

Creating a Classroom for Social Justice: Secondary Teacher Perceptions of the Environmental Outcomes of Culturally Relevant Education

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Abstract: *This descriptive phenomenological study aimed to explore secondary teacher perceptions of the environmental outcomes of implementing culturally relevant education (CRE) in the curricula. Descriptive phenomenological data analysis strategies resulted in three constituencies, and the essential structure was conceptualized as follows: Secondary teachers who meaningfully embed CRE as a social justice pedagogical practice observe safe classroom spaces that bond students through empathy and an empowering learning community that raises students' critical consciousness. However, a pedagogical shift in traditional teacher-centered roles is required for these CRE environmental outcomes to emerge. Study implications suggest that while secondary teachers realize the professed benefits of CRE in the classroom, customized support and professional development are needed to ensure effective implementation and resultant environmental outcomes.*

Keywords: culturally relevant education, descriptive phenomenology, secondary teachers

When the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision legally desegregated schools in the United States in 1954, new considerations emerged regarding the role of schools in fostering the democratic principles of equity, freedom, and opportunity for all (Rury, 2019). Through the *Brown* legacy, diversity came to be understood as a powerful lever leading to positive academic outcomes in achievement, engagement, and preparation for success in an increasingly globalized world (Byrd, 2016; Dee & Penner, 2016; Martell, 2013, 2018). Yet, equitable learning opportunities for all remain elusive, as illustrated by well-publicized achievement gaps in reading and mathematics, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating these inequities (Toness & Lurye, 2022). Culturally relevant education (CRE) is one pedagogical practice that holds great promise in transforming the teaching and learning of classrooms by empowering students to engage in critical discourse and action on educational and societal inequalities.

This study explores secondary teacher perceptions of the environmental outcomes of incorporating CRE in the curricula through a descriptive phenomenological research design

(Giorgi, 2009). CRE focuses on promoting social justice through pedagogical practices that honor the cultural experiences of marginalized people in order to create equitable and inclusive educational opportunities for all students (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The Aronson and Laughter (2016) model of CRE is used as the study's conceptual framework as it underpins the meaning-making of the lived experience of teachers who meaningfully incorporate CRE in their curricula. The model highlights the importance of teachers connecting students' cultural identities to academic skills and concepts, engaging students in critical reflection, facilitating cultural competence, and critiquing discourses of power. The guiding research question for this study is: How do secondary teachers describe the environmental outcomes of incorporating CRE in the classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As student diversity grows within American society and schools, CRE provides a means for teachers to promote social justice through pedagogical best practices. With the goal of creating equitable, inclusive educational opportunities, CRE benefits all students by creating a space to recognize and celebrate individual and community diversity (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Common goals of CRE include infusing social justice concerns in the curriculum and pedagogical practices, providing for the socio-cultural needs of all students, increasing academic achievement for all, and empowering students to challenge embedded inequities in society (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In her landmark study, Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed examining the relationship between teacher education, equity, and diversity as part of a new pedagogy. Ladson-Billings stated three central tenets: maintaining high expectations for all students, assisting students in forming a positive cultural identity, and guiding students in developing a critical consciousness to critique social inequities. CRE serves several purposes: challenging educator attitudes and beliefs on cultural and racial/ethnic diversity in the classroom; understanding the politics of power, privilege, and oppression; and ultimately gaining teacher buy-in (Gay, 2013). Borrero et al. (2018) argued the need for teachers to act as change agents, teaching for social justice by reflecting on their positionality as a practice to disrupt cycles of racism.

As a supplement to Ladson-Billings' work, Gay (2010) argued that multicultural education must be infused into curriculum design, professional learning, and classroom instruction by incorporating diverse histories, texts, and perspectives that ensure equity and remove systemic barriers to educational opportunities. Researchers have shown that integrating students' diverse cultural histories into the curricula leads to students' cognitive, emotional, social, and psychological needs being met and more engaging and morale-boosting learning environments (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Choi, 2013). When teachers successfully consider their school and local context and students' diverse backgrounds, they can develop students' sociopolitical consciousness and provide activities that sustain dynamic community practices (Martell & Stevens, 2019). Additionally, teachers with a greater understanding of students' cultural identities are more effective in developing new culturally relevant content and facilitating culturally relevant discussions, which enhance teacher confidence in the classroom (Brown et al., 2017; Christ & Sharma, 2018).

While beliefs vary on what constitutes CRE best practices, one of the main impediments is teacher misunderstanding of the pedagogical implications and implementation strategies needed to put CRE into instructional practice. Doing this well requires them to confront generalized and

misleading assumptions about culture and race/ethnicity to authentically center students' lived experiences and to build a curriculum focused on students' strengths (Borrero et al., 2018). Common challenges to building a CRE pedagogy include teacher resistance to new approaches, limited knowledge of their students' culture, and a lack of opportunity to develop their own critical consciousness (Christ & Sharma, 2018; Young, 2010). Thus, scholars agree that effective practices must begin with strong preservice teacher coursework, practica, and mentoring, as well as ongoing professional development to help educators put CRE pedagogy into action (Brown et al., 2019; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2010; Hill, 2012).

Skeptics of CRE have contended that teachers can never be truly competent in another's culture and argue that the idea of *competence* is troublesome since it implies a top-down approach, where often privileged community members decide curricular content and benchmarks (Greene-Moton & Minkler, 2019). Moreover, most studies have focused narrowly on how teachers and students from predominantly White backgrounds can use empathy to develop better relationships with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds (Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2021; Warren, 2014, 2015, 2018). Another criticism of CRE is the minimal research on how to infuse CRE in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) classrooms, with the implication being that putting CRE theory into practice holds greater applicability for social studies, language arts, and other non-STEM-based disciplines (Brown et al., 2019). Thus, a more expansive view of infusing CRE across disciplines is needed.

A deep investigation into the existing CRE literature revealed a gap between what is known about the positive effects of CRE and how CRE frames the learning environment. Commonly recognized student outcomes include increased student engagement and academic achievement among historically underserved populations; improved reflective skills; nurturance of cultural and sociopolitical competence, discourse, and consciousness; and positive cultural identity formation (Byrd, 2016; Choi, 2013; Dee & Penner, 2016; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Martell, 2013, 2018; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). Nevertheless, only a few studies have couched these outcomes in relation to the learning environment. For instance, Beschorner and Hall (2021) argued that CRE promotes a safe and inclusive classroom that engages students in learning and advances equity. A need exists to develop a greater understanding of the effects of CRE on classroom learning environments, particularly from the perspective of teachers who are charged with fostering culturally affirming educational experiences for all students.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The CRE conceptual framework of Aronson and Laughter (2016) was employed to ground the interviews and was used as a deductive lens to view the data and consider the study's implications. The authors presented four tenets of CRE: (1) connect students' cultural references to academic skills and concepts, (2) engage students in critical reflection about their own lives and society, (3) build students' cultural competence, and (4) expose oppressive systems through the critique of discourses of power. As such, CRE educators are charged to:

- build bridges between students' cultural references and academic skills and concepts,
- use students' prior knowledge and cultural assets to create a culturally relevant classroom inclusive of all students,

- engage students in critical analysis and reflection about their own lives and society through the use of inclusive curricula and activities,
- facilitate students' cultural competence in which students both learn about and develop pride in their own and others' cultures, and
- unmask oppressive systems by critiquing discourses of power in the active pursuit of social justice for all members of society.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive phenomenological research design (Giorgi, 2009) was utilized to explore the perceptions of 18 secondary teachers who self-reported incorporating CRE in their classrooms and their insights on the resultant environmental benefits. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method to uncover the human meaning of a lived experience. The philosophy and methodology were based on Edward Husserl's proposition that research should be treated as explicating a phenomenon's essential structure through exploring individuals' lived experience pre-reflectively as it reaches consciousness (van Manen, 2017). Interviews, grounded by the CRE framework of Aronson and Laughter (2016), provided an in-depth account of the CRE environmental meaning-making of secondary teachers. The guiding research question for this study was: How do secondary teachers describe the environmental outcomes of incorporating CRE in the classroom?

PARTICIPANTS

A sample of 18 secondary teachers who self-reported using CRE practices in their classroom was primarily drawn from Colorado Springs and Denver, Colorado. Nearly all participants indicated receiving district- or school-mandated training on CRE; most indicated the training to be introductory, broad, and not discipline-specific. Most participants were female (60%) and ranged in age from 35 to 64. One self-identified as Latinx, two as multi-racial, and the remainder as White. Each individual was employed in a public school with three to 40 years of teaching experience. Academic subjects taught varied but mainly included English and social studies. All participants hold a master's degree. Participation was incentivized with a \$25 e-gift card. The demographics of the participants are displayed in Table 1.

DATA COLLECTION

Following Institutional Review Board approval, all participants were provided with a consent form detailing the purpose of the study, interview procedures, and safeguards to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Multiple researchers administered the interviews one-on-one through web conferencing, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed using the CRE conceptual framework (Aronson & Laughter, 2016) to ensure questions were targeted regarding CRE goals, tenets, opportunities, and challenges. Sample questions include:

1. How do you define culturally relevant education?
2. How do you incorporate culturally relevant education in your classroom?
3. What are the benefits and challenges of incorporating culturally relevant education?

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Content Area	Years of Teaching Experience
Angelina	Female	Latinx	37	Mathematics	15
Camille	Female	White	43	Social Studies	17
Carlos	Male	White	30	English	8
Coach	Male	White	47	Social Studies	14
Dave	Male	White/Polish	43	English, Film	20
Georgia	Female	White/U.S. American	36	History, Geography	12
James	Male	White	56	Social Studies	32
Jennifer	Female	White	41	Social Studies	18
Leo	Male	White	50	Social Studies	22
Lisa Page	Female	White, non-Hispanic	39	History, Social Studies	17
Lucas	Male	White	36	Social Studies	2
Marty	Male	White	51	History	28
Michael	Male	White	42	Social Studies	17
Natalya	Female	Asian, White	25	English	2
Patricia	Female	White	31	English	10
Robert	Male	White	71	Social Studies	49
Selena	Female	White/Latinx	30	History	9
Wyoming	Male	White	52	History, Psychology	23

The interview questions encouraged participants to adopt a pre-reflective stance toward their lived experience of incorporating CRE in their classrooms with students (van Manen, 2017). While the interview protocol was carefully worded with questions posed in a specific order, the researchers participated as active listeners while probing for clarification and meaning to develop the dialectical relationship espoused by phenomenological researchers (Giorgi, 2009). Transcripts were created through a web conferencing platform, and recordings were deleted after the transcripts were reviewed and cleaned for errors.

DATA ANALYSIS

The five-step descriptive phenomenological data analysis strategy of Giorgi (2009) was followed: (1) sense of the whole, (2) meaning units, (3) transformation, (4) structure, and (5) essential structure. To effectively employ a phenomenological research design, researchers must first engage in phenomenological reduction by bracketing out prior knowledge of the phenomenon and setting aside one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences to minimize research bias in the data analysis process (Giorgi, 2008). To accomplish this, the researchers collectively discussed their views of CRE and experiences engaging in this social justice practice as both a teacher and a learner. Phenomenological reduction also includes refraining from theorizing or conceptualizing what is "given" during the interviews, while understanding the presented information is not necessarily accurate as participants share what is in their consciousness (Giorgi, 2012). Last, special sensitivity was given to adhering to Giorgi's (2008) experiential, discovery-driven analysis process. Through this process, an understanding was reached relative to the importance of possessing a solid knowledge of CRE and the value of individual commitments to ensuring all

students receive a curriculum reflective of their diverse backgrounds that illuminates issues of power, privilege, and oppression.

In applying the first step, researchers read the interview transcripts several times to obtain a *sense of the whole* of the interviews by engaging in phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2009). This process occurred through immersion in the data, resisting judgment or interpreting the meaning of the data, and developing a closeness with the participants through the attitude of special sensitivity. Bracketing was reintroduced to consider new and multiple ways of approaching the data. In the second step, each researcher developed *meaning units* separately because units are subjective, intuitive, and correlate with individual researchers (Giorgi, 2009). Meaning units were revealed as the researchers re-read the transcripts and began to define significant parts of the whole. *Transformation* in step three occurred by converting the participants' words and expressions into higher levels of meaning through free imaginative variation in which contextual factors and conditions were considered to gain a sense of closeness to the data. The conceptual framework of CRE (Aronson & Laughter, 2016) was used in this step as an analytical lens to develop a deeper meaning of the participants' voices.

In the fourth step, the *structure* was illuminated by considering the shared constituents of the environmental outcomes of CRE while attending to variations of the secondary teachers' experiences. Three constituents emerged: (1) safe classroom spaces bond students through empathy, (2) an empowering learning community raises students' critical consciousness, and (3) a pedagogical shift in traditional teacher-centered roles is required. The fifth step involved discovering the *essential structure*, which entailed clarifying the inter- and intra-relationships among the constituents (Giorgi, 2012). The essential structure was conceptualized as follows: Secondary teachers who meaningfully embed CRE as a social justice pedagogical practice observe safe classroom spaces that bond students through empathy and an empowering learning community that raises students' critical consciousness. However, a pedagogical shift in traditional teacher-centered roles is required for these CRE environmental outcomes to emerge.

VALIDITY AND RIGOR

Sundler et al. (2018) shared the importance of addressing issues of validity and rigor in descriptive phenomenology studies by upholding reflexivity, credibility, and transferability of the research process. Reflexivity through bracketing and the involvement of several researchers in the study allowed for continuous, critical reflection of the constituents and the essential structure. Credibility was achieved by following Giorgi's (2009) data analysis strategy to ensure the process was transparent and accounted for the wholeness of the data rather than confirmation bias. To ensure transferability, participant quotes were utilized to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon and bolster the "relevance, usefulness, and meaningfulness" (Sundler et al., 2018, p. 737) of the essential structure to other contexts. Additionally, the study's implications spoke specifically to interested stakeholders on the challenges of implementing CRE practices in secondary classrooms since much of the literature focuses on CRE's goals, strategies, and learning outcomes. This focus can aid readers in determining whether the findings resonated and could be applied to their own lived experience and unique setting.

LIMITATIONS

Ultimately, convenience sampling led to a homogeneous sample of secondary teachers, as most were White and taught in predominantly White suburban schools. While this is a limitation, it also speaks to Colorado's teacher and school demographics. Giorgi's (2012) phenomenological

reduction process exposed researcher bias, but we cannot absolve ourselves from the fact that confirmation bias could have affected our findings and interpretations. The research team believes strongly in the value of CRE. While the team remained open to the possibility that CRE would not produce appreciable environmental outcomes, this stance may have been challenging to maintain throughout the data collection and analysis processes. It also is important to note that all researchers are trained in qualitative research methods in educational settings and hold graduate student or professorship roles. Additionally, one is a current school teacher, and another is a former school teacher; thus, the data were approached from insider and outsider perspectives.

FINDINGS

SAFE CLASSROOM SPACES BOND STUDENTS THROUGH EMPATHY

As participants were queried on the value of CRE, benefits to the learning environment were raised repeatedly. The creation of safe classroom spaces that bond students through empathy at a deeper level was discussed by nearly every teacher as a direct environmental benefit of CRE. Participants shared that as the classroom became a safe space, students engaged in open dialogue about course content that challenged their worldview and shared related triumphs and difficulties within their own lives. Michael commented:

I think the classroom has got to be a safe space, so I think that expressing your cultural viewpoint is a really important part of that process... it is important that people feel like they can talk about their experiences and how they may be different from each other.

Similarly, Lucas shared the importance of promoting safe debate within the classroom: "I want to ensure people feel safe and respected and that they won't be attacked for voicing their opinion." Natalya indicated that when students are open with one another, it brings them together: "When students share personal information, it makes the classroom grow closer because students can see that people care about their feelings...and that kids are willing to help each other." This type of resultant student-to-student bonding was apparent throughout the interviews.

Additionally, participants discussed CRE as a means for students to empathize with one another, particularly as they learn potentially new and contrary information to their own experiences and backgrounds. For instance, James stated that students "build empathy for where other people's stories are, and I think that's one of the main important things in social studies." Carlos felt that "hearing about and learning about other cultures is super important to the awareness of reducing stereotypes." Patricia added a metaphor of windows and mirrors to describe how CRE requires students to reflect on their own experiences and that of others: "Literature is a window where you are looking at other people, and you're learning about them and their experiences, and sometimes literature is a mirror, you're looking at yourself." She shared that these opportunities in the classroom allow students to learn about the human experience from the course content and their peers, which can change their perspective and how they relate to others empathetically. Coach also intimated that student discomfort can engender feelings of empathy among students: "They are surprised about the connections that had never occurred to them, and they start to think about how maybe they judged someone/something, but now with this new information they can understand a different perspective much more clearly."

Nearly all participants discussed the importance of “foundational work” to ensure students are prepared to receive CRE, both the new insights and the potential dissonance it could unearth. Some accomplish this by taking time at the beginning of the year to build trust in the classroom. Other teachers commented on the need first to facilitate authentic relationships among the students and then with themselves to realize safe classroom spaces borne from CRE. Jennifer shared that we must “make sure everyone feels connected and feels safe and feels important, and if you are a minority, you may not feel like that.” Marty added, “being a minority in our school might be pretty tough right now...due to a lot of reasons—social, academic, economic.” While a few teachers discussed the benefits as salient to “minority” students, most noted the benefits as universal.

AN EMPOWERING LEARNING COMMUNITY RAISES STUDENT CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Teachers reported that CRE also leads to empowering learning communities that raise students' critical consciousness. Critical consciousness was discussed mainly in the context of students learning new information that transforms how they think about society, systems, and their own lives. While most participants shared that they accomplished this work deeply and meaningfully, some appeared to do so more superficially. Angelina shared:

It can be as simple as telling students where mathematics comes from, most assume it comes from Europe, but when I tell them it's from the Middle East, from the Sumerians, they are usually surprised...curriculum is really thin on the contributions of mathematicians and scientists outside of Europe, so this gives students some perspective that I don't think they get too often.

While this teacher could not share details about how she imparted this information, she felt the students' knowledge base broadened through this historical lesson in her mathematics classroom.

However, participants who incorporated CRE in more substantive ways richly described the appearance of an empowering learning community and how student consciousness was raised. Robert noted that CRE fostered community building and prompted students to engage in more critical discourses on relevant current events issues:

It lessens their possible sense of isolation from everyone else or the dominant school culture. It makes them more open to learning and connecting to teachers better...CRE broadens the classroom environment, connects students to real life, and fosters relevant examples of issues in their community.

The depth of CRE knowledge and strategies was apparent in how participants infused new knowledge into the curriculum, which they acknowledged enriched the classroom to be more inclusive and equitable.

To effectively aid in raising students' critical consciousness, teachers turned to pedagogical practices designed to impart critical thinking skills that allow students to form their own interpretations and conclusions. Dave lamented: “If we don't teach them how to think critically, they will fall victim to YouTube conspiracy theories.” Correspondingly, Lisa desired to “have the student voices be the ones that are critiquing those systems, that's more powerful than [me] standing up and critiquing the system itself.” Participants emphasized the value of teaching independent reasoning skills and the fact that CRE promotes students to form autonomous ideas

about themselves and the world. For instance, Michael shared that students must become more proactively aware of oppressive systems which contribute to persistent inequities in society:

My biggest challenge is trying to figure out ways for students to draw their conclusions and to eliminate my own personal biases. I think it's a much more powerful way for them to learn and a better way, in general, not to let my own personal biases in...it's important for students to be exposed to different cultural perspectives.

All teachers found CRE to naturally develop empowering learning communities in their classrooms, benefiting students and themselves.

Some participants shared ideals, morals, and principles they attempted to impart to their students through CRE content. For instance, Robert intentionally discussed the American mythos of unlimited social mobility and encouraged students to process and confront fundamental social and economic inequities in American society. He shared that the purpose was to:

Give greater clarity to what a student may already suspect about our meritocracy...all the hard work in the world may be less than fruitful. The deck is stacked against the marginalized. [It is] also a way for the dominant culture to reexamine things.

Selena also used historical examples to invite students to think critically about changing oppressive systems such as imperialism and capitalism. She shared: "Systems that promote White supremacy and all of that have to be understood, to be changed...Yeah, just talking about it and then having them be aware, it is really important." Teachers well versed in using CRE to develop empowering learning communities that raise student cultural consciousness tend to be rooted in the social studies, history, and literature disciplines.

PEDAGOGICAL SHIFT IN TRADITIONAL TEACHER-CENTERED ROLES IS REQUIRED

Teachers suggested that implementing CRE practices requires a significant pedagogical shift from traditional teacher-centered models to student-centered ones, where students' backgrounds and experiences drive the instruction and learning. This shift is not always easy or comfortable for teachers. As Leo explained: "Teachers are kind of in an ivory tower where [they] don't always kind of know what's really happening, so sometimes [there is] a false sense of what society is like." Georgia saw this shift as powerful when students and teachers play the role of teacher and learner together: "It is more collaborative when [the students] can teach the teacher something instead of the teacher knowing everything." Patricia recognized the importance of teacher buy-in for these shifts to occur: "If we can help teachers recognize that student-centered learning really helps students with engagement...and really feeling like they are taking ownership of their learning."

Nearly all the teachers spoke of the need for teacher buy-in to become more comfortable relinquishing the "control" they are often accustomed to in their classrooms. For instance, Selena spoke of the value of introducing project-based learning activities to facilitate student choice, freedom, and learning:

Through projects and a lot of those student choices on activities...they can explore things that are interesting or relevant to them...students think history is interesting if you make it interesting in their stories, in their reading, or in their political parties. I don't want it to be fake...I do think students enjoy CRE because I think it makes it relatable. It gives them context that helps them.

Similarly, Camille adds: “student choice is a powerful way to allow for that freedom of being able to meet students, wherever they are at.” To that end, teachers spoke of utilizing alternative forms of assessments, such as storytelling and non-linguistic representation, to center students’ experiences in their classrooms. Wyoming shared the importance of this shift: “I think it comes back down to differentiation and showing mastery...everybody's different in how they learn, so I think they’re also going to be a little bit sometimes different in how they obtain that mastery.” The value of the curricula and associated assessments being authentically relevant to students’ lives was palpable throughout the interviews.

As participants shared the importance of this pedagogical shift for students, they also identified ways they benefited as teachers, such as sharing deeper relationships with students by constructing meaning with them. Patricia said:

I've gotten to a point where I get to know students a lot better than I used to when I first started. As I progressed, I felt more comfortable getting to know students. I'm letting them get to know me to a certain level, too. And when they feel more comfortable with me and with their peers...people are respectful of each other, even if their ideas conflict.

Lisa Page intimated a similar benefit as she came to be considered a trusted teacher in her school through her use of CRE practices: “I had a student describe me as one of the most woke teachers on campus, so I take that as a very high compliment.” With the focus shifted to students, CRE encourages novice and experienced teachers to dig deeper into their content area, develop trusting relationships with students, and become more reflective of their teaching praxis.

DISCUSSION

Understanding secondary teacher perceptions of the environmental outcomes of incorporating CRE in the curricula is critical to improving the use of social justice pedagogical practices in schools. Sharing the insights and viewpoints of teachers through a descriptive phenomenological research design (Giorgi, 2009) illuminated the value of infusing CRE practices in the classroom. The Aronson and Laughter (2016) model of CRE was a valuable tool for organizing and communicating ideas about the benefits of implementing CRE in the classroom. The findings indicate that secondary teachers who meaningfully embed CRE as a social justice pedagogical practice observe safe classroom spaces that bond students through empathy and an empowering learning community that raises students’ critical consciousness. However, a pedagogical shift in traditional teacher-centered roles is required for these CRE environmental outcomes to emerge. In unison, the participants said CRE offers inter- and intra-personal student and teacher learning and growth opportunities when students are central to the curricula and pedagogy.

The findings of this study align with CRE's mission to promote social justice via classroom practices that expose students to marginalized cultural experiences and to create equitable, inclusive educational opportunities for all students (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Borrero et al., 2018; Choi, 2013; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Martell & Stevens, 2019). As teachers implemented CRE practices, they experienced safe classroom spaces where students bonded through empathy, as found by others (Beschoner & Hall, 2021; Choi, 2013; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2019). Empathy was necessary to facilitate cultural consciousness within and between students, a finding scantily covered by previous studies, which tend to overemphasize the need to develop White teachers and students' empathy for those of diverse backgrounds (Brown et al., 2017; Greene-Moton & Minkler, 2019; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2021; Warren, 2014, 2015, 2018).

As corresponds with previous research, the raising of critical consciousness by empowering learning communities was enabled by linking students' lives to the course content and noting the interdependence of society, systems, and individuals (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Finally, participants indicated the need for a significant pedagogical shift from teacher-led instruction to student-centered learning to implement CRE successfully, a finding rarely discussed in the literature (Borrero et al., 2018; Gay, 2013). To accomplish this pedagogical shift, participants indicated the need for regular and tailored professional development training on applying CRE in the classroom, as proposed in several studies (Brown et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2019; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Christ & Sharma, 2018; Gay, 2010; Hill, 2012). While participants shared appreciation of the CRE-mandated training offered in their schools and districts because it provided them with strategies to implement CRE practices in their classrooms, several described the training as simply "not good enough."

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study illuminates important implications for those invested in the promise of CRE. While all participants self-reported using CRE in their classroom, some could not clearly define its goals or purposes. Accordingly, their fidelity to implementing CRE practices was obscured. For instance, a few teachers convoluted teaching tolerance with CRE's desire to foster cultural competence and overemphasized using traditional multicultural education approaches, including encouraging White students to learn about other cultures. Moreover, several participants indicated that a lack of diversity in state-mandated curricula is a significant obstacle, confirming previous research (Gay, 2010). Several participants argued that inadequate professional development training was a more substantial problem. A participant who is a CRE school facilitator shared the need to conduct additional research to offer higher quality training than provided by her district. Other participants indicated that the volatile political climate over critical race theory (CRT) led to reluctance by some teachers to incorporate CRE in the classroom. Also, a few expressed concerns over being "superficial" or "fake" when incorporating CRE in the classroom and tokenizing a person's or group's history. Thus, while the participants credited CRE for transforming their learning environments, they require customized support to successfully implement CRE, which must begin early during teacher education training and continue into professional practice. More purposeful and intentional embedding of CRE practices and philosophies is needed throughout the teacher life cycle.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is warranted on participants' shared belief that CRE is easily embedded in the humanities and arts, negating the possibility of meaningfully doing so in STEM fields. Exploring the reluctance of teachers to critique discourses of power with students also is required. Participants were comfortable discussing current and past events as anomalies from which to learn, but some were uncomfortable and unwilling to explore them as part of systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Also, understanding why teachers with global experiences are more effective at articulating CRE goals, learning effects, and environmental outcomes deserves further study. Their experiences teaching and living abroad suggest a greater appreciation for CRE as a social justice practice relevant in today's secondary schools.

Additionally, some participants intimated concern that CRE might lead them down the road of CRT, which they avoided due to its unpopular recent attention and the highly-publicized movements to ban CRT in schools (Morgan, 2022). Dave mentioned, "teachers and the community are afraid of CRE because of the politics of CRT...and talk of teachers being fired in districts for teaching CRT." Also, Robert indicated CRE gets "political because of CRT even though it's not the same thing. Our community can get divided sometimes...CRT has caused much turmoil but also awareness and revealed a need for CRE." Thus, this blurred line between CRE and CRT deserves attention in future studies. Discerning where resistance to full implementation of CRE lies among those who espouse its embracement is warranted, as resistance to CRE is a multilevel teaching and learning problem that stems from limited understanding and belief in its efficacy and a lack of familiarity needed to execute it properly.

CONCLUSION

This descriptive phenomenological study (Giorgi, 2009) extends prior CRE research by exploring secondary teacher perceptions of incorporating CRE in their classrooms and the resultant environmental outcomes. The findings reveal that when CRE is meaningfully embedded in the curricula and teachers shift to student-centered pedagogical models, safe classroom spaces that bond students through empathy are borne along with an empowering learning community that raises students' critical consciousness. More significant consideration of the environmental outcomes of CRE has the potential to expand how CRE is couched as a beneficial social justice teaching strategy that supports, challenges, and inspires motivation, engagement, and learning across all students. Addressing the need for a change in pedagogical practices, this study critically examines how teachers who infuse CRE perceive changes in the classroom environment and their own teaching. As CRE sets high expectations for all students, we must first start with high expectations and support structures for teachers to develop and refine their CRE practices if the promise of American democracy is to be realized as a natural continuation of the progress begun by the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision.

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