

**Engagement on Stage: Culturally Responsive Teaching in the
Theatre Classroom**

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An Action Research Project
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Teaching

Western Oregon University

2026

Reading Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

College of Education

MASTER'S DEGREE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Completion Term: Spring 2026

Type of exit requirement: Action Research Project

The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Degree should be awarded

Recommendations:

- ✓ Exit Requirement has been approved
-

Acknowledgments

I would first like to express my sincere gratitude to Western Oregon University for the opportunities, support, and experiences it has provided throughout my educational journey. The knowledge I gained through my coursework, combined with the invaluable experience at my clinical teaching site, has prepared me for my future career as an educator. I am deeply appreciative of the professors and instructors who challenged and inspired me during my time in the program.

My studies introduced me to topics that I have become especially passionate about, particularly multicultural education and the ways theatre can serve as a conduit for culturally responsive teaching and learning. Through courses taught by Dr. Lin Wu, I developed a deeper understanding of multicultural education and gained practical tools that will continue to shape my teaching practice. These experiences have influenced not only how I teach but also how I view the role of education in creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the readers of this Action Research Project, Dr. Amy Bowden and Dr. Marie LeJeune. Their expertise, thoughtful feedback, and guidance strengthened this project and challenged me to think more critically about my research. I am especially grateful to Dr. Bowden for her mentorship throughout this process. She generously shared her time and patiently responded to my countless emails. Her support and encouragement were instrumental in helping me successfully complete this project.

I would also like to thank all of the teachers who have been part of my educational journey. Without their guidance, support, and dedication, I may never have chosen to pursue a career in education. They inspired me through their passion, kindness, humor, and commitment to their students. In particular, my arts teachers played a significant role in shaping my love for

the arts and encouraging me to pursue teaching as a profession. Their influence continues to guide my work as an educator.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support throughout this master's program. They listened to countless late-night phone calls and encouraged me through moments of doubt. I am deeply grateful for their love and support, and I would not have reached this milestone without them.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Reflecting on my K–12 experience, as well as my time earning my associate's and bachelor's degrees, I can confidently say that most of the teachers I had truly inspired me. Their influence played a major role in my decision to pursue a career in education. That being said, I struggled with the mechanical, rote learning that has long been a central feature of Western education. The heavy emphasis on standardized testing, test preparation, and scores significantly impacted my ability to learn as a child. This approach to teaching has been and continues to be widely critiqued as ineffective for meaningful learning by respected researchers including Grace Lee Boggs (2012), James Banks (2019), and bell hooks (1990). While it may have served a purpose during the industrial era, when the economy was shaped around factory jobs, this approach to teaching no longer meets the diverse needs of today's learners.

Throughout my schooling, I experienced significant academic challenges, particularly in reading and writing. These difficulties led to my participation in remedial support programs designed to help me “catch up” to my peers. In my junior year of high school, I was diagnosed with ADHD, a discovery that illuminated the reasons behind many of my academic struggles. Despite these difficulties, I excelled in extracurricular activities and in learning environments that emphasized collaboration, creativity, and active engagement. Hands-on and experiential learning allowed me to thrive, highlighting the disconnect between traditional, test-driven classrooms and the pedagogical methods that truly support diverse learners.

By contrast, the traditional, one-size-fits-all model of instruction often left me feeling alienated and labeled as a “bad student.” This label diminished my academic confidence and initially discouraged me from pursuing higher education. I was deeply interested in history and English, yet traditional lecture-based instruction and memorization-heavy assessments limited

my ability to demonstrate understanding. My challenges were not due to apathy or incapacity, but rather to pedagogical structures that failed to support my learning style or connect content to meaningful, real-world contexts. For instance, English was consistently one of my lowest-performing subjects, not because of a lack of interest, but due to difficulty translating my ideas into written form and lackluster content. I could easily articulate complex concepts verbally, yet written assignments rarely allowed me to express my understanding in ways that felt authentic. The one time I was given the opportunity to deliver a verbal presentation, I earned one of the highest grades in the class.

Looking back, I now recognize that my struggles were shaped by both the realities of undiagnosed ADHD and by the limitations of a rigid educational system. As Boggs (2012) argued, “At the core of the problem is an obsolete factory model of schooling that sorts, tracks, tests, and rejects or certifies working-class children as if they were products on an assembly line” (p. 137). This industrial model of schooling, as further supported by John Rury (2019), subjected “thousands of school-children [to] test preparation exercises that contributed little to their overall education” (p. 205). My personal experience aligns with these critiques: standardized testing and rote instruction did not nurture deep understanding or creativity, they stifled them. Recognizing this, I am committed to cultivating learning environments that reject such limitations in favor of culturally responsive and student-centered practices.

My experiences in theatre education further illustrate the consequences of narrow, Eurocentric curricular frameworks. Throughout my K–12 theatre courses, the curriculum was centered almost exclusively on the “great playwrights” of the Western canon, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O’Neill, all white men. It was only during Black History Month that August Wilson was briefly introduced. This limited representation reinforced a singular

narrative of theatrical excellence while marginalizing the voices of playwrights from diverse racial, cultural, and gendered backgrounds. It's deeply important that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum for learning to be empowering and relevant. Representation cannot be forced into isolated months of recognition; it must be woven throughout the curriculum in ways that affirm all students' identities and experiences.

While my educational journey was shaped by both struggle and privilege, I recognize that my experience as a white, upper-middle-class female afforded me significant advantages. Both of my parents were college-educated and financially stable, providing me with resources and support systems that many of my peers, including my peers from diverse backgrounds, didn't have access to. Acknowledging this privilege compels me to critically examine the ways that systemic inequities continue to shape educational access and outcomes. Given these experiences, I am focusing on culturally responsive teaching as the foundation of my pedagogical framework, one that values students' cultural knowledge and fosters meaningful, inclusive learning experiences that challenge the inequities I once witnessed firsthand.

Guiding Pedagogical Framework

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is defined as “the use of the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for effective teaching” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). At its core, CRT ensures that students see themselves reflected within the classroom environment, curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Research indicates that implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies enhances both student engagement and academic achievement (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

Gay (2000) identifies five key tenets of culturally responsive teaching: (a) developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, (b) integrating ethnic and cultural diversity into the curriculum, (c) demonstrating genuine care and fostering inclusive learning communities, (d) communicating effectively with students from diverse backgrounds, and (e) adapting instructional methods to align with students' cultural contexts.

The first tenet, *developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity*, involves a three-part process. Its primary purpose is for educators to intentionally learn about the cultural characteristics, communication styles, and lived experiences of their students. Teachers should actively research classroom demographics and develop an understanding of the specific cultural backgrounds represented among their learners. By understanding how students are socialized within their families and communities, teachers can design more relevant and effective learning experiences.

The second component of this tenet emphasizes developing a deep understanding of the historical and contemporary contributions made by various ethnic and cultural groups. This approach extends beyond token recognition of a few well-known figures. Instead, educators must engage in inquiry that centers the diverse intellectual and scientific contributions that have often been marginalized or overlooked in mainstream education. The third component involves cultivating a clear understanding of what culturally responsive teaching entails and how to effectively implement it in practice—precisely the goal of this action research project.

The second tenet builds upon the first by emphasizing that *teachers must learn how to effectively implement culturally responsive teaching practices within curriculum and instruction*. In the general classroom, the main three types of curriculum, formal, symbolic, and societal, can each be adapted to support culturally responsive practices. Through intentional collaboration

between educators and administrators, these curricula can be designed to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse students are supported.

The third tenet of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) involves *demonstrating cultural caring and fostering a strong learning community*. This tenet emphasizes creating an environment in which ethnically diverse students can thrive both academically and personally. Culturally responsive teaching is an action-oriented practice that requires deep empathy and genuine care from educators. It prioritizes students' needs and promotes relationships that support both academic and personal growth. Within this framework, the central focus lies in understanding diverse cultural groups, applying this knowledge to adapt instruction, and encouraging collaboration between students and teachers to enhance achievement (Gay, 2020).

The second component of this tenet centers on building and sustaining a strong learning community. Many ethnically diverse students come from cultures that emphasize collective well-being over individualism, where personal needs are addressed within the context of the group (Gay, 2020). Teachers can use this understanding of students' cultural backgrounds and community dynamics when designing curriculum and instruction. The positive impact of community-oriented learning environments has been validated by numerous studies, including those by Escalant  and Dirmann (1990), Sheets (1995), Fullilove and Treisman (1990), and Tharp and Gallimore (1988).

The fourth tenet of CRT is *effective cross-cultural communication*. Communication is a foundational component of culturally responsive teaching, shaping how teachers and students engage in the learning process. To communicate effectively, educators must learn to interpret the culturally influenced communication styles of ethnically diverse students. Culturally responsive teacher preparation includes studying how communication styles reflect cultural values and

influence learning behaviors. In contrast to traditional classroom models, where the teacher serves as the primary speaker and students are passive listeners, CRT classrooms embrace *communal communication styles*, in which the roles of speaker and listener are dynamic and interchangeable. Developing *multicultural communication competence* is therefore a critical goal and essential component of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002).

The final tenet of culturally responsive teaching is *cultural congruity in classroom instruction*. This involves *multiculturalizing* the teaching of ethnically diverse learners by matching instructional techniques to the learning styles of diverse students (Gay, 2002). Teachers build bridges between the cultural characteristics of their students and use that information when creating curriculum and instruction. Based on my experience and pedagogical training, I learned about this approach in my university courses: Teaching for Equity, Justice, & Agency and Curriculum Cycle: Assessment for Planning.

The implementation of Western education in the United States has had a devastating and lasting impact on marginalized communities. Systemic inequalities and injustices remain deeply embedded in today's education system, particularly in urban and low-income areas with high populations of ethnically diverse students. These communities have historically suffered under educational policies and practices that fail to serve them equitably. As a teacher, it is crucial to recognize this reality and to reflect on how these inequities affect students and influence the role of the educator in the classroom.

A central aspect of combating systemic oppression in education is developing an understanding of culturally responsive teaching practices and learning how to implement them effectively. Music, theatre, and art are universal; every culture expresses itself through some form of performance or storytelling, whether through Japanese Kabuki, the work of a shaman in

an Indigenous community, or the Greek chorus. The expansive and inclusive nature of theatre and the expressive arts provides a culturally responsive path for learning and connection.

As an educator, I have a responsibility to ensure that the art and artists I teach represent diverse cultural and social backgrounds. It is essential to be intentional about including voices from multiple communities and to remain conscious of the students of color in my classroom, ensuring that the materials I present reflect and affirm their identities. Art has long served as a mirror to society, often expressing truths that people are unwilling or unable to voice. It offers a path toward liberation, helping us to see differently and to imagine new possibilities.

Recognizing the transformative power of art, particularly in expressive arts education, is critical.

The structure involved in creating a culturally responsive classroom is surprisingly similar to that of a theatre classroom. Community engagement and peer-centered work take precedence in theatre arts over the focus on the individual learner. Learning and practicing different communication styles are common practices when first learning how to act. As an educator, I can apply what I am learning from culturally responsive teaching (CRT) theory to develop and enhance instructional strategies in the theatre classroom.

Connection to InTASC Standards

The goal of this action research project is to examine how the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices positively impacts both ethnically diverse and homogenous learning communities within the theatre classroom. During observations, I noted that my clinical teacher often used outdated content, which increased student disengagement and apathy rather than fostering curiosity and creativity. The classroom at Rose High School is highly ethnically diverse, indicating that CRT practices should be integrated into all aspects of instruction. I plan to implement CRT strategies across multiple lessons and assess their effects on

student participation and learning outcomes by systematically collecting and analyzing data.

In order to strengthen my ARP and curriculum, I must align them with the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards. The InTASC standards outline a set of professional principles designed to ensure that students meet essential learning goals necessary for success in college, the workforce, and civic life (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2013). These standards provide required benchmarks and a framework that guides educators in implementing effective instructional practices that promote student learning, equity, and overall achievement.

The InTASC standards that I will relate directly to my action research project (ARP) include Standard 2: Learning Differences, which emphasizes that “the teacher uses understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards” (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2013). Additionally, Standard 3: Learning Environments highlights that “the teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation” (CCSSO, 2013). Finally, Standard 8: Instructional Strategies focuses on the importance of instructional flexibility, stating that “the teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage learners to develop deep understanding of content areas and their connections and to build skills to apply knowledge in meaningful ways” (CCSSO, 2013).

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) should and can be implemented in every aspect of education. For the purpose of this action research project, the standards above align closely with my research. Standard 2 emphasizes how teachers are knowledgeable about their students’

backgrounds and learning styles, which connects directly to the first and fourth tenets of CRT: developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity and communicating effectively with students from diverse backgrounds. Standard 3, which focuses on creating learning environments that support students' individual and group needs, relates directly to the third tenet of CRT, which involves demonstrating cultural caring and fostering a strong learning community. The third standard, Standard 8, addresses instructional strategies, emphasizing the use of varied approaches to engage students in meaningful learning. This standard connects to the fifth tenet of CRT, cultural congruity in classroom instruction, which encourages aligning instructional methods with students' cultural experiences and learning styles.

Summary

The reason I want to teach stems from the incredible educators who inspired me throughout my academic journey. I aspire to bring that same sense of inspiration and joy into every aspect of my classroom. My goal as an educator is to create an environment where every student feels seen, heard, and supported. My own struggles in K–12 education with rote, mechanical learning, which often labeled me as a “bad student”, deeply shape how I want to show up in the classroom. Reflecting on how these traditional approaches failed to serve me and my peers highlights the urgent need for transformation within the education system. The outdated methods that continue to dominate classrooms today do not adequately meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student populations.

Theories of multicultural education offer potential pathways to address the persistent cracks in the system, such as achievement gaps and discriminatory practices. Specifically, the integration of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices can help bridge these divides. Rather than teaching to one type of student, CRT values and incorporates the lived experiences,

perspectives, and cultures of all learners into the classroom environment. Through my action research project, I aim to examine how implementing culturally responsive teaching practices can enhance student engagement and learning within the theatre classroom. In Chapter Two, I will provide a literature review that examines existing research on the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and its effects on students.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

In this literature review, I seek to examine the pedagogical connections between drama education and culturally responsive teaching. While each of the approaches examined in this chapter offers distinct benefits, their integration has the potential to yield a more beneficial and transformative learning environment. I will analyze their respective strengths and consider how these frameworks operate together to better support equitable and meaningful educational experiences for an increasingly diverse student population. Ultimately, this review is intended to inform the development of a conceptual framework for the research component of my action research project and to guide my selection of specific instructional practices for implementation.

In conducting my research, I consulted a range of scholarly databases, including ERIC, JSTOR, and the Western Oregon University Library system. Geneva Gay's (1999, 2000) scholarship served as a central anchor in guiding my search process; her influential work on multicultural education and the implementation of culturally responsive teaching substantially informed the direction of my literature review. Additionally, the reference lists within Gay's publications provided extensive research leads, which I examined to identify further relevant studies. Throughout the search process, I employed targeted keywords such as *drama education*, *culturally responsive teaching*, and *multiculturalism* to locate literature aligned with the focus and theoretical framework of my review.

Annotated Bibliography

Briggs, S., & Collay, R. (2025). Joyous exploration: Drama-based pedagogy for fostering critical literacy. *English Journal*, 114(6), 66–75.

<https://wou.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/joyous-exploration-drama-based-pedagogy-fostering/docview/3245741624/se-2>

Briggs and Collay (2025) examined how drama-based pedagogy can increase critical literacy and foster joy in K–12 classrooms. The authors, both white female teachers working in highly diverse schools, implemented drama-based practices in Collay’s English Language Arts classroom and documented the results. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Collay observed that her students appeared increasingly unmotivated, particularly when engaging with complex topics such as race, gender, power, and justice. Drawing on existing research, the authors identified drama-based pedagogy as a promising approach for addressing this apathy. As Boal (1985) notes, embodied dramatic activities allow students to explore challenging themes related to U.S. history, systemic racism, and privilege in accessible and meaningful ways. The primary limitation of this study was that the students being examined were heavily impacted by both the COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged exposure to rote learning practices. Pandemic-era classroom adaptations—such as social distancing and restricted group interaction—reshaped students’ expectations of participation and further intensified their hesitation to engage in physical and performative tasks (Abdelmonem & Karawia, 2024). This resistance to student engagement may have negatively affected the methodological quality and reliability of the data.

To increase engagement, Collay designed a series of lessons integrating drama-based pedagogy with culturally responsive teaching. These included activities such as Cross the Room, the Great Game of Power, Double Tableaux, Poetic Cypher Scenes, and the Last Scene Screenplay. After implementing these strategies, the authors observed notable increases in student engagement as well as a renewed sense of joy in learning. Briggs and Collay (2025) concluded that adopting collaborative, embodied practices encourages students to grapple with the complexities of racial identity, privilege, and power while also finding personal relevance in

the text. They argue that drama-based pedagogy should be incorporated across classrooms to affirm students' identities, stimulate critical thinking, and cultivate joy.

Thinking critically about the article, I found the information highly valuable. However, because the work was not grounded in a formal empirical study, the results appeared somewhat ambiguous rather than data-driven. This limitation weakens the article compared to research rooted in a clear theoretical or methodological framework. Nevertheless, the authors' insights remain relevant and persuasive, particularly in illustrating how the integration of culturally responsive teaching and drama-based pedagogy can effectively support K–12 learners. As noted in the article, drama-based learning has the capacity to deepen students' understanding of themselves, others, and the subject matter by fostering creativity, critical thinking, and community-building (Warren et al., 2015). These concepts directly relate back to the tenets of culturally responsive teaching. .

Carbonneau, K. J., Barrio, B., Ardasheva, Y., & Newcomer, S. (2025). The effect of case-based instruction on teacher candidates' culturally responsive knowledge: A mixed-methods study.

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 25(1), 29–51.

<https://wou.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/effect-case-based-instruction-on-teacher/docview/3206902779/se-2>

This study examines the effectiveness of case-based instruction (CBI) on preservice teachers' culturally responsive knowledge. The authors identified an increasing need for culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in K–12 classrooms due to growing student diversity (Gay, 2018). However, they found that many preservice teachers do not feel adequately prepared to implement CRP. In response, the researchers designed a study to identify best practices for

teaching CRP to preservice teachers, focusing specifically on the use of case-based instruction and expert-worked examples.

Guided by mixed methods approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), the authors sought to evaluate both the effectiveness (quantitative) and the perceptions (qualitative) of using CBI to support preservice teachers' learning about CRP. Ninety-five preservice teachers participated in the study. Using meta-inference to integrate the findings, the authors concluded that culturally responsive case-based instructional practices positively influenced participants' understanding of CRP. They argued that CBI offers a promising avenue for providing preservice teachers with the experiential opportunities necessary to learn, apply, and practice culturally responsive pedagogy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The authors identified three limitations in this study. First, data were collected from only one teacher education program, limiting the generalizability of the findings; therefore, future research should examine whether these effects remain consistent across more diverse samples. Second, the study focused exclusively on textbook readings and cases, without accounting for other instructional components such as teaching practica, case-based instruction, or problem-based learning. Finally, the use of subjective scoring methods may have influenced the results and affected the overall reliability of the findings.

As a preservice teacher, I found this article particularly enlightening because it parallels the instruction I am currently receiving in my graduate program. Case-based instruction (CBI) emphasizes tangible skill building situated within one's future professional context in this case, the K–12 classroom. As teachers, we know that there are limits to how much learning can occur solely through textbooks. My own learning improved exponentially once I began my clinical teaching experience because I could actively apply theoretical concepts in real time and receive

immediate feedback from students and mentor teachers. In analyzing this study, I see CBI as a valuable pedagogical approach that I could implement in my future classroom to help students engage with issues of diversity, racism, and prejudice. For example, students could work in small groups to analyze realistic scenarios involving biased or discriminatory situations and collaboratively generate potential solutions. This approach would not only build critical thinking skills but also promote empathy, dialogue, and a deeper understanding of social justice.

Chaiwanichsiri, A. (2025). Culturally responsive teaching in musical theater production: A review of literature. *Update Applications of Research in Music Education*,
[doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233251335054](https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233251335054)

In her 2025 literature review, Chainwanchsiri aimed to summarize Geneva Gay's concept of culturally responsive teaching (CRT), analyze the challenges associated with incorporating multiculturalism into school musical theater productions, and examine how CRT can be applied in theater and choral education, particularly within the context of musical theater production. Chainwanchsiri noted a significant gap in the existing research, observing that few studies addressed how school-based musical productions consider cultural elements (Grob, 2021; Janicki, 1982; Streeter, 2016). She explained that "in light of this gap in the literature, it was necessary to start by reviewing the literature on CRT in relation to theater and choral education and apply it to musical theater practice" (Chainwanchsiri, 2025, p. 3). Through her literature review, Chainwanchsiri argued that integrating culturally responsive teaching (CRT) into the musical theater curriculum would benefit students.

Chainwanchsiri found several factors that educators must consider when producing a musical in ways that align with CRT principles: acknowledging the diverse backgrounds and identities of students, selecting culturally valid musicals that reflect students' cultures and

experiences, employing identity-conscious casting, preparing culturally relevant materials, establishing a safe and inclusive rehearsal environment, and ensuring the appropriate interpretation and representation of musical numbers. While these practices show promise for positively impacting students' educational experiences, Chainwanchsiri emphasized that additional research is needed to expand the strategies for implementing CRT within the musical theater canon.

This study was particularly meaningful to my teaching because, in my second semester of clinical teaching, I will be co-directing and producing *Fiddler on the Roof*. This well-known musical, set in the Ukrainian village of Anatevka, portrays the lives of Jewish residents as they navigate family dynamics and increasing political oppression. The production is deeply rooted in Jewish culture and addresses themes of discrimination, displacement, and resilience. Chainwanchsiri's research and the CRT-aligned factors she identified will be valuable as I approach this production with cultural sensitivity and intentionality. Given current global and national issues, the musical is especially timely, and it is essential that we handle its cultural and historical elements with care. Integrating CRT into our approach to *Fiddler on the Roof* could also serve as a meaningful source of data for my action research project.

Cristina L. Lash. (2018). Making Americans: Schooling, Diversity, and Assimilation in the Twenty-First Century. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 4(5), 99–117. <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.5.05>

Lash (2018) conducted an ethnographic study to examine how schools, specifically Castro Middle School, convey the concept of American identity amid increasing diversity resulting from immigration. Lash employed bidirectional assimilation theories to better understand the processes of assimilation and national identity formation among students from

diverse ethnic backgrounds, highlighting the challenges and limitations schools face in representing a multicultural narrative. Through ethnographic fieldwork, including classroom observations and interviews with seventeen Latino, nine Black, four Asian–Pacific Islander, one White, and four students of other or mixed-race backgrounds, Lash’s methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of American identity in different cultural contexts.

The study revealed that assimilation can produce new definitions of Americanness that are more recognizable to immigrant communities; however, race remains a significant barrier in the assimilation process. Lash found that schools tended to focus more on assimilating African American students compared with Latino or Asian students. Interviews with students indicated that Latino and Asian students often did not see themselves reflected in the school’s model of Americanness. Lash (2018) argues that when implementing multicultural education and shaping a national narrative, it is essential to ensure that all culturally diverse students are included.

I found the results of the study particularly compelling, especially the disparity in assimilation efforts between Black students and Latino and Asian students. This pattern has been highlighted in several readings and in my graduate coursework, which discuss how multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) often focus more on Black students than on other students of color. Geneva Gay addresses this issue in *Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching*, particularly in relation to the first tenet of designing culturally relevant curriculum and how teachers frequently misinterpret this step. Gay (2001) notes that these patterns include avoiding controversial topics such as racism, historical injustices, power dynamics, and systems of dominance; repeatedly emphasizing the accomplishments of a few well-known individuals while neglecting the contributions of broader groups; and giving disproportionately more attention to African American experiences compared with those of other racial or ethnic groups.

Debra, M. P. (2015). The story of drama club: A contemporary counternarrative of a transformative culture of teaching and learning for disenfranchised black youth in the school-to-prison pipeline. *REMIE Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 5(3), 242-n/a. doi:<https://doi.org/10.17583/remie.2015.1522>

In her year-long study, Debra Mayes Pane (2015) examined the school-to-prison pipeline as it affects disenfranchised Black youth and explored the potential transformative power of a school Drama Club. Pane explains that Black students and other students of color have long been subjected to a master narrative regarding their educational achievement, one that ultimately diminishes student engagement. This narrative prompts students to question the purpose of schooling, particularly when it fails to transform “one’s self-perception or one’s status as a member of an oppressed group” (Perry, 2003, p. 11). Pane employed culturally responsive pedagogy and critical race theory to analyze how drama-based learning and strong teacher–student relationships might shift students’ educational trajectories. Using auto/biographical and auto/ethnographic methods, she collected data from three white teachers and their students at an urban alternative outreach school over the course of a year in the Drama Club program. Pane found that participation in the Drama Club strengthened teacher–student relationships and helped students develop a sense of belonging. Students came to view themselves as valued members of the community, recognizing that their presence mattered and that they had a meaningful purpose within the school environment.

Pane argues that the success of this study underscores the need for continued research focused on Black students and other students of color, particularly in relation to developing: (a) transformative teacher mindsets that contribute to a sustainable teaching workforce; (b)

exemplary critical multicultural and critical race pedagogical models for teachers to study and experience; (c) proactive and empowering teaching and learning cultures; (d) heightened critical consciousness among both teachers and students; and (e) effective, empowering, and transformative teacher education and praxis that explicitly address, rather than overlook, the systemic issues of race and ethnicity (Debra, M. P. 2015).

This study is particularly meaningful to my research because it illustrates the powerful role drama can play in building community and reshaping how students of color understand themselves and their capacities. Drama is an inherently collaborative and creative process that requires meaningful contributions from all participants. When a production succeeds, the collective effort of its members becomes visible, whether through performers' work onstage or through the cohesion of technical and scenic design elements. In Pane's study, students demonstrated that working together on a creative project, alongside consistent encouragement from teachers, enhanced their self-awareness. Pane found that teachers actively solicited student input and intentionally centered students' dialogue and cultural backgrounds within the Drama Club. As a result, students felt valued and supported, and positive teacher–student relationships emerged within a critically culturally responsive learning environment. This study also continues to showcase how the merging of drama and culturally responsive teaching practices can greatly benefit student outcomes.

Gay, G. (1999). Drama modes, meanings, methods and multicultural education. *Stage of the Art*, 10(3), 19–28.

In 1999, Geneva Gay delivered a conference address exploring the potential relationship between drama education and multicultural education, emphasizing how each can enhance the other's impact. Gay outlined the core components of multicultural education and explained how,

when paired with drama, it can effectively communicate the principles and lived experiences of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism encompasses all aspects of human life; it reflects how culturally diverse people live and how society can better support an increasingly diverse world. According to Gay (1999), drama and theatre “can be pedagogical instruments for the implementation of multicultural education,” while multicultural education, in turn, “can provide the topics, texts, themes, scenes, and characters for the scripts of theater performances”.

I found Gay’s address particularly impactful because it underscores the powerful potential of drama when paired with multiculturalism. As a future drama educator, these insights are essential for shaping how I structure my classroom and meet the diverse needs of all students. I found Chainwanchsiri’s breakdown of each aspect of culturally responsive teaching—and her concrete examples of how drama pedagogy can be integrated within CRT—particularly helpful. Her analysis sparked several ideas for how I might design a curriculum that is culturally responsive, inclusive, and grounded in students’ lived experiences.

Gay, G., & Hanley, M. S. (1999). Multicultural Empowerment in Middle School Social Studies through Drama Pedagogy. *The Clearing House*, 72(6), 364–370.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30189472>

In their 1999 article, Gay and Hanley examine three central components of multicultural empowerment: (1) defining what multicultural empowerment entails and why it is essential in middle school education, (2) identifying strategies for integrating multicultural empowerment into the social studies curriculum, and (3) demonstrating how drama pedagogy can support these goals. The authors argue that middle school social studies instruction should move beyond traditional, content-driven approaches and instead incorporate drama-based methods to build a more inclusive and empowering learning environment. Drawing on established multicultural

education theory, Gay and Hanley conceptualize multicultural empowerment as the development of the knowledge, skills, ethics, courage, and convictions necessary to value and advocate for cultural and ethnic diversity. The authors emphasize that middle school is a formative period for students' social, emotional, and civic development. They contend that drama pedagogy, through embodied learning, role-play, and perspective-taking, can help students engage more deeply with complex social issues, develop empathy for diverse cultural experiences, and strengthen their sense of civic agency. Overall, the article provides a compelling argument for using drama as a culturally responsive tool to enhance multicultural understanding in social studies classrooms.

This article was particularly impactful for my teaching because it provides further evidence that drama pedagogy can advance multicultural education and foster student empowerment. As a secondary education pre-service teacher, I need to be prepared to teach across grade levels and content areas, and this study reinforces the importance of integrating culturally responsive teaching practices into any classroom context.

Inphoo, P., & Nomniam, S. (2019). *Dramatizing a northeastern Thai folklore to lessen high school students' communication anxiety*. PASAA: Journal of Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand, 57, 33–66. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1224410.pdf>

In their 2019 study, Inphoo and Nomniam examined the effects of dramatizing Thai folklore on reducing students' anxiety in learning English. The authors employed culturally responsive English language teaching to explore educational challenges, utilizing the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaires and focus-group interviews to collect data from participants. They found that dramatizing folklore increased students' self-confidence and reduced their anxiety, suggesting that this approach can also enhance engagement with their local culture. Inphoo and Nomniam concluded that culturally responsive

English language teaching, particularly through familiar folk dramas, can serve as an adaptable pedagogy for boosting students' confidence and active participation in English classrooms.

Thinking critically about this article, I found that dramatizing non-theatre-based activities can be highly beneficial for English language learners. It supports the idea that drama can be integrated into any subject to enhance learning. Engaging in drama can help learners build confidence and develop the ability to act spontaneously. Drama is a collaborative experience. Drama encourages participants to move out of their heads and into their bodies, which can be particularly helpful for students experiencing high levels of anxiety by redirecting their focus. According to Inphoo and Nomnian (2019), dramatizing folklore may be an effective alternative for language learners and teachers to create co-learning spaces within regular language classroom activities.

Nganga, L., Nydam, A., & Kambutu, J. (2025). Goal setting for teacher development: Enhancing culturally responsive, inclusive, and social justice pedagogy. *Education Sciences*, 15(3), 264. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15030264>

This interpretive phenomenological study examines how in-service K–12 teachers enrolled in a graduate education program perceive the use of goal setting as a strategy for enhancing culturally responsive teaching practices. The researchers used an interpretive phenomenological approach to investigate twelve in-service teachers participating in an online diversity education course within a master's program. The findings were analyzed through the lenses of culturally responsive teaching, self-regulated learning, and goal-setting theory. The authors identified five key implications:

1. Continuous self-awareness and reflection are essential for developing culturally responsive practices.
2. The difficulty of translating theory into practice underscores the need for practical, hands-on training in culturally responsive pedagogy.
3. Exposure to diverse populations is necessary to strengthen teachers' ability to engage in culturally responsive teaching.
4. Teachers must build skills in time management and personal accountability to effectively apply culturally responsive strategies.
5. The role of the course instructor (i.e., teacher educator) emerged as an additional factor, suggesting that instructor modeling and feedback significantly influence teachers' development.

Sextou, P. (2006). *A theatre-in-education study of multicultural understanding in Hellas*. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 20(1), 77–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2006.10012588>

In this study, Sextou examines how a Theatre-in-Education (TiE) program can serve as a vehicle for fostering multicultural understanding among primary school students in Greece. She begins with two hypotheses: (1) that rising immigration in Greek primary schools may have increased negative attitudes toward immigrant students, and (2) that if this were the case, drama-based pedagogy could play a meaningful role in improving children's attitudes and relationships. The research involved drama workshops with 8- to 12-year-old students from two Greek primary schools, with one group participating in drama activities and a comparison group participating without drama. Using quantitative methods, specifically a five-item multiple-choice questionnaire, Sextou evaluated student attitudes across both groups.

The findings did not support the first hypothesis; none of the Greek children demonstrated a tendency to discriminate against immigrant peers. However, the study did suggest that drama education may positively influence multicultural peer relationships by encouraging empathy, collaboration, and social connection. Sextou also acknowledges several limitations, including irregular attendance, a small participant group, and the absence of long-term follow-up data, all of which constrain the generalizability of the results.

The article would have benefited from the inclusion of a qualitative component to complement its quantitative design, allowing Sextou to gather richer data from multiple sources. Despite this limitation, the study offers a thorough explanation of the TiE model, clearly articulating how and why drama-based pedagogy can positively influence students' intercultural understanding. The author provides a well-structured foundation for the study by integrating her professional background and prior observations, which helps contextualize the research. Notably, Sextou's incorporation of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed approaches adds depth to the intervention, offering students an opportunity to explore cultural differences through embodied and participatory learning. Techniques such as role-playing, central to both Boal's methods and TiE, are shown to be particularly effective in encouraging students to adopt the perspectives of marginalized or oppressed individuals, thereby enhancing empathy and critical awareness.

Stanton, S. M., & Gonzalez, G. (2011). Students Find Their Place in History. *Multicultural Education*, 18(4), 46–52.

In their 2009 study, Stanton and Gonzalez examined how pre-service teachers are prepared for multicultural education. They observed that teacher candidates not only need to understand the concept of multiculturalism but also require practical strategies for implementing it in the classroom. Many participants reported feeling underprepared and lacking the necessary

skills to integrate multicultural practices into their instruction. To address these needs, the authors developed two courses at their institution: *Improvisation for Teachers* (IT), taught by Gonzalez, and *Heritage, Identity, and Empowerment* (HIE), taught by Stanton. These courses were designed to offer pre-service teachers a more immersive and experiential approach to multicultural curriculum. The literature review in their study focused on analyzing the courses and their impact on teacher candidates.

Stanton and Gonzalez used multicultural theory as the framework for exploring effective teacher preparation and for examining students' participation in the two courses. Both courses met twice a week on alternating days for 80-minute sessions during the 13-week spring 2009 semester. The IT course enrolled 12 students, while HIE enrolled 10 students. Of the participants, 50% identified as White (including Jewish), 30% as Latino, 10% as African American, and 10% as Asian. Data were collected through three primary sources: outlines of student performances, video recordings of the performances, and written reflections, along with weekly student journals maintained throughout the semester.

The authors reported three key findings. First, embodied practices within multicultural education courses allowed pre-service teachers to engage with the curriculum more authentically. Second, theatre-based approaches provided effective avenues for both teaching and assessment. Third, White students demonstrated increased openness and receptivity to multicultural content when engaged through these embodied and performance-based methods, more so than has historically been documented.

I found this study both accessible and highly relevant to my action research project, particularly in its support for the argument that drama-based pedagogy can serve as an effective conduit for culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and multicultural education more broadly. The

authors' focus on multicultural education was especially insightful, as CRT operates within and often overlaps with the larger framework of multicultural education. One quotation that significantly influenced my thinking as an educator was the assertion that “*multicultural education is for everyone.*” This perspective reinforces the idea that multicultural pedagogy is not a niche practice, but rather a foundational approach that enables teachers to serve students more effectively and to foster their development into thoughtful, compassionate, and critically engaged individuals.

Williams, E., & Morris, J. E. (2022). Integrating Indigenous perspectives in the drama class: Pre-service teachers' perceptions and attitudes. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 51(1). <https://doi.org/10.55146/ajie.2022.26> ERIC+1

Elisa Williams and Julia E. Morris (2022) investigated the importance of integrating Australian Indigenous studies into education, specifically within the drama classroom. Their research revealed that many pre-service teachers felt apprehensive and uncertain about incorporating Indigenous content due to limited knowledge of Indigenous peoples, fears of cultural appropriation, and a general lack of confidence. The purpose of the study was to examine pre-service teachers' readiness to teach Indigenous knowledge. The authors employed focus groups and drew on Aboriginal ontology—defined as the continuous interconnection of people, land, and spirit, a metaphysics that shapes and sustains Australian Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, being, and doing (Martin, 2008).

Williams and Morris identified four key findings:

1. The importance of teaching Indigenous histories and cultures through drama;
2. A lack of education regarding Indigenous content, concepts, and perspectives;

3. Persistent fears about delivering Indigenous material appropriately; and
4. The need for stronger recommendations and support within initial teacher education programs.

I found this study particularly compelling because it directly addresses pre-service teacher preparation. As a pre-service drama teacher myself, and specifically as a white pre-service teacher, I have also experienced apprehension about effectively implementing culturally responsive practices. Engaging with this research has helped me recognize that such concerns are not uncommon, and that with appropriate guidance and institutional support, teachers can develop the confidence and competence necessary to teach in today's diverse classrooms. In their conclusion, Williams and Morris (2022) highlight a critical issue: the lack of national training available for graduate and pre-service secondary teachers in embedding Indigenous content within their subject areas. Reflecting on my own graduate studies and the research I have conducted, I find that a similar gap exists within teacher education programs in the United States.

Summary

The purpose of this literature review was to examine existing research on culturally responsive education and drama pedagogy, as well as how these two areas intersect to support positive student outcomes. The review also incorporated scholarship on multicultural education, the broader framework under which culturally responsive teaching (CRT) falls. I found it especially helpful to see drama positioned within both multicultural education and CRT contexts. When discussed within the multicultural education framework, drama pedagogy was presented through a wider, more comprehensive lens that offered a clearer understanding of its overarching benefits. In contrast, when paired specifically with CRT, the literature provided more targeted

and practical examples of how drama can be used to support culturally responsive practices in the classroom. The findings suggest that culturally responsive teaching and drama pedagogy complement each other effectively and serve as powerful components in creating well-rounded, inclusive classroom environments.

Chapter 3: Methods Guideline

To confidently take part in an action research project, it is important to understand what action research is and the steps involved in the process. Sagor (2000) outlines action research as a form of inquiry in which a practitioner (the “actor”) studies their own practice in order to improve or refine their actions. In this context, the action is teaching and the actors are teachers. Action research is especially effective for educators because it allows teachers to systematically examine what is happening in their own classrooms and make informed changes to improve student learning. By collecting and analyzing tangible evidence of their teaching practices, teachers can better understand what is working, what needs adjustment, and why. This process supports intentional, reflective teaching and leads to more meaningful growth for both teachers and students.

Sagor proposes an action research process consisting of seven steps that build on one another (Sagor 2000). The first step is identifying a focus: What part of my teaching or student learning do I want to examine more closely? In my case, I focused on increasing student engagement in today’s diverse classroom. The second step is clarifying theories. This is when the teacher explores existing theories, values, and beliefs connected to the central focus. The theory guiding my research is Culturally Responsive Teaching, and I will examine how it can effectively support student engagement.

The third component of the action research process is identifying research questions. This involves clearly defining and narrowing the focus into one meaningful, researchable question that directly connects to the work being done in the classroom. The research question I addressed was: How does the use of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies in a drama classroom impact student engagement? The fourth step is collecting data. I will begin my two full-time

research weeks, during which I will implement my plan and collect data based on my focus. I will gather multiple forms of student data, including classroom observations, journal entries, and lesson plans. It is extremely important that the data collected is both valid and reliable. To support this, I will use triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources rather than relying on a single form of evidence. Triangulation strengthens research by increasing its validity. According to Sagor (2000), triangulation involves gathering data from multiple independent sources. This approach will allow me to examine my research from different perspectives and develop a more accurate understanding of student engagement. In this case, I will collect data from student work samples, CRT observation checklists, and teacher journals.

Step five is analyzing the data that is collected. As noted by Sagor (2000), this is the stage where teachers ask two key questions: What story does this data tell? and Why does this story unfold in this way? This step allows educators to look beyond surface-level results and reflect on patterns, outcomes, and possible causes within their classroom practice. Step six is reporting the results. I will share my findings through this action research project and through an ARP poster presentation conducted at the end of my program. It is important to share results with other educators so that we can learn from one another's experiences and practices. Sharing findings supports professional growth and helps improve teaching beyond one classroom.

The final step is taking informed action based on the findings of the project. This step focuses on what I will do moving forward and how I will adjust my instruction, classroom practices, and future teaching decisions based on what the data reveals. This is where action research becomes truly meaningful, as the results directly inform real change in my classroom practice. In my action research project, I aimed to use theatre as a means to empower students and create meaningful, inclusive learning experiences.

Participants and Setting

The high school where I conducted my student teaching and data collection is located in an urban area of Oregon. The school serves multiple surrounding communities, contributing to a diverse student population. The area experiences notable economic challenges, with a community poverty rate of 14.9%, which is reflected in the lived experiences of some students. The school enrolls approximately 1,034 students. The student population is 60.4% White, 21.9% Hispanic or Latino, 11.8% identifying as two or more races, 1.9% Black or African American, 1.4% American Indian or Alaska Native, 1.1% Asian, and 0.7% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

The classroom for this unit was a Drama 1 class composed of 21 students across all grade levels who met primarily in the school auditorium rather than a traditional classroom. The class included six students with IEPs, two students with 504 plans, and one TAG-identified student with strengths in reading. There was one emergent bilingual student whose home language was Spanish. The student had received fewer than seven years of language assistance, indicating the importance of incorporating targeted language supports and scaffolding within the curriculum to ensure equitable access to instruction.

The class was culturally diverse, with 4 LatinX students, 11 White students, 1 Black student, and 1 student who identified as one or more additional ethnicities. While the specific ethnic backgrounds of students identifying as multiracial were not fully detailed in school records, I used the first-day “getting to know you” notecards that included questions about culture and home language to better understand students’ identities. Gender representation in the class included 9 male students, 11 female students, and 2 non-binary students.

At the beginning of the semester, students completed a “Getting to Know You” survey that gathered information about preferred names and pronouns, home language, interests and hobbies, favorite and least favorite parts of the school day, prior theatre experience, and whether there was anything else they wanted me to know as their teacher. The survey results provided valuable insight into students’ identities, interests, and comfort levels. While many students expressed enthusiasm about being in theatre, a significant number also reported feeling nervous and having little to no prior theatre experience. Recognizing that many students were beginners, I intentionally began the course with foundational theatre terminology and skills, carefully scaffolding instruction to build understanding and confidence. I placed a strong emphasis on community-building activities to establish trust.

I began my work with this group of students beginning winter 2026, and during that time I built a strong rapport with them. I learned all of the students’ names and many of their interests, and they seemed eager to talk with me and responded well to my directions. We began each class with a daily question that we answered together. This routine became a fun part of our class culture and often led to laughter and connection among the students. We also started each day with warm-up games, which students looked forward to because they allowed them to move, collaborate, and think creatively.

I noticed that students tended to thrive in gamified or performance-based activities rather than in more traditional academic tasks. When a worksheet was introduced, engagement tended to decrease. Because of this, I structured my lessons in ways that emphasized performance and active participation rather than pen-to-paper or computer-based work. I also designed assessments that were performance-centered whenever possible, so students could demonstrate their learning through acting, collaboration, and creative expression.

While my rapport with individual students was strong, an area I continued to work on was addressing the class as a whole and giving clear corrections or redirection. I felt less confident when it came to correcting behavior. For example, students sometimes talked over me or over each other, and I continued to develop strategies for redirecting the class effectively. Another area for growth was encouraging participation from students who were more hesitant or reluctant to engage. Additionally, I worked to improve how I supported students with IEPs to ensure they had equitable access to the content and felt fully included in class activities.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected addressed the research question which focused on the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices and how it affected student engagement. Data was gathered from three primary sources. The first data source consisted of lesson plans developed over the course of the school year that incorporated culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices. These lesson plans were analyzed to examine the extent to which CRT principles were implemented and to evaluate how these practices contributed to increased student engagement.

The second data source consisted of informal classroom observations. To guide these observations, I developed a checklist aligned with key principles of culturally responsive teaching. The checklist included indicators such as opportunities for student choice, the presence of culturally relevant content, the inclusion of student voice, connections to students' lived experiences, and multiple avenues for student participation. The third data source was teacher reflection journals completed after each lesson for two weeks. These reflections documented daily observations of student engagement and participation, aspects of the lesson that were successful, and areas that needed improvement. The reflection journals supported ongoing

analysis of instructional practices and helped identify patterns that emerged throughout the implementation of the CRT-focused unit.

I began the qualitative analysis process by reflecting on my research question and identifying where, within my classroom, I could collect the most meaningful data to support it. As noted by Sagor (2000), classrooms are data-rich environments in which teachers can gather information from a variety of sources, including records and direct observations. Based on this understanding, I selected three primary data sources: lesson plans, classroom observations, and a teacher journal. I determined that these sources would provide the most relevant and comprehensive insights into culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices while also supporting data triangulation.

A significant aspect of implementing CRT occurs before instruction even begins, during the planning phase. This includes developing an understanding of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences by reviewing class demographics and ensuring that all students' identities are represented and supported. As explained by Gay (2000), culturally responsive teachers are able to evaluate the multicultural strengths and limitations of curricula and instructional materials and make necessary adjustments to improve their effectiveness. With this in mind, analyzing lesson plans became an essential component of my data collection, as it allowed me to examine how culturally responsive principles were embedded in instructional design.

Another key component of CRT involves its implementation in the classroom. For this reason, I identified observations as a critical data source to support my research. I utilized both university observation protocols and a CRT-specific observation checklist that I developed. This checklist was completed by observers during each lesson to document the presence and effectiveness of culturally responsive practices. The final data source I used was a teacher

journal. After each lesson or school day, I recorded reflections on how the lesson unfolded, the level of student engagement, when and how CRT strategies were applied, and how students responded to them. This reflective process provided rich, detailed data on the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching in practice.

I utilized open coding by first organizing all collected data and reviewing it, section by section. During this process, I documented initial codes based on patterns that stood out. For example, within my lesson planning and observational data, the use of pop culture resources frequently appeared in connection with student engagement and as a strategy to incorporate culturally responsive teaching (CRT). As a result, “pop culture” emerged as a recurring code. I continued this coding process throughout the entirety of my qualitative research. In some instances, broader themes became apparent before specific codes were developed, prompting me to work backward from themes to the supporting data and corresponding codes. This iterative approach allowed me to more effectively identify and support the major themes emerging from the data.

To support the reliability and validity of this project, I asked Dr. Amy Bowden to review my analysis during the initial stages of data collection and interpretation. I also used the constant comparative method throughout the data review process. Additionally, Dr. Marie LeJeune reviewed my research methods, and I continued to employ triangulation throughout the study. These strategies helped strengthen the reliability, and validity of the project.

Research Positionality

Throughout my K–12 education, I often struggled within systems that emphasized rote learning and standardized achievement testing. Many of my academic classes felt focused on memorization rather than deep understanding. The subjects we studied were rarely connected to

our everyday lives, which often led me to question how the material would be useful in the real world or how it might support my future. However, when teachers incorporated meaningful materials or alternative approaches to teaching, I noticed a significant increase in both my own engagement and the engagement of my classmates.

These experiences aligned closely with the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). CRT emphasized teaching practices that built on students' lived experiences and their cultural funds of knowledge. It encouraged educators to ensure that content, curriculum, and instructional methods reflected and connected to the diverse students in front of them. As an educator, I also recognized the importance of acknowledging and continually reflecting on the privilege connected to my own identity. I was a white female from an upper-middle-class family, and my educational journey was consistently supported by my parents. This level of support was not the reality for many of my classmates or current students. Growing up with this privilege made it especially important for me, as a teacher, to critically reflect on my position and use that awareness to inform my teaching in increasingly diverse classrooms.

All of these factors influenced how I approached data collection and analysis for this research project. To effectively examine student learning and engagement, it was essential that I understood the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds my students brought into the classroom. This awareness allowed me to better interpret student performance and engagement while implementing culturally responsive teaching practices.

Chapter 4. Findings

Over the course of a two-week unit focused on implementing culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices, I collected and analyzed data to address my research question: How does culturally responsive teaching affect student engagement? Using qualitative data analysis, I systematically reviewed my findings and identified two central themes. The first theme, increased student engagement, highlights moments in the unit when my implementation of CRT strategies increased student engagement. The second theme, decreased student engagement, examines instances where my approach either had no impact or led to decreased engagement. Together, these themes provide insight into how culturally responsive teaching practices influence student engagement in the drama classroom. I utilized multiple data resources to help influence these themes: lesson plans, observations and daily teacher reflections.

To systematically collect observational data, I developed a checklist aligned with culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices (Figure 1). Observers, including my university supervisor and clinical supervisor or lead teacher, used the checklist during each lesson to document both instructional strategies and student engagement behaviors. The checklist consisted of two sections: the first recorded the presence or absence of specific CRT strategies, while the second measured levels of student engagement on a scale ranging from “not observed” to “most students.” Using data gathered from five completed checklists, I created data tables to analyze patterns and trends. Table 1 summarized the implementation of CRT strategies across the lessons, while Figure 3 illustrated observed student engagement behaviors. Together, these data sources provided consistent evidence supporting a positive relationship between culturally responsive teaching practices and increased student engagement.

Figure 1.

Drama Classroom Engagement Checklist Template

Drama Classroom Engagement Checklist (CRT Action Research Data Tool)

Date: _____

Class/Period: _____

Lesson Focus: _____

CRT Strategies Used Today (Teacher)

- ☐ Student choice in roles/topics
- ☐ Culturally relevant content
- ☐ Student voice centered
- ☐ Multiple ways to participate
- ☐ Connections to students' lived experiences

Student Engagement Observed

(Check what you see during the lesson)

Engagement Behavior	Not Observed	Some Students	Most Students
Students participate in activities	☐	☐	☐
Students volunteer ideas/performances	☐	☐	☐
Students stay on task	☐	☐	☐
Students collaborate respectfully	☐	☐	☐
Students connect work to personal experiences	☐	☐	☐
Students take creative risks	☐	☐	☐
Students are attentive to peers	☐	☐	☐

Teacher Observation Notes

(What did you notice about engagement today?)

Note: This figure demonstrates how the tenets of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) were implemented throughout the lesson. The checklist was designed around specific CRT tenets and

the observable behaviors associated with those tenets to determine whether the lesson aligned with culturally responsive teaching practices. During each lesson, an observer used the checklist to document the presence of these practices and recorded additional observational notes. Data collected from the checklists were analyzed to evaluate the extent to which the lessons within the unit adhered to CRT practices and how these practices influenced student engagement behaviors.

Increased Student Engagement

The first theme that emerged during data analysis was increased student engagement, specifically examining how and when the implementation of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) practices positively influenced student participation. I identified multiple strategies as contributing to higher levels of engagement. These strategies included cross-cultural communication, the incorporation of diverse pop culture references, student voice-centered approaches, and intentional instructional planning.

Cross-Cultural Communication

A core tenet of culturally responsive teaching is cross-cultural communication, which emphasizes effective interaction with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. In traditional Western or Eurocentric teaching models, communication is often structured in a passive format in which the teacher delivers information while students listen with limited interaction (Gay, 2000). In contrast, Gay (2000) explains that many students from culturally diverse backgrounds benefit from communication styles that are more active, participatory, dialectical, and multimodal. This understanding informed the design and implementation of the unit, particularly in lesson planning, instructional delivery, and assessment strategies.

In Lessons 1 and 2, where the highest levels of student engagement were observed (Table 1), multiple forms of communication were intentionally incorporated to support diverse

participation styles. Students engaged in learning through a variety of methods, including question-and-answer sessions, verbal participation (e.g., calling out responses), small-group discussions, a sticky note wall activity, and written responses via worksheets. These varied techniques allowed students to engage in ways that aligned with their individual communication preferences.

Table 1

CRT Strategies Across Lessons

CRT Strategy	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3	Lesson 4	Lesson 5
Student Choice	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Culturally Relevant Content	✓	✓			
Student Voice–Centered Instruction	✓	✓		✓	✓
Multiple Ways to Participate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Connection to Students’ Lived Experiences	✓				✓

Note. This table presents the data collected from the engagement checklist (see Figure 1) at the conclusion of the unit. The data are drawn from the first section of the checklist, titled “CRT Strategies Used Today,” which documented the culturally responsive teaching strategies observed during each lesson. Observers recorded the specific strategies present in each lesson to determine the extent to which culturally responsive teaching practices were implemented throughout the unit.

Instructional design further reflected these strategies. For example, one lesson included the use of a monologue from the Barbie movie performed by Academy Award-winning actress

America Ferrera to introduce content in a culturally relevant and engaging way. The lesson then transitioned into a whole-class discussion guided by essential questions such as, “What is a monologue?” Students subsequently participated in an interactive sticky-note activity in which they responded to prompts related to character objectives, strategies, and obstacles. The prompts included: “What does the character want?”, “How does the character get it?”, and “What stands in the character’s way?” Students then matched the terms *objectives*, *strategies*, and *obstacles* to the corresponding prompts.

Collaborative group work was also incorporated through a monologue analysis worksheet, which students could complete either independently or in groups. Teacher journal entries further supported the effectiveness of these strategies in increasing student engagement. In a reflection journal entry dated March 2, 2026, the teacher noted that the “majority of students chose to work together,” that students “collaborated well together” and “showcased support to each other,” and that the work students submitted “showcased effort and understanding of the material” (Teacher Reflection Journal, March 2, 2026). Observation notes from Lessons 1 and 2 also indicated that students remained engaged throughout the lessons and responded positively to the use of diverse actors and multimodal content. According to the Engagement Checklist observation notes dated March 2, 2026, “Students were very engaged during [the] video portion ... They remained quiet during videos and offered thoughtful responses in the Q&A that followed” (Engagement Checklist Observation Notes, March 2, 2026).

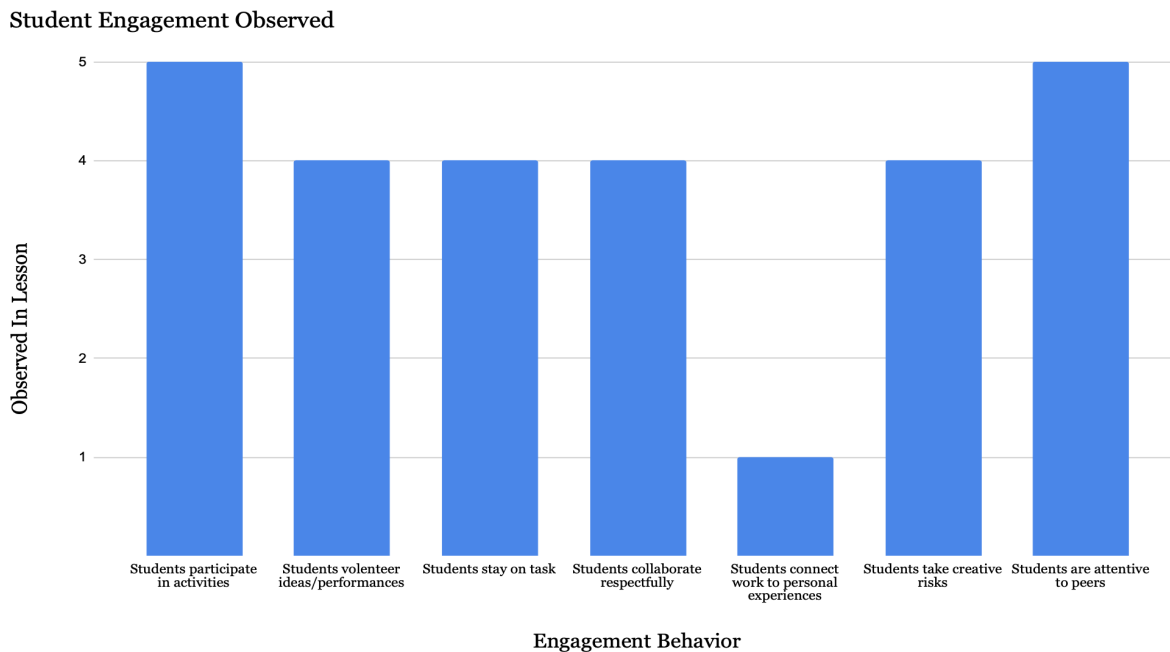
Students actively participated in discussions, successfully completed the sticky note activity, and demonstrated a preference for collaborative work, although some chose to work independently. Overall, students consistently remained on task and engaged across activities. Observational data also supported these findings. Observers noted high levels of engagement

during the video component: “Students were also very engaged during the video portion...they offered many thoughtful responses during the Q&A that followed” (Observation, 03/02/26).

Students also demonstrated thoughtful participation during class discussions and active involvement in the sticky note activity. Additionally, students engaged in respectful and productive collaboration during group work (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Student Engagement Observed Bar Graph



Note:

Culturally responsive teaching involves the integration of ethnic and cultural diversity into the curriculum. Gay (2000) states that culturally responsive teachers evaluate the multicultural strengths and weaknesses of curriculum designs and instructional materials and make necessary adjustments to improve their overall quality. This principle was evident in

another strategy that increased student engagement: the use of pop culture. Specifically, incorporating diverse pop culture references that reflected the demographics of the classroom contributed to higher levels of participation.

In the first two lessons of the unit, students focused on selecting, viewing, and analyzing monologues. To introduce the concept, students analyzed examples such as *Barbie*, *Do the Right Thing*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*. These selections were intentional, as they represented a range of cultural perspectives and identities. For example, Ferrera's monologue in *Barbie* reflects Latina identity, working-class experiences, motherhood, and themes of female empowerment. Radio Raheem's monologue highlights aspects of Black culture and explores themes related to community and social dynamics. The monologue delivered by Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* presents another perspective on female empowerment within a professional context.

The first lesson of the unit demonstrated the highest level of student engagement, which coincided with the strongest presence of pop culture references. As shown in Figure 2, this lesson yielded the highest percentage of participation across all engagement categories, particularly in relation to culturally relevant content. In the first lesson plan, the use of multimodal resources and diverse perspectives was intentionally incorporated. Here's an excerpt from the procedures section of my lesson plan, in which I wrote, "Share clips from well-known monologues, some students have likely seen or been exposed to through pop culture. I have included a majority of videos performed by diverse actors and individuals of multiple genders to reflect the class demographics" (Carroll, 2026).

Following each video, students engaged in discussion by identifying the actor's objective, obstacles, and tactics. Observational notes indicate that many students provided thoughtful and substantive responses. Notably, students identified race, gender, and language as potential

obstacles for characters. This demonstrates that students were making meaningful connections between cultural identity and lived experiences, which is a key indicator of increased engagement.

Student Choice

Student choice and student voice-centered instruction emerged as another strategy implemented throughout this unit that corresponded with increased student engagement. This approach aligns with culturally responsive teaching, including demonstrating genuine care, fostering inclusive learning communities, and effectively communicating with students from diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2000). In each lesson, students were provided with opportunities to make decisions regarding the materials they engaged with, their collaborators, and their modes of participation. Student choice was intentionally embedded throughout instruction to promote autonomy and increase engagement. For example, during a warm-up pantomime activity designed to practice nonverbal communication without dialogue, students were given the option to actively participate or observe. The majority of students participated physically, while two students chose to observe from the sidelines. Teacher journal notes from March 2, 2026, indicated that “students were very engaged in the warm-up game” and that although two students chose not to participate physically, they “engaged verbally with observations” (Teacher Journal, March 2, 2026).

Student choice was also incorporated into both formative and summative assessments. In the summative assessment, students were required to perform a memorized monologue; however, they selected their monologue from a curated packet. This approach provided students with autonomy while maintaining instructional structure and alignment with learning objectives. Increased engagement following this activity was documented in observational notes, which

stated that “students showed interest in the monologue packet, often asking questions about specific monologues and wanting to know more about the characters presented. All students had chosen a monologue by the designated due time” (Teacher Journal, March 2, 2026).

Similarly, in Lesson 2, students selected which monologue they wished to analyze while practicing the identification of objectives, tactics, and obstacles. Students were also given the option to complete the activity independently or collaboratively, further supporting student autonomy and differentiated participation. Reflection journal notes from March 2, 2026, documented increased engagement during this activity: “Students collaborated well in groups, while some chose to work independently. All students worked respectfully, remained on task, and were attentive to peers. All students turned in completed worksheets at the end of class” (Teacher Journal, March 2, 2026).

In Lesson 3, students were introduced to four different memorization techniques and asked to select the strategy that best aligned with their individual learning preferences. After selecting a technique, students applied their chosen strategy during independent monologue practice for the remainder of the class period. This approach supported differentiated instruction by allowing students to engage with material in ways that were most effective for their learning styles. Following the memorization stations, students participated in a roundtable discussion to reflect on their experiences with the various strategies. Increased engagement during this discussion was documented in the teacher reflection journal dated March 4, 2026, which noted that “students offered up thoughts and opinions regarding memorization and how it can be very difficult” (Teacher Journal, March 4, 2026). The lesson concluded with an exit ticket assessment in which students identified their favorite memorization station and explained why the strategy worked well for them. Evidence of increased engagement was demonstrated through fully

completed student work samples and the fact that all students submitted the exit ticket by the end of class.

In Lesson 4, student voice was emphasized through individualized coaching sessions. Each session began with the prompt, “This is your seven minutes, what would help you use this time most effectively?” While many students chose to rehearse their monologues, others requested support with written components of the lesson. This structure positioned students as active agents in their learning and allowed them to tailor instructional time to their specific needs. As illustrated in Figure 2, student choice was incorporated in every lesson, while student voice-centered instruction was present in four out of five lessons. Multiple indicators of increased student engagement associated with student choice were observed and documented in Figure 3. These behaviors included active participation in classroom activities, students offering meaningful thoughts and opinions during discussions, and students remaining consistently on task throughout lessons. Evidence of increased engagement was documented across multiple data sources, teacher reflection journals, observational notes, and the Drama Classroom Engagement Checklist.

Planning Instruction

Rigorous and intentional planning plays a significant role in culturally responsive teaching practices. This strategy aligns with three tenets of culturally responsive teaching (CRT): (a) developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, (b) integrating ethnic and cultural diversity into the curriculum, and (c) adapting instructional methods to align with students’ cultural contexts. Curriculum and instructional materials present in classrooms and schools can often be homogenous; therefore, according to Gay, culturally responsive teachers must know how to identify the multicultural strengths and weaknesses of curriculum designs and

instructional materials and make the necessary changes to improve their overall quality (Gay, 2000).

As a theatre teacher, I am fortunate that theatre education rarely requires adherence to a rigid curriculum. Instead, theatre educators often have the freedom to create their own curriculum. However, while theatre itself is diverse, many of the available instructional materials can still be limited, underrepresent diverse voices, and reflect narrow perspectives. As a teacher with an undergraduate degree in musical theatre and an Associate of Fine Arts degree, I recognize the importance of bringing diverse works of art and artists into the classroom. My educational background has provided me with a strong foundation in the arts and has reinforced the value of exposing students to a wide range of artistic perspectives, voices, and experiences. I utilized this knowledge during the planning process by being intentional about the video examples and monologues selected for students to study and perform. I carefully gathered materials that I believed would allow students to see themselves represented in the curriculum. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the use of diverse pop culture examples resulted in noticeably higher levels of student engagement during lessons in which those materials were incorporated.

Another instructional material that required intentional planning was the monologue packet students used to select a performance piece for the end of the unit. I created a packet containing 11 different monologues from which students could choose the piece they felt most comfortable performing. In selecting these materials, I considered multiple factors to ensure the process was culturally responsive. I also had to consider students' learning levels. This was a Drama 1 class, and nearly every student had never taken an acting class or attended a live theatrical performance. Additionally, this monologue unit occurred early in the semester, so I

intentionally scaffolded the first several weeks of instruction to ensure students felt prepared to take on an introductory monologue performance unit. When selecting monologues, I considered students' backgrounds, including gender identity, culture, and ability levels. I chose 11 beginner-friendly monologues that were accessible, engaging, and culturally responsive. Many of the monologues were gender-neutral, while three were female-identifying and two were male-identifying. Students selected a variety of monologues from the packet. One of the most commonly selected pieces was the "Cody" or "Student" monologue (Figure 2). These monologues focused on the challenges of school and the difficulties students sometimes face in trying to fit in.

Figure 3.

Monologue Example

Student: *(A student talks to the school counselor. They are not disrespectful, just honest.)* No, I don't like school. I only come because I have to. I don't have a choice. Grown-ups tell me what to do, and I do it so that I don't get in trouble. But if I had my way, I'd stay home and watch YouTube all day. Or play video games. But no... I get on the bus. I come to school. I sit at my desk. I watch the smart board. Me and 30 other kids crammed into a classroom, listening to a teacher who doesn't want to be there. It's all so stupid. I mean, shouldn't learning be fun? How do you expect me to like school when nobody asks me what I want to learn?

Student engagement appeared to increase in direct correlation with both the instructional materials selected and students' ability to exercise choice in their learning (see Table 1). Multiple instances of increased engagement were recorded in both observational notes and daily reflection

journals. For example, in a journal entry dated March 4, 2026, I noted, “We transitioned to the monologue analysis activity. All students worked respectfully, remained on task, and were attentive to their peers.” Similarly, observational notes stated, “Students had all selected their monologue to work with for the unit. Students took risks by performing quick portions of their monologues.” These observations suggest that providing students with culturally responsive materials and opportunities for choice positively influenced both participation and willingness to engage in performance activities.

After gathering and analyzing the data, a clear finding emerged: student engagement increased when specific strategies connected to culturally responsive teaching were implemented. These strategies included cross-cultural communication through the use of multiple modes of communication, the incorporation of diverse pop culture references, student voice-centered approaches such as student choice, and intentional instructional planning. Evidence of increased engagement was documented across multiple sources of data, including observational checklists and notes, charts created from checklist data, lesson plans, and a daily teacher reflection journal.

Decreased Student Engagement

Culturally responsive teaching occurs when students’ lived experiences are integrated into every aspect of the learning process. This approach has been shown to create more meaningful educational experiences for all students. Gay (2000) stated that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, learning becomes more personally meaningful, more engaging, and easier to understand and retain. In contrast, when instruction is disconnected from students’ experiences, student engagement can decrease, which was evident throughout my teaching unit. The data showed a

decline in student engagement over the course of the unit, particularly when instruction shifted toward more traditional and decontextualized tasks.

Lack of Culturally Relevant Content

When reviewing the engagement checklist (Figure 1), I noticed a clear pattern related to culturally relevant content. During the first two lessons, student engagement was noticeably higher, particularly in the area of cultural relevance (see Table 1). I incorporated pop culture videos featuring diverse actors, and students responded actively during both the viewing and post-discussion activities. Many students shared thoughtful and meaningful responses, suggesting they were making authentic connections to the material. However, engagement declined during Lessons 3, 4, and 5. These lessons focused more heavily on traditional academic tasks, such as monologue analysis worksheets, memorization stations, and performance preparation. Unlike the earlier lessons, these activities lacked culturally relevant content and did not strongly connect to students' lived experiences. This shift was reflected in the engagement checklist, where "culturally relevant content" and "connections to lived experiences" were not consistently present (Table 1 and Figure 3).

On the drama classroom engagement checklist (Table 1), the two indicators checked least frequently were culturally relevant content and connections to students' lived experiences. Culturally relevant content was only observed during Lessons 1 and 2 and was absent in the subsequent lessons. Notably, all three of those later lessons demonstrated a decrease in student engagement. To further analyze these patterns, I created two separate tables based on the drama classroom engagement checklist (see Figure 1). One table focused on the culturally responsive teaching (CRT) strategies implemented during each lesson, while the second examined the student engagement behaviors observed throughout the lessons (see Figure 3). In Figure 3, the

student engagement behavior observed least frequently was “students connect work to personal experiences.”

At the beginning of the unit, students were given a packet of monologues from which they selected a piece for their summative assessment. Students also used this packet in Lesson 2 to practice monologue analysis. Once students selected their monologue for the summative assessment, they continued working with the same piece throughout the remainder of the unit, applying new acting techniques and skills during each lesson. This structure allowed students to build familiarity and confidence with their chosen monologue over time. Although students were provided with choice and autonomy in selecting their monologue, the packet itself lacked cultural relevance.

During my research of beginner monologues that incorporated culturally relevant themes and perspectives; it was difficult to find accessible acting material for beginning students that reflected diverse lived experiences. Many beginner monologues focused on broad or generalized situations, such as school-related scenarios (see Figure 2), rather than culturally specific experiences or perspectives. As a result, none of the monologues in the packet meaningfully incorporated culturally relevant content. As students continued working with the same monologues, many became less interested and less engaged with the material. The data showed that when students were not meaningfully connected to the content, they struggled to relate the work to their own lived experiences. As demonstrated in Table 1 and Figure 3, lessons that rarely connected learning to students’ lived experiences were often accompanied by lower levels of engagement.

Lesson 3 demonstrated the lowest levels of engagement (Table 1). This lesson focused on learning memorization strategies for monologues. The summative assessment for the unit

required students to perform a memorized monologue for the class, and many students had expressed anxiety about memorization. I designed a lesson centered on developing memorization techniques. The lesson consisted of two parts. In the first portion, students practiced diction and projection skills. In the second portion, students rotated through memorization stations where they learned and practiced four different memorization techniques using their selected monologues. The formative assessment for this lesson was an exit ticket.

During the portion of the lesson which focused on projection and diction skills, I had my teaching assistant read a monologue from *Little Women* using poor projection and diction. Students were then asked to critique the performance and provide suggestions for improvement. However, I observed a lack of engagement during this activity. Very few students participated in the discussion, and the comments that were made tended to remain surface level rather than demonstrating deeper analysis or connection to the material. Although *Little Women* includes themes of female empowerment, the text itself offers limited cultural relevance for many students in this class. The play centers on the experiences of White women living in the 1800s, a historical and cultural context that many students may not personally connect with. As a result, the material lacked relevance to students' lived experiences, which appeared to contribute to decreased engagement. Without meaningful cultural or personal connections to the text, students struggled to engage critically and thoughtfully with the activity.

The second portion of Lesson 3 consisted of an activity titled "Memorization Stations," in which students practiced four different memorization techniques commonly used by actors. I selected the techniques prior to the lesson, and students rotated through each station in seven-minute intervals while applying the strategies to the monologue they had selected for their summative assessment. Although the activity was designed to provide students with multiple

approaches to memorization and support individual learning preferences, there was a noticeable decrease in student engagement throughout the lesson. This decline in engagement was documented in my teacher reflection journal. During the activity, I repeatedly redirected students' attention and reminded them to remain focused on practicing the memorization techniques rather than engaging in off-topic conversations. In the teacher journal for this lesson, I noted, "Students not participating despite prompting, so I need to find additional strategies to engage all students moving forward." Even among students who were participating appropriately, engagement appeared limited. In my journal notes, I observed that many students demonstrated body language associated with boredom or disengagement, including slumped shoulders, minimal interaction, and staring off while waiting for the timer to end. Although the activity incorporated student choice through varied memorization strategies, the lesson lacked meaningful cultural relevance and strong connections to students' lived experiences. Within Figure 2, in the lesson 3 column, only two categories were marked present: student choice and multiple ways to participate. The remaining categories, culturally relevant content, student voice-centered instruction, and connections to students' lives, were not observed.

Lesson 4 also demonstrated decreased levels of student engagement. This lesson involved a second monologue analysis worksheet utilizing an ELA "Somebody, Wanted, But, So" sentence frame. Students had already completed monologue analysis earlier in the unit, first using a random monologue and then using the monologue they would ultimately perform, I believed that implementing a slightly different structure would help maintain student interest. However my university observer noted a lack of culturally relevant content within the lesson. She stated that although other culturally responsive elements were present, culturally relevant content was absent, explaining that "the content was more a connection to student lived

experience than culturally relevant.” This observation was also reflected in the checklist data (Table 1, Lesson 4). One of the core tenets of culturally responsive teaching is the design of culturally relevant curriculum; however, this element was not evident in this lesson, and student engagement subsequently decreased.

During Lesson 4, students participated in individual coaching sessions in which they met with me one-on-one for approximately seven minutes to rehearse and refine their monologues. These coaching sessions functioned similarly to a dress rehearsal in preparation for the summative monologue performance scheduled for the following Monday. Observational notes indicated that students participating in the individual coaching sessions demonstrated high levels of engagement. During these meetings, students actively applied feedback, asked questions, and remained focused on improving their performances. However, engagement differed significantly among the students who remained in the auditorium working independently while being supervised by my clinical teacher. Observational notes from my clinical teacher indicated that students required multiple redirections throughout the lesson to remain on task. Additionally, he observed that many students rushed through the monologue analysis worksheet in order to avoid additional work for the remainder of the class period. Once the worksheets were submitted, numerous student work samples appeared minimal and lacked depth of thought or effort. Rather than demonstrating meaningful engagement with the material, many students appeared focused primarily on completing the assignment for a grade.

In Lesson 5, which consisted of the summative monologue assessment, observational data also indicated decreased levels of student engagement. Observation notes revealed that only three components of the culturally responsive teaching checklist were marked as present, while culturally relevant content and connections to students’ lived experiences continued to remain

absent. During this lesson, students performed their memorized monologues for the class. Students with accommodations through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan were given the option to perform privately for me, while all other students were required to perform in front of the class in order to receive full credit. Although students successfully completed the performance assessment, a noticeable lack of memorization was evident across many performances. Teacher notes documented that students frequently paused for extended periods or demonstrated uncertainty when recalling lines during their monologue presentations. Feedback recorded on several students' final graded rubrics stated, "You paused frequently and consistently had to stop to remember your lines, which caused you to lose points. Come chat with me and we can discuss stronger memorization techniques" (Teacher Feedback Notes, March 2026). These observations suggested that while students were engaged in the performance process, additional instructional support in memorization strategies may be necessary to strengthen performance confidence and fluency.

When reflecting on Lesson 3, the lesson focused specifically on memorization strategies, this outcome is not surprising. Lesson 3 demonstrated the lowest levels of student engagement throughout the unit, particularly during the memorization station activities. The lack of engagement during memorization practice appeared to directly influence students' preparedness and confidence during the summative assessment. These findings further support that student choice and autonomy alone were insufficient to sustain engagement throughout the unit. Although students were able to select their own monologues, the materials themselves lacked strong cultural relevance and meaningful connections to students' lived experiences.

The findings from this action research study suggest that culturally responsive teaching positively impacts student engagement in the drama classroom. Student engagement increased

when culturally relevant content was incorporated, student voice and choice were centered within instruction, and students were provided with multiple ways to participate in classroom activities. In contrast, engagement decreased when lessons lacked connections to students' lived experiences and relied primarily on traditional, decontextualized tasks. These findings highlight the importance of intentionally designing culturally responsive drama instruction in every aspect of the teaching process. Chapter 5 will discuss implications for teaching practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5. Discussions, Limitations and Conclusions

I began my research on culturally responsive teaching by studying *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* by Geneva Gay. During graduate school, I was also introduced to the work of influential multicultural education scholars such as Grace Lee Boggs (2012), James Banks (2019), and bell hooks (1990). After developing a foundational understanding of multicultural education and its related pedagogical approaches, I chose to focus specifically on culturally responsive pedagogy. From there, I expanded my research to examine culturally responsive teaching within drama and theatre education settings, which became the primary focus of the literature review for this study.

According to Gay (2000), congruency between how the educational process is organized and delivered and the cultural frames of reference of diverse students can improve academic achievement for students of color. When students see themselves reflected within curriculum and instruction, learning becomes more meaningful, relevant, and engaging. The findings from my action research project reflected these principles. Lessons that intentionally incorporated the tenets of culturally responsive teaching, particularly culturally relevant content and opportunities for students to connect learning to their lived experiences, resulted in increased student engagement. This increase in engagement was evident through observational notes, student reflections, work samples, and classroom participation. Conversely, when lessons lacked meaningful connections to students' lives and identities, engagement noticeably decreased.

Similar to Gay's (2000) work, my study demonstrated that students are more engaged when instruction validates and incorporates their cultural identities and experiences. In my classroom, students were more willing to participate in drama activities when they felt represented in the material and when lessons allowed for student voice, collaboration, and

personal connection. This was especially important in drama education, where performance and storytelling are deeply tied to personal identity and lived experience.

At the same time, my pedagogical practices extended current research by specifically applying culturally responsive teaching to a secondary drama classroom. Much of the literature surrounding culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on core academic subjects such as English language arts, mathematics, and social studies. My action research contributes to this emerging area by demonstrating how culturally responsive teaching practices can positively impact engagement in performance-based arts education. Through activities such as student-centered discussions, collaborative scene work, culturally relevant monologues, and opportunities for student choice, students became more active participants in the learning process.

Geneva Gay discussed the reciprocal relationship between drama education and multicultural education, explaining how each can strengthen the impact of the other. Gay (1999) stated that drama and theatre “can be pedagogical instruments for the implementation of multicultural education,” while multicultural education, in turn, “can provide the topics, texts, themes, scenes, and characters for the scripts of theater performances” (p. 28). This highlights the importance of drama education as a meaningful tool for positively impacting students’ lives while also serving as an effective method for implementing multicultural education. These principles were reflected throughout my monologue unit, where culturally responsive teaching practices were intentionally incorporated to create more meaningful, engaging, and culturally relevant learning experiences for students.

Additionally, my findings connect to recent scholarship regarding teacher preparation and culturally responsive pedagogy. Katherine J. Carbonneau, Barrio, Ardasheva, and Newcomer (2025) discussed the importance of preparing preservice teachers to effectively implement

culturally responsive teaching practices. Their research emphasized the use of case-based instruction (CBI) as a method for providing preservice teachers with experiential opportunities to learn and apply culturally responsive pedagogy. The researchers argued that CBI allows teachers to practice navigating culturally responsive instruction in meaningful and reflective ways. Although my own teacher preparation program did not specifically utilize CBI, my graduate coursework strongly emphasized multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching practices. This educational foundation encouraged me to pursue this action research project and intentionally implement culturally responsive strategies within my classroom.

One challenge that emerged throughout my action research project was the lack of culturally relevant and multicultural theatre materials available for secondary drama classrooms. This barrier directly impacted my instructional planning and highlighted a significant gap within theatre education resources. Theatre educators often balance teaching daytime drama courses while simultaneously directing after-school productions, including plays, musicals, and student-created work. As a result, locating culturally responsive materials that authentically represent diverse student experiences can be difficult and time-consuming. This challenge aligns with the work of Chainwanchsiri (2025), who discussed the complexities of incorporating multiculturalism into theatre productions and musical theatre education. Chainwanchsiri argued that culturally responsive teaching can positively impact students' educational and theatrical experiences when productions intentionally reflect students' cultures and lived experiences. One specific recommendation involved selecting culturally valid musicals and dramatic texts that authentically represent diverse student identities. I attempted to apply this principle during the creation of the monologue packet used within my unit. My goal was to provide students with material that reflected a variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences while also allowing

students to connect personally with the content. However, despite extensive research, I consistently struggled to locate monologues that authentically represented the diversity of my students and remained developmentally appropriate for classroom use.

Limitations

One limitation of this action research study was the small sample size. The research was conducted in only one Drama 1 class because I taught a single section of the course during the study period. In addition, the school and class experienced low enrollment and chronic absenteeism, which affected student participation throughout the two weeks of research. On average, only 12–15 students were present each day, and attendance varied frequently. As a result, the students participating in the lessons differed from day to day, which influenced classroom interactions, engagement levels, and participation with the instructional material. The inconsistency in attendance made it difficult to observe long-term patterns of engagement among the same group of students.

This limitation has important implications for future research. Conducting a similar study with a larger and more consistent sample size may provide a broader understanding of how culturally responsive teaching impacts student engagement in drama classrooms. A larger group of participants could reveal greater variability in student responses and provide stronger evidence of trends related to engagement and culturally responsive practices. Additionally, because culturally responsive teaching emphasizes incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences into instruction, a larger and more diverse sample could allow for the inclusion of a wider range of culturally relevant materials and perspectives. This may both strengthen the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching practices and present new challenges in designing instruction that meaningfully reflects all students' experiences.

Another limitation of this study was the short time frame in which the research was conducted. The implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies and the collection of data occurred over a two-week period. During this time, data consisted of five lesson plans, five classroom observations, and five teacher journal reflections. Although the study demonstrated a response to culturally responsive teaching practices, the limited duration of the research may reduce the overall validity and reliability of the findings. As Richard Sagor (2000) explains, classroom teachers often experience significant time constraints, limiting the amount of reflection and study that action research requires. This aligns with the challenges present in this study, as the short research period did not allow for extended observation of student engagement over time. While initial patterns and responses to culturally responsive teaching were observed, a longer implementation period may have produced more accurate and consistent data. Extending the duration of the study could provide more opportunities to observe changes in student engagement, identify long-term trends, and determine whether the positive effects of culturally responsive teaching are sustained over time.

Another limitation that I found interesting in this study was the lack of accessible multicultural dramatic materials for beginning theatre students. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was difficult to locate beginner-level theatre resources and lesson plans that were both culturally relevant and appropriate for the students participating in the study. This limitation was also connected to the time constraints of the research process, as there was limited time available to search for and evaluate appropriate materials. The monologue packet used in the study was personally created after spending many hours researching culturally relevant monologues for students to perform. Many monologues that reflected diverse cultural perspectives were either too advanced for beginning theatre students or contained content that was not appropriate for a

high school setting. Future studies would benefit from the development and collection of a larger database of culturally relevant and age-appropriate dramatic materials for beginning theatre students.

Conclusion

Throughout my experiences as both a student and a pre-service educator, I have consistently encountered evidence demonstrating the importance of multicultural education in increasing student engagement. Although schools today serve increasingly diverse student populations, many aspects of the educational system continue to reflect the foundations of a more homogenous society. As educators, it is our responsibility to work toward reforming educational practices and curriculum so they better support and represent the diversity of today's students.

The findings from this action research project suggest that culturally responsive teaching can be an effective tool for increasing student engagement in the drama classroom. Through research and the implementation of culturally responsive practices within my unit, I observed that students were more engaged when lessons incorporated culturally relevant content, centered student voice and choice, and provided multiple opportunities for participation and connection to students' lived experiences. These findings align with existing research demonstrating that culturally responsive teaching can positively impact both student engagement and academic achievement.

At the same time, this study also demonstrated that culturally responsive teaching must be implemented intentionally and comprehensively. When all five tenets of culturally responsive teaching were incorporated into lessons, student engagement increased noticeably. However, when one or more tenets were absent, engagement often decreased. This suggests that culturally

responsive teaching is most effective when it is implemented holistically rather than through isolated strategies.

In conclusion, this project reinforced the importance of continuing to reform curriculum and instructional practices to better reflect multicultural perspectives and experiences. By intentionally designing inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments, educators can create classrooms in which students feel represented, valued, and empowered to participate fully in their learning.

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