Feedback and Equity
Dissertation Advisor: Rebecca Woodard

MA Education, 2012
Elementary Education, Roosevelt University, Chicago, Il

MFA Creative Writing, 2012
Fiction Writing in African American Diaspora, Chicago State University, Chicago, Il

B.A. English, 2010
Creative Writing, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Il

AWARDS & HONORS

Creative Writing Award, Chicago State University English Department, 2012, $1000
Gwendolyn Brooks Writing Award, Chicago State University, 2012, $500
Minority Teachers of Illinois Scholarship, Illinois Student Assistance Committee, 2011, $2000
Roosevelt University’s Flash Fiction Award, Roosevelt University Writing Center, 2010

TEACHING, CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT & SUPERVISION

University Courses & Seminars

Course Instructor Fall 2017
C&I 414/504 Middle and High School Literacy/Secondary Literacy Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Illinois at Chicago

Teaching Assistant, 2017
C&I 414/504 Middle and High School Literacy/ Secondary Literacy Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Illinois at Chicago

K-12 Education, 2012- Present
7th & 8th Grade Literacy and Social Studies Teacher Present Chicago Public Schools

Curriculum Development

ThinkingCore Curriculum Designer, 2012-2017

Teacher Supervision
ThinkingCore  Literacy Coach/ Implementation Coach, 2012-2017

**PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS**

*Peer-reviewed Publications*


*Conference Papers & Presentations*


“Culturally Sustaining Writing Instruction at the Elementary Level”, Illinois Reading Council, Peoria, IL , 2015

*Workshops & Demonstrations (* Denotes invited presentations)*

CPS Social Science & Civic Engagement Conference on Tuesday, August 15 from 2:30-4:00 pm. Title: Moving From Culturally Relevant to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

**RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**
**Graduate Research Assistant**, Professor Rebecca Woodard Spring 2017
Engaged in various aspects of qualitative research, including literature review, data collection, and analysis.

**Project SUSTAIN Participant** Spring 2017 This teacher inquiry project was a collaborative inquiry between k-university teachers to explore culturally sustaining writing pedagogy.

**GlobalEd2 Participant** Fall 2015-2017 Implemented, modified and designed teaching materials to assist with the future pilot of this problem-based learning (PBL) simulation.

**Graduate Research Assistant**, Professor Nathan Phillips Spring/Summer 2017 Engaged in various aspects of qualitative research, including literature review, data collection, and analysis.

**SERVICE**

**Graduate Mentor**, LLC Program, UIC Counsel newly enrolled PhD students in the graduate programs, application procedures and funding.

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

American Educational Research Association (AERA)
Literacy Research Association (LRA)
National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)